

# Narration and focalisation in the installation art of Jan van der Merwe

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*For Mark*

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*A DVD with moving images featuring video clips from the artworks accompanies this text.*

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## ABSTRACT

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This study is an interdisciplinary exploration. It presents a narratological interpretation of selected installation artworks by the South African artist Jan van der Merwe (b. 1958). In particular, certain peculiarities of narration and focalisation processes are explored with reference to the artworks *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003) and *It's cold outside* (2004); these works are representative of the artist's large-scale rust-based installation artworks that also incorporate screen elements, usually with looping video imagery, as part of the artworks.

The study argues that the manner in which narration and focalisation in the installation artworks proceed problematises these narratological concepts, but more significantly that these concepts generate access to interpretative possibilities that seem to present themselves (because the works seem to contain narratives) and that yield insights that would not be attainable without recourse to narratological methodology and theoretical apparatus. In order to explore the ways in which narratology can contribute to the interpretation of installation art, this art form with its peculiarities is first perused historically. Following this, the visual arts, and especially installation art, are interrogated with reference to the four central narrative elements (indicated by Bal, [1978] 1986) of space, time, character and also, briefly event. Specifically, this chapter uses Bal's (2001a:214) contention as point of departure: that when one undertakes a study of narration in the visual arts, the fabula can be said to emerge from the concretisation and subjectification of space into place, the thickening of time by means of various devices, the semantisation of characters, all synthesised by means of focalisation. This is followed by a theoretical reflection on the narratological concepts of narration, focalisation and also the fabula in order to set up a framework for interpretation. Dimensions of these concepts that are problematised in the context of installation art are highlighted, and the approach towards these concepts is informed by emphasis on the particular application thereof in the context of installation art as a special type of art. Narration, firstly, is conceptualised also with reference to its application to filmic instances, in the sense that narration is understood to emerge from a variety of devices and sources, and that it tends to be de-anthropomorphised. Secondly, the fabula is argued to appear as an extended fabula (Eco's term [1979] 1985) in installation art; furthermore, the fabula is problematised as not being

*discovered* as much as *constructed* in this art form. Focalisation, thirdly, is addressed with emphasis on its embodied, affective and cognitive functions of synthesising and subjectivising— instead of focusing on its visual, filtering, or selecting functions as often associated with this complex term.

The interpretation of the artworks presents, firstly, a subjective understanding of how space and time are narrated and focalised. Space is narrativised as multi-layered, gendered and above all, constructed. The spaces of the works are devoid of human presence (apart from the spectator-participant) and therefore the works are marked by absence. Spatialities in terms of objects and places are understood as transformed and transformative; the processual nature of the materials – rusted metal and video loops – is central to the narration and focalisation of space. The narration and focalisation of time is also suggested by these materials that carry within them temporal manipulations that are equally multi-layered and transformative/transforming. Different temporal zones are distinguished; the now (the time of viewing and the present), the different temporalities planted by the artist (such as the looping video material, temporal suggestion by means of memory generated by the retro appearance of objects) and time suggested by the rusted material that decays together with traces of labour in the rusted surfaces that all serve to “thicken” time.

Character in the works was interpreted in three different character categories; these are the artist in his various guises (not least since the works have an autobiographical bent), the absent person(s) suggested by the works, and the viewer-participant who very crucially becomes a character. The narration and focalisation processes ascribed to these characters are perused in light of Fokkema’s (1991) topology of postmodern characters. The artist’s character category was argued to comprise a conflation of the implied artist (as a corollary of the implied author), the historical person and the paratextual elements of the works (the latter based on Genette, [1987] 1997). The absent person(s) are explored as ghosted entities, but also in terms of the possibility of them being selves in search of others. This last point informs the character category of the viewer-participant, who is interpreted by means of Cloete (2013) and Ricoeur’s (1992) arguments that the self can also be *an other* by means of radical empathy and other identificatory processes. The self as a layered, imaginative and complex self-other construction is therefore possible. The resulting fabulae – once time has thickened, space has been concretised into place, character has been semantised and all

these elements have been focalised – comprise different levels in order to reflect the notion of the extended fabula. On a first and less abstracted level, the works do not seem to convey more than what is fairly obvious: washing dishes and preparing to leave the house, in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside*, respectively. However, given the transformative and transforming nature of space, time and character, the fabulae become a more subjective interpretation of an iterative sense of longing and even mourning.

The study argues that narratological concepts such as narration and specifically focalisation can contribute significantly towards the interpretative possibilities inherent in the installation art of Jan van der Merwe, whose works have been described as story-telling monuments to the unknown. Furthermore, this study propounds that such an approach is likely to find broader applicability to the interpretation of installation art more generally in a way that will allow the interpreter to access the work in a fruitful and insightful manner.

## **2. Keywords**

*Biegbak/Confessional*, character in (installation) art, fabula, focalisation, installation art, intermedial / visual narratology, *It's cold outside*, Jan van der Merwe, narration, postclassical narratology, space in (installation) art, time in (installation) art

## OPSOMMING

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Hierdie interdisiplinêre studie bied 'n narratologiese interpretasie van geselekteerde installasiekunswerke deur die Suid-Afrikaanse kunstenaar Jan van der Merwe (geb. 1958). In besonder word sekere aspekte van vertelling en fokalisasie ondersoek met verwysing na die kunswerke *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003) en *It's cold outside* (2004). Hierdie werke is verteenwoordigend van die kunstenaar se grootskaalse roesgebaseerde installasiekunswerke wat ook skermelemente bevat, gewoonlik in die vorm van herhalende videobeelde.

Die studie voer aan dat die wyse waarop vertelling en fokalisasie in die installasiekunswerke verloop hierdie narratologiese konsepte enersyds problematiseer, maar van groter belang is dat dit verder ook toegang verleen tot interpretasiemoontlikhede wat hulself voordoen (omdat die werke skynbaar narratiewe bevat) en dat mens sodoende insigte verkry wat nie moontlik sou wees sonder die gebruik van narratologiese metodologieë en teoretiese apparatuur nie. Om dan die maniere te ondersoek waarop narratologie 'n bydrae kan lewer tot die interpretasie van installasiekuns word hierdie kunsvorm tesame met sy besondere eienskappe histories ondersoek. Hierna word die visuele kunste, maar in die besonder installasiekuns, aan die orde gestel in die lig van die vier sentrale narratiewe elemente (soos voorgehou deur Bal, [1978] 1986) – naamlik ruimte, tyd, karakter en kortliks ook gebeurtenis. Hierdie hoofstuk neem Bal (2001a:214) se argument as riglyn, naamlik dat met die ondersoek na vertelling in die visuele kunste kan aangevoer word dat die fabula na vore kom as gevolg van die konkretisering en subjektivering van ruimte na plek; die verdikking van tyd deur middel van verskeie strategieë; die semantisering van karakters – almal saamgesnoer in 'n sintese deur middel van fokalisasie. 'n Teoretiese refleksie van die narratologiese konsepte vertelling, fokalisasie en die fabula word aangebied met die oog op die daarstel van 'n interpretasieraamwerk. Spesifieke dimensies van hierdie konsepte wat geproblematiseer word in die konteks van installasiekuns word aangedui, en die benadering tot hierdie konsepte word belig deur voortdurende klem op die besondere toepassing daarvan ten opsigte van installasiekuns as 'n eiesoortige kunsvorm. Vertelling word eerste aan die orde gestel ook met verwysing na die toepassing daarvan in filmiese kontekste, in

die sin dat vertelling hier saamgestel word uit verskeie aanwendsels en bronne, en dat dit neig om 'n de-antropomorfiere karakter aan te neem. Tweedens word die fabula ondersoek en word aangevoer dat dit funksioneer as uitgebreide fabula (Eco [1979] 1985 se term) (of uitgebreide storie) in die konteks van installasiekuns. Verder word die fabula geproblematiseer in hierdie kunsvorm aangesien dit hier nie soseer *ontdek* as *gekonstrueer* word nie. Derdens word die meer komplekse konsep fokalisasie ondersoek met klem op die beliggaamde, affektiewe en kognitiewe funksies daarvan – daarom, ook as sintetiserend en subjektiverend – eerder as om te fokus op die verstaan van fokalisasie in terme ander algemene assosiasies daarvan, naamlik visualiteit, as filter of as selekterende aktiwiteit.

Die gedeelte wat gemoeid is met die interpretasie van die kunswerke bied eerstens 'n subjektiewe begrip van die wyses waarop tyd en ruimte vertel en gefokaliseer word. Ruimte word verhaalmatig verstaan as veelvlakig, geslagtelik en veral as gekonstrueer. Die ruimtes van die werke bevat nie menslike teenwoordighede nie (benewens die toeskouer-deelnemer aan die werk) en daarom word die werke gekenmerk deur afwesigheid. Ruimtelikhede soos gesuggereer deur voorwerpe en plekke word verstaan as getransformeerde en ook as transformerend; die prosesmatige aard van die materiale – geroeste metaal en herhalende videobeelde – staan sentraal tot die vertelling en fokalisering van ruimte. Die vertelling en fokalisering van tyd word ook gesuggereer deur hierdie materiale wat inherent sekere temporele manipulasies bevat wat self ook veelvlakig sowel as getransformeerde/transformerend is. Verskillende tydsone word hier onderskei; die nou-tyd (die tyd waarin gekyk word en die hede), die tydvlakke wat deur die kunstenaar in die werke geplaas is (soos die herhalende videomateriaal, tydsuggesties van herinnering wat opgeroep word deur die oudmodiese voorkoms van voorwerpe) en tydsverloop wat deur die geroeste materiaal gesuggereer word – roes wat verweer en ook die merke van arbeid in die geroeste oppervlakke wat beide aanduidend is van die “verdikking” van tyd.

Karakter in die werke is geïnterpreteer as behorend tot drie kategorieë wat insluit die kunstenaar in sy verskillende gedaantes (ook veral omdat die werke 'n outobiografiese aard het), die afwesige mens(e) wat aangedoen word deur die werke, en die aanskouer-deelnemer wat self – van groot belang vir hierdie studie – 'n karakter word. Die prosesse van vertelling en fokalisasie wat aan hierdie karakters toegedig word, word ondersoek in die

lig van Fokkema (1991) se topologie van postmoderne karakters. Die kunstenaar se karakterkategorie bestaan byvoorbeeld uit 'n saamvloeiing van die geïmpliseerde kunstenaar (as 'n eggo van die narratologiese geïmpliseerde outeur), die historiese persoon sowel as die paratekstuele elemente van die werke (laasgenoemde term met verwysing na Genette [1987] 1997). Die afwesige mens(e) is ondersoek as potensieel spookagtige entiteite, maar ook in terme van die gedagte dat hulle selwe is wat op soek is na andere. Hierdie gedagte rig die karakterkategorie van die aanskouer-deelnemer, wat geïnterpreteer is aan die hand van Cloete (2013) en Ricoeur (1992) se argumente dat die self ook 'n ander kan wees – deur middel van radikale empatie en ander identifiserende prosesse. Die self kan dan 'n gelaagde, verbeeldingryke en komplekse self-ander konstruksie word. Die voortspruitende fabulae – wat ontstaan as tyd verdik het, as ruimte konkreet plek word en wanneer karakter gesemantiseer en al hierdie elemente gefokaliseer is – behels ook verskillende vlakke wat die gedagte van die uitgebreide fabula moontlik maak. Op 'n eerste en minder abstrakte vlak kommunikeer die werke skynbaar op voor-die-hand-liggende wyse: skottelgoed word gewas en voorbereidings om die huis te verlaat word aangedoen deur *Biegbak/Confessional* en *It's cold outside* onderskeidelik. Dit is egter ook so in die lig van die transformerende en veranderende aard van ruimte, tyd en karakter dat die fabulae toenemend steun op meer subjektiewe interpretasies van 'n iteratiewe gevoel van verlange, selfs van bewening.

Die studie voer aan dat narratologiese konsepte soos vertelling en veral fokalisasie betekenisvol kan bydra tot die interpretasie van Jan van der Merwe se installasiekuns, ook omdat sy werk getipeer word as vertellende monumente aan onbekendes. Verder voer hierdie studie aan dat so 'n benadering breër moontlikhede kan bied by die interpretasie van installasiekuns sodat nuwe en bruikbare insigte tot die interpretasie van hierdie kunsvorm gevoeg word.

## **2. Sleutelwoorde**

*Biegbak/Confessional*, fabula, fokalisasie, installasiekuns, intermediale / visuele narratologie, *It's cold outside*, Jan van der Merwe, karakter in (installasie-) kuns, postklassieke narratologie, ruimte in (installasie-) kuns, tyd in (installasie-) kuns, vertelling.

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*Figures, tables and diagrams are listed according to their appearance in chapters and are numbered accordingly.*

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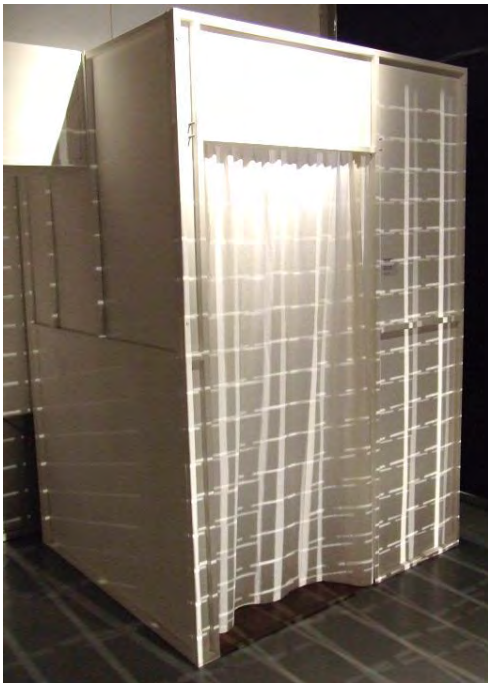
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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1 Preamble: a personal encounter with *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003)



Various views of Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/Confessional*

Top left: Fig. 1.1. Outside view of cubicle. Right: Fig. 1.2. Detail of work inside the cubicle

Bottom left: Fig. 1.3. View of sink showing monitor with hands washing; Right: Fig. 1.4 View of dishes in dish rack.

There is a cubicle in the gallery, large enough to accommodate one or two persons (fig. 1.1)<sup>1</sup>. The title next to the cubicle is indicated on a square of carton on the wall: this is Jan van der Merwe's *Biegbak/Confessional*. I enter the cubicle that houses the work through a white curtain. The space is small and intimate, and looks like a washing-up space in a kitchen (fig. 1.2; 1.3; 1.4). Everything inside has the likeness of the familiar, all the objects and fixtures are life-size and recognisable. But everything is also strange: it is made of or covered in rusted metal: cloths, drying rack, apron, sink, taps ... it seems as if I am in a Hansel and Gretel house where everything is made of something else (they, of course, had cake and candy). In another sense, it seems as if I am looking at things that recall underwater rusted images one sees of the Titanic resting on the ocean bed, where divers have discovered plates, dishes and other objects crusty with sea-age; used things that suggest traces of human presence. These things have rested silently for so long and now suddenly are laid bare for all to see. Time is transfixed in the encounter. Similarly, the space that immerses me calls up echoes of what it is like to walk through archaeological finds: ordinary things become extraordinary because they are old and special and coated with layers of time, and because they tell the stories that their now absent users cannot. The things here in the artwork, like archaeological things, seem old and therefore infinitely fragile, and they pervasively suggest another time, a long-ago time, or even a stalled moment.

It almost seems invasive: looking at someone else's ordinary, intimate things in a space that is not my own. But yet, I am inside, and strangely engulfed. The space is someone else's, but in another sense it

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<sup>1</sup> This description reflects on the artwork as it appeared at the Oliewenhuis Gallery in Van der Merwe's solo show *Time and Space* from 9 July to 18 August 2013. I have also seen the work at the Pretoria Art Gallery at Van der Merwe's retrospective show *The Archaeology of Time* in 2006, and at the 2003 Aardklop Festival Artist exhibition at the North-West University Gallery in Potchefstroom. This subjective narrative description given in this section on my personal encounter with the artwork reflects similar descriptive passages by Bal (2001b:9-30; 2010: various passages) when dealing with installation art. Free association and an uninhibited flow of thought (Bal, 2001b:8) lend a Freudian air to description, Bal notes; she adds that it is hardly possible to describe without giving a narrative account:

Description, as many specialists of narrative have pointed out, is challenged, dominated, if not ruined by narrative, whose handmaiden it is. Ever since Homer insisted that Achilles' shield could only be described as it was being made in Vulcan's foundry, description for its own sake has been an embarrassment to narrative (Bal, 2001b:25).

seems to accommodate me. It is familiar enough to be my world. I look down into the kitchen sink, and it's possible to imagine that I am the one whose place this is. It also seems as if I am standing in the place of someone else who may have used it long ago and is gone now, or I'm standing in the place of someone who was never here but who was wished into this place, almost like a memorial.

There is movement: a monitor is visible inside the sink. I see hands moving around in a perpetual circular motion— they are washing dishes; specifically, scrubbing a saucepan, continuously, over and over. Whose hands are they? A washing-up area is for most people a woman's place, and because the space is so intimate, so nostalgic, so *old*, it seems logical that the space must be a grandmother's. The artist's grandmother? He could have made this for her, and so it's a place of memory. But they can also be *my* hands, or my grandmother's hands, once I stand inside the space and imagine her kitchen, her washing up space.



Fig. 1.5. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/Confessional*. Detail showing hands washing a cooking vessel, appearing inside the sink.



Fig. 1.6. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/Confessional*. Detail showing cloths hanging on pegs and projected image of courtyard above the sink.

The artwork seems to suggest that I, my grandmother, and the artist's imagined grandmother can all be accommodated in this work. The work generates a sense of longing; possibly because it recalls the absent one(s) whose space I occupy. When I look up, I see raindrops like tears drizzling down a window in a continuous motion, above the kitchen sink (fig. 1.6). It's a projection of the image of a window with video material that loops. The circular motion of the hands that wash, the raindrops that are slowly and endlessly making their tearful way downwards, and the nostalgic sense of the entire small space generate a thick tangle of emotion: longing mostly, but more. There's a sense that there are stories waiting to take shape inside this very personal place. This is a space that someone goes into in order to disappear, to perform her duties, but also to meditate – the name *Biegbak/Confessional* suggests a religious contemplation. There are stories here, and on one level I understand them completely. My stories, and the artist's stories conflate, just as I feel myself merging with the absent person who is suggested by the work, and my stories merge quite easily with hers. It makes perfect sense, on one level. It is, however, an entirely subjective process; but I realise that my co-feeling and co-narrating are part and parcel of this process. I share a story position with the artist, and with the people we imagine here. Why, and how this is possible, and why these stories are so important, are involved questions, and they propelled this study into stories of Jan van der Merwe's installation artworks.

## 1.2 Introduction and contextualisation

This study presents a narratological reading of the installation art of Jan van der Merwe, with reference to the works *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003) and *It's cold outside* (2004; see fig. 1.7; 1.8). In particular, the study explores the manner in which these works parallel and problematise, but also enrich notions of narration and focalisation (and, by extension, time, space and character) as these are conceptualised in narrative theory. *Biegbak/Confessional* consists of a cubicle that represents a washing-up space inside a kitchen, and *It's cold outside* shows an open domestic interior with various pieces of furniture. To a large degree, the constitution, thematic concerns and atmosphere of these works are representative of the many large-scale rust-covered installations that Van der Merwe has been producing since 1998.



Fig. 1.7. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *It's cold outside*. Installation view.



Fig. 1.8. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *It's cold outside*. Still image from looping video (monitor inside vanity case lid) showing lipstick being applied.

The installation artworks selected for this study reveal replications of interior spaces with furniture and other objects, all on a life-like scale. These works represent spaces that are suggestive of female domestic areas. The objects in the spaces are covered in a dense metal layer, made up of stitched-together fragments of food cans, that has been treated to show a rusted surface. No human beings are shown, but the works do contain small video monitors or projections that show grainy recorded

images moving parts of human bodies. The video recordings always show the same action precisely repeated (by means of video looping technology) every few seconds. Hands are shown washing a cooking vessel in the screen mounted inside the kitchen sink in *Biegbak/Confessional*; in this work, there is also a projection above the sink that shows the image of a window looking out onto a courtyard with raindrops sliding down the window. *It's cold outside* features, among other objects, a stool on which a vanity case stands. Inside the lid of this case, where one would expect to find a small mirror, there is a video screen that shows the lower part of a woman's face with a hand applying lipstick. The screens and projection are therefore placed in focal areas inside the works and the looping images they display relate to the content of the spaces that are represented. It may seem as if the person whose presence is suggested by the work is also executing the actions shown on the screens.

The viewer/spectator can "enter" physically into the installations and engage with them and move around in their spaces. Some spaces are domestic and intimate: a washing up area (*Biegbak/Confessional*), a dressing room (*Sunday suit*, 2003; fig. 1.9), a sitting area inside a house (*It's cold outside*) or a dining room (*Guests/Gaste*, 2003; fig. 1.10). Others suggest public spaces such as an airport (*Baggage arrival*, 2001; fig. 1.11), or a cinema (*The End*, 2006; fig. 1.12), a church (*Water and rust*), or a graveyard (*Eclipse*). These are all charged spaces that are highly coded.



Fig. 1.9. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Sunday suit*. Installation view.



Fig. 1.10. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Guests/Gaste*. Installation view.

Left: Fig. 1.12. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2006. *The End*. View towards the screen

Below: Fig. 1.11. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2001. *Baggage arrival*. Installation view with *Luggage trolley* visible to the right.





Van der Merwe, Jan. 2005. *Water and rust*. Installation view from pulpit side.



Van der Merwe, Jan. 2002. *Eclipse*. Installation view towards screens.

A number of things strike the gallery visitor (Van der Merwe's works are typically shown in a gallery space); these are, for the most part, predicated on tensions between *what seems to be* at first glance, and *what is evoked* upon further reflection. In the first instance, the life-size aspect of furniture and objects draws attention to the human scale of the spaces. This makes the works seem strangely familiar, especially in light of their presence in a gallery. However, while the objects themselves connote closeness and intimacy (beds, suitcases, even clothes seem utterly recognisable) they are strange because they are all made of or covered in rusted metal. The metal coat of the objects has become such a trademark of Van der Merwe's work that it has, for many gallery-goers, become synonymous with this artist. What is seen and experienced here is, therefore, on the one hand extremely convincing representations of objects and spaces – this suggests "realness" and intimacy, but at the same time these objects and spaces are ostensibly re-created stand-ins for the real thing – and therefore the objects and spaces also evoke a sense of critical distance, so that the viewer can reflect on them as made things. Secondly, the work is imbued with a sense of time: time passing,

time suspended. This feeling can be ascribed to the rusted surfaces of objects that are evocative of a sense of passing time and of the patina of old, decaying things – counterpointed by the looping images that take time to play but which also seem to suspend time through repetition.

A third aspect strikes the viewer: the “who” of the work. The works all clearly concern “someone” – the person whose space or things are shown. However, that person is absent – although he or she is partially referenced in the looping images, which contain an image of part of a human body. It is not clear whether the limbs shown in the video loops are supposed to be the limbs of the person or character that the work is “about”, or whether the loops show what that person would have done in that space (which, of course, only draws attention to the constructedness of the space, since nobody can actually sit in a rusted metal chair, or wash dishes in a rust-covered sink).

The viewer therefore sees spaces with objects and actions that more or less convince as “real” and “present” while also clearly referring to the constructed make-belief storyworld – the spaces and objects are signifiers that in their presentness refer to spaces and times that are absent. As a corollary to this absence suggested by the spaces and objects, absence functions on a more profound level, namely the absence of the persons, or the characters who are the central feature of the works. This absence is what makes the works haunting, because the viewer is utterly aware of a sense of intruding upon someone else’s space – someone who is not there and whose world is shown with a great sense of domestic intimacy.

One could posit that the works present the four central elements of narrative (see Bal, [1978] 1986) in an urgent manner: space, time, event and character – or absence of the latter – are foregrounded here. In short, the works are suggestive of narratives. Indeed, Jan van der Merwe (*Walkabout*, 2013) notes that his artworks strive to depict a poetic moment (suspending conventional, sequential narrative), but the artist also expresses the sentiment that they tell stories. To these statements one could add that the stories of the works probably come into existence once the person who apprehends the works connect the elements of the poetic moment into a narrative (see Hühn & Sommer, 2013:6-13 for a study of narration in lyrical poetry).

Critics and fellow artists commenting on Van der Merwe's work use similar phrases: Kellner (s.a.:32) speaks of the artist's use of memory-infused narratives, his use of metaphoric suggestion and the sense that the works may be monuments. Hodgins (s.a.:29) refers to the "visual poetry" of the works as an elusive, difficult to define quality. The artist also often refers to his works as "monuments to the unknown"<sup>2</sup>. Other such references abound, but for the present discussion it suffices to note that the artist as well as his commentators interpret the work as having a narrative aspect, and as being evocative of a poetic, monumental quality. The narrative quality of Van der Merwe's installations is further sustained by the emphasis on temporality in his work (explicated by Van der Watt, 2005 and Kruger & Van der Merwe, 2010)<sup>3</sup>.

For present purposes, it can be said that these works invite narratological consideration with emphasis on narration and focalisation because (1) they are narrative in nature; they seem to tell of that something that happen(s)(ed) to someone at some time (see Ryan, 2004:4-5); (2) they comprise temporal and spatial elements (notably the use of rust as material), and seem to imply a character (some works seem to refer to a specific person; other works suggest a more generic person or persons, but they are always absent) and something that happens. The elements of narrative seem to prevail in a pertinent manner.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth quoting Danto (1985:152) at some length here regarding the idea of a monument: "We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget ... Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. Memorials ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends". Technically, following this distinction between a monument and a memorial, Van der Merwe's installation artworks are both monuments and memorials, because they are about remembering (a monumental function) and also seem to ritualise this remembrance (thus, memorials). However, the monumentalising and memorialising functions converge in Van der Merwe's works in the sense that the artworks infer a monumentalising impulse together with the memorial which is also, according to Danto (1985:152): "a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave". The artist's choice of words "monuments to the unknown" will here be understood to encapsulate the meaning of both memorial and monument. Also, this phrasing has a certain lyrical quality that underscores the notion of the poetic moment (Walkabout, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Visual art is conventionally regarded as spatial (see Lessing's canonical treatise with the title *Laocoön* [first published in 1766; republished 1962] which circumscribed and sustained this emphasis); the use of temporality in Van der Merwe's work adds an ostensibly narrative dimension – and spatiality, in turn, is of course also narratively significant.

This is where the role of the viewer becomes critical. Even though the central character is absent, the viewer is situated in his or her place. Consequently, the viewer, by virtue of entering the storyworld, becomes a character, because a character is a participant in a storyworld (Jannidis, 2013:1; Margolin, 2007:66). Furthermore, by being in the space of an absent character, the viewer (who, it will be argued, is a participant in the context of installation art) participates as a character-focaliser who is tasked with connecting the signifying elements into a meaningful fabula. This is a central thrust of the current study's exploration of Van der Merwe's installation artworks, and one that could possibly be extended to installation art more generally.

Of importance for this study is the notion that narration and focalisation unfold over time; this feature provides a link to installation art since temporality is also a distinguishing characteristic of this art form (see section 1.3 below).

### **1.3 Jan van der Merwe as an installation artist**

Wilkinson (2011:unpaginated) refers to Van der Merwe's installation artworks as "three-dimensional polysemic conundrums" in order to, it seems, bypass the difficulty of placing the work into a category such as sculpture or installation. The work selected for the study is, nonetheless, usually referred to as installation art (see Kruger & Van der Merwe, 2010:158; Hundt, s.a.). However, this nomenclature is not entirely unproblematic in view of defining characteristics of installation art provided by Reiss (2001) and Geczy and Genocchio (2001) namely that:

1. Installation art is often **large** in scale since it tends to activate an entire space. However, this type of art does not have to be either sculptural or truly architectural or environmental in nature, although it may employ aspects of sculpture – but typically without sculptural conventions such as the plinth (also see Colles, 2001:11; Alexander, 1996:61; Bishop, 2005:37).

2. Installation art may be (but does not have to be) **place-specific**, meaning in most instances that the artwork cannot, in essence, be repeated elsewhere<sup>4</sup>.
3. Installation art requires **active viewer participation**; one tends to rather speak of a *spectator* or *participant* in the context of an installation. This spectator participation may require the person engaging with the artwork to perform certain activities; although these need not entail more than navigating through a space to confront what is there. In this sense, viewer participation means to “complete the piece” (Reiss, 2001:xiii; also see Davies, 1997:14; Bishop, 2005:11). “Looking” in the passive sense is therefore superseded by the notion of “spectating” to describe the more involved role of the viewer.
4. Since installation art inherently and characteristically acknowledges the presence of the viewer/spectator (and hence is postmodern in the sense that it cannot, as modern art purported to do, exist without the viewer who completes the work<sup>5</sup>), it is also “theatrical” - which implies that it is **temporal** in nature. Temporality entails in some instances that the work itself is transient (Davies, 1997:15) or that the work reveals itself over time (Reiss, 2001:60).
5. While installation art has been variously and vaguely described as an aesthetic strategy, attitude or tendency instead of a style, it is widely regarded as an art form with **narrative** potential (Coleman, 2000:158-170).
6. Installation art has a **physical** presence. The temporal aspect together with the physical presence that characterises most installation art means that this art form is structured, essentially, over **time and space** (Rosenthal, 2003:27).

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4 Works that have a strong sculptural nature do not always comply with this characteristic of installation art; such work can be reassembled and shown elsewhere without changing the intrinsic nature of the work. Broadly speaking, however, such work may nonetheless be conceived of as installation art (see Meyer, 2000:25).

<sup>5</sup> The modernist critic Michael Fried proposed that “good modernist art does not require a situation for its successful completion. It exists, no matter what the viewing scenario” (in Reiss, 2001:59).

Van der Merwe's works can in the more obvious sense be aligned with some of the above features of installation art, notably because of their large scale and because of their physicality. The works' concern (mostly conceptually) with temporality as well as the strong spatial sense they generate are further qualifiers. I intend to demonstrate, furthermore, that a crucial dimension of his work is the requirement of the viewer to become an active spectator-participant, particularly in involving him or herself in the narrative suggested by the work and through becoming an active focaliser-character.

#### **1.4 Narratological points of departure: Narration, the fabula, and focalisation**

Three central narratological concepts guide the current study: narration, the fabula, and focalisation. Narration entails "a communicative act in which a chain of happenings is meaningfully structured and transmitted in a particular medium and from a particular point of view" (Hühn & Sommer, 2013:1). It is an account, in whatever medium, of a fabula that is presented in a certain manner (Bal, 2001a:214; Bal, 1985)<sup>6</sup>. A fabula, also sometimes referred to as a "story", has been defined as a chronologically ordered sequence of events; the fabula is constructed by the perceiver in response to a representation (Kafalenos, 2001:139; Chatman, 1978). It is therefore an abstraction (Eco, ([1979] 1985:14 et seq.) that can be seen as something that is constructed – a view that is of importance for the current study that argues for a conceptualisation of the fabula, in the context of installation art, as a synthesized construction in the mind of the interpreter.

The way in which the fabula is presented so that it may come across as a *story* is concerned with the "semantization of characters, the concretization and subjectification of space into place, the thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices, and, most important of all, *focalization*" (Bal's

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<sup>6</sup>There is an important distinction between the formalist terms *fabula* and *sjuzet*. This can be said to entail, in simplified terms, the difference between the reader's reconstruction of events in a narrative in chronological and causally related manner (fabula or story), and the orderly sequence of events as presented in the work (*sjuzet*; also viewed as the plot) – see Du Plooy (1992a:120). Genette's *histoire* and *écrit* ([1972] 1980:27) correspond broadly with this division, although they are not synonyms for the formalist concepts *fabula* and *sjuzet* (because the formalist terms are based on concrete textual elements and Genette's concepts function on the level of signification – see Du Plooy, 1986:203; 207). The revision of the concepts in postclassical narratology (see Nünning, 2009:53 et seq. for a discussion of relevant authors' points of departure) has not rendered them unusable; instead, it has expanded the possibilities of applying narratological concepts to the study of media other than literary texts.

2001a:214 italics). Focalisation was coined by Genette ([1972] 1980); in its simplest terms it relates to the questions “who sees?” (this answer indicates focalisation) and “who speaks?” (which indicates the narrator); “seeing” in this sense is a focalising activity<sup>7</sup> (Horstkotte, 2009:171 emphasises vision as a function of focalisation). Focalisation refers to the vision through which events or other narrative elements (such time, space, characters) are filtered (Bal, 2001a:43, 44, 47). Focalisation has been defined as the selection and regulation – as well as restriction – of narrative information related to the narrator, characters or other “more hypothetical entities” in the storyworld (Niederhoff, 2009:115). Furthermore, in a more constructive and synthesising sense, focalisation refers to the connection between events that constitute the fabula and one or more subjects whose “point of view” or “perspective” on, and whose subjective engagement with, events is represented in the narrative (Bal, 2001a:214 ).

Whether engaging with focalising strategies in visual or literary works, Bal (2006:167) advocates a view of focalisation as being the function of the work that binds otherwise unrelated elements together. Focalisation is distinguished from the elements of narrative (space, time, actors and events) because it is an *aspect* – which is processual in nature and which refers to the manipulation and regulation of the narrative elements (Bal, [1978] 1986:16; Du Plooy, 1986:281). Focalisation is usually regarded as a text-internal issue; if the argument is made that focalisation refers to choices made by the artist, and that further focalisation is lodged in the viewer-participant who becomes character, it actually remains a text-internal component of the narrative processes suggested by the works.

When applying narratological concepts to a reading of visual art, the notions of focalisation and narration are problematised – most obviously because the linguistic signifiers that indicate narration and focalisation by means of explicit textual directives such as prepositions are absent, and instead the interpreter of a visual artwork must resort to different means of understanding how events are rendered and through which vision these are filtered. Bal (2006a) as well as Steiner (2004), when

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<sup>7</sup>This view of focalisation is not uncontested, but although critics differ in terms of nuance (i.e. whether “point of view” or “perspective” is favoured in a definition of focalisation, for example), most concur that it concerns a perception and orientation of the information. See Niederhoff (2009) for a summary of different positions on focalisation.

reading paintings narratologically, uses a number of visual devices in their readings to suggest a narrative unfolding of events and focalisation. These include lines of sight or gazes (Bal, 2006a:138-176) of figures in the artwork, or a cycle of events shown by a recurring character in the same work (this device is often found in medieval or early Renaissance painting – see Steiner, 2004), or allusive/intertextual references (often iconographical reuse of known symbols and images) that point to a different time and possibly also a different “voice”, among others. Essentially, many different strategies are useful in this regard; Bal (2006a:167) posits that the study of focalisation in visual arts is a fairly flexible undertaking, and believes that the meaning and structure of focalisation cannot be fixed – although the viewer is guided and directed by signifying elements in the artwork that may be seen to act as signposts so that analysis is not entirely left open.

Therefore, regardless of the devices used to analyse and interpret narration and focalisation in visual artworks, scholars who read visual images by means of narratological concepts tend to make use of an approach that can be broadly characterised as semiotic; such an approach allows them to infer meaning with reference to visual information of whatever nature provided by the work, as well as linguistic prompters such as titles. Although this semiotic basis of most visual narratology may suggest that realism is favoured (given the iconic and also indexical nature of referential signification, and the conventional use of symbolism suggested by the practice of iconography), this is not necessarily the case – as Bal (2001a:213-238) demonstrates in a (semiotically driven) narratological reading of an abstract artwork.

The challenges facing a visual narratology (as part of a broader programme of intermedial scholarship – see Ryan, 2004) are currently being addressed by a number of scholars; the most pressing of these challenges for this study are to (1) engage with the nature of focalisation and narration on a visual-semiotic level appropriate to the mediums of visual art; which will help to (2) ameliorate the differences between the way in which the flow of events in time is presented in both literary narrative and visual images as these are filtered through the vision of a focaliser.

In terms of the narrator in the visual arts, Bryson (2001:14) concurs with Bal (2001a) who refuses to conflate the narrator with the artist – the artist as man (in the case of Rembrandt that Bal and Bryson

refer to) is a person with a history and story distinct from the narrator of the artwork; there are different points of view at work in a Rembrandt painting: “The different points – painter, narrator, received story, revised story, viewer – form an interactive and interpersonal force field that is characterised not by the perfect alignment of its elements but by their separability” (Bryson, 2001:15). This study aims to demonstrate that the narratological functioning of the various personas or characters involved in the production and interpretation of installation art, including the artist and his or her functions, problematise distinctions between characters, and between functions of characters. Thus while it remains important to separate functions (such as historical artist/author and implied artist/author, or participant and character, or real person and fictional character – see Lothe, 2000:18 for a consideration of Booth’s [1961] 1983 elaboration of the concept of the narratological implied author) in order to make sense of the character constellations, these functions are focalised by the participant to suggest a sense of connectedness between categories.

Installation art as a special instance of visual art will require a set of narratological tools that overlaps with, but is also distinct from, visual narratology as it currently exists. This is because installation art more ostensibly makes use of temporality as a distinguishing characteristic; because installation art requires active viewer participation in an explicit manner; and crucially, because installation art (with the exception of tableaux-like pieces by artists such as Edward Kienholtz [1927-1994] and George Segal [1924-2000] – see Bishop, 2005:27 – or in cases where an installation artwork also includes a performance by a human agent) usually do not feature human presences apart from the viewer/spectator – and hence at least the position of the focaliser but most likely also that of the narrator is complicated. These last two points form the basis of the theoretical framework of this study which entails a visual narratology for installation art in which the active viewer/spectator stands in for the absent human agent in the work, and participates as narrator and focaliser (together with implied narrator(s) and focaliser(s), depending on the nature of the work). This theoretical framework will be informed by the contention that the temporal dimension plays a central and

ostensibly subjective role (see Ricoeur, 1985 and Bishop, 2005) in both postmodern literature and installation art<sup>8</sup>.

## 1.5 Intermedial narratology

This is an interdisciplinary study, drawing on the disciplines of art history as well as literature studies, specifically as these are concentrated into the field narratology. Like Bal (2006b), the current study propounds that concepts can travel across discipline boundaries, and in the process enrich both disciplines. Therefore, while art history may enrich its vocabulary and interpretative approaches, narratology may also broaden its application of concepts and expand their use. The interdisciplinary nature of this study is partly why this thesis is fairly extensive; it is an attempt to do justice to both the narratological methodology and theoretical framework on the one hand, and the art historical objects of study (the installation artworks) on the other hand.

The pursuit of relating visual art and the literary arts, to use one of the more obvious examples of intermedial studies, has either bothered or delighted scholars. From Horace's oft-used dictum *ut pictura poesis* to Lessing's *Laocoön* ([1766] 1962; this was essentially an attempt at putting art "in its place", once and for all, as inferior to poetry), opinions have varied over the usefulness or desirability of peeping across the disciplinary fence that has for long seemed to locate different things into neat and comforting pigeonholes. This study contends, however, that transgressing these settled divisions actually helps illuminate rich angles on phenomena such as artworks (and, obviously, literature) that may have been overlooked without the use of theoretical and methodological tools borrowed from adjacent disciplines. Therefore, the tools and insights of another discipline are very likely to yield new and multifaceted interpretations.

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<sup>8</sup> The unfolding of time in narrative means that time can be presented as having any of the following qualities (or a combination of these): it can be compressed; stretched out infinitely; fractured; infinitely looped; suggestive of a sense of simultaneity; entangled with but distinct from "history"; and based on imagination and/or memory (see Heise, 1997:4, 5, 7, 11, 15, 52, 53). These qualities are found *both* in postmodern literature and in installation art.

This discussion sets out to present a few important markers of interdisciplinarity that inform the current study as a whole. The interdisciplinary markers that characterise this study include the first premise that that art history is itself a hybrid discipline. Giorgio Vasari (1511-74), broadly hailed as the founder of the discipline of art history, first married art and history in his treatise *The lives of the most eminent Italian architects, painters, and sculptors from Cimabue to our times* (2009; [first published in 1550, expanded in 1568]) in which he notably also linked the biographical dimension to the study of art – and in which he laid the foundations of the canon of western art and art history (Preziosi, 2009:16). The on-going debate surrounding the word-image conundrum is addressed extensively by Mitchell (1994) in his book *Picture theory: essays on verbal and visual representation*; he advocates an approach where the pictorial is not subordinated to the linguistic (i.e. the written). This is proposed in light of established approaches by art historical giants such as Erwin Panofsky whose much lauded iconological model (*Studies in iconology: Humanistic themes in the art of the Renaissance* [first published in 1939]) relies greatly on textual knowledge of conventional meanings of symbols (hence the components *icon* and *logos* in Panofsky's iconological model). Such an approach implicitly subordinates the visual to the written text that would “explain” it best.

A second premise of the current study's interdisciplinary approach is that it presents an attempt to apply the methodological, analytical and interpretative tools of (literary-based) narratology to the interpretation of a specific visual art form (installation art). In the last instance, the interdisciplinary nature of the study is lodged in the notion that installation art itself is in many ways a hybrid, even interdisciplinary art form that fuses spatio-temporal and other semiotic dimensions conventionally associated with theatre (including opera), film, graphic novel and other art forms in which word and image, or sound and image naturally occur side by side.

## ***A survey of literature on intermedial narratology***

The current study forms part of, and also wishes to contribute towards a larger network of developments mostly in the field of narratology. These developments, known as intermedial studies, have arguably been fuelled to a large degree by literary scholars – often more so than by their counterparts in other disciplines. Intermedial studies, or – depending whose terminology one uses, transmedial studies (Herman, 2010:47-75) in the current study refers to the scholarly approach towards investigating narrative across media, including visual arts, graphic novels, film and computer games, among others (see the anthology edited by Ryan, 2004 called *Narrative across media. The languages of storytelling*). An anthology edited by Page (2010) entitled *New perspectives on narrative and multimodality* offers a variant term used for communicative products that make use of more than one modality (film, opera, the artist’s book, for example). Another such anthology edited by Heinen and Sommer (2009) is entitled *Narratology in the age of cross-disciplinary research* and presents enquiries into narratological approaches in areas such as theology, historiography and the like – the authors (2009:2) contend that at present insufficient agreement exists among scholars from different disciplines regarding the use and epistemological status of narratives and that this hampers true interdisciplinarity.

In all these publications, the common denominator is that narratological terms, modes of analysis and therefore also new and expanded interpretative possibilities are brought to bear on a variety of fields not commonly associated with a narratological approach. Not commonly associated, perhaps, but these fields of study are quite likely in a position to benefit from the rich terminology and interpretative tools that a narratological approach offers – obvious examples are film and graphic novels, which are inherently story-telling instances. Less obvious examples where narratological analyses and/or consideration have been attempted include medical discourse of the body (Young, 1999); the field of music (Kalafenos, 2004; Rabinowitz, 2004; Tarasiti, 2004); as well as in the cyberage discourse (Ryan, 1999) and many others. Meuter (2013:2) mentions law, psychoanalysis, ethics, sociology and theology as well; these instances constitute evidence of the “narrative turn”.

Without simply naming the publications that have been consulted and found useful for the current study, it seems necessary to at least highlight the books and articles where the narratological cross-over has been explored in innovative, discipline-expanding ways that have had a bearing on the specific concerns of this study. I have noted above that installation art – the focus of this thesis – relates to art forms such as opera (explored in narratological terms by Hutcheon & Hutcheon, 2010:65-77), it also remains a visual art form in the sense that one will not typically find a discussion of the work of an installation artist in, say, a history of opera. The same is true of film: while installation art has many cinematographic features, film theory does not seem to notice installation art. Even though film is an ostensibly visual art form that clearly unfolds over time and also offers multimodal channels of reception such as sound which may be present also in installation art, and even though many installation art borrows cinematographic devices such as screens and projections, it seems that the visual arts and especially installation art is not part of the staple of theorising about film – apart from comparing the *mise-en-scène* of a film with a painterly composition, for example. Nonetheless, there are insightful publications dealing with narratological issues in film, such as Bordwell (2004) and Elliott (2004) as well as Lothe's extremely useful book *Narrative in fiction and in film* where Lothe, like Elliott (2004), focuses on filmic adaptations of literary texts. What makes this publication user-friendly is that Lothe presents clear and uncluttered filmic versions of a range of narratological concepts: narrators, time and space, characters and events and so forth.

The visual arts have kept many scholars busy with narratological analyses. Most of these scholars focus on applying narratological concepts to more conventional visual art forms such as painting. Many also turn to graphic novels, which are primarily a visual medium, and some work has been done with reference to installation art (more about this below). Apart from insightful contributions by the likes of Steiner (2004) on medieval painting and narratological implications of gazes, characters and architectural spaces inside an artwork, the towering presence in the field of visual narratology is the Dutch scholar (narratologist turned socio-cultural and art critic as well as more recently, artist and exhibition curator) Mieke Bal (b. 1946). Her output in the field is intimidatingly prolific and has informed much of my understanding of how narratological concepts can find application in the visual arts. One of her first and very well-known significant publications (not yet

with the focus on visual art that would characterise much of her later work) is called *De theorie van vertellen en verhalen – inleiding in de narratologie* ([1978] 1986); this small book gave a much simplified version of important aspects of Genette's ([1972] 1980) magisterial *Narrative discourse*. Various publications by Bal dealing with narratology in disciplines other than the visual arts (Biblical studies and so forth) will not be mentioned here, but relevant ones will be highlighted when the subject of focalisation is discussed in a subsequent chapter.

A seminal and oft-quoted article by Bal and Bryson with the title "Semiotics and art history" (1991) appeared in *The Art Bulletin*; here Bal and Bryson explored works by Rembrandt – a concern that would recur in Bal's publication record. In this article, the authors argue that conventional art historical methodology needs revision; they further contend that semiotics is a workable strategy to pursue. Since semiotics allows for transdisciplinary endeavour, it is eminently suitable for reading visual artworks since semiotic concepts "can be brought to bear on objects pertaining to any sign-system" (Bal & Bryson, 1991:175). This journal publication would be followed by a great deal of work by Bal on visual art, such as *Looking in – the art of viewing* (2001a) introduced by Bryson; here Bal announces that while she started out as a structural narratologist, she has become more interested in exploring narrative as a "discursive mode that affects all semiotic objects to varying degrees" (2001a:37) and sets out to apply narratological concepts such as focalisation to visual artworks in a series of essays and fragments of essays that deal with art from Rembrandt to abstraction.

In *Quoting Caravaggio – contemporary art, preposterous history* (1999b) Bal plays a temporal game that can best be explained by the quotation by TS Eliot from she uses as a motto to the introduction of the book: "Whoever has approved this idea of order ... will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (1919, quoted in Bal, 1999b:1).

Bal (1999:1, 7) argues in this book that certain contemporary artworks (such as the artist Andres Serrano's (b. 1950) 1983 photograph *Ascent* which shows two feet suspended in the air, presumably referring to the Assumption of Christ and echoing the Baroque artist's stylistic qualities) that are viewed in the present cause us to view the past (and its artworks) through a "detour" caused by the

present. This detour is the heuristic result of what has been seen and which, if I could paraphrase, cannot be unseen – so that the past is forever contaminated by what has been seen in the present. In short, the book engages with ways in which intertextuality alters both the text in which a reference occurs as well as the source text it refers to. In the process, the author addresses issues of the body, mirrors and narcissism, of identity and space, and illuminatingly of narration in “first person, second person, same person” (Bal, 1999b:177-179).

Other notable publications that have been consulted for the current study include a book-length study called *Louise Bourgeois' Spider - The architecture of art-writing* (2001b). Here Bal (2001b:ix; x) proclaims that traditional art-writing has shown a lack of proper engagement with the work itself (echoing concerns highlighted in the 1991 article with Bryson discussed above), and hence she demarcates her focus in this book as both revising the methodological approach to art writing, and to doing proper justice to the artwork by devoting an entire book to one work. She calls the *Spider* a “theoretical object” (it is, in the more obvious sense, an installation piece) because it is “both and object and a subject of art-writing” (2001b:3); it generates narrative in a theoretical as well as personal sense, instead of illustrating a narrative. The scope of the book includes grappling with the difficulty inherent in description, and elaborates on aspects such as viewing, narrative issues and art historical echoes in Bourgeois’ work (such as intuitive recall of Bernini’s Baroque sculptures). The tone is subjective but extremely well informed, which has become something of a Bal trademark when she writes about art. The broad theoretical base that informs Bal’s approach – cultural, literary, anthropological and art historical, to name a few – results in her voice having a peculiarly unorthodox quality that is likely to stir debate for years to come.

Perhaps the most impressive publication by Bal on the visual arts, at least in scope, is the 494-page *Reading Rembrandt – beyond the word-image opposition* of 2006a. Arguing that the visual and verbal domains of a given period and culture are intertwined (2006a:4), Bal tackles salient problems associated with interdisciplinary methodologies between visual art and literature (this noted on the blurb of the book). Bal (2006a:8-12) also engages with Foucault’s ideas set out in “What is an

author?" [1979]<sup>9</sup> – in a manner that resonates with the way in which Nelles [1997] sets out the difference between the historical and the implied author; in turn with reference to Booth's [1979] ideas about these). *Reading Rembrandt* is Bal's most extensive publication on a single artist; the book weaves its way through notions of "pre-text" (the existing story such as a Bible story that informs the text), the gaze in art, focalising dimensions, gender issues, psycho-analytic aspects and more. Her arguments (2006a:71-91) show a humane engagement with artworks based on a very close reading but also on informed associations sparked by both the pre-text and the interpreter's own knowledge base.

In her 2010 book *Of what one cannot speak: The political art of Doris Salcedo*, Bal explores the political use of narratives informed by loss and memory in the installations of the Colombian-born artist Salcedo (b. 1958). Markers of absence (empty shoes and so on) in Salcedo's work generate narratives of erasure and trauma, but also of a poignant will to remember (referring particularly to Adorno's views here). Again, Bal positions the artworks as "theoretical objects" that must be allowed to speak to the viewer on their own terms so that their stories can take shape in the space and time of the viewing, and also of the past.

## **1.6 Problem statement, research questions, and aims and objectives**

In the light of the discussion above, a number of salient issues inform the problem that is addressed in the current study. In the first instance, the study purports to offer an interpretation of the installation art of Jan van der Merwe; using selected works as examples. In the second instance, it is a study that uses narratological concepts in order to achieve this interpretation – specifically, narration, the fabula and focalisation. Thus an interdisciplinary confluence of Van der Merwe's works, an understanding of installation art as an approach in the visual arts, as well as a theoretical framework comprising narratological concepts is necessary in order to arrive at a methodology that is appropriate for a narratological interpretation of the works.

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault, M. 1979. What is an author? In *Textual strategies: perspectives in post-structuralist criticism*, ed. by J.V. Harari, transl. H. Bouchard and S. Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 141-160.

The central question that this study sets out to address is: How can the narratological concepts of narration, focalisation and the fabula provide access to peculiar interpretative possibilities in the installation art of Jan van der Merwe?

The problem, therefore, concerns the manner in which narration takes place in the installation artworks selected for this study. In particular, the role of focalisation is important here in order to discern the narrativisation of the narrative elements of space and time, and of character complexities, and to determine how the construction of meaningful fabulae in the artworks is facilitated by focalisation. An extension of this problem concerns the ways in which the viewer of Van der Merwe's installation artworks can be said assume the roles of a participant and a character who focalises, and the ways in which this active participation in the work gives rise to various fabulae.

The formulation of research questions is guided to a large degree by Bal's (2001a:214) approach towards a visual narratology. She suggests that pursuing the way in which the fabula is presented so that it may come across as a *story* is concerned with the "semantization of characters, the concretization and subjectification of space into place, the thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices, and, most important of all, *focalization*". The research questions (and the aims and objectives) that draw on this phrase and that will guide this study have different emphases: art historical, theoretical, and methodological – the latter seeking to find broad applicability of the particular narratological concepts used in this study to the interpretation of installation art:

*How can installation art as an artistic approach be conceptualised specifically with reference to the elements of narrative as proposed by Bal (2001a:214) in the context of the visual arts: the thickening of time, the concretization and subjectification of space into place, and the semantisation of character?* This question combines art historical concerns with narratological (theoretical) concepts. Answering this question entails pursuing a critical exploration of literature on installation art as well as its predecessors, links with other art forms, and ways in which the narrative elements time, space

and character (and event)<sup>10</sup> can be conceptualised with reference to visual art generally, and in installation art more specifically. The objective is to demonstrate that installation foregrounds the narratological elements of time, space and character in peculiar and self-conscious ways.

*Why are the narratological constructs narration, the fabula and focalisation problematised by installation artworks, and how can these narratological constructs be configured with a view to apply them towards an interpretation of Van der Merwe's installation artworks?* This question requires a theoretical consideration of the narratological concepts of narration, the fabula and focalisation in order to construct a methodological approach towards the interpretation of Van der Merwe's installation artworks in a way that may find broader application to the narratological interpretation of installation art. The objective is to indicate how these narratological concepts can be augmented and applied to the interpretation of installation art.

*How do the narration and focalisation of time and space, as well as character construction (and, more briefly, event) proceed in Van der Merwe's installation art in order to produce possible fabulae?* Answering this question requires applying the theoretical and methodological instruments gleaned from narratology – narration and focalisation in particular – to the narrative elements of time, space and character (and event) in the selected works in order to interrogate the construction of fabulae. The objective is to demonstrate that various components of the works, as focalised (selected) by the artist and then focalised (synthesised) by the viewer-participant, enable the thickening of time and the concretisation and subjectification of space into place. A further objective is to argue for a peculiar complication and expansion of the way in which the semantisation of character, and event, can be conceptualised in Van der Merwe's work, and possibly more broadly in installation art – all of these elements synthesised into extended fabulae that are constructed in the context of the interpretation.

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<sup>10</sup> A fourth element mentioned by Bal (1986) but not appearing in her application of these elements to fabula construction in the visual arts in her publication *Looking in* (2001a:214).

## 1.7. Central theoretical statement

This study contends that Van der Merwe's work, and much installation art in general, can be read as narratives and that these narratives suggest traceable processes of narration and focalisation that work to construct subjective versions of the fabula(e) of a work. However, the nature of the narrative elements – time, space and character as well as event that relate to the fabulae in most installation artworks (also in Van der Merwe's) complicates the application of these narratological concepts to a reading of such works also by foregrounding these elements in a self-conscious way. This complication further implies that installation works call for a specific reworking of existing views of narration and focalisation. Most significantly, I argue that the nature of character as narrative element in Van der Merwe's work (and in installation art in general) impacts in a special way on the ontological status of characters. These characters form groups that, to different degrees of presence and absence, include the following: (1) the artist who may be present in some installations, but who is absent in Van der Merwe's works – although the dimensions of implied and historical artist are also involved as facets of this character, (2) the viewer-participant who also becomes a character by entering the storyworld of the artwork (thus complying with Margolin's [2006] definition of a character), and (3) other characters. This last group may include characters that are present in some installation artworks, although in Van der Merwe's works, as in a great deal of installation artworks, these characters are inferred by the works, but they are absent.

The implication of this character constellation is that viewer-participant spectator installation art is not only a character, but participates in the narration and, most importantly, focalises in an active and embodied manner, by being physically present inside the work. Hence, the participant works to construct a fabula or fabulae, so that the narrative elements as proposed by the work are integrated into the participant-focaliser's subjective version of the fabula. The fabulae that emerge from this process are structured along multiple temporal spheres: that of the present, and the different layers of temporality suggested by the works themselves.

I argue that scholarship of Van der Merwe's work specifically, but installation art in a more general sense, can benefit from an expanded narratological lexicon that can provide access to interpretative dimensions that would not be possible without such a narratological approach.

Finally, I posit that the terms *narration*, *fabula* and *focalisation* are highly suitable narratological concepts that can in augmented form contribute towards the narratological lexicon of installation art. This expansion of narratology towards installation art relates to the current concern with intermedial narratological studies.

## **1.8 Methodological framework**

This is a qualitative study: a literature study and a theoretical framework are followed by an interpretation of the artworks.

I have consulted with the artist Jan van der Merwe at various times – he provided interesting personal angles on his work. These exchanges took place since 2012 and through 2014 by means of personal interviews and telephone conversations. I also attended a lecture he gave in 2013 at the year-end function of the Research Niche *Visual Narratives in the South African Context* at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University as well as the walkabout following the opening night of the Oliewenhuis exhibition *Time and Space* during which he addressed a number of gallery-goers on his works.

The methodological approach of this study entails an interpretation of narrative elements in the work of Jan van der Merwe in order to arrive at richer insight of his work; this methodological approach is envisaged as a means to participate in current intermedial studies of visual art and narratology.

As a point of departure I take Bal's (2001a:63) contention that "The dynamics of focalisation are at work in every visual work that contains traces of the representational work as seen and interpreted by the viewer, since it is precisely in those traces that the work becomes narrativised." "Traces" in this sense are regarded as any aspect of the work that has semiotic significance.

Therefore, the methodology entails that the works are read with the following in mind: A descriptive reading of the works is undertaken with reference, in each instance, to the space of the work and the objects present in the work; this requires an awareness of the material aspects of the work. Such a description highlights a number of aspects related to temporality – the duration needed to take in the work; the laboured time-layers inherently suggested by the surfaces, and the sense of time suggested by the video loops. These are the more obvious signs of temporality.

This is followed by an exploration of potential signifier signposts (titles, associations prompted by objects, time-switches suggested by the different media). These point to the specific human agent whose absence determines the narrative but who can be imagined by means of semiotic traces (see the quote by Bal, 2001a: above). In this process, the viewer becomes an active spectator-participant who focalises; apart from herself as focaliser, she identifies different potential focalisers (internal, external, or confections of these) suggested by the work and discerns a possible narrative based on semiotic suggestion of events, character/absence and cause and effect. Reading the video (looping) material in conjunction with the physical, large-scale, rusted objects in the space creates an awareness not only of the absent human agent or character, but also of the temporal layers and tensions in the work. This guides the process of identifying narrative events, complications, as well as cause and effect – and also generates a heightened sense of emotional involvement. At this point it will be possible to insert different potential fabulas into the reading; these are likely to play themselves out in the spaces between temporalities where focalisation is active. This process demonstrates the subjective nature of temporality (Ricoeur, 1985); it also indicates how focalisation as subjective process (Bal, 2001a:56) operates in installation art by means of, among others, analepsis and embedded narratives that guide the understanding (or construction) of the fabula(s).

The reading process is consistently informed by an emphasis on the visual artwork as point of departure; Bal (2001a:54) pertinently notes that focalisation in visual art is found in the “content of visual signifiers such as lines, dots, light and dark, and composition”. My contention is that the artworks themselves generate narratives – this sets these works apart from visual artworks that illustrate or rework existing stories.

## 1.9 Contribution of the study

This study aims to make scholarly contributions in three senses.

In the first instance, I would like to contribute towards the development of intermedial strategies that currently characterises the field of narratology - particularly developments that foreground narratology and the *visual arts* (see, for instance, Ryan's anthology *Narrative across media* (2004); Bal's *Reading Rembrandt* (2006a) and *Quoting Caravaggio* (1999b); Bal's *Looking in* (2001a); the entire anthology *Narratology in the age of cross-disciplinary research* (2009) edited by Heinen and Sommer as well as numerous individual contributions to anthologies (such as those by Alber & Fludernik, 2009; Meuter, 2009; Ryan, 2009) and a vast body of journal articles on the topic. I regard this *vogue* for visual narratology in light of arguments that art history's theoretical base can benefit by constantly expanding, appropriating and refashioning approaches developed in related disciplines; this view is strengthened by the statement that, "the analysis of visual images as narratives in and of themselves can do justice to an aspect of images and their effect that neither iconography nor other art historical practices can quite articulate" (Bal, 2001a:54).

More specifically, in the second instance, the current study wishes to contribute to this field of intermedial narratology by developing existing narratological concepts (especially narrator and focalisation) with a view to expanding the conceptual tools available for the interpretation of installation art in particular. To date, little narratological work has been done in this particular branch of art. Bal (1999a) produced an article on the installation art of Louise Bourgeois, but little evidence of other scholarly engagement with narratological approaches to installation art can be found.

Lastly, I wish to contribute to scholarship on Jan van der Merwe's work, as I believe that he is a major South African artist – he has won numerous prestigious competitions<sup>11</sup>; boasts an impressive

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11. These include (in 2005) the Special Delphic Award for outstanding presentation in art installation, 2nd International Delphic Games, Kuching, Malaysia; the Helgaard Steyn Award for outstanding sculpture by the North-West University; in 2004 the 4th prize for sculpture at the International Olympic Sport and Art contest at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland; in 2003 winner of the sculpture category at the IOC Olympic Art Competition; in 2000 2nd prize at the Kempton Park Tembisa Fine Arts Competition; the Pretoria Technikon Rector's Award; and others – including first prize

exhibition record locally and internationally (by his own admission, a career highlight was the large-scale retrospective solo show at the Pretoria Art Museum in 2006 entitled *The archaeology of time*); he was invited as the festival artist at the Aardklop National Arts Festival (2001) and generally enjoys a high level of prominence on the gallery circuit – yet apart from a few scholarly articles (by Kruger & Van der Merwe, 2010; Botha, 2009 and Van der Watt, 2005) specifically focused on his art, his work has not enjoyed the scholarly engagement it deserves to my mind. By implication, Van der Merwe's work has also not been read from a narratological point of view.

## **1.10 Chapter division**

After having laid out the context, problem statement and motivation for the study in the first chapter, the second chapter presents a contextualisation of Jan van der Merwe's oeuvre with emphasis on his installation artworks in rust, as well as an overview of installation art in order to provide background to this art form. Definitions, characteristics and art historical antecedents of installation art are explored.

In the third chapter, installation art is interrogated with particular emphasis on the narrative elements of time and space, as well as character event (briefly) in order to demonstrate that these elements are foregrounded in peculiar ways in installation art. The visual arts more generally is taken as point of departure for each element, after which more detailed attention is paid to how these elements appear in installation art.

In the fourth chapter, the theoretical framework and methodological approach are developed with emphasis on the ways in which narration, the fabula and focalisation are problematised by installation art.

The reading of the artworks commences in chapter five, where the narration and focalisation of time and space are pursued as these can be interpreted in the selected artworks *It's cold outside* (2004) and *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003).

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for mixed media at the New Signatures Art Competition at the SA Association of Arts, Pretoria in 1982. The artist's curriculum vitae is available at the website [www.iart.co.za](http://www.iart.co.za).

In chapter six, the interpretation of these artworks proceeds towards an exploration of the complexities of character groups and fabula construction. Again, focalisation and narration guide the processual understanding of how character and fabula construction can be interpreted.

Chapter seven is the final chapter; here the main findings of the study are highlighted and synthesised together with relevant insights and conclusions. Suggestions for further research are noted as these are expected to emanate from the present study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ART HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALISATION: JAN VAN DER MERWE AND INSTALLATION ART

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This chapter introduces the artist Jan van der Merwe and provides an overview of representative artworks from his oeuvre with emphasis on his installation artworks, after which installation art as an art form is considered. Installation art is explored here historically and also with reference to a number of peculiarities that characterise this art form.

Hereafter I explore installation art in narrative terms to demonstrate that this art form foregrounds the narrative elements time, space and character in peculiar, self-reflexive ways<sup>1</sup>.

The current chapter is structured along two main concerns: firstly, the focus is on the artist. A brief biographical overview of Jan van der Merwe is provided as well as an introduction to key issues in his oeuvre. Secondly, since Van der Merwe is positioned as an installation artist, some historical realities and definitions pertaining to installation art are probed together with characteristics that are associated with this art form.

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<sup>1</sup>Bal (2001a:214) refers to “issues of semantization of characters, the concretization and subjectification of space into place, the thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices.” Her omission of *event* here – which is considered as a defining narrative element by herself (1986) is noted in the discussion on installation art that follows in the subsequent this chapter. The element of event will be briefly noted together with the discussion of character in (installation) art.

## 2.1 Introducing the artist and his genre: Jan van der Merwe as an installation artist

Van der Merwe's oeuvre is presented here with emphasis on those installation artworks made with or covered in rusted metal, specifically works in rust that also contain video screen elements. These types of works constitute the bulk of his artistic output, although the artist has also explored mixed media. Brief reference is made to a number of traceable contextual links between his work and contemporary art practice in a broader sense; these links will become clearer in the section on installation art that follows the introduction to the artist.



Fig. 2.1. Jan van der Merwe in his studio located in the back yard of the Van der Merwe residence in Pretoria.

### 2.1.1 Jan van der Merwe: brief artist's biography

Jan van der Merwe is often described as an installation artist (Hundt, s.a.:1; Van der Watt, s.a.:3; Van der Merwe, s.a.<sup>2</sup>). While a comprehensive and detailed factual discussion of the artist's life would be superfluous, a number of pertinent biographical and artistic issues can be highlighted as these inform the artist's approach to his work and will also have a bearing on the analysis and interpretation of selected works in subsequent chapters. This section also highlights a number of salient publications that engage with aspects of his work.



Fig. 2.2. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2006. *Unknown*. Installation view and detail.

Van der Merwe was born in 1958 in Virginia in the Free State. He spent his childhood in Ladybrand, a small town in KwaZulu-Natal where his father served in the railway police as an electrician. The Van der Merwes were not well off financially, but were a close-knit family. After a heart attack at age 38, Van der Merwe's father spent much time in hospital – the artist recalls many trips on foot to visit his father there (Personal interview, 2014).

When his father died at the age of 46, Van der Merwe was 21 years old; as the only son he was a lone male figure in a familial setup with a strong female presence (such as his mother, maternal grandmother and sisters) – with whom he felt closely connected. This might

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<sup>2</sup> These references belong to the undated catalogue *Unknown* which gives a comprehensive overview of Van der Merwe's work. The catalogue was produced by the end of 2004 according to the artist, although this date does not appear in the front matter. The name of the catalogue refers to the unnamed absent people in the artist's installations and also to an artwork (2006) of his by the same name that consists of 224 'unopened' envelopes made of rust (see fig 2.2).

explain the importance of women as thematic indices in his work: very often an installation would suggest a female protagonist – compare, for example, *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003; fig. 2.3 – 2.5) which was made in honour of his grandmother, and *It's cold outside* (2004; fig. 2.6 – 2.8) which, according to the artist<sup>3</sup>, was inspired by his mother.

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<sup>3</sup> The artist's intention, in this instance his version of the narrative, is taken into consideration in this thesis because artistic intention, ominously fallacious for some scholars, can on occasion play some role in the interpretation of an artwork. This is the case here because Van der Merwe's work engages with highly personal, mostly autobiographical themes (albeit with universal resonance – cf. Hundt, n.d.:i). Also, my personal contact with the artist means that I have been informed about aspects of his intentions and therefore this knowledge cannot be erased or, once the connection between the work and the artist's statements about it has been made, completely disregarded. Thus, in some sense, the artist's personal account has some bearing on interpretation, but does not direct every aspect thereof.

Scholars remain carefully ambiguous about taking artistic intentions into account. Bal (2006b:236-263) has explored intention as "the concept we hate to love"; in the interpretation chapters of this study, her views are referenced again. In Bal's (2010:3) book-length study on Doris Salcedo's political installation art (*Of what one cannot speak*), she cautions against too heavy reliance on artistic intention but concedes that she, too, "use[s] some artist information" in her reading of the works. While I concur that taking an artist's intentions as the sole guiding principle during interpretation is unwise, I argue that subjectivity, personal accounts, insight into the artist's view of art and life and the like can, if felt to be useful, be part of the interpreter's toolkit. I have conducted a personal interview with the artist on 8 December 2012 at his house in Pretoria, and was also present during a Walkabout he conducted on 10 July 2013 at Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein following the opening of his solo show there called Time and space. Van der Merwe presented a lecture at the North-West University during November 2013 where he discussed his work, and I had telephone interviews with him during 2012, 2013 and 2014, and another face-to-face interview at his house on 2 February 2014. Most of the information presented here has been gleaned from these sessions. Issues pertaining to the artist's role and intentions, also with reference to the latter function as paratextual elements, are further addressed in chapter 6.



Clockwise, from above left:

Fig. 2.3 Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/ Confessional*. Detail of sink with objects.

Fig. 2.4 Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/ Confessional*. Installation view of sink and apron.

Fig. 2.5. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/ Confessional*. Detail of sink with monitor showing image of hands.



Fig. 2.6. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *It's cold outside*. Detail of stool with vanity case.



Fig. 2.7. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *It's cold outside*. Installation view.



Fig. 2.8. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *It's cold outside*. Installation view showing chair with negligée.

After completing school, Van der Merwe (like his father) worked briefly for the railway police. He then decided to apply for admission to study for the Fine Art diploma at the then Pretoria Technikon. Upon acceptance, he moved to Pretoria, arriving in the city with R75 and a suitcase, in his own words (personal interview, 2013). At the Technikon he majored, interestingly, in painting and not in sculpture as one might expect, given the sculptural quality of most of his oeuvre. He passed the National Diploma in Fine Art with a distinction in painting in 1984 and the National Higher Diploma in Fine Art in 1986. After graduating, he was employed as a graphic artist in the service of the Defence Force for five years (completing his compulsory military service there), where he produced propaganda graphics for the military of the South African government then involved in the so-called Border War (the complex series of conflicts between the South African, Namibian, Cuban, and Angolan armed forces during the 1970s and 1980s). Deciding that critique instead of complicity with the political and ideological system of the time suited his temperament far better, he pursued different artistic avenues – from working as a décor painter and prop maker at the now disbanded PACT (Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal) and as a heraldicist at the Bureau of Heraldry.

Van der Merwe's teaching career started in the field of set design at the Pretoria Technikon's Department of Entertainment Technology while completing his master's degree (i.e. the Magister Technologiae [Fine Art]), which he obtained with distinction in 1999. For the practical component of this degree, Van der Merwe made a series of installations that together are called *Final inspection* (1998, fig. 2.9 – 2.12). This series comprises a number of objects that convey a nuanced critique of war and military efforts. The series was shown, as his M. Tech exhibition, at the African Window gallery in 1998, and was subsequently taken up in the *Memórias Intimas Marcas* collection. This collection was the result of a touring exhibition in the year 2000 by the same name (*Memórias Intimas Marcas* means "traces of intimate memory") featuring works selected by the Angolan-born artist and curator Fernando Alvim. The large exhibition expressed and commemorated the trauma of the Border War<sup>4</sup> focusing on the South African-Angolan side of this conflict (Van der Merwe,

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<sup>4</sup> For a broad and critical discussion of the cultural, social and aesthetic impact of the Border War, see Baines, G. & Vale, P. (eds.) 2008. *Beyond the Border War. New perspectives on South Africa's late Cold-War conflict*. Pretoria: Unisa Press. A number of artworks related to this war effort is mentioned in this book, although Van der Merwe's works do not feature here.

s.a.:24). The exhibition traveled to England, Portugal and Belgium and contained works from South African, Angolan and Cuban artists.

Van der Merwe's M.Tech. (F.A.) exhibition as well as the international exposure of *Memórias Intimas Marcas* marked the beginning of critical success for the artist. Shortly afterwards he was appointed as a senior lecturer in the Fine Arts department of the Pretoria Technikon (now known as the Tshwane University of Technology) – a position he still holds.



Objects from  
Van der Merwe, Jan. 1998. *Final inspection*. Clockwise from left:

Fig. 2.9. *Clothes horse*.

Fig. 2.10 *Chair and jacket*.

Fig. 2.11. *Soldier's bed*

Fig. 2.12. *Ironing board*.



Van der Merwe started out, therefore, as a painting student and currently also teaches painting. However, he soon began to create not-so-two-dimensional pieces that became too bulky and eventually too three-dimensional to hang upon the wall (see, for example, *Letters from home*, 1997, fig. 2.13 – 2.14) which comprise relatively flat artworks displayed on legs – clearly a transition towards three-dimensional art).

Two views of Van der Merwe, Jan. 1997. *Letters from home*.

Below: Fig. 2.13. Front view. Right: Fig. 2.14. Side view.



Wilkinson's (2012:1) identification of Van der Merwe's installation works as "three-dimensional polysemic conundrums" seems quite apt; the type of works produced by the artist seems to create categories instead of fitting into existing ones. Van der Merwe's involvement in set design, interestingly, alerts one to the influence of the theatrical on his work. Looking at the large installations he has produced since 1998, one does get the impression that the works, being on a human scale but devoid of characters, are akin to theatre sets in which human dramas could unfold (he also describes these works in such terms). Theatre is an art form that ostensibly employs time and space in a physical, tangible manner, to present dynamic character relations and events. These elements are the cornerstones of narrative and are also at the heart of Van der Merwe's approach to installation art; I argue in chapter 3 that most installation artworks make use of at least some of these elements in a self-conscious manner.

Apart from the breakthrough moment when he was invited in 1998 to participate in the international exhibition *Memórias Intimas Marcas*, other highlights from Van der Merwe's art career include the Special Delphic Award for outstanding presentation in the discipline of art installation at the second International Delphic Games in Malaysia (2005), his winning sculpture at the IOC Olympic Art Competition (2003), and the Helgaard Steyn prize for sculpture (2005). In 2003, he was also elected festival artist at the Aardklop National Arts Festival held annually in Potchefstroom. The most recent accolade awarded to Van der Merwe is the medal of honour for visual arts (installation art) that he received from the

Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (the South African Academy for Science and Arts) in 2014.

His curriculum vitae boasts many more achievements, including works in collections and various awards<sup>5</sup>. He has presented numerous workshops abroad – especially in Ghent, Belgium, in the context of art education for people with mental disabilities. He collaborated with the Feniks social artistic organisation which has ties with the social advocacy organisation Onze Nieuwe Toekomst<sup>6</sup>. Art produced by people with mental disabilities who participate in these initiatives is presented in exhibitions alongside work by established artists – this helps to overcome the stigma associated with art for “special needs people” (one stigma is that such art would, for example, always be the result of art therapy whereas “normal” artists produce “real” art for personal expression and other purposes [telephonic interview with the artist, 2014]). Fairly recently, in 2012, Van der Merwe also spent three months in New York on a two-month residency of the Ampersand Foundation.

### 2.1.2 Publications on Jan van der Merwe’s work

The most comprehensive guide for the student or art historian interested in Van der Merwe’s work is the undated catalogue *Unknown* (see footnote 1 of this chapter). The catalogue was edited by Stefan Hundt, as curator of the Sanlam Art Collection. It presents an overview of highlights from Van der Merwe’s oeuvre up until 2004, beginning with the exhibition mounted for his M. Tech. (F.A.) at the Pretoria Technikon in 1998, proceeding through the initial addition of video screens into his pursuit of rusted interior spaces with works such as *Artifacts*<sup>7</sup> (1999; fig. 2.15) and ending with a number of life-size objects and

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<sup>5</sup> These include the 4<sup>th</sup> prize for sculpture at the International Olympic Sport and Art contest at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland in 2004; in 2000 Van der Merwe was awarded 2nd prize at the Kempton Park Tembisa Fine Arts Competition; the Pretoria Technikon Rector's Award; and others – including first prize for mixed media at the New Signatures Art Competition at the SA Association of Arts, Pretoria in 1982. The artist's curriculum vitae is available at the website [www.art.co.za](http://www.art.co.za).

<sup>6</sup> Onze Nieuwe Toekomst has a Facebook page - Onze Nieuwe Toekomst vzw.

<sup>7</sup> This work was awarded first prize at the Sasol SCI-fest art and science competition, sponsored by the French Embassy, in 1999 (see Van der Merwe, n.d.:26). Van der Merwe’s spelling of *Artifacts* (using the American spelling instead of the British “Artefacts”) could be read as a word play on ‘arty facts’ – which in itself may suggest facts communicated by art. The computer as source of play and data corroborates this interpretative possibility. “Artifact” is also the spelling favoured, perhaps incidentally, by the Prague semiotician Jan Mukařofský ([1934] 1976) in his iconic essay “Art as a semiotic fact”.

large-scale installations produced during 2004. (The fact that the last fairly comprehensive publication on this artist's work appeared in ten years ago, in 2004, suggests that another study that features more recent works is in order – Van der Merwe has noted in a telephonic interview in 2014 that he is looking into this matter; the current study hopes to make a contribution towards his efforts in this regard.)

Among the objects and installations featured in the catalogue *Unknown* are *Luggage trolley* (2004, fig. 2.16) and *It's cold outside* (2004, fig. 2.7, 2.8). The artist has to date continued to explore rust and life-size objects and spaces. Many of the works he produced after 2004 make use of similar combinations of human spaces and, as is the case with *Artifacts* and *It's cold outside*, many works contain video material in screens or projections. Van der Merwe has also recently begun to explore a different line altogether, producing works that show lyrical combinations of charcoal, Fabriano<sup>8</sup> paper, burnt tree trunks and furniture. These works comment on the evanescence of life and of man-made things, as well as the traces left by memories of people and experiences (see fig. 2.17).



Fig. 2.15. Van der Merwe, Jan. 1999. *Artifacts*.



Fig. 2.16. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *Luggage trolley* with *Baggage arrival* in the background.

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<sup>8</sup> Fabriano is a thick cotton-based paper with a slightly textured, creamy white surface. It is used for drawing in charcoal as well as for printmaking techniques such as etching. It is also a favourite of artists who work in watercolours.



Fig. 2.17. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *Uprooted/Ontwortel*. Installation view.

The *Unknown* catalogue contains essays by the former artist-curator-lecturer Koos van der Watt, the curator Clive Kellner, the artists Willem Boshoff and Robert Hodgins<sup>9</sup>, as well as by Van der Merwe himself. Van der Merwe's article in this catalogue is a condensed version of his master's dissertation with a similar title ("Transformasie van die gevonde in kontemporêre konteks" which can be translated as "Transforming found objects in a contemporary context") that he completed in 1999 at the then Pretoria Technikon under the academic supervision of J.P. (Koos) van der Watt and Ingrid Stevens. Van der Merwe also wrote short accompanying texts for each artwork that appears in the catalogue in which he discusses some thematic and material concerns of each work (these are paratextual elements that function almost like prefaces – see chapter 6.3.2). Some recurring issues emerge upon scrutiny of the different sections of the catalogue; these shall guide the present discussion of the artist and his work.

A number of useful scholarly and more popular texts on the artist and his work can be mentioned here before I proceed to discuss a few important issues regarding his oeuvre. John R. Botha explored a different angle in 2009 with his article "Eyeing the creatures: an exploration of mirth as a personal function of art", published in *Literator*. The article formed

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<sup>9</sup> These essays are also available on the internet at [www.art.co.za/janvandermerwe](http://www.art.co.za/janvandermerwe).

part of the practice-based research project called *Tracking Creative Creatures*<sup>10</sup> that has been undertaken by a large group of artists, designers and art historians from different institutions (the project was based at the North-West University's Potchefstroom Campus). Botha's article deals with Van der Merwe's contribution to the *Creatures* project's art exhibition for which the artist made eye-glasses for all the different fantasy creatures. These glasses playfully suggest that visual impairments such as myopia can metaphorically reflect similar mental conditions; the artist produced different eye-glasses for other eye conditions that have ideological or mental counterparts.

Runette Kruger together with Van der Merwe himself published a fairly philosophical consideration of his work in the journal *Image & Text*, with the title "Liminality, absence and silence in the installation art of Jan van der Merwe" (2010). This article focuses on the installation pieces *It's cold outside* (2004), *Wag/Waiting* (2000, fig. 2.18) and *Final inspection (Soldier's bed, 1998, fig. 2.10)*. The central argument of this article is that the spatial and temporal aspects that suggest liminality in the works are "productive of nothingness" (2010:158) – an argument I contest in the section on absent characters in chapter 6.4, where I discuss character in Van der Merwe's work.

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<sup>10</sup> This practice-based project comprised, among others, 40 invited artists and writers, as well as a large number of school children and a handful of community projects. All the creative participants received nine drawings of strange hybrid animals produced by the artist Ian Marley – who was in turn prompted to draw these creatures by his son Joshua's night-time stories. Participants had to use the creatures as inspiration for creating artworks – whether written, painted or musical in nature – after which theorists or artist-scholars produced scholarly articles on aspects of the project. For more information on practice-based research, see Gray, C. & Malins, J. 2004. *Visualizing research: a guide to the research process in art and design*. Thousand Oaks: Robert Gordon University Press. For more information on *Tracking Creative Creatures*, see Combrink, L. & Marley, I.R. 2009. Practice-based research: Tracking Creative Creatures in a research context. *Literator*, 30(1):177-206, April; also Greyling, S.F. & Marley, I.R. 2009. Op die spoor van Kreatiewe Kreature: 'n Interdissiplinêre ondersoek na die kreatiewe proses. *Literator*, 30(1):1-29, April.



Fig. 2.18. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2000.  
*Wag/Waiting*. Installation view.

Van der Merwe's catalogue article mentioned above ("Transformasie..."), also appeared in the journal *Image & Text* in 2000. Many newspaper articles and radio and television interviews are listed at the back of the catalogue.

VF du Toit completed her Master's degree in Art History at the North-West University in 2012 with the title *Die uitbeelding van hegemonie, identiteit en herinneringe deur die konseptuele kunstenaars Berni Searle en Jan van der Merwe* ("The representation of hegemony, identity and memories by the Conceptual artists Berni Searle and Jan van der Merwe"). Her choice of Van der Merwe's works included *Wag* (2000; a rust-clad work with furniture and clothing) and *Sleepmerke* (2009; this is one of the works that feature Fabriano paper marked with charcoal "drag marks", a tree trunk and burnt furniture). To date, however, no extensive monographic study or doctoral research has been completed with Van der Merwe's work as focus.

At the time of writing (2014), Van der Merwe was enrolled for the practice-based D. Tech. (Doctor Technologiae) at the Tshwane University of Technology in which he is writing up his own art-making – with a focus on thematic issues such as archival suggestions and especially on his techniques and manipulation of material that he has developed over the last 35 years. This thesis would most likely serve, inter alia, as a monographic overview (which is as noted currently lacking regarding his oeuvre) whilst my present study – to recap the aims set out in the first chapter – intends to contribute towards more theoretically inclined

scholarship (especially regarding narrative concerns) on Van der Merwe's work on the one hand, and on the other to enlarge the theoretical and methodological scope of narratological readings of visual art in a broad sense with the focus on focalisation and narration in installation art in particular. This last aim does not necessarily entail a fully generalisable set of methodological and theoretical tools, but rather sets out to explore narratological possibilities in the interpretation of Van der Merwe's art in the hope that these possibilities can also find broader application in the context of installation art.

### **2.1.3 Some key issues in Van der Merwe's oeuvre**

A few themes and motifs appear in almost all publications about Van der Merwe's work. Theme is, broadly speaking, taken to refer to content that carries over from the narrative to the real world. Themes and motifs that convey themes and that manifest repeatedly in an artist's oeuvre can be seen as: "a recurring complex of interrelated story-world features and discourse features" (Hogan, 2012:60).

The first of the characteristic and repeated motifs, and one that is mentioned in every publication about Van der Merwe's work, is the artist's frequent and extensive use of rust as material – seemingly, this is also the first and most obvious aspect that the visitor to the gallery notices. And, of course, when one notices the rust, one also becomes acutely aware of the amount of work; the sheer immensity of labour<sup>11</sup> that the artworks so clearly represent. Labour in itself becomes thematised; up close the rusted surfaces assume the character of a patchwork quilt (a "feminine" aspect that is addressed below with reference to gendered aspects in his work).

The current discussion briefly engages with the qualities that the rust lends his work before proceeding to the further obvious suggestion of time that emanates from the awareness of labour as well as from thinking about rust as a process. Themes such as the way in which ordinary spaces and things represent loss, vulnerability, history, memory and the like are

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<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given his extensive output of rust-clad works that require a great deal of labour, Van der Merwe admits to being mesmerised by performing compulsive and obsessively repetitive work. He has also referred to his fascination with his mother's embroidery work (Telephonic interview, 2013). The scale of many of the artist's rust-clad works, and the number of repeated objects (such as 224 envelopes in *Unknown*) attest to this compulsion. Such an ability to work compulsively, repetitively making things, is also a characteristic he admits to sharing with many of the mentally impaired people with whom he has worked in the context of the Feniks foundation (discussed above under the artist's biography and oeuvre).

also addressed below in conjunction with reference to some autobiographical elements in Van der Merwe's work. Even though the narratives that inspired the works are often highly personal, they also represent universal themes and narratives that invite the gallery-goer to relate the work to his or her own reality. A consideration of how theme and narrative suggestion create a particular atmosphere and mood will illuminate the indispensable dimension of viewer participation. This last point, I argue, demonstrates that over and above narrativity, the works require a focalising agent in the form of the viewer or participant whose subjective ordering of visual information together with suggestions of narrative possibilities in the works helps to construct *fabulae* (or, to use Bal's term, *fabulas* – Eco [1979] 1985; [1979 [1984] prefers *fabulae*). In short, the viewer's focalisation works to construct narratives but at the same time problematises a number of aspects within the field of focalisation and narration. This problematising occurs in the context of installation art but it may, in turn, give rise to a consideration of what happens when focalisation and narration are extended to various art forms, especially installation art – so that perhaps the definitions of focalisation and narration can be expanded as these are illuminated from angles that have not yet been probed in the literature of the field.

### *From ordinary to liminal: some transformations*

Featuring banal, everyday settings and objects such as a kitchen's washing-up area in *Biegbak/Confessional*, a dining table in *Guests/Gaste* (2003; fig. 2.19), and a men's dressing room in *Sunday suit* (2003; fig. 2.20), Van der Merwe's installation works are easily recognised for what they represent (the objects and spaces "look like" their referents in the "real world"). This recognisable aspect is perhaps the reason why the works seem conceptually accessible, also to the novice gallery-goer. The works therefore have a semblance of "realism" – a chair is recognised for being a chair, for example. Most of the spaces represented in the works are interior spaces that are usually domestic. Recurring objects include suitcases of different shapes and sizes, for example a vanity case and small suitcase in the intimate *It's cold outside* (2004; fig. 2.7, 2.8); an entire collection of suitcases in *Baggage arrival* (2001, fig. 2.21, 2.22).

Below: Fig. 2.19. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Guests/Gaste*.

Right: Fig. 2.20. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Sunday suit*.



Fig. 2.21. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2001. *Baggage arrival*. Installation view with *Luggage trolley* visible to the right.

Fig. 2.22. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2001. *Baggage arrival*. Detail of carousel.

These suitcases seem to function as placeholders for humans and also, more obviously, suggest travel<sup>12</sup> – as well as transience, displacement and the liminal aspect of place and being. More recurring motifs that stand in for humans are clothes (often men’s jackets), as well as different types of furniture, especially chairs and beds such as in *Final inspection*

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<sup>12</sup> The journey as theme presents itself in many installation artworks, often as an overt concern, or simply with reference to navigating through the work to suggest a “nomadic narrative” (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:31).

(*Soldier's bed*, 1998, fig. 2.11), *Wag/Waiting* (2000, fig. 2.18). A number of works feature basins of various types, often with screens that show things being washed or water dripping (hands washing a pot in *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003; fig. 2.4, 2.5) and a screen showing a dripping window in the same work; also hands washing a razor in *Sunday suit* (2003, fig. 2.20) and *Cleaning instructions* (2003, fig. 2.23) that contains a screen in which one sees a handgun being cleaned – this last work is not one of the rust-covered pieces. Washing and cleaning are daily rituals that are often quite intimate; metaphorically speaking, cleaning also has religious as well as transformative implications (cf. Van der Merwe, s.a.:38).



Left: Fig. 2.23. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Cleaning instructions*.



Right: Fig. 2.24. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Showcase*.

Another example of furniture that appears in an artwork is *Showcase* (2003; fig 2.24) which features an Art Deco showcase, covered with rust and filled with ornaments and trophies. The collection of things on display has a kitsch, nostalgic sense: these are the types of things that so often cluttered sitting rooms some decades ago. A looping video showing a silver trophy being cleaned is visible in a small monitor at the bottom of the showcase, and above the showcase a projected image of the Voortrekker Monument appears and slowly fades into white, to reappear and fade again. The work celebrates “ordinary people” (Van der Merwe, s.a.:40) and viewers may quite likely associate with the strange mixture of quaintness and ideological burden of the paraphernalia on display.

The aged, slightly kitsch, even mass-produced items in the showcase recall similar features that gallery-goers of a certain age may recognise as having been in family homes, quite possibly generating a sense of endearment and nostalgia. One may remember items like these, somewhere in the family's history. And yet, seeing the showcase removed from its familiar sitting room context with the objects inside coated in rust, the entire combination has a quality of strangeness, although it resonates with familiar likenesses.

The ordinariness of the human scale of objects and furniture that Van der Merwe uses therefore represents the "real thing" convincingly, and this invites one to relate almost effortlessly with the works. And yet, the rusted surfaces of those works embalmed in rust necessitate a double take: one is made particularly aware of the fact that the objects are, and also are not "real". This awareness creates a sense of alienation or, in formalist terms, a defamiliarisation that heightens awareness of the aesthetic constructedness of the objects and spaces<sup>13</sup>. This defamiliarisation hinges, in turn, on the uncanny where the familiar and its unfamiliar representation disturb and give rise to more profound reflection on the objects and spaces, and what they represent.

Spaces represented in Van der Merwe's works are mostly quite intimate and private since they are mostly domestic in nature. Public spaces, when they do occur, are less common and are found in works such as *Baggage arrival* (2001; fig. 2.21. 2.22), *The End* (2006; fig. 2.25-2.28) and *Eclipse* (2002; fig. 2.29). These works, respectively, feature a carousel with unclaimed luggage being endlessly jounced around, a movie theatre and a walkway towards a graveyard. However, even these references to public spaces are also strangely liminal: consider the feeling of hushed closeness in a dark cinema and the sense of aloneness or the feeling of being neither here nor there, often experienced in anonymous airport spaces such as a baggage carousel.

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<sup>13</sup> The Russian Formalists, among whom Viktor Šklovskij, held that art's purpose was to make one acutely aware of something familiar by making it strange (by means of various techniques that heighten awareness of something one might usually not notice) in order to give it meaning. "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Šklovskij, [1917] 1988:20).



Four views of Van der Merwe, Jan. 2006. *The End*. Clockwise from top left: Fig. 2.25. View towards the screen; Fig. 2.26. Detail showing a chair with umbrella; Fig. 2.27. View towards the back; Fig. 2.28. Detail showing seating section with army paraphernalia.



In some instances the extensive size of these works, and the impact thereof, invite further consideration. *Baggage arrival* (fig. 2.21 – 2.22) is an ambitious installation: it features a full-scale moving luggage carousel, corroded as per Van der Merwe's trademark process, littered with bags and suitcases that actually, physically, circulate unendingly into the viewer's space and vision and then disappear behind a small rust-curtained area at the back of the carousel. The back of the carousel is visible on a television monitor that shows the bags being filmed in real time on a security camera. Here the idea of real-time surveillance comes into play. The loops used in recorded video format in other works now become real moving, looping images. The sense of desolation one may feel when looking at the

unclaimed belongings of unnamed travellers could become quite intense as each loop (and each actual appearance of baggage on the carousel) brings nothing but the same image or object, in spite of waiting for what may normally yield a different angle. This work was first shown, ominously, a few weeks before the terrorist attacks (with aeroplanes) on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. The unpeopled carousel with its slow-moving offering of luggage to the gallery-goer must have had a chilling effect at the time of its first showing, even more than the sense of loss the work generates even without such a context. A spectator may be encouraged to ask the following sort of question: “Who are the people whose things these are? Significantly, the gallery-goer stands in the place of these unnamed ones, but are unable to claim any of the baggage.

Unnamed, also, are the protagonists of *The End* (fig. 2.25 – 2.28). The scale of this work is quite extraordinary: it consists of 108 cinema seats that are placed in a large space, as if in a real cinema, and the screen the seats are facing shows a looping collage of the last seconds taken from old films with the words “The End” featuring in succession. On each and every chair are objects, left there, it seems, as relics or identifiers of the departed who used to sit in the chairs. Popcorn boxes, large drinks cups, handbags, umbrellas, hats, boxes and books, a section featuring military hats and another section with playthings such as folded aeroplanes, all made of or covered in rusted metal sit on chairs themselves covered in rusted metal, complete with small spotlights behind each chair. The viewer navigates between the rows of seats and peruses the chairs with their bits of left-behind stuff, bathed in soft yellow pools of light from the chairs’ backs. The silence is palpable; a mood of melancholy pervades the space. It seems a bit like stumbling upon the *Mary Celeste*, that famous ship which was discovered on 5 December 1872 adrift in the Atlantic Ocean, devoid of its seven crew members but yet still replete with traces of a now absent, human presence.

I have seen *The End* at the large solo retrospective solo exhibition *The Archaeology of Time* at the Pretoria Art Museum in 2006, and also at the Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein in 2013 as part of the solo show called *Time and Space*. At this last venue, the installation housed in the underground reservoir space of Oliewenhuis (a huge out of use underground space: dark, with thick pillars and rich in atmosphere). The reservoir space

evoked the mood of melancholy and the atmosphere of reverence – it seems as if one goes down into the belly of the earth, like into a tomb. Indeed, it is possible to imagine the entire space of *The End* as an indoor graveyard since the outlines of chairs look like a massive congregation of gravestones, each containing the ghost and things of a departed soul (fig. 2.25 – 2.28 - although these brightly lit images above do not do justice to the semblance of gravestones produced by the chairs). Graveyards are sacred, and are also profoundly liminal spaces – places of commemoration, of the in-betweenness of life and death (see Emmerichs, 2012; Lazaroo, 2013; Herman, 2011). In *The End*, the surfaces that are simultaneously rusted metal are also stand-ins for the “real thing”, and likewise, the chairs are both chairs and gravestones; everything is double, mutable, transformed. The meaning of objects is deferred, so that the awareness of sameness versus difference, rust versus actual thing, suggest that the artist has achieved a sense of *différance* here (see Derrida, [1967] 1976:63).



Two installation views of Van der Merwe, Jan. 2002. *Eclipse*. Left: Fig. 2.29; right: Fig. 2.30.

The only representation of exterior space that I could find among Van der Merwe’s rust-based installations is in *Eclipse* (2002; fig. 2.29, 2.30). This work is a “memorial to the innocent men, women and children who are left in the dark by a lack of compassion and hope due to famine, war and epidemics” (Van der Merwe, s.a.:34). In this large installation measuring 10 650 x 3 800 x 2 400 mm, a gravel walkway is lined on both sides with a barbed wire fence, onto which rust-covered garments are suspended; the walkway ends in three vertically mounted television monitors, the top one situated at eye-level and the bottom one almost level with the floor. The monitors show flower petals being dropped, fluttering in stages into a freshly dug grave. These stages are achieved by making the top monitor’s

image seemingly taken over by the one below, and then the last one showing the “same” petals falling into the deep earth. The absence of human beings in this work evokes a sense of death – not only because of the grave, but because the barbed wire and walkway are reminiscent of Holocaust images – or of any images of war-like confinement that could generate archetypal associations of dread and conflict.

Together, the walkway, the sound of gravel underfoot, and the wire fences create an ambient environment and draw attention to the focal point which is made up of the moving images in the monitors. The fences also suggest an inevitable journey (towards death); they entrap the viewer-participant who can only move forwards towards the open grave. The experience of walking on the gravel, hearing its sounds, may be exacerbated by the grating sound of other gallery goers’ footsteps on the gravel, as if suddenly one walks in procession towards the open grave that tells of death, and thus towards death itself. Spotlights point outwards from the gravel, illuminating the rust-sculpted clothing “draped” onto the fences.

Empty like the grave to which they lead, garments signify human absence – specifically bodies that are absent<sup>14</sup>. The empty clothing functions in a double sense: to make absence felt, but also as a silent audience keeping vigil along the walkway. Therefore, the various components of the work – the clothing and the fences, the gravel walkway that ends in the grave, and the moving images that narrate a final farewell to departed souls – work together to thematise absence and death.

*Eclipse*, *Baggage arrival* and *The End* all convey a sense of the liminal, of death hovering close by. The living – those who visit the gallery – walk among these departed ones; the atmosphere is eerie and sacred, melancholy.

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<sup>14</sup> Clothing in an artwork can be seen as an extension of the living body, and therefore generates awareness of absence if abandoned. See Smith-Windsor (2013:unpaginated).

### *The transformative nature of rust: gender, labour and alchemy*

Although the rusted surfaces are the most recognisable aspect of most Van der Merwe's oeuvre, the artist in fact references his reliance on his *transformations* of the "readymade" more often than he does the rust itself. This is evident from the title of his M.Tech. (F.A.) dissertation and his similarly named article "Transformation of the found". While he sometimes sculpts objects from scratch (or, from bits of tin) resulting in what can be called simulacra of the supposed readymade, he also intersperses "doctored" found objects, especially those that have a very personal connection to him, amongst the hand-crafted sculptural pieces. In this regard, the table used for *Guests/Gaste* (fig. 2.19) can be mentioned. In short, the artist does not really use bona fide readymades as things that have been found and used as is. Everything that is present in this works has been processed in some way and might well be equally "removed" from its possible original meaning or significance, whilst simultaneously serving to evoke nostalgia in the spectator by virtue of a naïve assumption that the objects do seem to invoke "the real". In this manner, as noted, Van der Merwe achieves a Derridean sense of *difference*: the objects are neither simply real nor fabricated, and yet they are both; they are impossible yet possible, present yet speaking of absence (see Hart, 2004:56).

Of interest regarding Van der Merwe's rust-clad spaces is also the gendered aspect they suggest – here the artist manages to create a liminal quality in that some of the spaces are both (and neither) masculine and feminine in content. His works portraying public spaces are not gendered as such, but the more private spaces are: the washing up area in *Biegbak/Confessional* (fig. 2.3 – 2.5), the room in *It's cold outside* (fig. 2.6 – 2.8) and also the bedroom in *Wag/Waiting* (fig. 2.18) are clearly feminine spaces, while a men's dressing room is shown in *Sunday suit* (fig. 2.20) and the objects and pieces in the *Final inspection* series (fig. 2.9 – 2.12) connote and connect masculinity and war. In these last works the clothes iron and clothes rack are conventionally associated with female domestic activity – although "the macho soldier has to perform such tasks as part of army life" (Van der Merwe, s.a.:24). Similar gender echoes can be discerned in most of Van der Merwe's installations. I briefly note a few more such instances below with reference to his materials.

The rusted metal that has become the trademark feature of Van der Merwe's oeuvre recurs in all the works discussed in this section. These corroded surfaces are achieved by covering found objects – as noted, often banal domestic objects such as beds, chairs and the like – with fragments of discarded food cans, or by constructing simulacra of the intended item from bits of these cans. The cans are treated with household chemicals (vinegar, water and salt) to set the rusting process into motion. These pieces and fragments are stitched together in a painstakingly slow process<sup>15</sup> that entails the artist making holes through layers of metal (by means of a hammer and a sharp instrument like a nail) and connecting the layers with bits of wire.

Then the connections between fragments of metal are smeared with sticky bitumen, sprinkled with a mixture of sand and rust particles, and brushed – like an archaeologist brushing away the dust that covers his finds, the artist notes in a personal interview (2013). Weintraub's (1996:122) statement that, "a work's surface reverberates forever with the passion or deliberation, the delicacy or aggression, of the creative act" comes to mind here: the *traces* of work are themselves charged with meaning that creates "an engrossing narrative" (ibid) in which the viewer imaginatively tries to reconstruct sequences of actions and decisions made by the artist during production. Fig. 2.31 shows a close-up photograph of one of Van der Merwe's rusted surfaces with its highly wrought stitched connections.



Fig. 2.31. Close-up of rust fragments stitched together to form a surface.

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<sup>15</sup> The thematising effects of labour on the temporal dimensions of Van der Merwe's works are perused in chapter 5. Also, reference to the time-consuming work characteristic of some (not all) installation artworks is made in chapter 3. In some artworks like Van der Merwe's, the sheer impact of scale and fussy connections make themselves felt in the sense that one can imagine that "this took a great deal of work".

When Van Der Merwe creates objects like a “paper” aeroplane (for example, in *Killing time* [2007; fig. 2.32] and *The End*, fig. 2.25 – 2.28), or a jacket or umbrella (in many works), he uses a stencil that he derives from a real object (almost like a pattern used for home-made clothes) in order to create a reproduction/simulacrum of that object using only metal. In such instances the artist sometimes drapes the real object or garment to find the right appearance. Then, reproducing that object in metal, he applies quite some force to achieve a strangely stiff, unyielding variation of the appearance of the object he models from. When working like this, he wears thick gloves or uses instruments to manipulate half-formed sections of metal that he carefully shapes into the desired form.



Fig. 2.32. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2007.  
*Killing time*. Installation view.



Fig. 2.33. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2005. *Water and rust*. Installation view.



Fig. 2.34. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2005. *Water and rust*. Detail of baptismal font.

The minister's gown in *Water and rust* (2005; fig. 2.33) is an example of a difficult manipulation – the gown was first made on scale so that it was larger than the artist himself (who is a fairly short person) and then made to “drape” over the pulpit – its robust folds and heavy panels imposing in size. Since the metal is hard and unyielding, the objects are quite rigid and do not respond “properly” to the pull of gravity –this rigidity actually helps to achieve the defamiliarised effect discussed above, since objects may appear to float, ghost-like, in space. Because real garments are used as references, the artist sometimes uses his own jackets or he finds appropriate objects. He relates a bit sheepishly how he has once ended up in a women's lingerie store looking for the appropriate lacy petticoat to emulate in metal for *It's cold outside* (2004; fig. 2.8) (here a petticoat in rusted metal is draped over the chair) (Walkabout, 2013<sup>16</sup>).

Apropos the use of cans the artist notes that the material suggests both metal armour (a masculine association) and (feminine) vulnerability – the latter also because rust degenerates and deteriorates, which makes it emblematic of the passing of time (Van der Merwe, s.a.:34; 36; 39). Van der Merwe (Walkabout, 2013; Van der Merwe, s.a.:24) suggests

<sup>16</sup> This walkabout refers to event where the artist took a number of visitors (members of the public) on a guided tour through his work on show in the *Time and space* exhibition at the Oliewenhuis Art Museum on 10 July 2013.

that the structural rigidity and armour-like quality of the metal lend it a masculine quality, which is transformed by the rust process to suggest the end of an era of male dominance. By forming, for example, delicate women's garments and domestic articles such as blankets and towels out of rusted metal, he plays with gendered associations and undermines facile masculine/feminine attributions. His tools are "masculine": a hammer, nails, and other tools associated with men's outdoor work sheds. Yet the manner of "stitching" bits of metal together is quilt-like, fussy and reminiscent of the usually feminine work of mending clothes.

The intimate domesticity of many of his works, and the themes of indoor work (as well as motifs of domestic nature that make up a great deal of his oeuvre) seem to corroborate a sensitivity towards this male/female dichotomy. Works that deal with "masculine" subjects (compare, for example, *Sunday suit* [fig. 2.20] and the *Final inspection* series [fig. 2.9 – 2.12]) either show men being vulnerable (the suggestion of not yet being clothed is planted by the clothes hanging in *Sunday suit*) or they show the irony of men at war necessarily having to do so-called women's work (such as washing and ironing clothes in *Final inspection*).

More can be said about Van der Merwe's use of material. Since cans are originally used for preservation, the transmutation of these into rusted objects with a delicate reddish brown patina becomes an ironic and conceptual action that reflects not only waste and loss, but also the urge to recycle in the battle against consumerism and the desire to preserve a transient moment in time. The rust creates a sense of the archaeological, of layers of history – it has even been likened to the rusted appearance of shacks in squatter camps that are scattered next to so many highways in South Africa (Hodgins, s.a.:28). For the gallery-goer, the audacious oddness of covering known objects in rusted metal or making life-like reproductions of things renders this medium unforgettable.

Aside from transforming the purportedly "masculine" material objects that can often be labelled "feminine", other types of transformation also occur in Van der Merwe's work. Forging objects out of metal or covering furniture and other found objects in rust entails a process of not only material, but also conceptual transformation and transfiguration that hinge on alchemy: transforming things by shedding the old surface and building them into new identities or conceptual *denotatums* with a different presence (Van der Watt, s.a.: 12). Van der Watt (s.a.:13) muses that, "the objects are transfigured [...], they acquire a

metaphorical significance [...] that evoke a magical presence loaded with intentional properties”.

Achieving this transfiguration of ordinary objects into multifaceted objects that have the quality of relics requires a very involved, indeed an obsessive process of intense labour. To make one metal jacket that can eventually be draped over the back of a chair<sup>17</sup>, for example, requires about three months of work (personal interview with the artist, 2012).

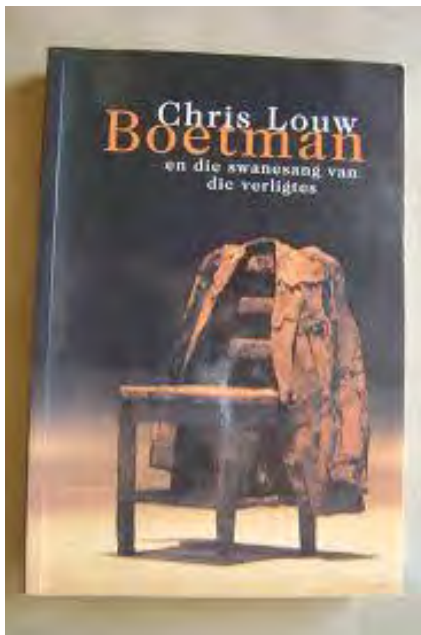


Fig. 2.35. Cover of *Boetman en die swanesang van die verligtes* by Chris Louw, showing an artwork by Jan van der Merwe featuring a jacket draped over a chair.

The artist regards his working instruments – chisel, hammer and so on – as keys to his artistry. His instruments and what they represent are emblematic of the process of transformation and even sanctification achieved by working with tools. For example, the artist refers to the mythological view of a hammer as being associated with holiness and enchantment (Van der Merwe, s.a.:19).

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<sup>17</sup> Such a work appears on the cover of the iconic/infamous book by Chris Louw entitled *Boetman en die swanesang van die verligtes* (colloquial language is difficult to translate; *Little brother and the swan song of the enlightened [of South Africa]* is a possible translation) – Louw, C. 2001. *Boetman en die swanesang van die verligtes*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau. In this book, Louw expresses his indignation at the ideological indoctrination of his age. See fig. 2.35. Van der Merwe’s work featured here is described as being part of the healing of wounds caused by the Border War – a consequence of the ideological situation that Louw attacks. Louw was a friend of Van der Merwe’s and the artist relates how they sat together at the very table used for the work *Guests/Gaste* (2003; fig. 2.19). Louw committed suicide in 2009.

His approach to work, then, suggests a belief in the ennobling effects of labour; compare this quote by Van der Merwe in his article “Transformasie van die gevonde: ‘n alchemiese proses” (Transformation of the found: an alchemical process, s.a.:19 in the *Unknown* catalogue): “Die hamer, troffel, saag, skaaf, boor en ander werkersgereedskap [... placed iconically in one of his series called *Story Board*] is verwysing na kunsmaak en kunstenaarskap as ‘n proses waar deur arbeid en bewerking [gewerk word] in die geloof dat arbeid adel ...[the sentence as such is incomplete, but the meaning is clear enough]: “The hammer, trowel, saw, carpenter’s plane, drill and other working instruments [...] are references to art-making and being an artist as a process through which work and processing aid the belief that labour ennobles.” Van der Merwe (s.a.:20) speaks of the wisdom and purification associated with the alchemical effects of work; for him, to transform the banal into art represents physical as well as spiritual transcendence. Quoting Swartz-Salant (1995:2), Van der Merwe (s.a.:20) posits that:

But this outer or mundane work with materials was intimately linked [for alchemists] to an inner or arcane work on the human personality. For example, the alchemical fire, is clearly a physical fire controlled within an actual vessel, but it is also the heat-producing quality of mediation and imagination.

In short, the transformative nature of the artist’s intervention and manipulation of materials is labour-intensive; in this process he achieves an end product that impresses with a sense of the sacred and traces of many hours of work. The importance of a material corollary as symbolic manifestation of imaginative inner life will help to guide the interpretation sections of this study where this notion is further extrapolated.

Van der Merwe’s physical commitment to the making/manufacturing process is perhaps slightly unusual although not entirely unique in this age of Conceptual art. Compare, for example, a contrasting view expressed by the Conceptual artist such as Sol LeWitt (1928 – 2007) who claimed that the appearance of the artwork is not very important (see Harrison, 2004:62). For Van der Merwe, on the other hand, the labour that results in a particular appearance of the artwork represents the inner workings of the artist’s personality. What the traces of labour also do, in his work, is to draw attention to the thing-ness (or objecthood) thereof and therefore, perhaps ironically, to the modernist notion of the artist’s

signature<sup>18</sup>. These traces of labour also add a genuine, empathetic, theatrical temporal dimension to his work – as postmodern corollary to the modern objecthood of the works.

The discussion on installation art below (from 2.2 onwards) presents further thoughts on the role of labour in contemporary art. Labour being performed may be the overt theme of some works, as washing action in *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003, fig. 2.3 – 2.5) and the gun being cleaned in *Cleaning instructions* (2003, fig. 2.23) demonstrate. The actions – washing dishes, cleaning, and so forth – are usually very ordinary rituals. However, this is perhaps exactly why the work is so gripping: to see the everyday elevated to the level of art. McMahon (2000:229) notes that, “[O]nce it [an everyday activity] is rescued from utility, the most ordinary of activities bathes the everyday in ecstasy.”

### *The patina of time: memories and absence*

Time emerges as a central concern for most critics and scholars who respond to Van der Merwe’s work. Time is, indeed, an inherent focus of most installation artworks (in chapter 3 the way in which time is addressed in installation art is dealt with, with reference also to how time is represented in the visual arts more generally). Van der Merwe acknowledges time’s centrality in his work in exhibition titles such as *The Archaeology of Time* (Pretoria Art Museum, 2006) and *Time and Space* (Oliewenhuis Art Museum, 2013).

The title of Koos van der Watt’s article in the catalogue, “Jan van der Merwe and the patina of time” (2004) reinforces the idea that the work of this artist deals profoundly with aspects of time – patina being the aspect of rust that one associates quite positively with a nostalgic awareness of things that endure and beautify as they age. Time’s patina refers to the layers of temporality encrusted on the fragile surfaces of the corroding objects. Time encapsulates History and histories, and so the artist sets out to freeze historical and personal time into a poetic moment (the artist’s phrase – Walkabout 2013). Van der Watt (s.a.:6) calls this process an historicising of the present; this author uses words such as “excavate” when imagining the sediment of past and present. This author also refers to Van der Merwe’s

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the purported tension between aspects of modernism and postmodernism in Van der Merwe’s work, see Van der Watt, n.d.). Van der Watt argues that these tensions in Van der Merwe’s work can be traced to, among other aspects, the formal modernist aesthetic in aspects of his work versus the contemporary impulse to create a more democratic visual narrative by means of metaphor and confession, also present in his art.

sense that “our history moves on and yet is always with us” (ibid). History’s presence in the present is echoed in the artist’s feeling that the artwork, like history, is never completed – corrosion obviously personifies this idea on a material level as it proceeds through time.

The temporal strata suggested in Van der Merwe’s works are ambivalent; one can talk of timeless time, or layers of time, or of “time folded in over itself” into an “archaeologised future past” (Kruger & Van der Merwe, 2010:159). These aspects will require further exploration, specifically as the temporalities gain in complexity by the use of monitors with looping images. The looping imagery, as video, refers to a time when the material was filmed, but also raises awareness of the time of viewing, and in this way enters into a dialogue with the elements surrounding it (in Van der Merwe’s work, the monitors themselves are surrounded by particular formations of rusted furniture and objects). The looping images, furthermore, add a level of technological archaeology because we use technology to “look back” at stars that are light years away; and thus we look back into time, according to the artist (Walkabout, 2013). Technology may suggest spirituality: in the video loops it connotes both never-ending time as well as a sense of time standing still. This, together with the interpretative possibilities arising from the temporal layers of rust, clearly warrants significant reflection. I will argue in the interpretation chapters (5 and 6) that these temporal peculiarities have a bearing on the way in which narration and focalisation can be conceptualised in Van der Merwe’s works.

Hundt (s.a.:i) notes that Van der Merwe’s work presents highly personal themes with universal resonance. These include memories of family members (such as his mother and grandmother whom he commemorates in *It’s cold outside*, fig. 2.6 – 2.8 and *Biegbak/Confessional*, fig. 2.3 – 2.5 respectively) and intimate personal rituals of washing and cleansing (such as the looping image of a razor being rinsed in the wash basin in *Sunday suit* [fig. 2.20] and the scrubbing of dishes in *Biegbak/Confessional*) recur in his works. They remind the viewer/participant of the transience of existence, the futility of preserving the present and the vulnerability one feels in remembering loss. The artist’s evocation of the people he knew by means of *not* showing them may suggest that he creates autobiographical texts in which the mortality of the individual is acknowledged and in which the role of the viewer as participant is active and cooperative.

Although some works such as *Biegbak/Confessional* may suggest (the absence of) a specific person, Van der Merwe refers to his works in general as “monuments to the unknown” (Walkabout, 2013 and personal interview, 2012). Significantly, this phrase seems to suggest that the absence of the person that dominates the work is an emptiness that the viewer-participant can fill with his or her own version (of, say, a person such as a grandmother in the kitchen doing dishes – referring to *Biegbak/Confessional*, fig. 2.3 – 2.5). Thus, even though the artist made this work as a monument for *this* grandmother, the phrase “monuments to the unknown” acknowledges that his grandmother is only *one of the possible individuals who can be inserted by the viewer’s (or rather the participant’s) focalising into the work*. Perhaps this idea of monuments, or concrete eulogies, is at the heart of the nostalgia, even sadness many gallery-goers mention upon experiencing Van der Merwe’s installations.

The large-scale works such as *Baggage arrival* (fig. 2.21 and 2.22) and *The End* (fig. 2.25 – 2.28) more specifically propose the unknown *many* as central absence. These works, like all Van der Merwe’s installations, require the viewer to enter into the heart of the artwork’s space; they request the viewer to take time and absorb the experience and to become actively involved in generating the stories that suggest themselves – as Hundt (s.a.:i) emphasizes in his foreword to the catalogue *Unknown*.

In conclusion to this discussion of a few thematic and material concerns of the artist’s oeuvre, I would like to quote Robert Hodgins (s.a.:28) who has phrased his view of Van der Merwe’s work in these words:

The work of Jan van der Merwe is for me the best kind of art, where medium, colour, shape, external reference, scale, together form not so much an assemblage but rather each is so integrated that they become an entity, not to be considered as preachment or theory or a collection of idea particles, but as a complete thing. It is not idly coincidental that one talks of this as a body of work.

#### 2.1.4 Contextually speaking: Van der Merwe as a contemporary South African artist

Part of what most art historical studies do is to look for contextual markers: artists or movements that share a kinship in terms of place and time of production, as well as thematic and other concerns that could cast an informative light on the artwork.

How can Jan van der Merwe be situated in the context of South African art? His work does not feature in significant publications such as the four-part series *Visual century: South African art in context* edited by Goniwe, Pissarra, and Majavu (2011; series edited by Gavin Jantjes) where one would hope to find him in the fourth volume (art from 1990 to 2007), and his work is similarly overlooked by other important publications such as Sue Williamson's *South African art now* (2009)<sup>19</sup>. However, he has been included as an example of a contemporary South African artist in the Grade 12 school syllabus – which can be taken as a measure of canonical status.

Reasons for what are arguably oversights in the arts publication field may be difficult to suggest with accuracy; Van der Merwe probably deserves to be better known than he is at present, given the impact of his exhibitions, the prizes he has won and the scope of critics writing positively about his work (an extensive curriculum vitae and list of publications are available on art.co.za). How artists become canonised, or to use the non-academic term *famous* is a precarious and intensely complicated process that may include diverse “strategies” such as marrying a famous pop star (Yoko Ono, b. 1933 is arguably more famous as an artist than she would have been if she had not married John Lennon) to shocking the art world (as Marcel Duchamp, 1887 – 1968 did) to living a desperate, extremely productive life, writing many heart-wrenching letters and dying young (Vincent van Gogh, 1853 – 1890)<sup>20</sup>. More sober, but also newsworthy paths to becoming well-known

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<sup>19</sup> Blurbs of these books suggest that they provide comprehensive overviews of South African art. *Visual century* sets out to give “a much needed and comprehensive overview of South African art”; *South African art now* “offers historical context and in-depth analyses of a wide variety of South African art genres and mediums ...”, focusing also on placing the works in a “truly international context”. Given these claims, Van der Merwe's absence from such publications is noteworthy.

<sup>20</sup> Consumption, production, shock value, globalisation and well-managed public personas are among the forces of which the impact on artistic stature today have been explored in Marxist, Baudrillardian and related terms; these issues contribute in complex ways to the construction of fame and its problematic corollary: money (see Wheale, 1995:10-14 for a brief discussion of the complexities of establishing a name in the art

include winning major competitions (from the longstanding Prix de Rome or the British Petroleum Portrait awards, to the South African New Signatures or the Helgaard Steyn award – these local competitions Van der Merwe won in 1982 and 2005 respectively) or being a festival artist (as noted, he was Aardklop’s festival artist in 2003). In all, Van der Merwe’s stature as an important artist is likely to increase, given his relative popularity<sup>21</sup> and the depth and scope of his output.

Van der Merwe’s concerns – thematic and in terms of installation as his chosen art form – converse with national as well as international counterparts. Nationally, his work echoes the compulsive labour-intensive processes associated with an artist such as Willem Boshoff (b. 1951) whose installations often baffle with their attention to laboured detail. Similar labour-intensive efforts characterise the American Ann Hamilton’s (b. 1965) installations (see chapter 3, fig. 3.24). Since Van der Merwe uses installation art as a type of memorialising that suggests loss and absence, his work also invites comparison with the French artist Christian Boltanski (b. 1940) whose installations often recall the Holocaust (Boltanski’s work is discussed in some detail in the section below dealing with installation art; see fig. 2.50 and 2.51) as well as Doris Salcedo (b. 1958; fig. 3.59 in the next chapter), whose memory-infused installations that frequently feature furniture and clothes speak of loss and absence in a poignant way. Regarding Van der Merwe’s Border War-inspired works (such as *Final inspection*; fig. 2.9 – 2.12), the likes of Gavin Younge (b. 1947) and more recently Christo Doherty (b. 1959) can be mentioned.

Van der Merwe himself, in an unfinished document in preparation for the high school syllabus, refers to the South African artist Christo Coetzee (1929 – 2000) as an influence in his experimentation with mixed and found materials. In the same document, Walter Battiss’ energetic contribution to art in Pretoria is mentioned, as well as Jackson Hlungwane’s (1923

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world; more recently Thornton’s *Seven days in the art world* [2009] and others explore some of the hidden mechanisms that drive artistic visibility and fame). Many issues come into play when gauging an artist’s purported claim(s) to fame; in politically charged situations such as contemporary South Africa, ideological overtones may have a significant bearing on how fame is achieved.

<sup>21</sup> In her exhibition report of *Time and Space*, Oliewenhuis curator Esther le Roux notes that the exhibition was “extremely well received, with people from all walks of life commenting positively on the exhibition” In all, 14 690 people attended the exhibition – an exceptional number, according to the report.

– 2010) spiritual approach to art and the critique of power abuse that recur in the oeuvre of the painter Robert Hodgins (1920 – 2010).

The use of video or other screen-based material situates Van der Merwe in a fairly long-standing tradition including the well-known Bill Viola (b. 1951) and many more artists using this medium. Bruce Naumann (b. 1941) is famous for using a security camera in works like *Live-taped corridor* (1969; fig. 3.25) which I also reference in the next chapter – this type of camera was used in Van der Merwe's *Baggage arrival*.

Reference to a few more kindred artists will suffice at this point for contextualising Van der Merwe's work in an art historical sense. Like Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) and a whole host of Pop artists, and following Duchamp's readymade aesthetic, Van der Merwe makes use of ordinary objects that are recontextualised as art – although Oldenburg is famous for exaggerating the scale of objects while Van der Merwe's work capitalises on the realism and human scale of his objects and spaces.

Van der Merwe's use of intimate domestic spaces echoes the genre paintings of artists working in the tropes of the domestic Baroque such as Jan Steen (1626 – 1679; fig. 2.36), Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699 – 1792; fig. 2.37) and Johannes Vermeer (1632 – 1675; fig. 2.38). These artists' works portraying interiors are referred to as "genre painting" – meaning art that show ordinary household scenes (Bal, 2006a:227), often including reference to female domestic work like washing, activities such as eating, and elements like dogs, everyday household objects and the like.



Fig. 2.36. Chardin, Jean-Baptiste Simeon. 1739. *Back from the market*.



Fig. 2.37. Steen, Jan. circa 1663-1665. *The feast of Saint Nicholas*.



Fig. 2.38. Vermeer, Johannes. circa 1660. *The milkmaid*.

Artists such as Antoni Tàpies (1923 – 2012) and Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986), both known for using ordinary (“unartistic”) material in symbolic ways and also for their spiritual approach to art making are cited by the Van der Merwe as influences. The artist cites similar reasons for feeling a kinship with the works of Belgian artists Panamarenko (pseudonym of Henri Van Herwegen, b. 1940) and Jan Fabre (b. 1958). Anselm Kiefer’s (b. 1945) large mixed media works that evoke complex layers of history and spirituality by means of unconventional mediums (including straw, ash, clay, lead and shellac) affected Van der Merwe’s approach his medium and themes.

More recent parallels with artists who make use of domestic objects may be found in works like Tracey Emin’s (b. 1963) *My bed* (fig. 2.39), produced in 1998 and nominated for the Turner Prize in 1999. However, Van der Merwe’s work never displays the kind of provocative defiance often associated with contemporary art that explores intimate spaces (Emin’s work features used condoms and other paraphernalia stained by various types of body fluids). Her work is therefore subject to natural deterioration – in a manner resembling artists like Beuys whose use of evanescent mediums like animal fat likewise was subject to rot and decay. Van der Merwe’s choice of rust as material echoes this sense of the transient, albeit in his rather more poetic manner.



Fig. 2.39. Emin, Tracey. 1998. *My bed*.  
Installation view.

To summarise this brief overview of the artist's oeuvre and his art historical kinships, it seems that Van der Merwe occupies a unique position in the contemporary art scene although his work can be thematically, materially and conceptually linked to a wide spectrum of artistic practices. He works mainly with installation art to express his ideas in ways that foreground both the personal and the universal; the preciousness of the ordinary, and the transience of experience. Concerns that are at the heart of narrative – time, space, character and the implication of event – abound in his works; these form the cornerstone of the subsequent overview of installation art in a broader sense.

## **2.2 Installation art**

### **2.2.1 Introduction**

This part of the chapter provides art-historical contexts aimed at illuminating what installation art is, and what it does. By providing an exploratory overview of the literature on installation art I set out to (1) position this artistic endeavour historically, and (2) suggest a number of defining qualities of this type of art in also to illuminate Van der Merwe's unique approach.

### **2.2.2 Approaches to installation art**

Installation art has, since its site-specific and transient beginnings in the 1960s and 1970s, kept critics and scholars puzzling – not least because for the last few decades the critical edge of contemporary art was predicated on installation practices. Like any art form or genre, it needs to be articulated, unravelled, and theorised; most authors succumb to the desire to make sense of installation by also trying to categorise it (see also McTighe, 2005:1). This is not a very satisfying pursuit because the range of possible categories simply evades conventional logic, as demonstrated in the sections below. Indeed, as De Oliveira, Petry and Oxley 2003:14 note; “[I]t is in the nature of the practice [of installation art] itself to challenge its own boundaries”.

Aspects such as materials and processes that conventionally served to distinguish art forms from each other (for example, painting is flat and uses paint, delimiting sculpture is more complex but conventionally a sculpture is three-dimensional and made of material like bronze or marble), but the materials of installation are too diverse; material may even be entirely absent. Other possible categorising principles such as institutional critique, theme, and time-space relations are extremely diversely handled by installation artists; these do not seem to constitute useful bases for categorisation.

Some authors such as De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry (2003) use conceptual categories such as “escape”, “author and institution”, “exchange and interaction”, “time and narrative” and the like to structure their approach to this art form. Rosenthal's (2003) categories of installation are also conceptual; his use of terms such as “enchantments”, “interventions”, “impersonations” and “rapprochements” is quite captivating, but these categories may be

too mystifying and obtuse to be useful. In short, attempts at categorisations may be used to structure a discussion or a book, but often fail to give a *real* sense of the distinguishing characteristics of certain “types” of installation art, if there were such a thing. At the most, attempts at categories show a subjective understanding of the emphases of a work or set of works – they may prove to be useful but are not watertight in any way. It is therefore possibly best to approach any discussion of installation art in tentative terms – or from a particular angle as I attempt in chapter 3 with reference to the elements of narrative.

Reiss (2001:xv) mentions that installation art has resisted traditional art-historical approaches and has, for this reason and also perhaps because it tends to “cease” after being dismantled, received relatively marginal scholarly attention. A comparatively small number of publications exemplify a scholarly engagement with installation art – among these are Bishop’s very thorough overview *Installation art: a critical history* (2005); Reiss’s book *From margin to centre: the spaces of installation art* (2001); Rosenthal’s book *Understanding installation art: from Duchamp to Holzer* (2003); Gezcy and Genocchio’s anthology *What is installation?* (2001); Suderburg’s 2000 anthology *Space, site and intervention: situating installation art*; Davies’ 1997 book *Blurring the boundaries: Installation art 1969-1996*; and De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry’s 2003 book *Empire of the senses: Installation art of the new millennium*.

These books have been consulted for the present discussion<sup>22</sup>. The authors of these texts grapple with different approaches towards defining, demarcating and characterising installation art and provide different perspectives from where they direct their discussions. For example, Bishop focuses on the activation of the viewer/spectator of installations; Reiss explores the various spatial and transgressive aspects of installation art; Rosenthal distinguishes between various ways of thematically or conceptually activating spaces; Gezcy and Genocchio’s (2001) anthology is a broad and diverse collection of essays on Australian installation art practice; Suderberg (2000) is concerned with mostly site-specific variations of

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<sup>22</sup> McTighe (2005:2) argues that all critical texts on installation art are predicated on a canon of texts from the sixties and seventies: Krauss’ *Sculpture in the expanded field* (1979) which in turn draws on Judd’s *Specific objects* (1965), Morris’ *Notes on sculpture parts I, II and III* (1966-7), and Fried’s *Art and objecthood* (1967). This last publication is actually a counter-installation publication that sets up a number of salient elements foiled by installation, such as Fried’s disdain for the theatrical aspect of art that has ironically become a staple of this art form.

installation art, and Davies (1997) sets up a number of conceptual categories for installation art – as do De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry (2003).

The recurring emphases on conceptual issues in these publications seem to be in line with much art practice since the 1960s. Since the 1970s and into the 1980s most trendsetting art practice has been conceptually driven and cannot be circumscribed in terms of media or “style” (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:xi-xiii); the same is probably true for art history’s response to a great deal of art in recent years. Thus, instead of the more conventional art-historical approaches characterised by, for example, biographical emphasis (begun by Vasari [1568] 2009), formalist and stylistic analyses (as found in Wölfflin, [1929] 1932), and iconology (Panofsky, [1939] 2009), to name only a few, the so-called new art history<sup>23</sup> has since the late 1970s become much more theoretically inclined, more inclusive and interdisciplinary – so that semiotics (Bal & Bryson, 1991), feminism (Kelly, 1981; Smith, 2006) and postcolonial theory (Coombes, 1992), among many others, found themselves grappling with concepts of identity, reception and the like<sup>24</sup>.

For the moment, a brief reflection on installation art in a more general sense is necessary. The discussion below will refer to a few relatively well-known installation artworks as examples of this art form, also with a view to providing a general reference point for the arguments set out in the rest of the chapter.

Reception is a central issue in any discussion of installation art. For many, installation art may appear to be a source of bafflement; this art forms seems to presume a class of theoretically informed viewers/gallery visitors of “a certain sensibility” who are

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<sup>23</sup> Nelson ([1996] 2003a:xv) proposes, a bit sardonically, that “[A]rt history was not immune to what some regarded as the contagion of critical theory”, referring to the changes brought about by the so-called new art history during the 1970s. Regenerating what was believed to be a discipline in crisis, art historical enquiries expanded to include narrative, representation, gender and the like (Nelson, [1996] 2003b:xi-xiii). For an in-depth consideration of the changes felt in the discipline of art history, see Harris, J. 2001. *The new art history. A critical introduction* London: Routledge.

<sup>24</sup> Preziosi’s 1998 anthology *The art of art history* indicates these authors as representative of various theoretical positions. Preziosi’s book offers a useful bird’s eye view of important developments in art history: from theories of causality to the notion of pendular development over phases in time; from objects, contexts and makers to identity and history. Coincidentally, the editor/author offers a delightful definition of art history – it is “one of a network of interrelated institutions and professions whose overall function has been to fabricate an historical past that could be placed under systematic observation for use in the present” (1998:13).

“knowledgeable experts” (Chambers, 2006). Indeed, installation art is often experienced by gallery visitors as bewildering, opaque, and perhaps somewhat bizarre (ironic, since a frequent claim of installation art is that it wants to break down boundaries between art and life). However, this sense of bafflement is not entirely surprising, given the experience offered by many installations. Compare, for example, the work called *Untitled installation* (fig. 2.40) by Michael Asher (b. 1943) which purports to be a statement about dematerialisation; it is also supposed to be is also institutionally critical and ideologically subverting; I quote from Bishop (2005:59):

His contribution to this exhibition [the Whitney Museum’s *Anti-illusions: Procedures/materials 1969* and also Asher’s first appearance in a major exhibition] – a “sculpture” taking the form of a column of pressurised air ... the work was imperceptible to the eye. Asher later rationalised the piece in terms of integrating peripheral phenomena into the institutional mainstream: “In this work I was dealing with air as an elementary material of unlimited presence and availability, as opposed to visually determined elements. I intervened therefore to structure this material, given in the exhibition container itself, and to reintegrate it into the exhibition area.” [my insertion].

One could be forgiven for being mystified that “pieces” and statements like these are taken seriously at all and not immediately dismissed as inaccessibly esoteric, or at least part of the emperor’s laughable wardrobe. In this vein, Bishop (2005:59) talks about the work as presenting “uneasy phenomenological means for conceptual ends” – a kind way, I suspect, of suggesting that the work does perhaps not amount to much. (Since the *work* cannot really be reproduced in a visual, the image below technically only illustrates its surroundings.)

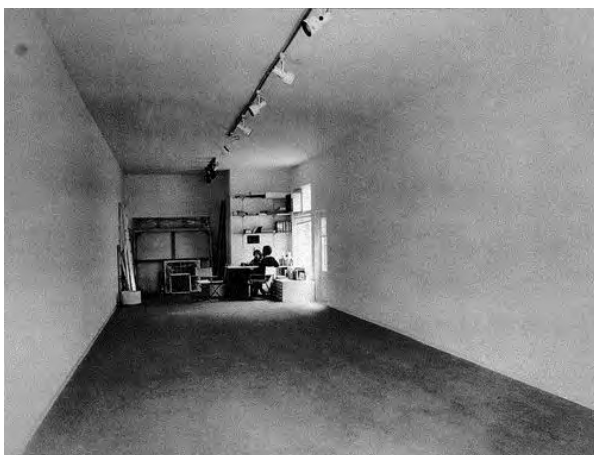


Fig. 2.40. Asher, Michael. 1974. *Untitled* Installation view.

On the other hand, many installation artworks have received both popular and critical acclaim. One notable example of a very popular work is the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's (b. 1967) *Weather project* (2003; fig. 2.41 – 2.44). The work was shown in the large turbine hall of the Tate Modern in London; it entailed a simulated weather effect achieved by means of a massive illuminated half disc on a wall at ceiling level that doubled its own image in a ceiling mirror to appear like the sun. The entire ceiling, being highly reflective, clearly reflected the images of the people on the floor. These images of gallery-goers were bathed in a yellow light and haze generated by a mist machine. People engaged with the work: they lay down on the floor staring at the high ceiling, making individualistic patterns that were seen reflected in the ceiling, or moved around slowly, and generally appearing to be quietly mesmerised, apparently watching their own images mirrored above with interest. The effect of the machine-generated yellow mist that filled the entire vast turbine hall of the museum created a strangely immersive, sensuous experience. The installation drew vast numbers of visitors. Strangely, this work did “little more than spectacularly alter[ing] the gallery space” (Bishop, 2005:77), but it nonetheless made a significant impact on the viewing public. Apart from the popular appeal of the work, it invited critical reflection on the ideology of the presentation (and the absence) of objects, as well as on aspects of human consciousness, the institutions of art and the politics of moral responsibility, among others (see Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:233; Bishop, 2005:77).



Various views of Eliasson, Olafur. 2003. *Weather project*.

Clockwise from top left: Fig. 2.41. View from toward the illuminated disk; Fig. 2.42. View of gallery floor reflected on the ceiling; Fig. 2.43. View of gallery floor reflected on the ceiling (including disk; showing a particular type of viewer participation); Fig. 2.44. View of gallery floor reflected on the ceiling (including disk).

The two works discussed above – Asher’s *Untitled installation* and Eliasson’s *Weather project* – represent a type of installation art that is essentially *not* made of physical objects; these works could be viewed as “dematerialised”, to use the word popularised by Lucy Lippard (1972)<sup>25</sup>. Nonetheless, the actual physical spaces in which they were shown, the themes that emerged, the aspects of time suggested by the work, and the gallery-goer’s presence together can be said to constitute the “material” of the work. *Weather project* also highlights quite literally the self-reflexive role of the viewer-as-spectator-as-participant. This participant is made aware of his or her presence by the work, and experiences the work in a bodily, affective and cognitive sense. This is an important consideration that emerges in most publications on installation art (see, for example, Bishop, 2005; Paparo, 1998; Reiss, 2001).

To return to the absence of physicality and material in some installation artworks, one can further illuminate this aspect with reference to works that deal with an unusual take on the (absence of a) physical person in installation art. One such example is Vito Acconci’s (b. 1940) installation<sup>26</sup> called *Seedbed* (1972; fig. 2.45 – 2.46). For this work, the gallery was empty apart from a ramp created by raised floorboards under which the artist lay masturbating for eight hours per day, invisible to viewers, and from where he responded with fairly explicit verbal fantasies and noises transmitted over two loudspeakers across the room to physical movements by the viewer (Bishop, 2005:66). No apparent objects in the conventional sense were present, even though the raised floorboards and loudspeakers, as well as the physical space of the gallery, were absolutely essential to the piece. The concealed body of the artist points to a thematised practice often found in installation art: the body as presence and/or absence which, in turn, suggests both the presence and the absence of a central character necessary for the artwork to unfold (McTighe, 2005:174) – and usually invites the viewer to ponder his or her presence as a role-player, or – as I argue, as a character. Similar absences and presences can be found in Van der Merwe’s work (see Chapter 6).

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<sup>25</sup> Lippard, L. [1973] 1997. *Six years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

<sup>26</sup> This work is in the parlance of Bishop (2005:66) a “live installation” and shows close correspondences with performance art (also see Rosenthal, 2003:70).

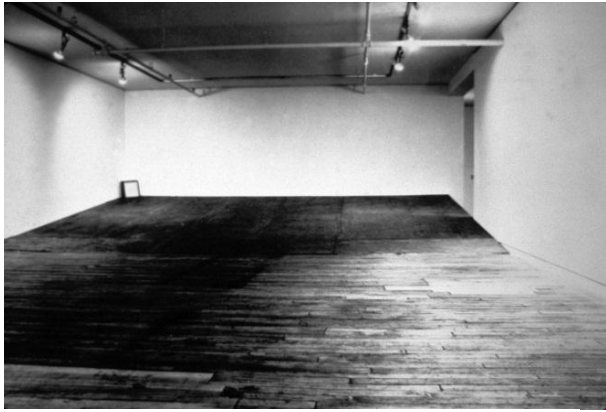


Fig. 2.45. Acconci, Vito. 1972. *Seedbed*. View of slanted wooden ramp.



Fig. 2.46. Acconci, Vito. 1972. *Seedbed*. View of the artist hidden underneath the slanted ramp.

Another work that demonstrates the theme of presence and absence is Judy Chicago's (b. 1939) *Dinner party* (1974-9; fig. 2.47 – 2.48). This installation was a large-scale collaborative project in which the artist addressed the absence of proper female representation in patriarchal versions of history. The work boasts a great many mostly hand-crafted objects: a triangular table with thirteen seats on each side of the triangle complete with intricate table settings that feature dinner plates mostly designed in the shape of female genitalia. The genital imagery thus stands in, metonymically, for the absence of the female bodies as historical or mythical characters (which are named – Hatshepsut, Artemesia Gentileschi, Virginia Woolf, and others) as well as the general absence of females from dominant historical narratives (see Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:79). An obvious reference is also made to the Last Supper with its thirteen male protagonists. This work is framed in the feminist discourse (Molesworth, 2006:68), which highlights the fact that reference to bodies is often made in the context of installation art in order to address gender-related issues.



Above: Fig. 2.47. Chicago, Judy. 1979. *The dinner party*. Installation view.



Left: Fig. 2.48. Chicago, Judy. 1979. *The dinner party*. Detail showing place settings for Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe.

Vanessa Beecroft (b. 1969), another artist who also works within a feminist mode, is known for variations of her work *Show* (first produced in 1998; fig. 2.49) which comprised a number of fashion models – many of them nude, some in underwear – who stood in a triangular formation in the atrium of the New York Guggenheim for hours. Robertson and McDaniels (2003:87) note that the bodies in this work seem to be dehumanised, idealised versions of female beauty, and that the installation suggests a deconstruction of artificially constructed notions of beauty.



Fig. 2.49. Beecroft, Vanessa. 1998. *Show* Installation view.

Characters in the bodily sense and the play of their presence and absence constitute a staple of much installation art. Other examples that work with the absences of bodies include the photographic memorial artworks dealing with Holocaust victims by Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) such as *Monument Odessa* of 1991 (fig. 2.50). Here the photographs serve as memories, as nostalgic stand-ins for the often anonymous people they represent.

The same artist's work *No man's land* of 2010 (fig. 2.51) consisted of tonnes of used clothes in heaped disarray on the gallery floor. Viewers had to trample over the clothes, smelling them, immersed in what has been reported to be a nauseating intimacy; some gallery-goers noted that they felt brutal and murderous while "inside" the work (see Weintraub, 1996:155 on similar works by Boltanski). This sense of being complicit is explained by Weintraub (1996:154-5) as follows: "Physical immersion in a 360-degree surround of textures and smells replaces observation of a static work of art from a respectful distance", and therefore, one cannot remain disengaged. This means that the spectator is immersed, has physical contact with the objects; "the search for meaning is kindled by these sensations" (ibid:155).



Left: Fig. 2.50. Boltanski, Christian. 1990. *Monument Odessa*. Part of larger installation series.

Above: Fig. 2.51. Boltanski, Christian. 2010. *No man's land*. Detail of installation.

Various artists have used clothes or shoes as being metonymical of people and their (absent) bodies. This device is often associated with themes of memory, trauma and violence related to the absence (or death) of the characters – compare, for example, Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios*<sup>27</sup> (1992-3; fig. 2.52) where shoes stand in for memories of violently silenced people (Bal, 2010:60, 62). This resonates with Van der Merwe's use of clothing, often jackets, that stand for absent characters.



Fig. 2.52. Salcedo, Doris. 1992-93. *Atrabiliarios* (detail of installation).

<sup>27</sup> *Atrabiliarios* means "defiant"; this title is, however, not translated in publications on the work.

The installation artworks discussed up to this point are very diverse. In order to derive some sense of how one can address what installation art is, and what its broad concerns are, a brief historical contextualisation will hopefully provide useful insights.

### 2.2.3 Installation art: an historical context

The concise historical overview of installation art that I provide below includes a number of the frequently cited predecessors of this art form. The discussion aims to shed light on why this approach to art emerged at all, and how it grew out of specific contexts – socially, artistically, and economically speaking.

Dada experiments with the activation of spaces by means of unusual materials and actions, Bauhaus intermedial collaborations, Russian constructivists and artists from De Stijl can all be cited as pioneers of installation. For example, the First International Dada Fair (fig. 2.53) in Berlin (1920) presented a messy jumble of real posters, photographs and three-dimensional objects; they were “real” because most of these had been produced for various events, not specifically for the exhibition. The show was put together as a collaborative effort with inputs from many artists, and set out to violate aesthetic conventions and political conservatism alike (the Berlin Dadaists favoured communism) (Rosenthal, 2003:34-36).

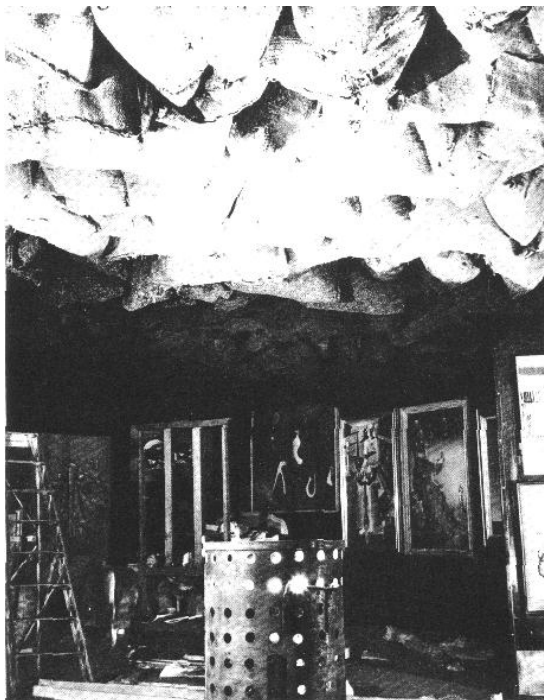


Fig. 2.53. Artists at the First International Dada Fair, 1920.

Most sources cite the International Surrealist Exhibitions (featured in Paris during 1938 and in New York in 1942 – see Bishop, 2005:20; fig. 2.54 and 2.55) as a significant precursor to installation art practices. For the Paris leg of the Surrealist Exhibition, the entire interior of

the Galerie des Beaux-Arts was transformed: furniture was removed, daylight sources were altered, and the gallery was filled with objects such as crumpled beds<sup>28</sup>, plants, actual paintings and heaps of rubbish that filled the space so that little walking room was left. The remaining gallery space was activated in very unusual ways: by Marcel Duchamp's *1 200 sacks of coal* suspended from the ceiling and sifting coal dust over visitors; then also by a coffee-roasting machine that added the smell of coffee and finally by a soundtrack of hysterical laughter recorded in an asylum that permeated the gallery (Bishop, 2005:20).

These elements added qualities of movement, sensory feeling, hearing and smell to the art gallery where conventionally the focus is only on visual observation. Actually, on the opening night, the entire exhibition was clad in darkness because the Dada artist-photographer Man Ray's (1890 – 1976) plan of illuminating the works by means of spotlights as visitors approached them did not materialise, so to speak, in time. As a consequence, visitors were given flashlights instead. This proved to be a perfectly Surrealistic solution in the sense that in the darkness visitors were compelled to discover, in a Freudian-archaeological sense, the works one by one (or stumble over them) and to generate free associations while navigating between things (Bishop, 2005:22).



Left: Fig. 2.54. Installation view of the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism, showing Duchamp, Marcel. 1938. *1 200 sacks of coal*.

Below Fig. 2.55. Installation view of the 1942 International Exhibition of Surrealism, showing Duchamp, Marcel. 1942. *Sixteen miles of string*.



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<sup>28</sup> Tracey Emin's installation *My bed* (fig. 2.39) can be seen to pay homage, consciously or unconsciously, to this exhibition.

The typical Surrealist exhibition importantly foreshadowed installation art in many ways, especially with regard to the use of banal materials and the activation of an entire space. Of course, the space was also a gallery – the institutional status of which is also subverted by the transformation of the formal interior by a highly unusual jumble of objects in the place of the usual grand chairs and carpets and framed artworks (see Bishop, 2005:22). Other aspects that this exhibition shares with more contemporary installation art practice include the emphasis on time: the time needed to navigate the space and the time-layers suggested by the unrelated items on display. A final aspect that connects the exhibition to installation art is the emphasis on the viewer's role, who had to find his or her way with a heightened sense of physical, embodied participation.

As I will show below, in the discussion of a few of installation art's characteristics, these elements work together in installation art to generate what can be broadly a narrative, even cinematic or theatrical artistic experience. This experience also distinguishes installation art from the non-theatricality of modernist art. (Dada and Surrealist experiments such as the ones noted above did not, of course, sit well with what Fried [1967] desired of modern art: purity of medium, present-ness and non-theatricality.)

To continue with the historical contextualisation, it becomes clear that installation art owes its origins to a vast range of art styles, movements and individuals. Apart from his work *1 200 sacks of coal* (fig. 2.54) mentioned above, Duchamp is perhaps the most prominent precursor of installation art. He was famous as the champion of the readymade<sup>29</sup>, the found object and the notion of the junk aesthetic; furthermore, his variations of *Sixteen miles of string* (fig. 2.55) were among the first to explore notions of the activated space. The version of this work that was shown at the 1942 *First papers of Surrealism* in New York, 1942 consisted of a criss-crossing of miles of string across the gallery space – actually impeding proper viewing of the artworks and objects displayed against the wall (see Bishop, 2005:22-23). With gestures like these Duchamp defiled the “neutral space [of the gallery] that had been made sacrosanct by modernist ideology” (Chambers, 2006:404).

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<sup>29</sup> Geczy and Genocchio (2001:2) hold up the readymade as the real beginning of installation art, because of the following: by: “*suspending* the utility of an everyday object, *enlisting* it into the halls of art and *engaging* the viewer into his or her complicity in the religion and game of art”. Like the readymade, installation art sets out to re-engage art-making with “experiences outside the symbols, mythologies, and constraints of the conventional language of the visual arts” [Davies’ italics] (Davies, 1997:13).



Far left: Fig. 2.56. Duchamp, Marcel. 1946-66. View through aperture of *Étant donnés: The waterfall*.

Left: Fig. 2.57. Duchamp, Marcel. 1946-66. Exterior: *Étant donnés*, showing a gallery goer looking through the aperture.

Works by Duchamp such as *Étant donnés* (1946-66; fig. 2.56, 2.57) and his *Boîte en valise* series (begun in 1942; fig. 2.58) helped to further break down the mystique of the art object and the notion of art display. *Étant donnés* consisted of a small dark chamber where the viewer peeps through a hole in order to become a voyeur by “spying” (an active, participatory, even coercive role as opposed to passive looking) on a naked female figure in a sexually provocative position (Rosenthal, 2003:36-37). The *Boîte en valise* series contains objects in a box; it has been interpreted as an absurd, fun-poking critique of the museum’s authority as a “cube”<sup>30</sup> that houses art (Chambers, 2006:404-5). Duchamp was therefore perhaps the most notable *provocateur* of the art scene – a significant precursor in terms of how thinking about art developed in ways that could accommodate the peculiarities of installation art.

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<sup>30</sup> The pristine white space of the gallery is famously critiqued in Brian O’Doherty’s essay series entitled *Inside the white cube* (1976); here he exposed the hidden ideologies and limitations of the institutions of art.

Below: Fig. 2.58. Duchamp, Marcel. 1943.  
*Boîte-en-valise* numbered O/X.

Right: Fig. 2.59. Schwitters, Kurt. 1930-32.  
*MERZ-bau*. Installation view.



The Dada/Surrealist artist Kurt Schwitters' home transfiguration of found materials called *MERZ-bau* (1930-32; fig. 2.59) is also frequently cited as a precursor of institutional critique associated with installation art which aims to subvert the long-held belief of the gallery as sole purveyor of art; all the associations and conventions of the gallery therefore came under fire with works like this one as well as other instances of art production that disregarded the gallery (Fer, 2001).

Later precursors of installation art practice are Pop art, Minimalism, Conceptual art and Land art (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 1993:67). Pop artists in particular are known for incorporating banal objects into the artworks to celebrate the ordinary and the lifelike; Conceptualism is an obvious precursor since Conceptual art broke so many long-held views and conventions of art, art practice and art reception that it has come to represent the most distinct juncture of poststructuralist thinking about art<sup>31</sup>. Land art is important as a precursor to installation art, particularly because it undermines the primacy of the gallery; Land art or Environmental art usually refers to site-specific (outside) and transient work.

Other related instances of art that set the tone for installation include tableaux (fig. 2.60 and 2.61) produced by artists such as Edward Kienholz (1927 – 1994) working with Nancy Reddin Kienholz (b. 1943) and Claes Oldenburg – these tableaux undermine conventions of sculpture by using everyday materials, and by removing traditional aspects (such as the

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<sup>31</sup> Most installation artworks can be described as variants of the wider umbrella term of Conceptual art.

plinth), thus activating an entire interior. Artists since Duchamp have in various ways challenged a range of conventions associated with art, particularly its institutional *status quo*.



Left: Fig. 2.60. Kienholz, Edward and Nancy Reddin. 1981. *In the infield was Patty Peccavi*.

Below: Fig. 2.61. Oldenburg, Claes. 1961. *The store*.



Institutional critique, however, constituted only one terrain of artistic revolt. Most works that relate to installation practice as we know it today have emerged since the late 1950s as part of a broader programme of discontent with a great many aspects of the art world: art practice, dissemination, art markets, the relationship between art and life and the content and function of art, to name a few prominent issues. When the post-World War II art scene shifted to the United States of America and prices of artworks escalated beyond anyone's expectations (Jackson Pollock [1912 – 1965] is a key figure in this shift), the very nature of art changed profoundly in many ways. Among others, the figure of the isolated artist producing inaccessible and abstract works that were praised by critics yet generally mystified the broader public came under scrutiny. Installation art would attempt, perhaps not always successfully, to bridge the divide between art and life.

Similarly, the practice of studio painting (not necessarily easel painting in the case of artists such as Pollock, but painting nonetheless) conventionally used to be revered as an important, noble expression of humanity, and as a commodity of connoisseurship (Burgin, 1986:33-34, 39) but this was about to change. Painting was perceived as having too much canonical baggage that situated it firmly as a chauvinistic and exclusionary endeavour – and

so this art form came under fire in a context where authority, stifling tradition as well as the Modernist drive towards originality all seemed overwrought.

All these shifts happened during a time when the art market was booming (especially in the United States of America) and this brought about the realisation that art had, in the post-War world, become a commodity like so many items in, for example, consumer catalogues. Disenchanted by these changes in the art world, Minimalism, Land art and Conceptual art (in the form of Light-and-space art, performance pieces and many others) emerged to counter the money-making ability and painterly domination of art. Land art and more conceptual artworks were either impossible or very hard to sell, and were not initially believed to be desirable collectables by curators – whereas Pop art did well in what was at its time a thriving art market. Crucially, these art forms attempted to address the way art and life interacted.

Conceptual art and Land art in particular aimed to break down barriers separating art and life, as well as barriers associated with the spaces of art – so that the museum and the gallery were often shunned in favour of industrial, derelict spaces on the outskirts of cities that provided that “edgy” quality sought after by many. “Edgy” in this sense not only suggests “fashionable” but also marginal – “on the edge”, “cutting edge” – physically and mentally, but also artistically speaking. The word is also used in this way in Linda Weintraub’s 1996 book *Art on the edge and over*. Edgy may refer to the unusual and a proclivity for spaces that, for example, promote non-profit work (Coleman, 2000:167); historically charged spaces such as old prisons or army camps (McMahon, 2000:225) ); or places used for progressive cultural practice (Coleman, 2000). In the case of Land art, artists often turned to less accessible natural spaces (on the edge of town) in order to explore the notion of the earth as canvas.

The emergence of installation art – drawing on Dadaist spaces, Surrealist combinations, Minimalist experiments, theatrical combinations of different elements, as well as Performance art and the like – was, with hindsight, almost a natural consequence of this era. Installation art can be seen as part of the larger programme of change in the arts begun by these movements: it abandoned conventional modes of art making and sought to, instead of being roped off in a gallery or contained by a frame, remedy a world believed to

suffer from all manner of ills: institutional, moral, and in terms of what constitutes art practice (Danto, 1996:15-16). If it could not remedy, it aimed to at least raise consciousness: “The experience of art becomes a moral adventure rather than a mere aesthetic interlude” (Danto, 1996:16).

It was around the late 1960s that the death of art as it used to be seemed to become a real possibility; Danto’s essays on the art world and its impending end formalised this view<sup>32</sup>. He understood art’s demise to be linked closely to changes internal to the art world (such as the rise of performance and street art). The so-called end of art actually referred to the likely death of the art object as autonomous and self-sufficient – also under the pressure of the end of modernism, the erasure of philosophical boundaries *between* categories, and the view of art as style-free and general havoc these wreaked on the museum of fine arts (Danto, 1996:13-17). This age also saw the impending death of the author (proclaimed by Roland Barthes in 1967<sup>33</sup>); it was the end of structuralism which entailed a shift in the entire set of rules by which theory and thinking functioned.

The ascent of installation art is furthermore widely associated with the rise of post-structuralism in academic circles (McTighe, 2005:2; Krauss, 1979). Generally, across many spheres, the late 1960s heralded a number of paradigmatic shifts that brought about the end of the (western) world as it used to be; this signalled an epistemological crisis (Crary, 2003:7). For the purposes of this discussion, installation art can therefore be regarded in many ways as a symptom and a response to these contexts; furthermore, it can either be viewed as a consequence of the demise of traditional views of art, or as a reinvention and invigoration of art. Thus, against the backdrop of significant changes that marked the late 1960s, installation art can be seen as an attempt to interrogate and expand the practices and media of art, together with the persistent interrogation of conventions associated with art. For art practice, it meant challenging the definitions, institutions and contexts of art.

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<sup>32</sup> Examples of such publications by Danto include the article “The artworld” (1964), and the book *After the end of art: contemporary art and the pale of history* (1997) in which he revisited previous claims about the end of art.

<sup>33</sup> Barthes’ notorious essay “The death of the author” was first published in English in the American journal *Aspen*, no. 5-6 in 1967.

These historical realities acted as central drives for artists to pursue installation as an art form (see Paparo, 1998:7-8). Art forms peculiar to the age – in particular installation – also set out to engage more fully with social issues in order to break the modernist belief in the autonomy of art<sup>34</sup>. In this regard, the worldwide 1968 student protests, as well as the successes of the civil rights movement and the women’s movement all helped to open the stage to more voices, and to a general sense of subversion of constricting categories and hierarchies (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:21).

However, while in theoretical logic and with historical hindsight this shift towards installation makes sense, it does not follow that its actual reception was welcoming. While major international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta, Skulptur and others increasingly relied on installations for “memorable, high-impact gestures within large exhibition spaces”, many curators still associate installation art with a hint of subversion, believing it will probably not sell and its outcome is unpredictable (Bishop, 2005:37).

The evasive, heterogeneous nature of installation art is the (perhaps ironic) entry point to the attempts at definition that follow.

#### **2.2.4 Installation art: some definitions**

Dan Flavin first coined the term installation art in 1964 with reference to one of his early light pieces (Johnston, 1985:48), but “installation” only appeared in *Art Index* in 1978 (Reiss, 1999:xii). Geczy and Genocchio (2001:1) propose coyly but unhelpfully that: “There is no such ‘thing’ as installation because ‘installation’ is a stand-in term for a state of relative disappearance and then reappearance of the art object”. Significantly, these authors (2001:2) refer to installation as an activity that activates a space; another author calls it “a verb pretending to be a noun” (Alexander, 1996:62). It is related to the French verb *installer*

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<sup>34</sup>Burgin (1986:37) argues that an art form which involves itself truly with the concerns of society as it exists today (Burgin believed this to be photography) must be, and he quotes Brecht, engaged: “not with the good old things, but with the bad new ones”. Concern with social issues is a staple of much installation art practice – and artists do not shirk from messy and complex issues such as transcultural identities, body functions, violence, slave histories and the like (see Bal, 2008; 2011; Warr, 2006; McTighe, 2005; Robertson & McDaniel, 2010 for extended examples of these).

– “gathering” and “assembling” also come to mind; gathering may entail either found or made objects (see Geczy & Genocchio, 2001:9).

Furthermore, installation art is rather contentiously viewed by some as a medium; but a medium that is expansive, transgressive and non-elitist (Rosenthal, 2003:25); the same author suggests that installation is “a way of working” (2003:26). Installation may be an aesthetic strategy, attitude or tendency instead of a style – especially in view of the relationship between the work and the location in which it is placed (Geczy & Genocchio, 2001:2). De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry (2003:13) concur; instead of offering a definition of installation art, they circumscribe it broadly as a critical action that entails raising awareness about the position of the artist, material culture, exhibition practices and the role of the audience. Bishop (2005:6) characterises installation art as theatrical, immersive or experiential. It may have a physical aspect and is presented in a space – broadly speaking, then, related to but being neither sculpture nor environment.

The nature of installation art’s affinity with or overlap with the genre of sculpture is to an extent clarified by Colles (2001:11) who proposes that installation *can* be interpreted as a sculpture, “provided one thinks of sculpture as something that can be environmental or ambient rather than discrete; that it can be an arrangement rather than a fabrication”. Alexander (1996:61) refers to Krauss’ views (set out in her insightful *Passages in modern sculpture*, 1977 in which the plinth and pedestal are dealt with extensively) to suggest that installation can be a type of sculpture where the pedestal or plinth has been removed, so that one deals with “real time, real space, real materials”. Getting rid of the plinth, according to Alexander, replaces the transcendental space of sculpture as gallery exhibit with the real space of the work (the same could be said for the frame in painting).

In terms of space and also with regard to the integration of different art forms (such as architecture and painting), Giotto di Bondone’s (1266/7 – 1337) Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (fig. 2.62) and James McNeill Whistler’s (1834 – 1903) Peacock Room in London (fig. 2.63) have been noted as precursors of installation art. Other places such as the Sistine Chapel (fig. 2.64) and the caves at Lascaux (fig. 2.65) – what Geczy and Genocchio (2001:2) call “charged spaces” – are included as historical antecedents of this art form. However, Colles (2001:11) argues that while installations may include aspects of genres such as sculpture,

painting, graphics, theatre, architecture, interior design, and photography they need not combine these, “integrally and functionally into a total work of art (like a [b]aroque spectacle or a Bauhaus ballet)”.



Fig. 2.62 Scrovegni Chapel, Padua (1303-1305) featuring Giotto di Bondone’s fresco paintings.



Fig. 2.64. Interior of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican. Built 1475-83, frescoes by Michelangelo, 1508 (ceiling); 1535-41 (back wall).



Fig. 2.63. Whistler, James McNeill. 1876-77. *The Peacock Room*.



Fig. 2. 65. Cave paintings at Lascaux. c. 30 000 B.C.E. Right wall, *Hall of bulls*.

Thus, while installation art has been referred to as expressive of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 1993:67; Rosenthal, 2003:25) this notion is not a generally agreed upon one – perhaps also because such a notion is modernist and presupposes the artist as genius, which among of the attributes of art that did not carry into the era of postmodern

art. Many authors concur<sup>35</sup>, nonetheless, that installation art can be defined by its “hybrid” quality. It celebrates the transgression of boundaries between art forms, drawing frequently on the theatrical and the immersive as experiential categories. Installation artworks also often make use of a mixture of media, in this way also suggesting a hybrid of materials.

Davies (1997:13) seems to make fairly sound conceptual sense of installation art’s fundamental characteristics by proposing that: (1) it entails the habitation of a physical space; (2) it has a connection to real conditions – visual, historical or social, and (3) it often entails transgressing traditional art boundaries of public and private, individual and communal, and high style and vernacular.

Reiss (2002:xiii) adds a significant point for this study, namely that the essence of installation art is spectator participation. This may mean that the viewer is required to perform certain activities in the context of the artwork; however, these activities need not entail more than physically navigating through a space to confront what is there. In this sense, viewer participation means to “complete the piece” (Reiss, 2001:xiii; see also Davies, 1997:14). “Looking” in the passive sense is, then, superseded by “spectating” which better describes the more involved role of the viewer (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 1993). Danto (1996:16) suggests the word “encounter” as he concurs that “viewing” is too external, and also too visual. Traces of the Romantic notion that the incompleteness of an object (one may imagine a folly) allows the viewer/spectator/audience who encounters the work to mentally complete the image can be seen here (Honour, 1979:17; McTighe, 2005:16). Bishop’s (2005) insistence on participation is especially descriptive of the fact that the viewer is drawn into the artwork and does something in this context.

Since installation art acknowledges the presence of the viewer who participates in the work, it is aligned with Romanticism as well as with a broad postmodernist perspective. This is because it cannot, as modernist art purported to do, exist without this person who completes the work; it is also theatrical (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003). “Theatrical” was used in a derogatory manner by the well-known modernist critic Michael Fried in his 1967 essay *Art and objecthood*. Ironically, Fried’s plea for rejecting the theatrical in art as set out in this seminal essay helped to delineate a number of characteristics that installation art

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<sup>35</sup> See Rosenthal (2003:25-26); Geczy and Genocchio (2001) and Bishop (2005:6-35 et seq.).

would *celebrate* (also see Reiss, 2001:xiv),. These characteristics are that art that is theatrical is, like theatre, (1) temporal in nature, (2) its dependence on a particular situation is another factor; and (3) it is focused on the role of the beholder (who becomes a participant). Fried the modernist rejected the notions of time in art and the idea of being part of an actual situation, as well as the role of the beholder of art. Instead, Fried proposed that: “good modernist art does not require a situation for its successful completion. It exists, no matter what the viewing scenario” (1968 in Reiss, 2001:59).

Like theatre, installation art is “over” once it is dismantled. In addition, there are four main sources of the installation artwork available to the art historian once the work is not shown any longer (see Reiss, 2001:xvii) - these clearly apply to Van der Merwe’s art, too:

1. **Published criticism** (where reviewers present their response to the work). Such publications function as eyewitness reports; it is noteworthy that the first-person nature of such accounts “does not diminish its importance” (Reiss, 2001:xvii) – first-person experience being one of the main points of installation art.
2. **Interviews** – with artists, curators or critics. Interviews yield information pertaining to these individuals’ memories, perspectives and writings.
3. **Photographs** of the installations serve as valuable sources of information: “[W]ithout photographic documentation, installation art would likely be even more peripheral to art history than it already is” (Reiss, 2001:xviii). However helpful photographs of installations works are, they are two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional spaces and are not substitutes for the original work. This means that the photograph, according to Reiss (2001:xiii) should not be analysed *as* a work of art; it should be used critically, and when photographing works the person who documents should consider such salient aspects as whether or not to include spectators in the photographs.
4. The **context** in which the work was exhibited serves as the final source; this aspect is also a salient thematic concern for much installation art and relates to institutional critique as well as the activation of space. This latter point is addressed below under the section which concerns itself with the spatial characteristics of installation art.

Installation art, according to Reiss (2001:xix) is always a public art form – and therefore it follows that if the same work is re-shown elsewhere, it would not be exactly the same because, Reiss posits, “the physical characteristics of the space have an enormous effect on the final product” (I have referred to the different experiences of Van der Merwe’s work *The End* that was shown at the Pretoria Art Museum as well as at the underground reservoir space at Oliewenhuis).

Increasingly, the effect of the real-life context on the work of art has enjoyed attention since the 1960s (Reiss, 2001:xiv). This is because of the radical questioning of the notion of a “neutral” exhibition space since the realisation dawned that the historical realities and physical spatial experience of the exhibition locale are profoundly intertwined with the very history and nature of installation art (Reiss, 2001:xix). In particular, installation art has created a profound rupture in the long-held perception that the gallery is *the* institutional authority on art (in O’Doherty’s, 1976 terms, the gallery is the ideologically problematic, pristine, white cube-like space). As a response to this critique, many installation artists seek out raw spaces or they take the work outside, into the street – the “edgy” spaces mentioned above.

Nonetheless, however hard some artists attempt to liberate the art work from the ideologically inscribed white cube of the gallery, most installations are actually presented in the context of a gallery space - Van der Merwe’s work typically feature in galleries. The gallery as a space is highly coded and carries with it the burden as well as the potential Midas touch of associations and historical depth. Western (2004:15) notes that: “The act of placing a work within a gallery elevates it to the status of ‘high’ art and unless the installation deliberately embraces this nature of the space it must work very hard to create a suspension of disbelief in the viewer. The gallery is not the blank space it appears to be.” In this sense, the institutional context of the gallery continues to have a bearing on many works; seeing an artwork in a particular gallery can validate the work, or the work can be understood to enter into a dialogue with the space into which it is “relegated” (see Reiss, 2001:xiv). In this sense, institutional critique ironically became a legitimising feature of some gallery spaces who wanted to be seen as displaying an awareness of the multifaceted pursuits of the new art (Stemmerich, 2008:138). And so, most installation art remained tied

to institutional contexts in what Stemmrich (2006:137) calls a “quasi-Oedipal” manner – and are therefore likely to be shown in a gallery while its ideological strictures are bemoaned.

As noted above, Duchamp’s variations of *Sixteen miles of string* (such as fig. 2.55) and *1 200 coal sacks* (fig. 2.54) are precursors of artworks that undermine and expose the highly coded space of the gallery. Installation artworks initially irked curators who were cautious of exhibiting works that would potentially both alienate their viewing audiences and were highly unlikely to sell; I have noted that many artists circumvented this problem by finding places outside of the museum to produce and show their work; site-specific art, performances and performance-based installations, for example, created an alternative cultural system that rejected the network of museum and gallery institutions (Lapugnani, 2006:252).

Some installation artists regarded saleable art as complicit with the institution-based and “politically neutral” *status quo* which had come to represent a “conservative ideology in which capitalism dovetailed with patriarchy, an imperialist foreign policy, racism and a host of other social ills” (Bishop, 2005:32). Subverting the notion of saleable art<sup>36</sup> had a sense of urgency that coincided with a critical attitude towards the gallery or museum as a coded social institution. In this sense, one may well remember that any act of transgression requires a boundary (see Amato, 2010:55); and so the institutions of art and their values provided a foil for art’s discontents.

Incidentally, this institutional critique has been linked to a renewed interest in the way [conventional, i.e. painterly but also other] artworks are hung and arranged in the gallery space in order to reflect an ideology or produce a narrative. In this manner, the entire exhibition, the decisions made about which works to show and how to place works, i.e. the dynamics between artworks, can be seen to constitute a dialogue that entails an artistic activity in itself. This activity generates a number of tensions worth exploring – and may qualify an exhibition as an installation (see Bishop, 2005:55; see Bal, 2001a:117-160 for a

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<sup>36</sup> Not without irony, Davies (1997:9) notes that: “It remains a capitalist verity, however, that competent painters of modestly sized realist pictures will make a living, while brilliant environmental sculptors [i.e. installation artists in Davies’ sense] will make art history and need a day job.”

critique of the ideology of displaying; see Swanepoel, 2012 for a discussion of an entire exhibition that can be read as an installation). An example of an exhibition that has been severely criticised in these terms is the infamously themed *Magiciens de la terre* (mounted in 1989 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris). This exhibition displayed mostly modernist European artworks alongside African art that purportedly “inspired” the European imagination active in the production of work; this exhibition demonstrated how artworks are understood to “talk” to each other according to curatorial decisions on selection and placement. *Magiciens de la terre* received scathing reviews and brought to bear a number of postcolonial tensions; it generated much debate on ideological undercurrents purported to be laid bare in the assumptions underlying curatorial decisions (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999:8-14).

In recent times, installation art has gained greater institutional acceptance. In some instances, installation artists and curators have begun to explore collaborative possibilities that “transform the art institution [the museum or gallery] into a cultural laboratory” (De Oliveira *et al.*, 2003:i) – these may include artists presenting lectures, leading protests or holding panel discussions in institutional contexts. In addition, institutions and private collectors have even begun to acquire installation works, although it remains a truism that these works are less lucrative for collectors than paintings or sculptures (Bishop, 2005:42). Van der Merwe (Personal interview, 2014) reiterates that his installations do not sell readily in the same manner as conventional art forms (painting and sculpture, for example) - although he has sold smaller pieces that can be described as sculptures.

## 2.3 Chapter summary

Jan van der Merwe's oeuvre and approaches, his materials, themes and stature served as the basis from where installation art as a peculiar instance of relatively recent art-making was explored.

To summarise, it can be stated that installation art defies simple definition and categorisation; it is flexible and may activate or negate various media. Difficult to sell, installation art nonetheless tends to be regarded as trend-setting and indicative of broad shifts in terms of what art is and what it does, and how it relates to its institutional and ideological contexts. Installation artworks often converse with real-life situations; these may include reference to institutional realities, history, places and people in a self-reflexive manner. Also, installations are often ephemeral and bound to particular places. Of importance for the current study is the manner in which installation art tends to engage with time and space in ways that foreground these elements. Furthermore, the role of the gallery-goer that changes from that of beholder into participating and actively engaging with the artwork is important because this role is salient for making sense of installation art.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INSTALLATION ART AND THE ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE

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In chapter 2, it was established that Jan van der Merwe often produces works that can be regarded as installation art. Therefore, a few historical and contextual tenets of this art form were explored. The aim of the current chapter is to reflect further on installation art in terms of its potential to be interpreted from a narratological vantage point. Therefore, the discussion sets out to gauge the extent to which installation art invites narratological consideration – specifically by tracing the narration and focalisation processes of this art form. These last two terms constitute the focus of the interpretation chapters (5 and 6) that follow, where a select number of Van der Merwe’s installation artworks are interpreted from a narratological perspective with emphasis on the focalisation and narration of time, space and character – with event implied in the interpretation of character.

This chapter is structured to explore installation art with reference to Bal’s (2001a:214) point of departure for a narratological reading of visual art, namely that one deals with:

... issues of semantization of characters, the concretization and subjectification of space into place, the thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices, and, most important of all, *focalization* [Bal’s italics].

This quotation is a second-order elaboration on the basic narratological *elements* (these are events, actors/characters, time and space) propounded by Genette and others (see Bal, [1978] 1986), and their manipulation by means of the narrative *aspects* (of which focalisation is one). In other words, “semantization”, “concretization”, “subjectivization”, and “thickening” suggest that Bal engages the elements here in their focalised sense.

The phrase “space into place” should be briefly clarified: in Bal’s early work (such as *De theorie van vertellen en verhalen: Inleiding in de narratologie* of 1978, second edition 1986) she notes that place in relation to observation becomes space: “Die plaatsen, *gezien in relatie tot de waarneming ervan*, noemen we ruimte” ([1978] 1986:102; author’s italics).

Here, *place* is understood as the “general” or abstract sense of spatiality. However, in more contemporary texts – including Bal’s publications such as *Looking in. The art of viewing* (2001a), her use of these concepts has transformed to concur with postcolonial nomenclature: *space* is now rather conceptualised as the abstract concept that is “concretized and subjectivized” [these two transformations can refer to focalisation] into a specific *place*.

This concurs with the view of Doloughan (2011:108), among others, that place is particular and topographical while space is less specific; space would therefore be the broader category (which may also be mental or virtual space) while place refers to the filtered, specific locational aspect of space.

The discussion of installation art in this chapter proceeds with reference to the elements of narrative mentioned in Bal’s quotation above. In amended order, these appear as follows: time, space, and character (here brief reference is also made to event, to include the fourth element – character and event are grouped in one section). Focalisation is a second-order *aspect* of narrative (Bal, [1978] 1986) that – as argued in the chapters concerned with interpretation – drives the meaning of the narrative elements in Van der Merwe’s work, as explored in chapters 5 and 6.

Time is the first element of Bal’s (2001a) view of narrative elements that is applied to the visual arts and installation art specifically. The section below introduces time as well as space in order to acknowledge the interconnectedness of time and space. Both time and space as narrative elements that are represented in various ways in the visual arts and in installation art will be discussed separately in subsequent sections.

### **3.1 An introduction to time and space in installation art**

Installation art’s focus on the participant’s experience means that it is necessarily preoccupied with time and space (McTighe, 2005:9); I propose that this preoccupation can be distinguished from most other genres or visual art forms by the way in which time and space are usually dealt with in installation art *in a very self-conscious manner*. That is, installation artworks almost invariably make a statement about time and space, or foreground these in some or other way.

In this section, time and space in installation art are explored by first presenting a brief and necessarily selective overview of time and space as connected elements in the visual arts generally before turning to time and space as these have evolved specifically in installation art; for clarity purposes a number of installation artworks are referenced as examples. The same procedure (first referring to the visual arts in general and then turning towards installation art specifically) is followed for the section on character in (installation) art in the next chapter.

The connectedness of time and space in installation art referred to above is in no way confined to this art form. Thinking about time in the context of the visual arts (or in most contexts) is, almost invariably, likely to also involve awareness of space; separating time and space for the purposes of this discussion is in a sense an artificial exercise, but time and space do have different emphases which warrant separate consideration in this chapter.

Gaston Bachelard (quoted by Alexander, 1996:64) in his book *The poetics of space* ([1958]; 1969) propounds that: “space is compressed time”. Space without time, or time without space would be unthinkable<sup>1</sup>. This notion that time and space are two sides of a coin has not always been prevalent in the theoretical reflection on the visual arts. Instead, painting, sculpture and later also architecture were regarded as purely spatial art forms.

The most canonical example of such theorising is a text written in the eighteenth century, namely the Enlightenment dramatist and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s (1729 – 1781) famous treatise on sculpture called *Laocoön: An essay on the limits of painting and poetry*, first published in 1766. Here Lessing interrogated the nature of sculpture as opposed to literature, especially poetry. Looking for objective criteria by means of which to define sculpture, Lessing searches for the essential, limiting conditions of the separate arts in order to establish what is “natural” to a specific artistic form. Essentially, he argued, sculpture is a medium of *space* and therefore differs inherently from art forms such as poetry, which naturally belong to *time*. Thus it would seem to follow, based on his logic, that time is *not* natural to sculpture or painting.

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin (1981) conceptualises this dependence of time and space on each other as the *chronotope* – a word he coined to elucidate changing space-time perceptions. Space and time relations have increasingly fascinated scholars, artists and others since Einstein introduced his theory of relativity in 1905.

Lessing propounded the impossible-seeming argument that in the absence of time, all aspects of the visual artwork must appear to the viewer and apprehended *simultaneously* (see Krauss, 1977:3 for a critique of Lessing). Lessing’s argument also entails that (1) an artist – painter or sculptor – can never show more than a single moment (which Lessing argues must be chosen with great care since an artist, “should never portray an action at its climax” but should seek for the moment before impact, so to speak); (2) the single moment is viewed from a single vantage point; (3) but is contemplated repeatedly and at length (1766[1962]:19). Clearly, this last point undermines his own purely spatial view of art. Lessing would most likely not agree, however, and his unyielding distinction between purported time and space-based arts became a (problematic) natural opposition that would gain heightened impetus in the writings of modernist critical theorists such as Michael Fried (especially his *Art and objecthood* of 1967).

Several authors engage with ways of working within this tendency to categorise works of art (or other modes of communication) into spatial or temporal camps. This is exemplified in the way in which installation art is conceptualised and categorised by Ryan (2004:20) as well as in the typology of the South African art historian Arie Kuijers (1986).

**Table 1:** Kuijers’ typology of the arts (Kuijers, 1986)

<b>Spatial</b>	<b>Temporal</b>	<b>Spatio-temporal</b>
Painting	Music	Stage performance: ballet, theatre, orchestra
Sculpture	Literary arts	<i>*Installation art (my suggestion – LC)</i>
Drawing, printmaking		
Architecture		

- By the time Kuijers’ typology was published (1986), installation art had perhaps not made a sufficiently lasting impression (in South Africa where he published, in any event) to warrant an entry in his scheme. However, the key to positioning installation here is the theatrical, which has been shown to be a defining characteristic of installation art and where I suspect Kuijers would have placed installation had he actually considered it. What this typology does not account for at all is the varied and vast evocation of space in literature and the significance of time

in the so-called static visual arts. Essentially, the conceptual bluntness of this typology means that it lacks the nuance necessary to engage with art forms in a less reductionist manner.

Briefly, one can propose a distinction between *mode* and *referential evocations*. In such a distinction, mode may refer to the actual physical taking up of time or space, while referential evocations refer to ways in which time and space are suggested. The existence of an artwork as a physical object in space, for example, is its most salient characteristic – its *mode*. However, the artwork may *reference* time (and may also, of course, reference other spaces) by means of certain devices (see 3.2 below). In the same vein, a novel's physical existence as a collection of pages is not its most salient characteristic – rather, its unfolding over time is important so that its *mode* would be temporal. Again, a novel may evoke spatial referents and whole fictional worlds, and these are *referential evocations*.

Ryan's typology shows a number of similarities with Kuijers', although she presents a more expansive view that focuses on media affecting narrativity:

**Table 2:** Ryan’s typology of communicative instances (Ryan, 2004)

Temporal			Spatial	Spatio-temporal	
One channel		Two channels	One channel	One channel	Multiple channels
Linguistic	Acoustic	Linguistic/Acoustic	Visual/Static	Visual/Kinetic	
Media of long-distance oral communication :	Non-texted music	Songs with lyrics, Sung poetry	Painting, sculpture, Photography, Architecture? <sup>2</sup>	Mime, Animated graphics, Silent movies without music	Acoustic-visual (kinetic): dance, silent movies with live music
Radio, Telephone					Linguistic-visual (static): comic strips, artist’s books, children’s books, newspapers
Manuscript writing					Linguistic-visual (kinetic): face-to-face oral communication
Printing writing in various supports					Linguistic-acoustic-visual (kinetic): cinema, theatre, TV, opera
Digital writing: e-mail, Internet chat, Hypertext (text-only)					Synthesis of all channels:
					Installation art, interactive computer-mediated forms of expression: web pages, art CD-ROMs, computer games, virtual reality

These typologies are indications of our desire to reflect on what different art forms or communicative instances can do, and thus provide some insight into where installation art can be positioned and how it relates to other instances of artistic or narrative communication. However, the number of exceptions to any category tends to complicate the boundaries between types and thus render these boundaries redundant (virtual realities have especially problematised our understanding of time and space). Also, the user of such categorisations or typologies has to “play along” significantly with what the authors propose, because tables like these invite the devil’s advocate to expose deficiencies of any kind in what may seem to be a workable scheme.

<sup>2</sup> It is illuminating that Ryan (2004:20) who positions installation as spatio-temporal in her typology of media, places architecture in the same category, albeit with a question mark. This is likely the case because although a building is a fairly fixed construction in space (and thus would tend to be a spatial instance in this typology) time is needed on the part of the human subject to walk through the different spaces of the building. Architecture shares with installation the conflation of time and space as prerequisites of experience.

At later stages in the discussion, the complementary functioning of time and space in installation art will be considered in some detail, but the present discussion now turns to a brief consideration of time in the visual arts and also in installation art.

## 3.2 Time and (installation) art

Diverse temporalities are at play when considering the various ways in which time functions in the visual arts (for the moment, not only including installation). It is of course possible – as noted above – to demonstrate that visual art such as painting is not simply confined to the category of spatial art – for one, “taking in” painting or sculpture takes time.

### 3.2.1 Introductory comments

Generally speaking, the experience of time is associated with a sense of (movement in) space (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:114). Static art forms have attempted to suggest the passage of time by means of, among others, (1) a recording of events in a memorial, for example; (2) showing a decisive narrative moment<sup>3</sup> in a story depending, as in the example above, on viewers’ knowledge of the pre-text<sup>4</sup>; or (3) by means of elements in artworks that suggest a sense of movement, or other aspects that suggest the passing of time<sup>5</sup>. This last point can be further divided into three broad strategies (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:120-122). In the first instance, the artwork itself may *move* to produce awareness of time (this is found in, among others, kinetic art, performance art, the mobiles of Alexander Calder and the moving sculptures of Naum Gabo). Secondly, the artwork uses specific *media* to suggest movement in time – video, flipbooks, montage elements and the screen parodies of Nam June Paik are examples here. In the third place, if the artwork appears to be unfinished in some or other way, the flux of the artwork’s *material* – as a type of material *memento mori*

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<sup>3</sup> Robertson and McDaniel (2010:114) also note the multi-episodic format found in vignettes in ancient Egyptian art; the scrolls of China, as well as triptychs and diptychs in medieval Christian art. More recent examples include graphic novels; the narrative intent of these art forms is central here. The decisive moment also echoes Hühn’s (2009) views of eventfulness – tangential points between narratology and the visual arts are explored in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Bal’s (2006a) term; in a work where the fabula’s construction is contingent upon greater involvement from the side of the viewer, the pre-text is not *the* determining factor and may indeed be regarded as an intertextual element. Pre-text is a useful term nonetheless as it refers to existing stories or events that in some or other way are represented in the artwork.

<sup>5</sup> Jan van der Merwe’s works in various ways contain all these aspects: a work like *Baggage arrival* actually moves; the use of looping images suggests time, and the rust in which the works are covered also evokes the passing of time.

– draws attention to its temporal nature. These last three strategies all belong to the toolbox of temporal foregrounding strategies associated with installation art (including “live art” where the installation borders on a performance).

In order to explore what Bal (2001a:214) calls a “thickening” of a sense of time, a very brief overview of ways in which viewing artworks can foreground an awareness of temporality or temporalities is necessary. In this section, the varieties of passing time set out by Robertson and McDaniel (2010) above are used as guiding principle, although for the purposes of this discussion I merge the first two points (memorial references and narrative art) since essentially they both point to a re-calling or re-making of something that supposedly happened in real life or in a story. Thus, the discussion briefly touches on (1) strategies that suggest that the work is related to (not necessarily illustrating) a narrative pre-text which as a separate text can be known and unfolds over time; and (2) elements in an artwork that suggest the passing of time by means of movement or by inferring the passage of time in another way.

### **3.2.2 Time, visual art and the pre-text**

Artworks that depend on a narrative pre-text that is “real” or fictional abound in Western art history; Bible stories are a prime example. Salome’s dance, crucifixion scenes, and many other Biblical themes populate our knowledge of art. Historical, mythological and allegorical themes share this dependence on a pre-text. Artists usually select a poignant moment from the existing story to portray – the “pregnant moment” in Lessing’s ([1766] 1962) terminology; it may also be a particular or a constructed, imaginary moment from an historical account. The moment stands metonymically for the larger story, but the resulting artwork may have a fairly independent existence from the pre-text in the sense that the artwork makes sense on its own, on a formal level and so on, and is not merely an illustration of the narrative pre-text. It is, also, an artist’s interpretation of the event that is known to be part of a larger story that unfolds over time. A few examples are highlighted above to illustrate these ideas; no particular art-historical chronology is implied here.

Different poignant moments may be chosen when an artist interprets a pre-text. For example, Donatello’s (c. 1386 – 1466) interpretation of the biblical pre-text that relates the

slaying of Goliath in the artist's sculpture *David* (c.1440) (fig. 3.1) shows the figure of the youth almost coquettishly displaying his might *after* having killed Goliath (a 'moment' often chosen by artists). On the other hand, in Michelangelo's (1475 – 1564) *David* (1504) (fig. 3.2), we see the tense figure of the young man *anticipating* his confrontation with the giant, slingshot draped over his shoulder.



Left: Fig. 3.1. Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi, known as Donatello. 1440s?. *David*.

Right: Fig. 3.2. Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni known as Michelangelo. 1501–1504. *David*.



In Medieval art that depicts Bible stories one frequently finds another device: the artist selects a *few* key instances from moments in the pre-text and depicts all of these in the space of one artwork. This technique of representing a narrative in multi-episodic format is echoed in works across the ages – such as in the frieze of Trajan's column (113 C.E.), in the Bayeux tapestry (c. 1075), as well as in William Hogarth's (1697-1764) painting and engraving series *The rake's progress* (1732-35), to name but a few. Steiner (2004:145-177) provides an insightful discussion of a narrative portrayed in the Late Medieval artwork shown below (fig. 3.3) where the architectural spaces together with the directional gazes of characters determine the flow of events represented, to create varying temporal strata in different physical spaces.



Fig.3.3. Gozzoli, Benozzo. 1461-62. *The dance of Salome.*

In such works, the viewer “connects the dots” of the different scenes or events to “read” the narrative as it unfolds over time; this process is, however, still determined by the viewer’s knowledge of the pre-text, but the story is made more overtly into a series of events that flow in a causal manner; multi-episodic approaches render a story sequential. Much later, graphic novels (such as *Maus*, fig. 3.4) would apply a similar sequential approach usually with frames delineating episodic moments to either create or re-tell a story. *Maus* tells the story of Art Spiegelman’s father who was a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor – thus the narrative draws on existing pre-texts (the Holocaust) as well as an autobiographical “small” story against this backdrop. *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1992.



Fig. 3.4. Spiegelman, Art. 1991. *Maus. A survivor's tale* (excerpt).

The existence of a fairly well-known pre-text does not imply, however, that different viewers who view the work at different times will respond in similar ways to the artwork, because, for one thing, they may have gained their knowledge of the pre-text in different (time-bound) ways. This part of my discussion takes its cue from Bal’s (2006a) reading of two paintings of *Joseph accused by Potiphar’s wife* by Rembrandt (1606 – 1669), both painted in 1655; one painting is housed in Berlin and the other in Washington (fig. 3.5 and 3.6). Bal (2006a:36-37) notes that while the paintings are “about” the Joseph story, they were produced in the aftermath of the Reformation when knowledge of the pre-text was textually (Scripturally) based, while today’s viewer is perhaps more likely, according to the author, to know the story from anecdotal accounts (she writes from a contemporary Dutch/international perspective – once again this may impact upon her views). How one comes to know a pre-text has a bearing on the viewer’s understanding of the work – so that: “the relation between the image and its pre-text, the primary characteristic of history painting, is unstable over time”.



Fig 3.5. Van Rijn, Rembrandt. 1655. *Joseph accused by Potiphar's wife* (known as the Berlin painting).

Fig 3.6. Van Rijn, Rembrandt. 1655. *Joseph accused by Potiphar's wife* (known as the Washington painting).

A few aspects related to time in the arts can be extrapolated from this example. In the first instance, any artwork originates from a specific historical time, which refers to the time during which the work was produced. More than simply an historical date, “time” here includes the era, stylistic period and its various socio-political and other contexts. The

Rembrandt paintings mentioned above were produced in the context of the Protestant Baroque – with, inter alia, its various religious and social and complexities.

More specifically, Bal notes how the subject tended to be received during this period (also in light of the viewers' knowledge of the theme). She propounds that these paintings (and other artworks based on this pre-text) respond to say, the biblical Joseph novella<sup>6</sup> but do not simply copy or illustrate the Biblical version; "Rather, they propose a counter-reading, a displacement of interests, a shift in emphasis and effect" (Bal, 2006a:37). Such a take on the matter suggests a number of very interesting interpretative possibilities that are based on shifting meanings that are in their turn related to historical and other temporal realities.

A further temporal dimension of artworks with narrative pre-texts therefore concerns the subject of the artwork, which may – generally speaking – refer to or be situated in a particular historical or imagined time. For example, the artwork may (as in the Rembrandt paintings) recount a Bible story or it may narrate an historical event; the artist may add another temporal dimension and present the story in contemporary terms by means of dressing figures in clothing of his/her time and placing them in architectural surroundings associated with a particular historical period (both of which help to bring about an complex layering or "thickening" of time).

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<sup>6</sup> The Joseph narrative is recognised by many biblical scholars as being more than simply an account or folktale. For some, it is viewed as a forceful psychological narrative and is accordingly described as a "novella". A novella is identified by having recognisable plot development and unambiguous textual engagement. Cf. Boadt, L. 1984. *Reading the Old Testament: An introduction*. New York: Paulist Press. pp. 148-152. Here it is accepted that (in line with the thinking of Tate, 1991:74-104), for something to qualify as a "plot" it should ideally consist of a "structural triad" of complication, conflict and resolution/denouement. In this regard the Joseph novella is recognised as an archetypical example of this quality. Cf. Tate, R.W. 1991. *How the Hebrew Bible Communicates Literature*. In *Biblical Interpretation*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, pp. 74-104.



Fig. 3.7. Crivelli, Carlo. 1486. *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius*.

An imagined or mythological subject may, of course, be presented in a variety of time-based surroundings. In his essay on *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius* (1486; fig. 3.7) by Carlo Crivelli (c. 1435 – c. 1495), Horváth (2011) interprets a number of time levels in the painting to show that these levels work to suggest a particular interpretation of the subject at hand. The work shows an annunciation scene with an anachronistic use of quattrocento architecture and fashion seen in the Virgin’s dress (as she obviously lived centuries earlier). Another time aspect is also piled onto these historical layers – an inner frame (*mise-en-abyme*) that shows a real event: the contemporary town receiving the right to self-governance from the Pope. Horváth (2011:8-15) lucidly demonstrates how the parallel stories of “receiving news” create a sense of visual temporal density that sways the interpretational emphasis promulgated by the work towards the town’s victory, not the Virgin’s story. This “ramification” of the pre-text expands the narrative and provides, through multiple temporalities, a rich historicising of the religious narrative.

In all of these instances there is also another temporal layer: that of the viewing present, which refers to the now-time of looking at the artwork. Bal (2006a) frequently refers to the fact that the viewer of an artwork exists in a contemporary situation, and that this reality

impacts profoundly on his or her engagement with an artwork. Any viewing of an artwork therefore has at *least* two layers: the present and the time of production, but then any number of other layers may be suggested. The relationships between all these times are subject to a great variety of complications.

The act of narrating either a well-known biblical/mythological tale or a historical event (as in history painting) in picture form is in itself a temporal concern. This relates to Robertson and McDaniel's (2010:122) "decisive narrative moment" or Lessing's (1962[1766]:19-22) "pregnant moment" from a story. Almost all periods of Western art (except, perhaps, formalist Modern movements such as Colour Field painting) have yielded works that can in some or other way be seen to convey a narrative. Consequently, apart from the temporal aspects indicated above – time of production, time of reception, temporal suggestions by means of clothing, and so on – a static work of art such as a painting can have its own internal narrative *movement* that suggests events that unfold over time.

The two examples of Rembrandt's *Joseph accused by Potiphar's wife* (1655; fig. 3.5 and 3.6), noted above illustrate this point well: Joseph, who stands to the left in both versions has been unjustly accused of violating Potiphar's wife; the gestures of her hand show how she is giving her version of the story; and the husband (in his multirole function as simultaneously audience, accuser, employer and authority is listening, comparing what he hears with what he knows.

Typically, by virtue of the iconography employed, and based on possible knowledge of the biblical novella, the spectator is aware that *future* events depend on Potiphar and his decisions. Due to the painting's composition and passages, the viewer's eyes move across (indeed, in a process of focalising and fabula construction) these paintings to internalise this narrative aspect while also taking his or her time to peruse the work as such: to ponder over such items as dishevelled clothes and draperies, take in expressions, internalise colour contrasts and the like.

This last point concerning the viewer's involvement in making meaning, and the time he or she needs to peruse the artwork is another temporal quality that the "static" visual art forms possess and which have a significant bearing on the way in which installation art is

defined in temporal terms especially because with this art form the viewer needs to physically navigate through the work. Installation art's temporal foregrounding and time requirements imply a physicality, a bodily sense of viewing agency that challenges the notion of the disembodied eye which sees (this idea is discussed below in the section dealing with space under 3.3). For the moment, however, a brief overview of more devices that suggest temporality follows.

### **3.2.3 Other devices that suggest time**

What other devices can be used to suggest the passing of time in a visual artwork?

As noted, an artwork may represent different time periods in layers so that the viewer understands the work in terms of time that thickens; a work may of course also add sequential (and therefore narrative) suggestions to these layers – as indicated, for example, with the *Annunciation* (1486, fig. 3.7) by Crivelli. In a different way, an artwork can also present its own understanding, or view, or reflection on time as such by means of any number of strategies; for example, works may engage with concepts of transience, change, permanence; or yesterday or tomorrow; or different durational categories (year, minute, moment). The discussion below explores different ways in which the temporal aspect of an artwork can be self-consciously foregrounded.

Different art-historical eras are known for certain conventions regarding the way in which time was viewed and approached. For example, the *freezing* of time in a unified pictorial space suggested by Renaissance perspective has long held sway in the visual arts of the western tradition. The way in which time is frozen in Renaissance art, perhaps paradoxically, usually suggests eternity, permanence, and stability. Time as internal factor is therefore underplayed or made invisible – see, for example, Michelangelo's *David* above (fig. 3.2) where time “stands still”.



Fig. 3.8. After Myron. c. 140 AD. *Discobulos*. Roman marble copy of Greek bronze original from 460-450 BC.

“Frozen moments” appear in a different sense in ancient works such as the Greek *Discobulos* (c. 450 BCE; fig. 3.8) as action brought to an imaginary halt. Similarly, a sense of the momentary is found in the snapshot aesthetic of, for example Edgar Degas’ (1834 – 1917) paintings of dancers (fig. 3.9), in Claude Monet’s (1840 – 1926) paintings of Rouen Cathedral at different times of the day and year (fig. 3.10 and 3.11), and in his famous series of paintings which featured water lilies (i.e. *Nymphéas*) (1897-1926). These works differ from the Renaissance view of time in that they seem to suggest time that is fleeting and transient; the frozen moment is depicted precisely because it is already over and *not* intended to make a statement about eternity.

Photography has since the early nineteenth century excelled in capturing this quick slice of life – Eadweard Muybridge’s (1830 – 1904) many photographic series (fig. 3.11; this image series showing a human being’s movements has the peculiar name of *Animal locomotion*) are good examples of the great fascination that a changing view of time had for the nineteenth-century imagination. Since the invention of photography, time has become a more conscious concern in the hands of artists; it was on its way towards becoming a central thematic concern.



Fig. 3.9. Degas, Edgar. c 1878.  
*Dancer with a bouquet of flowers (Star of the ballet).*

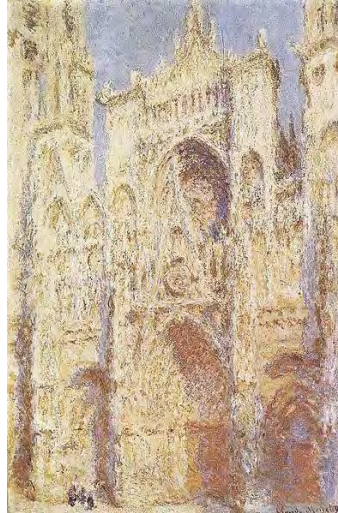


Fig. 3.10. Monet, Claude. 1892. *Rouen Cathedral, West Façade, sunlight (part of Rouen Cathedral series).*

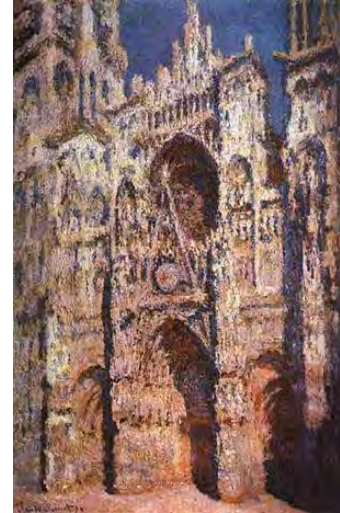


Fig. 3.11. Monet, Claude. 1894. *Rouen Cathedral, West Façade, full sunlight (part of Rouen Cathedral series).*

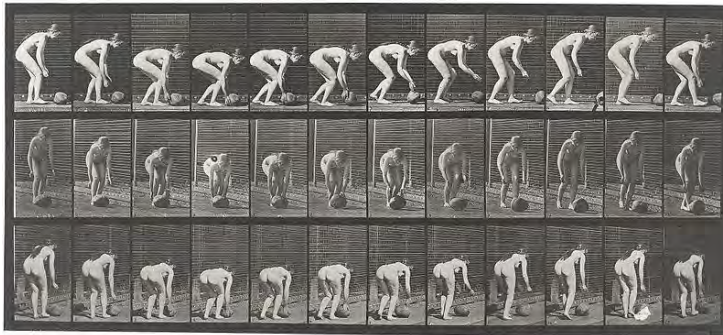


Fig. 3.12. Muybridge, Eadweard. 1887. *Animal locomotion.*

This changing view of time has evolved from at least the sixteenth century when the Ptolemaic view of the world (in which the sun revolves around the earth) was increasingly being replaced with the then more modern Copernican<sup>7</sup> view that holds that the earth revolves around the sun. Henri Bergson, during the nineteenth century, neatly situated this conceptualisation of time in terms of its relationship with space; he believed that time becomes measurable through its strange contamination by space. One of the implications of this understanding of time is that time is subjectively experienced – twentieth-century thinkers as diverse as Einstein and Freud, and novelists like James Joyce (1882 – 1941) and Marcel Proust (1871 – 1922) have drawn attention to the subjective and relative nature of

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<sup>7</sup> The heliocentric model is normally attributed to Aristarchus of Samos c. 310 – c. 230 B.C.E. who was influenced by Philolaus of Croton c. 470 – c. 385 B.C.E.

time by showing how relativity, unconscious associations, stream of consciousness and idiosyncratic memory recall are all valid, albeit novel, ways of apprehending the temporal aspect of reality.

A further implication of the subjective and relative nature of time is that the world can be viewed from multiple perspectives at the same time. This idea was visualised in the works of the Cubists (who captured the same image as experienced over time from various angles; see fig. 3.13) and the Futurists (whose disregard for the past resulted in a dramatic celebration of today and, especially, tomorrow; see fig. 3.14). Time became a heightened concern of many artists who set out to capture the rush of modern life.



Fig. 3.13. Braque, Georges. 1910. *Violin and candlestick*.

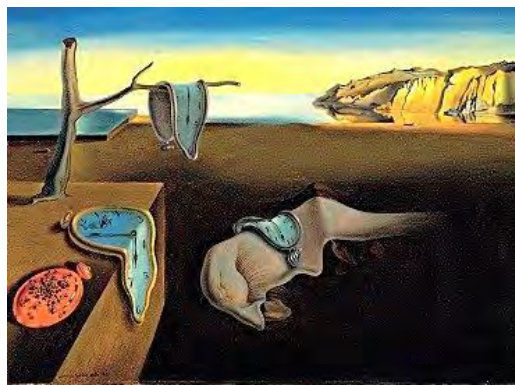


Fig. 3.14. Boccioni, Umberto. 1913. *Unique forms of continuity in space*.

On the other hand, instead of celebrating the frantic passing of time, the Surrealists specialised in complicating linear time using what Robertson and McDaniel (2010:117) call a “bag of temporal tricks”: speeding, slowing, fracturing, stopping, and doubling back of time. Salvador Dalí’s (1904 – 1989) famous watches (fig. 3.15) that forever “melt” time into a dreamy sludge and René Magritte’s (1898 – 1967) strange time-riddles (for example, fig. 3.16) that obfuscate any temporal logic come to mind here. Another way of exploring the slowing down (or stopping) of time entails the use of found materials, a practice that began during the Dada heyday and continuing in the work of many Surrealists. Themes of decay that indicate time passing, and the evocation of time through association (say, of childhood

or wartime) stand out in this regard: artists use found objects such as rubbish, ordinary things or memorabilia to create an assemblage of temporal strata.

Below: Fig. 3.15. Dalí, Salvador. 1931. *The persistence of memory*.



Right: Fig. 3.16. Magritte, René. 1938. *Time transfixed*.



Paradoxically, these early twentieth century experiments with time in the visual arts rejected the *narrative* impulse that characterised much pre-twentieth century art. In particular, of course, the art critic Michael Fried ([1967] 1998) advocated an anti-narrative stance; narrative for him had theatrical associations that would “contaminate” the pure essence of painting or sculpture. Hence much of modern art set out to refine a version of each art form that was pure and unaffected by the essence of any other type of art. Visual art had to emphasise and celebrate its visuality, its presentness, its immediacy. Consequently, modern art often avoided narrative temporal associations because temporality in art was associated with narrative – as if aspects of time such as sequentiality, cause and effect, and movement necessarily mean “story” in the conventional sense. Non-sequentiality was therefore central to the modernist rejection of narrative.

Attempting to show that movement can be non-sequential, even high modernists toyed with movement and time – although these experiments are often related to technological experiments and avoided “narrative” intent. For example, the Constructivist concentric cylinders of Vladimir Tatlin’s (1885 – 1953) *Monument to the Third International* (a model of which was constructed in 1919-20; fig. 3.17) was intended to physically move inside each

other at different speeds<sup>8</sup>; Duchamp's *Bicycle wheel* (1951; third version, after lost original of 1913; fig. 3.18) could be made to spin and Alberto Giacometti's *Suspended ball* (1930-31; fig. 3.19) was predicated on: "the sensation of motion that could be induced" (Krauss, 1977:113).



Fig. 3.17. Tatlin, Vladimir. 1919 – 20. Model for *Monument to the Third International*.



Fig. 3.18. Duchamp, Marcel. 1951, third version, after lost original of 1913. *Bicycle wheel*.



Fig. 3.19. Giacometti, Alberto. 1930 - 31. *Suspended ball*.

All these works display an engagement with time that, importantly, suggests an awareness of the *real* time of experience (and not a frozen moment or an eternity) which is also an open-ended and incomplete phenomenon. These works anticipated the mobiles (fig. 3.20) of Alexander Calder (1898 – 1976) which derived their *raison d'être* from their ability to move over (real) time and ironically also work with real time like installation art does. Also, while none of these moving artworks made overt narrative claims, the introduction of movement foregrounded time in a self-conscious manner. Works like these also seem to ask uncomfortable questions about the modernist idea of visual art as dependent purely on presumed essence of visual presentness. What aligns these works with the modernist sensibility, however, is this: their insistence on the viewer as a disembodied intellect who

<sup>8</sup> A working model (c. 1979) now resides within the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France.

reflects, considers, contemplates – but does not experience either time or space in a corporeal manner.

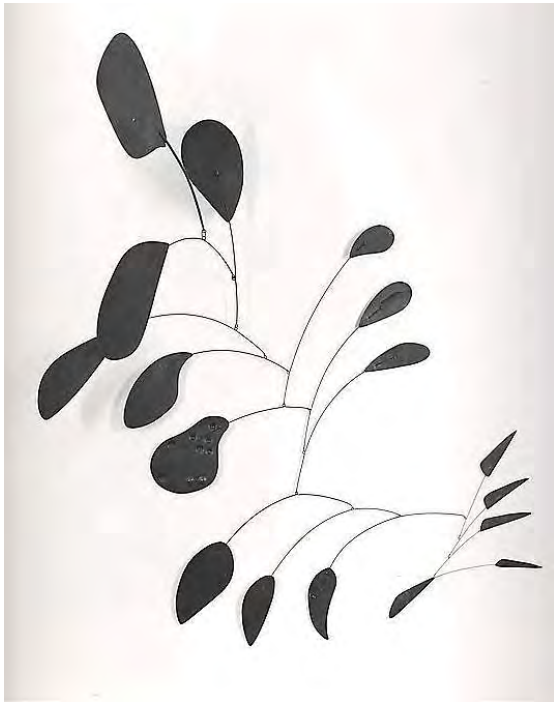


Fig. 3.20. Calder, Alexander. 1941. *Mobile*.



Fig. 3.21. Morris, Robert. 1965. *Untitled (L-beams)*.

Minimalism was among the first movements in art to challenge the viewer as disembodied *cogito*; it drew the viewer, over time, into the space of the artwork. Robert Morris's (b. 1931) *Untitled (L-beams)* of 1965 (fig. 3.21) is a notable example: the large forms of the work in space seem to change as the viewer enters under them and views them (over time) from different angles. The forms don't change, of course, but depend on the viewer's prior knowledge of the ideal, perfect or whole image of the beam that guides the process of making sense of the forms. This knowledge of the shape is felt and augmented as the beams are circumscribed (Krauss, 1977:264-5)<sup>9</sup>. Minimalist works like these marked an important shift towards the understanding of visual art as inherently temporal in nature, and of course of the viewing subject as an embodied participant (the emphasis on the viewer also implies that the subjective nature of time is foregrounded).

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<sup>9</sup> This experience suggests the Gestalt principle of invariance which holds that perception is guided by knowledge of an object so that one recognises an object even if it is turned in different directions or represented in different means (for example, one recognises a chair whether it is photographed, drawn in a tonal scale or painted in an expressionist style).

From the discussion above the multifaceted temporal dimensions of the visual arts (excluding for now installation art) can be summarised thus: there are the time of viewing, the time of making, the temporal layers suggested by narrative pre-texts or moments in stories told by the artwork, and the temporalities inherent in material aspects that may include physical movement<sup>10</sup>. Installation art arguably makes use of all these dimensions – the difference is that time is more often foregrounded in a self-conscious manner, as a thematised element of the artwork’s content.

### **3.2.4 Temporal experience in installation art**

To counter the modernist notion of immediacy in art (which purported to show “a series of disconnected presents”) on the one hand, and a sense of timeless eternity on the other<sup>11</sup> (see Bishop, 2005:72), installation art tends to foreground time, or the “thickening of time” in Bal’s (2001a:214) words, in self-conscious and self-reflexive ways.

Installation art is often historically positioned to address specific issues that hinge on a particular time and real-world concerns; one can think of social issues that unfold over time such as migration, displacement, gender construction and the like. It may therefore address personal as well as collective memory (adding more temporal strata) as theme. This historical interplay between context and situation or “situatedness” may enable the intersecting of multiple temporal frames that activate different time-space dimensions. Compare, for example, Boltanski’s *No man’s land* (2010; fig. 3.22) that recalls not only the Second World War, but war in general, past and contemporary accounts of displacement and genocide, and a real sense of the present time of being inside the work and which rests heavily on the traces of various pasts.

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<sup>10</sup> These temporalities suggest links with Genette’s (1980) temporal extrapolations of order, duration and frequency, although for purposes of the current discussion this is not further explored; in Chapter 4 where temporal dimensions in Van der Merwe’s works are investigated, I demonstrate that Genette’s view of narrative time can indeed be applied to aspects of installation art.

<sup>11</sup> The notion of the disconnected present was predicated on the plinth and the frame – both imbued the work paradoxically with a sense of timelessness as well as presentness; while maintaining the work on a temporal and spatial level removed from the here and the now.



Fig. 3.22. Boltanski, Christian. 2010. *No man's land*. Detail of installation.

Added to the temporal layers inherent in the theme of the installation, a further time dimension is that, in a theatrical sense of unfolding, it takes time for the viewer or participant to navigate into and around the work. This means that the modernist view of visual art as present and non-theatrical is overruled by the temporal requirements of experiencing installation art. Furthermore, installation art may evoke an increased awareness of the complexity of the self as temporal being, made up of a past, having multiple memory layers, existing in the present and thinking about a future. Many installations where time is explored as a central concern suggest as much, echoing Bal's (2006a) argument that the viewer's present has a significant bearing on the way that the work is experienced. It makes sense, then, that memory features strongly as a theme in a great deal of installation art (see Swanepoel, 2010; McTighe, 2005; Bishop, 2005:76).

Many, although not all installation works foreground time in the sense that they are temporary by nature and cease to exist after being dismantled (Paparo, 1998:18); the actual historical time of viewing can therefore be pinpointed. For example, viewers of Eliasson's *Weather project* (2003; fig. 3.23) could only experience this piece while it was showing at the Tate Modern; the work could not be seen after the specified date. Even in instances where the material or pieces that make up the work are not discarded, the work is not available for viewing unless it is laid out or constructed – sculptural installations such as Van der Merwe's are instances of these. While the work may become part of a collection, it does not "exist" for viewer participation unless one can physically be inside the space of the work.



Fig. 3.23. Eliasson, Olafur. 2003. *Weather project*. View of gallery floor reflected on the ceiling; view includes illuminated disk.

The person who enters the installation artwork physically is also in a position to judge another aspect of time: that of material. Involuntary markers of time on the material surface of art include darkened varnishes and cracks (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010); others are the patina of metal that suggest corrosion, decay and process. Some artists prefer these types of materials in the sense that they foreground the temporal aspects of their work (Jan van der Merwe's preference for rusted surfaces are a case in point). Mutable materials such as wax or ice, or process work, or work that transforms over time also come to mind here. An example is Anne Hamilton's work *Dominion* (1990; fig. 3.24) which consisted of thousands of moths going through their life-cycles in a contained space. The work's "material" constantly transformed, shifted, and finally decayed to suggest a view of time that is ephemeral, transient and very "real". Arguably, the actual subject of this artwork is time itself.



Fig. 3.24. Hamilton, Anne. 1990. *Dominion*.  
Installation view.

Material is therefore a means of making time tangible (McTighe, 2005) since it imaginatively suggests the time required for production and manipulation of the material. Art that bears the traces of the maker's hand (Rembrandt's thick paint application, Rodin's bronze surfaces that recall both the sculptor's hands and the technical processes required to transfer clay into bronze) make the viewer aware of the process, of the labour of creating. Labour in installation – or in some cases the lack of traces of labour – raises a number of questions.

Some critics (such as Burgin, 1986:29-50) scoff at the notion of art as the product of intense labour<sup>12</sup>. Labour in art is often associated with the image of the Eurocentric genius, and with the masculine image of the artist's "eternal struggle with the brute earth in order to wrest from it its hard-won fruits" (Burgin, 1986:46). This view informs a great deal of installation art where the fruits of labour – if any – may be concealed beneath the shiny surfaces of mirrors, the flash of lights or in the endless repetition of things that seems to obliterate the labour (which did not even have to be the artist's own labour). Eliasson's *Weather project* (fig. 3.23) did not, for example, necessarily make the viewer aware that any particular *labour* went into producing the work although one can be certain that the artwork did not come into being on its own.

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<sup>12</sup> Burgin's preference for the photograph (as well as the moving 'photograph' – television, film, video) is ascribed to it being the most "technologically apt" medium for representing the current age also because it is not "laboured" in the conventional sense.

Labour has, since Duchamp at least, been scrutinised and found to be no prerequisite for creative production; it has also become derogated as old-fashioned and out of touch with the more intellectual nature of contemporary art and its discourses. (Duchamp famously insisted on rethinking and remaking the world through language – he purportedly abhorred handcraft for purposes of providing retinal pleasure – see Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:196. Having noted this, it is also the case that Duchamp may have anticipated a great deal of what post-structuralist thinkers would propound especially as regards the linguistic paradigm. Nonetheless, he is historically situated in the modernist era and arguably cannot be seen as operating outside of this paradigm.)

Many installation artworks are characterised by a lack of overt indices of labour. Indeed, J.M. Coetzee (1988, in *White writing*) reminds us that, in the colonial history of South Africa at least, labour was a burning point in art: he refers to the urgency that pastoral art had to *portray* labour (particularly of a white hand) in order to dispel colonial anxieties about whose land and whose labour were at stake. The perceived lawlessness of the wilderness generated such anxieties; furthermore, perceptions of white idleness (as opposed to black labour, in this instance) were untenable. The point that Coetzee makes is that labour, and traces of labour, correlate with deeply ingrained beliefs about a puritan or at least a Protestant sense of work ethic.

Thus, views oscillate between labour (with its temporal traces) as necessary and ennobling, or as utterly dispensable and somewhat unsophisticated. This last view extends into the belief that labour is not only unnecessary, but should be viewed as undesirable and, indeed, as against the grain of the way (conceptual) art is currently moving. This is probably the case because labour and handcraft have pre-modernist associations; the traces of work left by the artist were believed to signify his unique fingerprint or signature – metonymical for the Midas touch of the artist-genius. It is paradoxical that while the postmodern sensibility has come to embrace craft as worthy of consideration as art (in view of feminist and postcolonial arguments in favour of this idea), the same postmodern sensibility rejects craft on the basis of its associations with artistic genius.

Regardless of one's position on labour as noble or unnecessary (or any other position), traces of labour foreground, indexically, the duration it took to produce a piece or part

thereof. Therefore, traces have a bearing on memory since they evoke the intense somatic experience of physical production (see McTighe, 2005:98-99; this author discusses labour in slightly different terms, but I am indebted to her insights here). Things that are clearly handmade may also, for some, exude the Benjaminian aura<sup>13</sup> of authenticity and suggest a nostalgic sense of pre-industrial contentment and security (McTighe, 2005:109). The commodity-exchange value of art (as “a special kind of good”) has complicated this debate (see Smith, 2003; Wood, 2003).

Marxian opinions of labour posit that alienation is the result of industrialised labour; McTighe (2005:123) references these as follows:

What constitutes the alienation of labour? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; and that consequently, he does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, but does not freely develop his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased.

Art is arguably the diametric opposite of this view which suggests that the subject is hopelessly tied up in a system that denies his humanity and delight in productive work; the artist whose work displays traces of labour does so because he has, given that he was not forced to, chosen to perform (hard) labour in order to produce his/her (art)work. Artworks that bear the traces of labour are different from mass-produced commodities in the sense that in the latter, the traces of labour-time tend to be erased or become illegible (McTighe, 2005:124). Some artists in their labour-intense work processes draw attention to or critique the “push-button, labour-saving, automated conveniences” of our age, where most people associate work with drudgery (Weintraub, 1996:130). McTighe (2005:136) posits that average viewers tend to view a work or art that bears no traces of its maker’s labour with confusion or suspicion. Eavesdropping on conversations at exhibition openings of purely conceptual work (read: no overt traces of labour such as *Column* referred to at the beginning of this section) will quite likely confirm this suspicion.

The idea of labour has been introduced here because it is relevant to the current study; Van der Merwe’s work clearly reflects many hours – intimidatingly so – of labour. This type of

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<sup>13</sup> See Benjamin, W. 1929. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. The notion of an original work exuding an aura of uniqueness has come under scrutiny, especially in today’s highly digitised world. Preziosi (2009:406-7) provides a brief introduction to critiques of Benjamin’s views of originality.

installation work is not very common and therefore I felt it was necessary to elucidate the issue at some length to supplement the discussion of labour in the section on his art-making practices (2.1.3). Furthermore, the traces of labour in Van der Merwe's work may contribute towards the relative popularity of his art among the general public, who may not be informed about theoretical or philosophical debates that have a bearing on the reception of installation art but who are capable of imagining and admiring the sheer extent of work that went into the pieces. Van der Merwe himself, in the *Unknown* catalogue of his work, concurs with Preller (he quotes her; 1998:30) who mourns the undervaluation of "labour/skills and craft" – these have, Preller argues, sadly gone "out of fashion". Viewing labour as a means of alchemically transmuting base material into a more sacred product is central to Van der Merwe's aesthetic.

To summarise, the genre known as installation art has its own temporal "bag of tricks" that is characterised most acutely by the suggestion that installation tends to foreground its concern with time in a fairly self-conscious way; it would perhaps be rare to find an installation artwork that does not inherently pose a question or make a conspicuous statement about time.

### **3.2.5 Video, installation and time**

In the context of installation art, video is perhaps best suited to achieve what Bal referred to as the *thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices* (2001a:214). While the video screen can be regarded as a material aspect that is often part of installation (or is the entire work) it is also undeniably concerned with movement – and movement can be seen to be indicative of time. Contemporary installation has a dual fascination with video: the moving image on the screen as well as the conditions of its presentation (Bishop, 2005:95). More precisely, video in installation exists both as a material entity and as a virtual window; it can be shown to have both spatial as well as temporal implications.

Mondloch (2010:xi) uses the *term screen-reliant installation* to refer to works that contain either video (monitor) or projected (filmic) moving images that are used in conjunction with artistic or sculptural elements. A screen, especially in the context of an artwork, is both a barrier and a window onto what is presumed to be another world or phenomenological

reality<sup>14</sup> – in this sense, the screen is like the canvas in the sense that it tends to refer to a space “beyond the frame” (Mondloch, 2010:xiii).

Media screens (video and projections) either as installation artworks or as part of works started to enter the art world in the late 1950s; this practice continued to proliferate into subsequent decades in, inter alia, the works of Carolee Schneemann (b. 1939), Allan Kaprow (1927 – 2006), John Cage (1912-1992) and Nam June Paik’s (1923 – 2006) satirical video installations (Mondloch, 2010:2). The late 1960s and early 1970s saw many works containing instant video feedback by means of close-circuit technology – an example is Bruce Nauman’s *Corridor* series such as *Live-taped video corridor* (1970; fig. 3.25). This entailed two video monitors set up in such a way that the viewer’s head and shoulders were visible on one screen (the other showed a pre-recorded tape of an empty corridor), but diminished in size the closer one moved to the screen. Thus, the closer the viewer wanted to get to his/her own image on the screen, the smaller (further away) it became. As a consequence, it was possible for the viewer to be overcome by a sensation of disempowerment. According to Bishop (2005:71), this caused, importantly, a sensation of being de-centred. The disorientation brought about by seeing oneself as others see you relates also to the presence of the body as participant in the creation of meaning; this point is important and will be unpacked in the section on character in installation art below (3.4).



Fig. 3.25. Nauman, Bruce. 1970. *Live-taped video corridor*. Installation view.

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<sup>14</sup> Mondloch (2010:63) suggests that Western conventions of representing spaces on flat surfaces have been thus conditioned since Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise *Della Pittura* in perspective in 1435.

Among the most prolific artists in the field of video installation, noted in most publications on the use of video as medium, Bill Viola (b. 1951) stands out. His work is characteristically different from slick cinematic images with which the viewing public is likely to be familiar; instead, he uses a fragmented, grainy, hand-held technique to create work that tends to be perceived as dream-like, often also “spiritual” (Bishop, 2005:97). An example is *Five angels for the millennium* (2001, fig. 3.26), a video installation where the title itself of course plays with the idea of the metaphysical. Since video in installation art is often used to suggest a slowing down of viewing, and in this way make the viewer aware of the hectic pace of ordinary life, he or she will tend to experience a conflict with inner time if the clock is slowed down enough, which contributes to the intensification of experience (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:129).



Fig. 3.26. Viola, Bill. 2001. Still from *Five angels for the millennium*.



Fig. 3.27. Gordon, Douglas. 1993. Still from *24 hour Psycho*.

A famous example of time slowed is Douglas Gordon’s (b. 1966) *24 hour Psycho* (1993; fig. 3.27) – this work consisted of transparent screens that stretched the classic Hitchcock thriller over 24 hour-cycles (Mondloch, 2010:40-41). Viewers found the work disconcerting – it was slowed to an almost unrecognisable and agonising non-rhythm (the climactic shower scene with its iconic millisecond cuts must have been impossible to watch). The speed viewers saw in the artwork clashed violently with their durational knowledge of the film (or, in a sense, the pre-text). The viewer is an active role-player; he or she determines how “much” of the artwork they see, or how long he or she stays in the gallery since one cannot “see” the entire 24 hours of the work. Whatever one does see, then, stands metonymically

for the work as a whole. This is a type of open-ended temporality where Hitchcock's sixties, the time of viewing, and the slowed-down viewing coincide in a dislocating way.

The viewer who becomes more sensitive to a slowing down of time tends to take in the artwork and apprehend its temporal layers with greater attention (also see Bal, 2011:215-217). This attention is often used to focus, in the context of installation art, on narratives about identity, loss, memory and the like (Western, 2004:25).

Video therefore offers numerous uses of temporalities that are conceptually or thematically structured in order to suggest narrative intent. Narratives that hinge on memories are multi-temporal. For one thing, memory as an act of recall takes place in the present – and hence the (multi-layered) time suggested by moving video images, as well as the time of viewing, namely the present, together with references to the past and anticipations of the future are often observed in video installations (Bal, 2011:211). Bal (2011:211) notes that video – in the context of installation art specifically – is a medium that allows one to contrive, manipulate, and layer time (in what she calls “multi-layered ways”). Video is therefore excellently suited to convey narratives imbued with a heightened sense of time past, present and future; themes that relate to movement and stagnation, waiting and pushing forward, and reflecting back and looking forward come to mind.

Video is used for portraying themes like these because it provides an understanding of multi-temporality in an experiential way. Bal (2011:211, 213) calls this experience “heterochrony” and notes that heterochrony as a non-routine experience of multi-time “offers temporal shelter to memories”. One can engage actively with memories (themselves multi-temporal) in a heterochronical situation (such as video installation art) because heterochrony “disrupts the traditional linear narratives onto which routine responses and images are grafted” (Bal, 2011:225). The many temporal layers in a video installation artwork work to suspend time, and fold it over, so that a situation emerges where time is “made” for remembering.

Although in the context of video one can talk of time being “framed”, it is not the same framing of time as both universal and eternally present as in the modernist sense of the actual picture frame. Instead, video can, *inter alia*, compress, foreshorten, interrupt,

synthesise, slow down or fast-track time. Significantly, it can create gaps by means of editing; or it can close any temporal gaps to present a flow without beginning or end. This notion points to a technique peculiar to screen-based media, namely the loop: endless repetitions of the same moving image can both stall time into one moment (literally “capture” time) or suggest infinity, a sense of “never-endingness”. The loop has been described as a “moving painting”; it eludes sequential narrative conventions but still yields a story of sorts (Western, 2004:19). It makes time “sticky” (Bal, 2011:220-1) because, metaphorically speaking, it “curls” linear time into a circular shape. Important for this discussion is that in all these forms of temporal manipulation we become aware of the *subjective and constructed* nature of time – the focalised “thickening of time”.

This concept is further elucidated under the section below that deals with ways in which space is dealt with in the visual arts, and specifically how space is foregrounded in installation art.

### **3.3 Space in (installation) art**

This section explores the “concretization and subjectivization of space into place”, in Bal’s (2001a:214) words. Space has been thoroughly theorised in the literature of the field and thus the discussion below refers only to those aspects that seem pertinent to the current study.

#### **3.3.1 Introductory remarks**

Space is “an integral constituent of the self” – thus begins an article by Etlin (1998:1) entitled “Aesthetics and the spatial sense of self”. This statement posits that the self cannot be grasped outside of space – and that, in turn, the understanding of space is grounded in a self who perceives space over time. Space is also ontologically connected to the self In common-sense terms, however, and for a brief moment attempting to ignore the obvious understanding that space and time are deeply entwined, space can be conceptualised in terms such as near, far, here, there, close by, or apart (and by implication, of this and that – but inevitably, then, necessarily also in terms of the temporal awareness of then and now).

For a moment, I would like to briefly reiterate the close relation between space and time, specifically to consider a conceptual model of space and time before proceeding to the discussion of space (and place) in the context of the visual arts. Coëgnarts and Kravanja (2012:87-88) propose a typology that neatly illustrates the confluence of space and time. This topology comprises two possible conceptual models: on the one hand, using the phrase “time is flying” as guiding principle, one can say that *time moves* like a river or conveyor belt – time passes us by while we are *fixed in space*.

The other model entails that the ego (I or we) moves *through space* while time is *stationary*; the phrase “we’re getting close to Christmas” conceptually represents this idea that the self or the ego proceeds through a landscape made up of time. In such an understanding, it follows that past, present and future are fixed locations in this time-space landscape. From these conceptual metaphors it becomes apparent that time and space can be seen to coexist in two (not necessarily exclusive) ways: either time is a place or it is an object in space. These conceptualisations illuminate how time and space are entwined; for the remainder of the discussion, however, the emphasis will be on space.

Space in the context of the visual arts is related to depth, flow, perspective, and overlapping of objects, and it relates to the (usually imaginary) navigation through areas in a work – given that the viewer of a painting cannot actually “go into” the work, the space is imagined. This is achieved by the thinking-seeing eye (or in literature, by the mind’s eye)<sup>15</sup>. Spaces can be either interior or exterior (inside or outside); the corollary of these would be inner and outer spaces (“inner” here referring to mental or imaginative spaces); there are also public and private spaces.

Architecture – the art of manipulating or rather engaging with both space and time, and of circumscribing public and private spaces (Till, 2009:95) – has also been conceptualised in terms of gendered spaces (ladies’ sun rooms and tea parlours for women, and smoking rooms and libraries as traditional male spaces, to name a few). This gendered aspect of space points to the constructedness of spatial meaning: gender roles are equally argued to be *performed* (Butler, 1990) in the same way that identities are seen as *constructed* (Hall,

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<sup>15</sup> Installation art would challenge this notion of the disembodied, thinking eye since the viewer-spectator usually traverses *through* the actual work.

1997). Aptly, the title of Lebevre's (1991) influential publication on the workings of space suggests as much – it is called *The production of space*. Lebevre here explores how spaces are socially negotiated and subjectively understood – usually in terms of what he calls the “genitality” of spaces. Meaning in represented space is promulgated or manipulated on the one hand by the artist/or architect (or author/narrator), and on the other by the subjective engagement with space by the person who experiences the space.

In a different sense, space has been described as the non-entities or empty bits that exist between objects or figures; when looking at artworks one also talks of positive and negative spaces. Spaces exist between objects or figures in artworks, and there are spaces between the figures or objects and their viewer, and thus also between the viewer and the actual work of art. Spaces are separated or demarcated by lines, or walls and thresholds, or other borders – in particular, frames or plinths were and are still used to separate the space between the viewer and the space represented in the artwork.

The frame and the plinth came to prominence after the Medieval era where painting and sculpture tended to be integrated with architecture; they have been part and parcel of art display practices for a sustained period in Western art up until the end of the modernist era. In every situation where the artwork is not fully integrated into its architectural environment (either as adornment or as part of an installation), the frame and the plinth have worked to set the space of the work apart from that of the real world.

Space and the objects that exist in space can be reproduced in two dimensions as being foreshortened, or compressed; space can be continuous or discontinuous and it may be accessible or inaccessible; it can flow or multiply or extend (Till, 2009:118). Human beings orientate themselves in spaces – and it follows that humans can also find spaces disorientating if said spaces do not follow the conventional ordering and structuring by which space is made legible, or by means of which space is produced (here one can think of Bruce Naumann's *Green light corridor* (fig. 3.28 and 3.29) that disorientated spectators since it was almost too narrow to walk in).

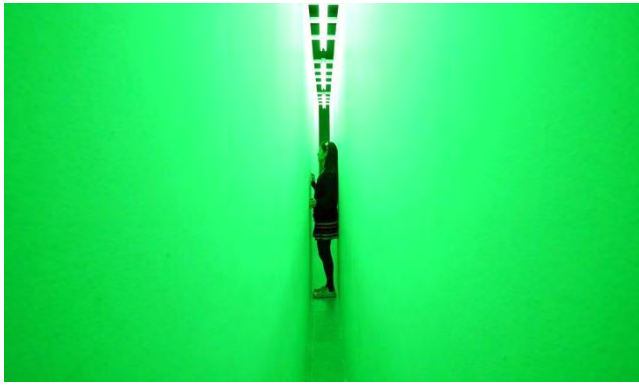


Fig. 3.28. Naumann, Bruce. 1970. *Green light corridor*. View of person inside the corridor.



Fig. 3.29. Naumann, Bruce. 1970. *Green light corridor*. Side view of corridor.

Space has been conceptualised in “objective” and rational terms (to reflect a rational, Cartesian view of a structured universe) (see also Iles, 2000:257); on the other hand, the heightened emotional experience of a particular kind of space has been described as “sublime” in Romantic terms<sup>16</sup>. Anthropological views of space have, in their turn, explored the subjective experience of space as a “bubble” around a person that has a circumference that is socially determined – there are intimate, personal, social and public distances or bubbles (Etlin, 1998:2).

More recently, therefore, space has been explored in subjective, political, emotional and social terms (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:35). The exploration of space as subjective is dealt with most notably by Levebvre (1991) who also engages with spaces of exclusion and discipline as proposed by Foucault. The spatial perceptions are understood to be subjective constructions that have a social character. Levebvre (1991:8-9) highlights the production of space in its representational, political, ideological, economic, phenomenological and conceptual aspects. He maintained that “(social) space is a (social) product”, and linked these to the perceived, conceived and lived aspects of life (Levebvre, 1991:26). Levebvre’s view of space instilled the awareness that space has multiple, conflicting dimensions that are implicated in the political nature of space (see Till, 2009:126). These dimensions are exemplified by Levebvre’s four categories of space, namely (1) accessible space for normal but rule-bound use such as roads; (2) boundaries and forbidden territories; (3) places of abode; and (4) junction points (1991:193).

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<sup>16</sup> The aesthetic sublime was addressed in Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

The discussion of space in the context of art that follows sets out to extrapolate a few salient spatial concerns to visual art practice with emphasis on installation art. Installation art by definition presupposes a heightened engagement with space (Sturken, 2000:287), also in the sense that space is a product of a particular set of choices by various agents who produce and experience the space. This heightened engagement with space is thus further predicated on the supposition that there is a spectator or viewer who is situated within or, at times, even controlled inside that space. In installation art, the viewer is present more often than the artist who may be present in installation-performance works such as Acconci's *Seedbed* (fig. 3.30 and 3.31), but not as a rule – this is further elaborated below under the subsequent section (3.4) dealing with character in (installation) art. For the purposes of the current discussion, space pertains to a large measure to the viewer or spectator's physical experience thereof, because one can hardly talk about space without being aware that space is experienced by a bodily self (Etlin, 1998:1; Merleau-Ponty, 1964) who experiences by touching and by the other sensory organs (Lebevre, 1991:40). Space as element in and around the artwork is also addressed.

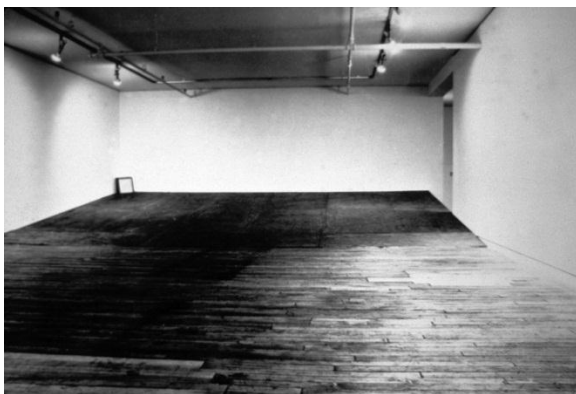


Fig. 3.30. Acconci, Vito. 1972. *Seedbed*. View of slanted wooden ramp.



Fig. 3.31. Acconci, Vito. 1972. *Seedbed*. View of the artist hidden underneath the ramp.

This study contends that installation art tends to employ space in a self-conscious way in order to foreground the viewer-spectator's experience of space. Therefore, the following statement by Lebevre (1991:35) is important: he argues that "[A]ll subjects are situated in a space in which they must either recognise themselves or lose themselves". In installation art, space determines and intensifies the experience either of being forcefully *aware* of oneself or of *losing* oneself in an immersive environment (an example of forceful awareness may be Naumann's *Corridors* (fig. 3.28 and 3.29) where one's body is made to experience

the too-small space in an uncomfortable manner; an example of a more immersive environment in which one can lose oneself would be the *Weather project*, fig. 3.23).

In addition, the person inside the installation may be exposed to spatial-temporal technologies such as video, which is a medium where time and space are quite ostensibly bound together. Whether or not said temporal technologies are used, the central argument remains that in most installation artworks the viewer is confronted with a heightened experience of space and, concurrently, with a heightened experience of time so that the meaning of the work becomes activated when the viewer interacts with the work in its space-time configurations (also see Sturken, 2000:287). In installation art, the viewer's position is inside the work, not from a viewing distance; he or she becomes part of the space of the artwork. This is a radical departure from artistic conventions of space as these existed up until the advent of minimalism (this was perhaps one of the first art movements that required the viewer to "enter" the work) and into the age of installation<sup>17</sup>. Thus in installation art, space – like time – is foregrounded in a self-reflexive way.

The present discussion of space and installation art addresses a number of relevant aspects. I have already referred to the physical, institutional or other space in which the work is shown – this idea was addressed in the previous chapter (chapter 2, section 2.2) on the definitions of installation art; below other aspects of the manipulation of space in art are considered (also historically speaking) by means of, among others, the frame and the plinth. This is followed by ways in which installation art challenges and changes the idea of space and perspective as these have co-existed in Western art for centuries; and following from this, the way that space is activated through the use of materials is discussed; and finally, the concretisation and subjectivisation of space into place (Bal's [2001a:214] terms) is discussed. In the subsequent section, the way that space invites reflecting on the notion of the character (or, for my purposes, often the body as character in installation art) will receive attention.

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<sup>17</sup> See Krauss (1977:201, 203) for her discussion of Morris's work as *theatrical*; she proposes that minimalism has this quality and that it has vast consequences for space, time and the viewer's role – an argument that has become the cornerstone of much future discussion on the changing nature of space in art.

### 3.3.2 Space and the frame/plinth

Since Van der Merwe's installation artworks - like most if not all installation art - do away with the frame and the plinth in order to achieve a completely different understanding of space, this discussion shows how installation art acts as a foil for more traditional spatial practices (such as linear perspective) in art.

A typical historical overview of painting – representational and non-representational – is “largely an argument about space; the push and pull, into and out of the picture plane” (Woodcock, 2007:51) – and this “into and out of” invites further consideration of framing in art. The distancing effect of the frame and the plinth was briefly mentioned above. The use of a frame (or framing device such as a square of paper, a canvas or any other ground that serves as a material base for an image) or a plinth, in sculpture, presupposes both distance from what is represented in the artwork, and also has a bearing on the position of the viewer of the work. Some of the implications of these are considered below in an historical context.

Medieval art, for example, was often incorporated into the space of the architectural environment – especially as mosaics, sculptural elements, wall paintings and stained-glass pictures. Art from this period tended to make use of architectural framing devices such as niches, images of framed celestial domes and built structures (see fig. 3.32). This type of art did not pretend to represent a world which had a direct, physical relationship with “reality” as experienced. For example, size was usually manipulated so that the most important figures were disproportionately scaled and took up a larger part of the picture space; depth was negated in favour of spiritual and symbolic content so that medieval art usually appears flat. Representations of space were borrowed from Ptolemaic conceptions modified by the Christian world-view of the time: space was finite; it was filled with decorative and didactic images that served as symbolic indications of places (often showing abstracted views of a luminous cosmos, bits of earth, and the underworld or fires of hell).



Fig. 3.32. Gislebertus. 1130-45.  
*Tympanum of the main portal. West  
Facade, Cathédrale St-Lazare.*

Medieval spaces were, therefore, interpretations of cosmological representations (Levebvre, 1991:45). Values such as eternity and pedagogy directed the appearance of most images which were, invariably, made to glorify the church and its doctrinal views of God, sin, saints and judgement. Medieval works tend to appear relatively unconcerned with physical proportions and rather purported show the intangible. Art from this epoch presupposed a humble viewer who belongs to the realm of the physical (and therefore base) world. This brief reflection on medieval art highlights the fact that spatial representation on a two-dimensional picture plane as it is known today is by no means a universal or natural phenomenon, but rather a way of contriving and manipulating what is seen, as any symbolic, flat and decorated space is. It can further be implied that the spatial distancing achieved by this particular set of visual tools presupposes a view of *time* that concurs with the way *space* is understood: eternal, intangible, symbolic. Space was therefore overtly manipulated for purposes other than mimesis, so that spatial representation did not appear to reflect the visible reality in an entirely believable sense.

Increasingly, artists of the proto and early Renaissance (such as Giotto) began to explore the physical world with interest and began to reflect it with greater urgency and with a more acute sense of realism in their art (on a two-dimensional surface). Thus in Giotto's works one would see fairly life-like, human-scaled figures situated "close to" the viewer, sometimes even turning their backs to him or her. Rather than shutting the viewer out of the action, these figures make the viewer feel as if he or she is able to, in some sense, participate in the actual event (compare, for example, his *Lamentation*; see fig. 3.33). The viewer could therefore imagine crossing the threshold of the frame. Still, a hierarchy of

spatial placement was suggested: heaven was placed above (spiritual sphere) and earth below (material sphere): such hierarchies structured “admission” into the work.



Fig. 3.33. Bondone, Giotto (known as Giotto). Between 1304 and 1306. No. 36  
Scenes from the Life of Christ: 20.  
*Lamentation.*

Compositions in Renaissance painting of the 1400s and 1500s often tended to be firmly structured within the confines of the frame, as if the art of this period celebrated the organisational clarity offered by this device. The viewer is therefore kept decisively on the other side of the frame – this sense of separation is reiterated by the frequent use of further framing devices such as windows, framed vistas and placement of the body (folded hands, reserved pose) that all work to keep the viewer at a proper distance. Most Renaissance figure studies or portraits use these devices; another example is Raphael’s *School of Athens* (1510; fig. 3.34) the frame helps to structure the visual offering, setting it aside not only spatially but also temporally. The way that the frame is used in artworks from this period indicates the proper placement of the human being in relation to the (structured) universe around him. In addition to the frame, Steiner (1991:23) notes that a fixed vanishing point (clearly a device used in this painting) supposes a fixed viewer position looking at *one moment in time* (Steiner’s italics). Thus both the frame and the type of perspective (one point) are spatial devices that contribute towards a specific conceptualisation of time.



Fig. 3.34. Santi, Raffaello (known as Raphael). 1509–1510. *School of Athens*.

Baroque painters such as Caravaggio are known for exploring space in different terms, and for daringly drawing the viewer into the drama that seems to “leak out” of the frame – works such as *The conversion of St Paul* (1601; fig. 3.35) attest to this: the figure of the apostle projects out of the frame and into the viewer’s space. Etlin (1998:3) also refers to Rembrandt’s portrait paintings such as *Titus at a desk* (1655; fig. 3.36) where the figure of the young boy seems to be thrust into the viewer’s personal space so that a sense of physical and emotional closeness can be felt. This is true also of the experience of time: Baroque works may create the feeling that the events that are seen are unfolding in the present.

Over time, painters experimented with the way that the real world and the painted world could be seen to interpenetrate or exist on distinct planes of reality. Various possibilities of spatial experience and manipulation ensued, but it was not until centuries later that Jackson Pollock (1912 – 1956) physically entered the canvas of his work while splattering and dripping that the implicit and fixed notion of the frame (or the squared off shape of the artwork) as separate from the world truly began to crumble (fig. 3.37). Space and time became entangled in a new way in his process of moving across the canvas.



Fig. 3.35. Merisi or Amerighi, Michelangelo (known as Caravaggio). 1600-1601. *The conversion of St Paul*.



Fig. 3.36. Van Rijn, Rembrandt. 1655. *Titus at his desk*.



Fig. 3.37. Jackson Pollock painting in his studio.

As regards sculpture, the distancing and timelessness that are associated with the frame are equally true of the plinth or, where sculpture is integrated into architecture, with devices such as niches. Most sculptures produced up and until the age of modernism implied a preferred viewing position. Indeed, even avant-garde works such as Umberto Boccioni's *Development of a bottle in space* (1913; fig. 3.38) which seems to express so many departures from pre-modern sculptural conventions, at the same time suggest a traditional

viewing situation: a preferred frontal view that, actually, imply a *disembodied* intelligence which is immobilised as it peruses the work (Krauss, 1979:45). As the work flirts with movement (the bottle “develops” in space), it reinforces the non-corporeality of the viewer by assigning him or her a fixed point of view. This brief example illustrates the spatial import of the plinth as a way of conceptually (and physically) drawing a line around the space of the artwork as belonging to a different spatial and temporal realm than the viewer: the artwork is made to exist there, and eternally so.



Fig. 3.38. Boccioni, Umberto 1913.  
*Development of a bottle in space.*



Fig. 3.39. Gallery view of the Metropolitan Museum of Modern art, showing the frame and the plinth as distancing devices that also freeze time.

Both the frame and the plinth therefore serve to distance the artwork from the viewer's reality, and also to set up a hierarchy of viewing where the viewer's position – fairly passively – is dictated by the artwork<sup>18</sup> - compare the gallery view in fig. 3.39. In opposition

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<sup>18</sup> The frame and the plinth have a semantic relationship with the façade as applied in architecture. The façade orientates and dictates the way the viewer or user of the space can use that space; the façade is also therefore a structuring and

to this, installation art pursues a lifelike manipulation of the viewer's position – instead of freezing time and space, the viewer is in the present inside the work, and shares the space of the artwork (Rosenthal, 2003:27). Being inside the artwork challenges one of the most canonical conventions of representational art, namely perspective. The use of perspective in art (especially painting) brings about a range of interesting complications in terms of space and the position of the viewer.

### 3.3.3 Space and perspective

The use of the term *perspective* in the visual arts is related to but not quite similar to the way in which perspective is used in literature, where perspective refers to point of view – in other words, the character whose experience guides the story (Niederhoff, 2011:1, 10). In the visual arts, perspective is closely associated with attempts to represent three-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional surface, usually by means of converging linear devices. By implication, the viewer of the artwork is also accorded a particular viewing position outside the frame – and hence the correspondence with literature is that perspective implies a position from where events are viewed, although in literature this can be either a character's position inside the story, or a more omniscient one outside the events, or a variety of combinations of these (Niederhoff, 2011:11).

Before linear perspective was either invented or discovered in the early Renaissance, fishbone perspective (often found in Greek in Roman painting) and so-called reverse perspective<sup>19</sup> were often used in two-dimensional art. Norcus (2004:186) suggests that reverse perspective is a symbolic device and may imply an inner perspective, meaning it brings to expression the view of the persons inside the painting who are looking at the outside viewer. The opposite occurs with linear perspective: rational, scientific and coherent, it stresses the position of the outside viewing subject.

Since Renaissance perspective (or linear perspective) was developed in the West as a solution to the depiction of illusory space, it has been hailed in the Western painting

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disciplining device – a personified view of architecture. Lebevre (1991:275) cannot resist: he notes that the façade adorns both the front and back of a house – “its face, as it were, and its obscene parts”.

<sup>19</sup> Reverse perspective is a feature of much medieval art and especially Russian icon painting; this type of perspective occurs where the lines of objects do not converge so that the object becomes ‘smaller’ towards the back, but instead these lines move farther apart to create a geometrically absurd appearance for eyes accustomed to neat linear perspective.

tradition as a hallmark of artistic proficiency, up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, it has been so pervasive in the way that space has been ordered, structured and represented in art that it is often assumed to be the only, or the “natural”, or the “true” and “correct” way of visual representation (Norkus, 2004:175-176). Linear perspective imbued a work of art with a sense of authority; it speaks of order, structure and rationality. This type of perspective had a mathematical basis (it was first described by Alberti in the 1430s); it allowed for the representation of objects in space to conform more or less to how these objects appear to human perception (Mehigan, 2007:10). When spatial representation is bound to the rules of linear perspective, an argument can also be made, as propounded by Norkus (2004:176), that events portrayed are set out in an irreversible sequence according to the spatial logic of the perspective.

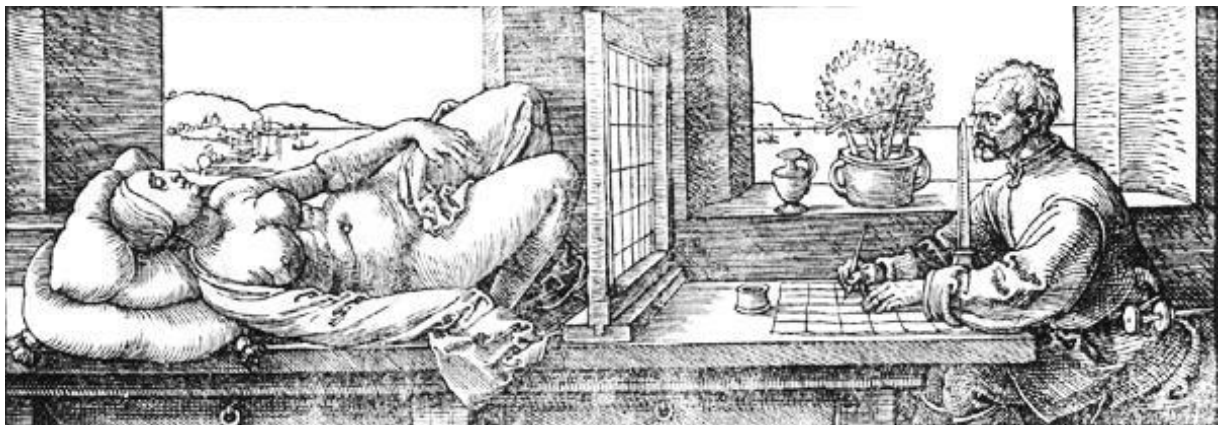


Fig. 3.40. Dürer, Albrecht. 1525. *Draughtsman drawing a recumbent woman*.

Dürer’s drawing grid (fig. 3.40) neatly illustrates the craft of devising linear perspective on a two-dimensional surface. Apart from the very obvious invitation to critique gender roles, vision, body issues as well as the politics of artist and model, this famous sketch illustrates how one particular static vantage point outside of the framing device is privileged.

Bishop (2005) proposes, more specifically, that there is an authority implied by Renaissance perspective (in single point perspective) that suggests a hierarchy between the implied (centred) viewer and the “world” of the painting spread before him (the masculine is consciously used here since viewing at this point was certainly orientated towards the masculine). The two-dimensional work produced by means of linear perspective has a single vanishing point; and dictates a particular privileged viewing position. This position was

related to a centred position *vis-à-vis* the painting. Linear perspective, then, implies a fixed point of view from which the work is optimally viewed (Norcus, 2004:183). In a work where the rules of linear perspective have been closely followed, this point is the only point from where a coherent depiction of objects in space (and, by implication, a coherent narrative) can be deduced (Norcus, 2004:189). In this way linear perspective kept the viewer firmly lodged in his world while it created a sense of transcendence, distance and eternity in its world. Moreover, the viewer is an *eye who sees*; in essence, a purely mental construct.

For example, “Panofsky ... equated Renaissance perspective with the rational and self-reflexive Cartesian subject (I think, therefore I am)” (Bishop, 2005:11). Bishop (2005) uses as central premise of her *Installation art: a critical history* that the way space is activated in the context of installation art can be described as a dismantling of a fixed viewer position as conventional perspective implied. Thus installation art decentres the viewer because it gives him or her a sense of agency to choose a viewing position – usually more than one position is possible (this might suggest that as installation art expands the notion of space in art, it approaches literature where the notion of inside perspective is common enough).

Mehigan (2007:16) concurs with Lebevre (1991:25) that the breakdown of this type of perspective was accomplished in the early twentieth century. Lebevre (1991:25) indicates pertinently how the perception of space has changed from a purely mental view to a bodily understanding of space:

The fact is that around 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge (*savoir*), of social practice, of political power, a space hitherto enshrined in everyday discourse, just as in abstract thought, as the environment of and channel for communications; the space, too, of classical perspective and geometry, developed from the Renaissance onwards on the basis of the Greek tradition (Euclid, logic) and bodied forth in Western art and philosophy, as in the form of the city and town. Such were the shocks and onslaughts suffered by this space that today it retains but a feeble pedagogical reality, and then only with great difficulty, within a conservative educational system. Euclidean and perspectivist space have disappeared as systems of reference, along with former “commonplaces” such as the town, history, paternity, the tonal system in music, traditional morality, and so forth.

Paul Cézanne (1839 – 1906) began to break down the picture surface to present the foreground and background as explicitly ambiguous spaces (Woodcock, 2007:51 – see fig.

3.41); this was an important step towards breaking down the Cartesian paradigm of vision (Iles, 2000:257)<sup>20</sup>. In the same vein, Lebevre (1991:301) proposes that Pablo Picasso's (1881 – 1973) *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907; fig. 3.42) shocked precisely because of the ambiguity between spaces around figures and spaces inside figures – the entire surface was filled so that negative spaces were not “empty”. Cubism set out more forcefully to disrupt the hierarchy of foreground and background by complicating this ambiguity further: it introduced the representation of multiple perspectives. In short, from this point onwards, modern art would be generally characterised by a demise of linear perspective (Norkus, 2004:175). The rule of linear perspective – also called classical perspective – together with its geometric foundations was thus finally ended around the first two decades of the twentieth century.



Fig. 3.41. Cézanne, Paul. 1875. *View of Auvers sur Oise*.



Fig. 3.42. Picasso, Pablo. 1907. *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*.

The demise of linear perspective's authority was brought about by a self-conscious awareness of space as something malleable and concrete, and as something to be used subjectively, as Picasso and the other Cubists did. The authority of linear perspective was shattered and the experience of space was decentred, and with these the act of viewing became arguably increasingly disorientating. Still, the idea of a centred viewing position continued to dominate early twentieth century art (see Boccioni's *Bottle* above, fig. 3.38), as if a structured, ordered way of perceiving persisted. It was with the rise of post-

<sup>20</sup> Lebevre (1991:200) notes that the Cartesian tradition over-emphasised the intellect which also meant that it repressed the importance of gesture, movement and so on; favouring the gestural, Lebevre contends that: “[T]he total body constitutes, and produces, the space in which messages, codes, the coded and the decoded will subsequently emerge.”

structuralism during the seventies – its theories of course propagating the decentring of the subject – that a parallel decentring of the viewing subject became much more self-consciously apparent in art (Bishop's, 2005 contention).

A post-structuralist view posits that the rational, centred, coherent humanist subject of Renaissance thinking was superseded by the intrinsically dislocated, divided subject who is at odds with him or herself (the use of both masculine and feminine pronouns in this instance as opposed to the masculine pronoun in the context of the Renaissance is intentional). In short, the subject is decentred and fragmented, and the subversion of one-point Renaissance perspective which purported that there was one privileged and ideal place from which to survey, is complete (see Bishop, 2005:13). Bishop (2005:35) links the multiperspectivalism associated with installation art – which offers no single favoured viewer position – to a political intent. One example of such an intent is feminism's overt aim of subverting patriarchy: both feminist thinking and installation art set out to undo the centring of the viewer in a, "position of mastery before the painting, and by extension, the world". In this sense the "plural and fragmented vistas" (Bishop, 2005:47) provided by installation art profoundly destabilizes hierarchies of perspective and subject positions and democratizes space (Rosenthal, 2003:25).

This is explained by Bishop (2005:11-47) as follows: the viewing subject who enters the installation artwork is activated to experience a situation that is analogous to the real world (real space, real objects and so on – Bishop calls this "immersion"). Boltanski's *No man's land* (fig. 3.22) physically destabilises the viewer as it requires him or her to traverse the heaps of clothing in the space, to be immersed in the fabric of worn tatters, while mentally subverting the notion that either the viewer or the artwork can claim some form of hierarchy (the viewer is destabilised, the artwork is trampled upon). De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry (2003:52) note that an immersive space is fundamentally experiential; it is also theatrical. The notion of real space, time and the like is often achieved by means of media that have been selected to facilitate such an experience. For example, light, reflection, haziness as experienced in Eliasson's *Weather project* (fig. 3.23) offered a temporary feeling of being immersed in the artwork, of "losing oneself" in the experience offered by the work.

### 3.3.4 Space and the exploration of media

Space itself is often the “medium” of installation art - compare, for example, the title *Time and Space* of Van der Merwe’s 2013 solo exhibition.

Rachel Whiteread’s (b. 1963) *House* (1993; fig. 3.43) casts empty space (which is usually understood as negative) as a positive, solid form; this gives expression to the notion of space as a tangible medium that can be shaped, “to mean, to contain, to conjure” (Coleman, 2000:163). Regarding choice of material, installation is unlimited. Zurbrugg (1991:25) hammers home this point: “Installation materials range across static, dynamic and interactive, combinations of organic, graphic, typographic, plastic, sonic, kinetic, photographic, filmic, videomatic, telematic, cybernetic and ritual representations of everything from material, physical, environmental and mechanic realities, to the evocation of conceptual, theoretical, spiritual, and metaphysical existence.”



Fig. 3.43. Whiteread, Rachel. 1993.  
*Untitled (House)*.

Davies (1997:13) adds that aspects of light and audio, performance and process, constructed architectural environments, narrative or political work may be included. Sunlight and shadows, the aesthetic of emptiness, even the experience of pain (by viewers or artists) can be “materials” (McMahon, 2000:226-228). The experience of discomfort (produced by sexually explicit works such as Acconci’s *Seedbed* [fig. 3.30 and 3.31 or Nauman’s narrow *Corridor* series [fig. 3.28 and 3.29] has spatial and material implications, as does smell and its evocation of feelings such as disgust or nostalgia; here one can think again of Boltanski’s *No man’s land* (fig. 3.22) and other works using clothes where the smell

of the used clothing is unbearable in its indexicality of deceased (see also Weintraub, 1996:155).

In view of the unconventional and conceptual nature of installation art as well as its tendency to challenge its own boundaries, it is unproductive to categorise different types of installation in terms of the media used (for example, sculptural installation, performance installation, and so forth – see Paparo, 1998:6; De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:14). Nonetheless, there is a marked awareness among artists and theorists that the material aspects of the work are important in terms of what installation art does in space. Of course, some artists such as James Turrell (b. 1943) in works like *Trace elements* (fig. 3.44) shun “material” altogether (this is a piece consisting of an almost entirely darkened room – his work echoes on empty spaces such as Yves Klein’s (1928 – 1926) *The void* of 1958 – an empty space at the Iris Clert Gallery in France). But then, in a sense, the conscious abandoning of material together with the specific physical site and the use of darkness can be said to constitute a novel way of working with materials<sup>21</sup>.

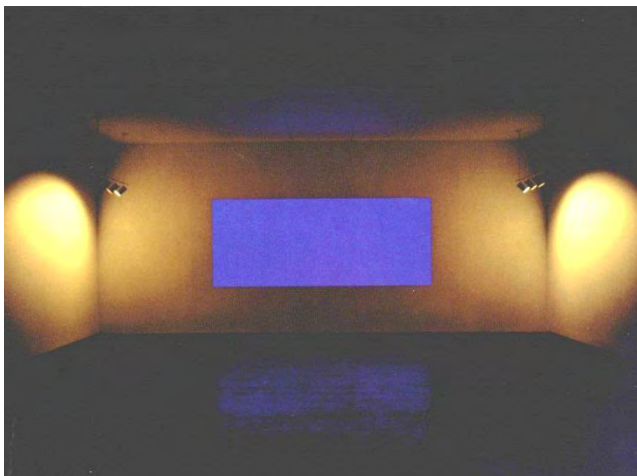


Fig. 3.44. Turrell, James. 1991. *Trace elements*.

Generally speaking, most installation artworks do have a physical, material aspect. In a purported effort to bring art and life closer together, installation artists often prefer to use “real” materials rather than the depiction or representation of material objects as art used to do for centuries. This is also because “real” as well as “poor” materials from everyday life (read “banal” or “low culture”) can be used to, “subvert our ingrained responses to the dominant repertoire of cultural meanings” (Bishop, 2005:41; 44) – in the process also paying

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<sup>21</sup> Many installation artists flirt with the notion of the dematerialisation; see Lippard (1973).

tribute to the Dadaists' *objet trouvé*. Installation is characterised, often, by the "aesthetics of junk" as popularised in the environments of Jim Dine (b. 1935), Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg. This "real" or "junk-based" approach to material suggests a sense of continuity between the work and everyday life, but junk or discardable material also adds an ephemeral quality to the work (Reiss, 2001:21) and often entails a critique of consumerism. The junk aesthetic may also be an assault on highbrow institutions as well as the elite audience it traditionally served (Reiss, 2001:22). Alexander (1996:64) lauds this type of critique as being the "thrift-story alchemy" of installation art – "a second-order sanctification of the ordinary"; indeed, "the art of seeing poetry everywhere". This means that far from being random, objects in installation art are used for specific purposes, be they objects of everyday usage, industrial waste, or objects imbued with a sense of memory (Bishop, 2005:26).

Apart from the almost iconoclastic insistence on unusual, throwaway, ephemeral materials, media such as video, the internet and other digital approaches generated by computer and displayed on screen or by means of projection have occurred abundantly as installation art since the 1970s. Working with different agendas, these works address themes such as perception, embodiment, immersion and disorientation (see Bishop, 2005:94-98). More recently, works with video elements tend to explore ways of making sense of the subjective experience of embodiment in an electronic world that proposes a disembodied future – in this way pointing to the truism that it is well-nigh impossible to talk about medium without also referring to themes typically evoked by a particular medium. Video will be addressed more fully under the section dealing with time, since video inherently works with time.

### **3.3.5 Space and place**

The concretisation and subjectivisation of space into place constitutes the final point of the current section; this is where installation art's tendency to foreground the (often bodily or somatised) experience of space is arguably most pertinent. As noted in the introduction to this larger discussion on installation art, place can be seen as space that is lived, performed (Kaye, 2000:3). Furthermore, place is individuated and localised space (Trigg, 2006:121); it is space made real through delimitation and location (De Certeau, 1984:109, 117). Place may be imbued with memory so that the more anonymous understanding of space can be

transformed into a significant place through memory, and through art (De Certeau, 1984:117; Dempsey, 2006:8). Place refers to the individuation of space by means of the dimensions of the *body* that are felt in the space – and also by means of other demarcation processes such as naming (Trigg, 2006:122)<sup>22</sup>. A site refers to a place that has been levelled. This levelling is done by means of objects or events so that the site is known by its relations to said objects or events (Kaye, 2006:2).

Site-specific art thrives on exploring spatial issues; this type of art can only exist in a particular site and the meaning of such art articulated in its interaction with the meanings that the site brings to bear on the work. This type of art often overlaps with installation as a conceptual category.

Robertson and McDaniel (2010:150-178) provide a helpful range of approaches to understanding the way that place as a function of space is dealt with in contemporary art (these are all applicable to installation art – and many apply to site-specific art); the authors cite the following: (1) places have *meanings*; (2) places have *value* [here the authors mean psychological value or other attributes of places; they refer to the place under the bed as an example of a place that is feared by many children]; (3) *history* has a bearing on place – this subsection is divided into “(most) places exist in space” – referring to cartography and similar metaphors of space and “the work of art exists in a place” – land art and site specificity versus institutional spaces are addressed here; (4) looking *at* places [landscapes, interiors and so on that have social meanings]; looking out *for* places [in the sense of conservation or other related concerns]; (5) real and simulated places [*imaginary* places presented as dioramas, tableaux or other simulations]; (6) *placeless* spaces [cyberspace]; (7) exploring the *public/private* dichotomy; and finally, (8) *in-between* places – the liminal, diasporic, and the displaced as these appear in art.

From the above overview it can be argued that contemporary art generally (the topic of Robertson and McDaniel’s book) and installation art in particular engage with space in a self-conscious way: art is concerned with space not as an element of visual grammar (that

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<sup>22</sup> Pierre Nora’s work on places of memory (particularly his well-known *Les lieux de memoires* that also appeared in “Between memory and history” in 1984) raised awareness of the importance of place in acts of remembering; his work emphasised the nuanced differences between history and memory, and their role in our understanding of commemoration and nation (also see Ricoeur, 2006:401-411).

would include colour, texture, shape and the like as found in centuries-old artistic conventions) but with space as a real, constituent element that is part of the very matter (in the material as well as the conceptual sense) of the work of art: as a place.

The use of space in installation may have physical, psychological or psychic implications; it may also be used in terms of its geographical associations. One characteristic of a great deal of installation art (but not usually of Van der Merwe's) is its site-specificity, which means that the physical place of the work is one of its defining elements so that the work cannot exist elsewhere – and cannot be repeated. For example, interventionist and activist installations<sup>23</sup> in charged social spaces (for example, in the 1970s at the time of heightened political unrest in Los Angeles) draw attention to the space as site of power relations related to surveillance and suppression – space in this sense is used as a material substance (see Chavoya, 2000:190).

This practice points to a central aspect of much installation art: profound awareness of the social, political and symbolic nature of space (and the way that space becomes place). Of course, space in this sense is also tied up with the institutional critique of installation art because site-specific work is often produced outside the borders of the gallery. In many recent installation pieces, however, artists make use of “movable pieces” and may adapt the work to different (gallery or other) contexts (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:28). The use of real space and actual geographies can obviously also be related to the removal of the frame and the plinth (which confer, as indicated above, onto the work a sense of being removed from actuality).

Of great importance for the current study is that the use of space in an installation artwork may mimic the breakdown of the concept of the autonomous self (as also echoed in the discussion of perspective above). This is because installation art tends to dissolve boundaries between public and private space, the studio and the gallery, and between the

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<sup>23</sup> Chavoya (2000:189-199) refers to the group Asco (Spanish for nausea with the impulse to vomit) who produced street and gallery-based performances and media installations in Los Angeles in the 1970s in response to the way that the Chicano people of Los Angeles were subject to police brutality, violence and discrimination. Their works consisted of marches (called “walking murals”) and the activation of outdoor spaces by turning them into installation/performance sites (for example the *Asshole mural* of 1975 which featured three activist artists posing at a large storm water opening of the city's waste disposal system which they claimed were “the city's asshole” and a “ready-made mural”. Their work is referred to as “spatialised aesthetics”.

artist and the viewer (Iles, 2000:254). An example of an artwork that literally removes physical boundaries is Stefan Brüggemann's (b. 1975) *Opening* (1998; fig. 3,45) for which the artist removed a large sheet of plate glass window from the gallery to allow audiences to step through what used to be a reflective barrier (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:21).



Fig. 3.45. Brüggemann, Stefan. 1998. *Opening*. View from inside the gallery

Gallery goers could enter the “work” (and the gallery) at will, also at night. The work served to open up space, and break down barriers between inside and outside, admission and non-admission, and on a simpler level, between door, window, and wall. It questioned the authority of the gallery and its rules of engagement – thus undermining the control and manipulation of behaviour and movement by architectural spaces. The outside world and the gallery became one. How installation art can contribute towards questioning the autonomous self and the boundaries that separate the self from another will be addressed in the interpretation chapters, especially in the section on character.

As noted in a discussion above, some installation art spaces are difficult to negotiate and this causes a heightened sense of spatial awareness. Bruce Nauman's *Corridors* are examples of these; some of the *Corridor* works such as *Green light corridor* (fig. 3.28 and 3.29) were disorientating to the point that people were seen stumbling out of the space of the work (McMahon, 2000:222). Such works draw attention to the difference between experienced space and represented space (see De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:35). In spite of the desire of most installation artists to draw attention to real space, new forms of

representation – specifically simulations “of elsewhere” – are visible in the work of artists who use digital renderings of space (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:40).

In conclusion, it is necessary to note that since installation artworks are usually temporal, site-specific or both, it follows that the viewing public of the actual original artwork will be relatively small, compared to viewers of a painting in a gallery, for example. As noted, photographs are used as *aide-mémoire*; also in the context of various publications (books, catalogues or internet images). De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry (2003:80) note that installations are demanding a reworking of how published material is dealt with, because viewers’ perceptions of work are irrevocably shaped by how work appears in publications. Furthermore, curatorial issues are often more clearly revealed in more innovatively produced publications related to installation art. Essentially, the publication, “has thus replaced the importance of site to become the place and meaning of the work” (*ibid*, 80).

To summarise the section on space in the visual arts and installation art in particular, a few signposts of the discussion above can be revisited. Firstly, the connectedness of space and time, and greater awareness of this co-existence emerge as central to the understanding of space. From being conceptualised as symbolic (in the art of the medieval period) to its more rigorous structuring in Renaissance perspective, space has been deployed not only in narrative and representational senses, but also as a means of prescribing and regulating the position of the viewer *vis-a-vis* the artwork. Implied in such a situation is that the viewer is essentially a disembodied eye – and installation art problematised this by allowing the viewer access into the work. In this way, he or she begins to participate in the artwork’s space, and comes to depend on the body as a moving entity in space.

Space as a social product, and place as the consequence of individuated space now come into play. Greater emphasis on space as element of art means that space is foregrounded, as time was argued, in a self-conscious manner in the context of installation art. Different media and site uses contribute towards the rethinking of spatial practice so that space is increasingly understood as localised, felt, real and embodied.

The next section turns towards character that is explored in the context of the visual art and with reference to installation art specifically.

## 3.4 Character in (installation) art

### 3.4.1 Introductory comments

It seems apt to begin the section on character with a quotation by the eminent art historian Donald Preziosi – he introduces the chapter on gender in *The art of art history: a critical anthology* (of which he is the editor) by saying:

What is pertinent ... is the *corporeality* and the material *spatiality* of this whole business that is art history. By this I mean that it is in fact a deployment of *bodies* (subjects, to be sure, but also all manner of objects of desire) that are set into disciplined (and at times not so anonymously policed) relations with one another. Moreover, all this doesn't just happen in some virtual reality; it materially *takes place*. It involves the spatialisation and theatricalisation of knowledge; the submission of things and viewers to complementary yet asymmetrical roles, functions and places within a landscape (1998:339) [italics given].

From this quote the intricate and intimate relationship between space, time (“theatricalisation”) and bodies in their various as character-like guises in the fields of knowledge and art history, but also in artworks becomes apparent; the last sentence suggests that the things (artworks and things inside artworks) and viewers are the main functionaries in the study of art.

On a more art-specific note, a quote that refers to the work of Edward and Nancy Kienholtz (also see fig. 2.60 in chapter 2) is applicable to installation art and illuminates how space interacts with figure, and thus with character in this art form:

Space, the figure, and narrativity turn curiously into one another as if they were almost one – or one possible triangulation of forces somehow perilously remaining in balance. Space is the medium that enables the figures to exist; the figure, in turn, is the agent that activates space. Their collaboration, finally, is the necessary cause of the special situation in which narrative can occur: where event horizons explode into events (McEvilley, 1996:52 in Coleman, 2000:164).

The over-arching purpose of this chapter art is to position installation art in terms of Bal's reference to the narrative elements in art – the relevant phrase for this particular chapter section is to explore how a narrative comes into being based on the “semantization of

character”<sup>24</sup>. The focus of the discussion is to explore the notion of character in art generally, and then specifically in installation art. As was the case with the sections dealing with time and space, part of the current section is devoted to an historical contextualisation followed by a consideration of the peculiarities of character in installation art. As the discussion will show, the concept of character poses a number of questions in the visual arts in general, and these questions generate various possibilities in installation art.

### **3.4.2 Character and the visual arts**

Character, unlike time and space, is not a term used in typical art historical discourse although it is not necessarily completely alien to this discipline. Art historians would, for example, rather talk about sitters, or figures, or images when referring to a (usually human) agent – i.e. a type of character – in an artwork. For the overview of time and space, the discussion abstained from borrowing terms and concepts from narrative theory since the aim is to position these concepts in the field of art without overt recourse to extended theories of these in the sphere of literature. This is because the aim of the current study is not to interrogate *narrative* time, space and character as such, but rather to argue that the elements of narrative (time, space, character, and narratable events presented by means of focalisation) are indeed found in the visual arts and, specifically, have a peculiar and self-conscious presence in installation art. The argument of the present discussion is, therefore, that installation art presents the notion of character in a similarly self-conscious manner as was the argument for time and space. The discussion will begin by showing that character can be viewed from various potential angles in the visual arts in general and these angles are more specifically problematised and foregrounded in installation art.

However, since the word “character” is not a typical art historical term, the definition of character of necessity is borrowed for use in the present discussion from narrative theory. Here character has been defined as a: “text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or human-like”; characters are “participants in storyworlds created by various media in contrast to “persons” as individuals in the real world” (Jannidis, 2009:14). From here, a

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<sup>24</sup> The point of departure used here, to reiterate, is that one looks for “issues of semantization of characters, the concretization of space into place, the thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices, and, most important of all, *focalization*” (Bal, 2001a:214).

number of inferences can be made which in turn give rise to problems as well as interesting possibilities. With reference to Preziosi's and Coleman's words quoted at the beginning of the section, the discussion is guided by the idea that character and body are closely related, and that character is as much interwoven with space and time as these two are with each other.

### 3.4.3 Character complicated

As an introductory example of an artist whose work toyed with the complicated relationship between creating (the artist), "being inside the artwork" (the person portrayed) and the function of beholding (the viewer), René Magritte's painting *Not to be reproduced* (1937; fig. 3.46) seems apposite. The work shows a man looking into a mirror at the reflection of the back of his own head. This begs the question: "who is looking, and at whom?" The man's head that we see before the mirror plays a trick, in a *mise-en-abyme* fashion: it can be Magritte's, or the viewer's, or indeed the sitter's who has been inserted between the viewer and the mirror. The identity of the inverted reflection is a puzzle because it *must* be the same person whose head we see, even though it cannot be. Here the complication of character roles, and the consequent possible role-sharing between artist, figure in the work and viewer is made clear – these shared roles will play a salient role in how character is conceptualised in installation art.



Fig. 3.46. Magritte, René. 1937. *Not to be reproduced*.



Fig. 3.47. Velázquez, Diego, 1656. *Las meninas*.

In the painting's exploration of the intertwined aspects of looking, being looked at and creating, at least three different aspects of character therefore emerge: the one who makes, the one who is made, and the one who is made to look – and the painting makes us acutely aware that these are not necessarily distinct categories.

Similar complications, even more multifaceted, of character in painting are found in Diego Velázquez' (1599-1660) *Las meninas* (1656; fig. 3.47) – in this work, the artist *and* his diverse models are joined by the king and queen who are reflected in the mirror and nowhere else. And, if the mirror is to be believed, they “are” also the viewer. Even the artist is shown where he may in fact be busy working on this very painting that we are looking at, propped up against his large easel. All artworks could indeed be said to contain a measure of this type of complexity regarding looking, relating and character formation, but artworks that contain mirrors seem to raise more acute awareness of this issue.



Fig. 3.48. Van Eyck, Jan. 1612-1613. *The Arnolfini portrait*.

The shifting roles of character in terms of artist/author, model and viewer can also be explored Jan van Eck's (b. before 1395, d. 1441) *Arnolfini portrait* (1434; fig. 3.48) where a small mirror on the wall behind the couple shows the reflection of, possibly, the artist who is present as a witness; the viewer here blends into the role of this witness and thus also of the artist (who is not here at present, but the viewer is) – so that once again different and complex character roles are suggested. The man holding his hand, as if to gesture towards the viewer, corroborates this. Other character-like agents such as the figures portrayed in

the Passion (in the tiny medallions around the mirror) draw the attention to more character levels that invite consideration in terms of different ontologies of time and space, and other levels of narration and focalisation of events – given that different stories are told and perceived by different agents inside and outside of the work, and also by the beholder.

The works included in this discussion have been deliberately selected because they rather ostensibly draw attention to complications that are possible in the entire set of character relations: artist, viewer and character inside the work. The present discussion of character is therefore guided by these three categories of agents that relate to artworks: the role of the artist as a possible character; characters suggested by artworks (usually as human or human-like figures); and the beholder (or viewer, or participant) as character. The reason why this choice was made is because all three categories, as the discussion will show, are foregrounded in peculiar ways in the context of installation art. The potential uses of character are therefore presented and interrogated in installation art in ways that are different from (but in other ways similar to) more conventional art forms such as the tradition of painting. The three categories that guide the discussion roughly correspond with Bal and Bryson (1991:252-6) who reference Jacobson's communication model to denote:

1. the artist as sender or author;
2. the internal agents of the work; and
3. the receiver of the message (the viewer or beholder).

In this context, the model therefore allows for agency in a character-like fashion in terms of:

1. the sender-author-artist;
2. the message-artwork and its actors; and
3. the viewer-recipient<sup>25</sup>.

In order to develop the argument that the artist-author as well as the viewer-beholder can indeed qualify as characters, the first category that is explored below addresses the artwork and the agents inside the work or agents that are in some way referenced by the work (number 2 above). These agents are the most obvious starting point because they do not represent the more problematic inclusion of artist and beholder. Such characters are mostly

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<sup>25</sup> The argument in this section does not, however, concur entirely with Krauss (1977:76) who also references this model but who argues that, "the meaning of most art objects is lodged within a mesh of ideas and feelings held by the creator of the work [i.e. the sender], passed through the act of authorship into the work [which becomes the "message"], and thereby transmitted to a viewer or reader of it". Krauss' proposition is not entirely unsound, but seems to place too much emphasis on the artist and too little on the active interpretation of the viewer. The discussion that follows in the chapter demonstrates that such an emphasis on the artist is part and parcel of art historical views in general.

present in artworks but may also be absent (thus inferred), and in this way the characters referenced by the artwork suggest a few important qualities that will illuminate the arguments regarding the more problematic categories of artist and beholder as characters.

A brief word on the inclusion of the artist here: art history has a long-standing tradition, perhaps more so than the case is with the literary arts, to involve the artist in interpretative undertakings – hence also the modernist rejection of artistic biography in the pursuit of formalist analysis as a reaction to this oft-over-emphasised dimension. While a too narrow concentration on the artist's "hand" may stilt art historical endeavour, the argument in this discussion is set to culminate in installation art, where the artist often intrudes into the artwork, or makes his or her presence/absence felt in a number of ways. As a preamble to this discussion, it can be noted that it was therefore deemed appropriate to include the artist as one of the "characters" in the visual artwork.

#### **3.4.4 Character inside the artwork**

Character as an element that is usually human or human-like (see the definition by Jannidis, 2009 above) suggests that one can begin to find corollaries for the notion of character in the visual arts by looking at figurative art. Such a pursuit needs not necessarily be limited to realistic art, but a useful point of departure would be to begin with artworks where one can distinguish agents that at least stand for figures in a recognisable way. From here it can be reiterated that character in the visual artwork tends to be conceptualised in terms of a figure or a body. For now, this is the first important point: that the interpretation of character in art usually presupposes reference to a *body* of sorts. This point will emerge again when the discussion turns to character in installation art.

Characters can, furthermore, be divided into flat and round characters (using EM Foster's [1927] 1980 famous typology). As is the case in other narrative media, in the visual artwork this may mean types (flat characters as stereotypical or social types – see Dyer, 1993 in Jannidis, 2009:26) as well as more complex, round characters. A flat character or type may be more generally associated with characters that are stand-ins for a variety of pre-texts: here allegories, symbolic figures (angels, saints) and other social types such as mothers, athletes and the like come to mind. These types are recognised by symbolic conventions associated on the one hand with the literary pre-text (such as the nativity) but also with the

history of the type (in iconological terms). A medieval convention, for example, is to give symbolic significance to the most important character in a scene by rendering him or her larger than the other figures. Particular symbolic objects also identify characters: in the western tradition, John the Baptist is usually associated with a lamb because of Biblical allusions but also simply because over time the John figure has come to be portrayed, iconically and iconographically, as a figure with a lamb. Other identifying symbols include halos for saints and a white lily to indicate Mary as the Mother of God. Associations like these thus have a bearing on an important point regarding characterisation, namely the identity of the character.

Apart from symbols conventionally associated with a particular character, different objects, the character's space, his or her appearance, clothing and suggested action are further identifiers. Some characters in the art canon are known for having peculiar signature *differences* or deviations from standard types that suggest a "rounder" version of a pre-texted character. Donatello's *David* (fig. 3.1), for example, dons a Tuscan hat which seems slightly odd given his otherwise nude body (it was also a bit odd in Donatello's time that this particular biblical figure should be portrayed in the nude) and the artist's choice of contemporary, local hat style. However, the hat is believed to be a reference to the city of Florence (where David is symbolically important since it is a small boy – symbolic of the city of Florence – who defeats a great giant – in this case, Rome).

More complex variations of character types exist in, for example, various versions of *Judith slaying Holofernes* – the rather violent and bloody version of this story by Artemesia Gentileschi (1593 – 1656; fig. 3.49) shows the female character as unusually aggressive as compared to works by male artists. This violence is coincidentally often interpreted as a statement about the artist's use of the pre-text, or as her projection of the self into the figure of Judith, in to sublimate her own aggression – much to the chagrin and irritation of feminist scholars<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Gentileschi herself had to battle prejudice and struggled to become an artist in a conventionally male profession; she was even raped by her mentor, Agostino Tassi. The ostentatious violence in her *Judith* (as noted, more so than most versions by male artists) is therefore sometimes taken to signify a personal take on the story. Feminists take offence at such projection; sardonically, Salomon (1991:351-2) notes that from a feminist point of view, the persistent mention of Gentileschi's sexual history and the subsequent interpretation of paintings such as her *Judith* only help to compromise her creativity as personal, relative and therapeutic – especially if compared to the often embarrassed silence about the sexual histories of her male contemporaries, notably the homosexuality of Michelangelo and Caravaggio.



Fig. 3.49. Gentileschi, Artemesia. 1612.  
*Judith slaying Holofernes.*



Fig. 3.50. Brancusi, Constantin. 1923.  
*Bird in space.*

In a further extension of the idea that the artwork contains agents that may be interpreted as characters, it can be argued that a character does not have to be a human or even recognisable body – many, especially modern, artworks reference a human or other form in abstract or metaphorical terms. Here one could consider, for example, Constantin Brancusi's (1865 – 1957) sculptures (fig. 3.50) that may represent the movement and essence of birds, infants, fish and the like without “looking like” them. It follows that lines and shapes, even in a completely non-figurative work, can be seen as agents of action in an artwork – often because the human mind associates the restfulness of a horizontal line with restfulness precisely because it reminds of a human lying down, with similar implications for vertical and diagonal lines or shapes that may even be seen to “move”. Harmony, rhythm, tension, grouping – these are all anthropomorphised qualities ascribed to formal elements like line, shape and so on in visual images (Ocvirk *et al.*, 2009:45-94).

In the same way, weight and dominance is allotted to shapes based on size and impact – because of actual association of gravity with similar shapes in the imagination of the beholder (consider, for example, Robert Motherwell's (1915 – 1991) abstract works that evoke gesture and Jackson Pollock's drip paintings that suggest much dancing and moving over the canvas). That is likely why brushstrokes in a painting (especially but not exclusively

violent or expressive ones) can, in themselves, be agents of action in an artwork – because the beholder re-imagines the action of making and the movement involved in this.

Of course, here the line between the artist and his or her created “character” or agent suggested by the artwork becomes quite narrow – this is because re-imagined movement evoked by gesture refers mostly to the movement of the artist *who is not there* but who is imagined to have been there, making the gesture that results in the brushstroke. This instance is a borderline case between character in the artwork and the artist as character who leaves his or her mark. It will suffice at this stage to mention that Bal (2001a:213-238) with perhaps characteristic fearlessness explores *character as marks made by the artist*. She expounds the work of the abstract painter David Reed (b. 1946) as being a narrative that is related by the abstract elements in the artwork in their implied conversation with, among others, Caravaggio.

In artworks that do actually contain a figure or figures, different types of communicative modes may exist between figures (and between figures and the beholder). For example, some figures may be removed from the main internal action of the work – they may either, as the figures in the Passion panels in the *Arnolfini portrait* (fig. 3.48), suggest a different layer of action that may be read as an embedded story complementing the main action. Figures may also address the beholder directly (as the man seems to do in the *Arnolfini portrait*). The presence of the beholder may be actively constructed by means of interaction invited by figures inside an artwork – and the beholder may therefore be made complicit with actors in the artwork.



Fig. 3.51. Maes, Nicolaes. 1655. *The eavesdropper (with scolding woman)*.

Kemp (1998) proposes this notion in a reading of Nicolaes Maes's (1632-93) painting *The eavesdropper (with scolding woman)* (1655; fig. 3.51) in which he shows that the figure of the woman who eavesdrops invites the viewer to become a co-voyeur while the subject of her eavesdropping is not aware of her (or the viewer's) presence. Such works call for a consideration of the complex social interactions between characters and the beholder, and also between these characters and other characters inside the work. A work like Titian's (1488/1490 – 1576) *Venus of Urbino* (1538) certainly boasts a character who gives her (male) onlooker a bashful glance; Manet's *Olympia* (1863) scandalised the Parisian art public because her straight glance at the onlooker was taken to signify a lack of submission and, consequently, loose morals – because by looking aggressively at the viewer, she denied her status as an object of desire (see also Berger, 1972:63).



Fig. 3.52. Tiziano Vecelli or Tiziano Vecellio, known as Titian. 1583. *Venus of Urbino*.



Fig. 3.53. Manet, Eduard. 1863. *Olympia*.

In most instances, however, figures tend to interact with each other inside the work and may therefore seem to be unaware that they are being watched by the viewer who is outside the artwork. The bulk of visual artworks that contain figures or figure-like agencies fit this category: Raphael's *School of Athens* (1510-1511; fig. 3.34) and many, many more artworks show a drama *inside* the work that is played out by agencies that are embodied but unaware of a spectator.

### 3.4.5 Characters absent from the artwork

A further sub-category of character in the visual artwork relates to the above example as well as to the notion of “having been there” set out above with reference to the artist. One seemingly simple example of an absent character can be found in Van Gogh’s *Shoes*<sup>27</sup> (1886; fig. 3.54). Many artworks suggest a character who has been “there”, but who has departed; the beholder understands this because clothes, or other metonymical signs or indices, point to the fact that a particular person was present in the moment preceding the slice of time that is seen in the artwork. The implications of this absent character for narrative time and fabula construction in the visual arts are enormous, since absence immediately implies that a series of events have taken place over time, and these have to be plausibly reconstructed in order to propose a likely fabula. Absent characters constitute, in a manner of speaking, a central position in Van der Merwe’s installation art.

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<sup>27</sup> This painting was the object of quite a stir in philosophical circles. First, Martin Heidegger in his 1935 lecture, and then his book *On the origin of the work of art* (1975) interpreted the shoes as a well-worn pair belonging to a peasant. Then, Meyer Schapiro vehemently argued that they are in fact the artist’s, and that one should acknowledge that Van Gogh was an urbanite and *not* a working peasant; the shoes were modified by the artist to *look* worn. To give an oversimplified account of the matter, Heidegger’s speech was severely criticised by Schapiro, who viewed Heidegger’s interpretation as highly problematic in his [Schapiro’s] 1968 publication “The still life as a personal object – a note on Heidegger and Van Gogh”. Schapiro (1968:205-6) accused Heidegger of projecting onto the shoes their presumed peasant ownership, a projection informed by Heidegger’s desire to see in them “the pathos of the primordial and the earthy”.

From here, Derrida in his book *The truth in pointing* ([1978] 1987), particularly the chapter “Restitutions in pointing” (“pointing” being a pun on painting and needlework) offered a reply. A long argument unfolds in which Derrida propounds, among other things, that the shoes are perhaps not even a pair. Derrida makes this point to suggest that Heidegger made the mistake of not really talking about a painting, but rather about shoes, forgetting the representational issues (i.e. that we are looking at shoes as signs represented in paint). Derrida then suggests that Heidegger chose an image to “correspond to his [Heidegger’s] mental image” (see Ruben, 1997:25-29) and thus dismisses Heidegger’s ideas, too. Schufeider (2010:362) puts the issue to rest by saying that the shoes *were* probably a pair, they were most likely not worn enough for Van Gogh’s liking, and to make them look “less smart”, Van Gogh wore them. And so, even though they were originally most likely the shoes of a peasant, they ended up being Vincent’s. However, they were his only because he most likely reshaped them (by wearing them) to make them fit for painting purposes and not because they were a personal object of functional use value.

Van der Merwe’s reworking of objects, like Van Gogh probably did with the shoes in question, resonates with the idea of taking away the usefulness of an object in order to render it suitable for the artwork – but in this case, the actual object (such as a table) features – covered in rust – in the artwork, not an object reproduced in paint.



Fig. 3.54. Van Gogh, Vincent. 1886. *Shoes*.

Other types of absent characters may be thought of as conceptual categories: a corporate “portrait” by, for example, Rembrandt or Frans Hals (1580 – 1666) may show only male figures, which a contemporary viewer may interpret as emblematic of the *absence* of women in key positions of business at the time. (Sometimes in the case of Hals, these are all-female portraits – with related gender implications; works such as his *Regents* and *Regentesses* of 1664 are examples.)



Fig. 3.55. Van Rijn, Rembrandt. 1666. *Lucretia*.



Fig. 3.56. Van Rijn, Rembrandt. 1654. *Bathsheba at her bath*.

The important point here is that characters in the visual arts do not have to be *present* in order for them to signify as characters. Consider, for example, works such as Rembrandt’s *Lucretia* (he made a first version in 1664 and another, shown here in fig. 3.55 in 1666) or his *Bathsheba at her bath* (1654; fig. 3.56). Lucretia features in a Roman myth; she was raped

and killed herself afterwards in what seems to be an attempt to save her or her husband's honour; her father also features in versions of the pre-text. In Rembrandt's *Lucretia*, only Lucretia is shown, which means that three central figures in the story are absent: the husband, the father and the rapist.

Similarly, the protagonist David is absent from the *Bathsheba* work. He is metonymically suggested by the letter Bathsheba is holding and his implied gaze makes the viewer who also looks at the suggestion of her complicity in the murder of her husband. Those characters who "are there" and those who are not there, physically speaking, are therefore both pertinent when interpreting character in or referenced by an artwork. And, to complicate things more, a character in the visual artwork (sculpture, painting, photography) always already reads as a double or a stand-in of the actual character who is not there but who is shown by means of significant substitutes that evoke the character (in paint, marble or any other medium) by means of recognisable signifiers.

#### **3.4.6 Character in installation art**

Installation art (especially where this genre overlaps with performance art) plays with various uses of character. Some installations – especially those working with screens – may show human presences by means of representational categories that relate to the visual arts in general, meaning that the artwork refers to a character by showing a representation of him or her (an example would be the recognisable human actors in Douglas Gordon's *24 hour Psycho*; fig. 3.27). More often, however, installation art seems to use a more "real life" approach: it does not signify human presences by means of images or representations of humans (such as painted figures), but rather tends to either (1) show actual, real humans or (2) to suggest human presences by means of significant omissions and absences (like Van der Merwe's works do).

An example of the first type (actual humans) is Vanessa Beecroft's *Show* (1998; fig. 3.57) which features live nude models who stood in a triangular formation in the gallery space (the Guggenheim in New York). On the other hand, installation works that signify by means of omissions (or traces, or absences) in order to evoke presence through absence are, among others, Boltanski's *No man's land* of 2010 (fig. 3.22), Santiago Serra's *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes* of 2000 (fig. 3.58), and

Chicago's *Dinner party* (1974-9). In the first of these examples, the clothes of the dead and departed are stand-ins for those who use to wear them; the absence of the wearers creates ghostly presences in the mind of the beholder. In a harrowing replay of violence and murder, the beholder has to physically trample and stumble over the pieces of clothing – as if stepping on humans (invoking at least two categories of character, namely absent agents inside the work [figures] as directed by their placement in the gallery, and the viewer-beholder who also becomes a character inside the work).



Fig. 3.57. Beecroft, Vanessa. 1998. *Show*. Installation view.



Fig. 3.58. Serra, Santiago. 2000. *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes*. Installation view with spectator-participant.

In Serra's *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes*, refugees have been asked to hide inside cardboard boxes placed in the centre of the gallery floor. The work comments on German legislation that makes it illegal for immigrants to be paid for work so that they are rendered invisible and silent – literally, in the case of this work – where they are present but cannot be seen or announced by the gallery. Serra seems to suggest that presence and perception are regulated by legal and economic exclusions, and his use of “character” as invisible presence thus profoundly involves the viewer's understanding of embodied perception (see Bishop, 2005:120; the notion of embodied perception is briefly addressed below in the section below on the viewer as character). This is an example of the necessity of having a preface-like text such as the ones that Van der Merwe attaches to his installations in which the artist comments on the works. Titles such as Serra's also help to elucidate (or confuse, depending on the instance). Without textual keys to the work the artwork would most likely not achieve its communication. Installation artworks, perhaps for this reason, often but not always appear with some form of written

accompaniment – these written bits are artist’s texts, or paratexts, and will be dealt with in chapter 5.

To return to the issue of absence and character, one can refer to Judy Chicago’s *Dinner party* (fig. 3.59 and 3.60). This work is also thematically concerned with absence (in this case, also conceptually referring to the absence of females from canonical history). Addressing the lack of a representative female history, the work presents female genitalia that stand in for the absent bodies of historic or mythic women. It alludes to the iconographic convention of the Last supper (with thirteen places at a long table).

Chicago’s work extends this convention to feature three times thirteen to form a triangular table (the triangle has feminine symbolic associations), but unlike typical representations of the Last Supper, the actual bodies of the diners are not present. Instead, their presence features in terms of surrogate representations of their sex – perhaps to suggest that women have been reduced to sexual beings by patriarchal history; this work is also part of Chicago’s shock tactic of using female sexual imagery that has been used among others to expose viewers’ supposed squeamishness about female sexuality (see Robertson & McDaniel, 2010:79). In all these instances, the character of the installation is understood to be human and is signified by means of a human body, or by means of body parts that stand in metonymically for a body, or reference to the absence of a human body.



Two views of Chicago, Judy. 1979. *The dinner party*.

Above: Fig. 3.59. Installation view.

Left: Fig. 3.60. Detail showing place settings for Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe.

In some cases, the work does not contain references to human bodies – either present or absent – and here it may be the case that the *viewer* has to become the only character inside the artwork. Compare, for example, the reflections of gallery-goers in Eliasson's *Weather project* of 2004 (fig. 3.23) or the presence of the viewer in video work such as Naumann's *Green corridor* of 1969 (where the artist made use of closed circuit video technology; fig. 3.28 and 3.29). Such instances are addressed shortly when exploring the viewer as character. To conclude the discussion of character in installation art, it seems apt to suggest there is *always* a character in the work: it does not matter if the work "itself" does not suggest any type of human or other agent that has the aspect of a character, because the presence of the viewer as participant fulfils this role. In this sense, installation art is different from the visual arts in the more conventional sense because of its heightened, foregrounded concern with character. As a character, the viewer can experience him- or herself as being the "painted figure inside the work" or the figure that the artwork is "about". This point is elaborated further in the section on the viewer's role as character below.

### 3.4.7 The artist as character

The discussion of character now turns to the role of the artist. The artist as human-like participant and thus at times also character adds a peculiar dimension to the current reflection on character in the visual arts. In the context of the more conventional forms of visual art, diverse ideas and opinions exist regarding the role of the artist. In general art-historical practice, for example, it is rare to find a study about an artist's work without fairly extensive background contextualisation in order to frame, literally, the oeuvre of the artist and to make him or her into an active agent. Compare, for example, the practice of giving monographic studies titles such as "the man and his work" – as indeed is the case with many examples. An example is Marcus' respected book on the sculptor David Smith, predictably called *David Smith – the sculptor and his work* (1983). In the preface already the author states that the purpose of the book is to: "offer an assessment of Smith's sculptural oeuvre, *not to write his biography*" [italics added] and yet in the next sentence it is noted that it is: "impossible to understand the particular directions he [Smith] took unless we examine the experiences that led to his choices" (1983:13). The rest of the book dwells frequently on very specific things Smith did, felt, talked about and believed.

Perhaps more so than with other art forms, interpreters of the visual arts seem bent on using biography as a searchlight when navigating through an oeuvre. This practice is of course not unproblematic; it seems to relate to the psychoanalytical impulse that one can somehow "see" or "gauge" the soul or at least the intention of the artist as it is sublimated into his (mostly, but also her) work. The artistic impulse as expression of individual genius that is made visible by studying the biography of the artist has been described as an irritation for many art historical positions (see Salomon, 1991:345). The roles of the artist, narrator and character need not and should not *necessarily* be conflated, although to ignore the agency of the artist as some sort of presence in the viewer's understanding of the artwork is to ignore a longstanding art-historical emphasis on the artist as (usually) significant role-player (a role that increases in prominence in many installation artworks). *How* one sees this role-playing will, however, determine the aptness of valorising a view or interpretation with reference to the artist's biography.

In the visual arts (excluding, for the moment, installation art and its own set of complexities) the assumption is that the artist is (or was) a “real” person in the “real” world – the historical artist (who was or is usually also a *great* person – corollaries of these are found in reflections on the historical author, implied author and so on – often associated with Booth, [1961] 1983). It follows, except in the case of a self-portrait which colours this argument somewhat, that the artist is not usually an *ostensible* participant in the artwork’s storyworld (with reference to the definition of character as participant in a storyworld according to Jannidis, 2009:14). This artist’s role may therefore be distinct from the work and yet still susceptible to interpretation of intentionality or of the artist’s “hand” (many especially lay viewers look for what the artist “intended” as a form of holy writ that would prove to be the definitive interpretation of a work). Of course, the examples highlighted at the beginning of section 2.2.8 that included mirrors that sometimes included self-portraits of the artist are a special category of artistic presence in an artwork.

Romantic notions of the deep-feeling artist did little to alleviate the pressure on the art historian to “read” the artist “into” the artwork; this practice has endured as is well known from persistent idealisations of Van Gogh’s biography and the rather insidious fascination with his mental states. (For a brief moment the modernist formalistic views of art as self-sufficient and autonomous, independent of the artist, seemed to offer some respite from this.) The view of the artist as active participant has emerged since Vasari decided to call his famous treatise *The lives of the great artists* [1568] 2009 and hence set a tone for enquiry in the visual arts that foregrounded the artist’s life, feelings, genius and alas, his (often celebrated) suffering. These impulses helped to establish the myth of the “artist” as construct (which Salomon, 1991:345, calls an “invention”)<sup>28</sup>.

Bal (2006a:9:10) refers to the contemporary mythologised view of artists such as “Rembrandt” as necessarily suspect. She uses inverted commas when referring to

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<sup>28</sup> The death of the author (and by extension, of the artist) proclaimed by Barthes in 1968 seemed to save the artist from being constantly dragged in to play his part, although some artists (like Duchamp and Beuys and many others) never disappeared from view – talking, publishing and provoking as artist-selves. However, the rise of installation art – coinciding with the time of the death of the author – paradoxically gave new impetus to the author/artist as character-like presence in the artwork, as noted in the Acconci example (*Seedbed*) discussed above and also below. Coincidentally, the death of theory, deconstruction, of aesthetics and others dot the latter part of the twentieth century landscape; the artist did not die alone (see Emerling, 2005:238).

“Rembrandt” in her 2006 book on the artist (*Reading Rembrandt*), noting that the name of the artist refers simultaneously to a person, a kind of art, a tradition and a projection riddled with “romantic presuppositions” and “wild speculations” which are likely to boil down to reductionism of all kinds. These multifaceted potentialities and, for some, irritations regarding the role of the artist as a type of character-like agent have been unpacked to a degree by Bal and also by Foucault.

Foucault’s essay *What is an author?* (1969) clarified much of the fuzziness around the issue of the author/artist with startling elegance. Like Bal (who draws on Foucault – see Bal, 2006a:11-12), he suggests that using the name of the author has an ambiguous function: the author’s name is both the person who lived but also a host of other attributes that signify the critical category called “the man and his work”; thus, “authenticity and attribution; the systems of valorisation in which he [mostly he] was included; or the moment when the stories of heroes gave way to the author’s biography” work to create the image of the author (Foucault, 1969:299-300).

This discourse raises awareness of a number of salient issues: for one, the writer-artist is [usually] absent at the time of consumption of the text (as is the artist unless he is inside the artwork like Acconci’s *Seedbed*; fig. 3.30 and 3.31); and also, that the use of the author’s name is not a proper name like others since it stands for a range of conventionally attributable significations.

There are four of these significations:

1. The author’s name is legally codified to denote ownership (Foucault, 1969:305 notes sardonically that only since the time that punishment for transgressive work was instituted did copyright begin to matter).
2. The use of the author’s name is not universally constant, which means that some texts are accepted as having authority even though they may be seen as anonymously authored – science is mentioned here while usually literary texts are more likely to be predicated on author’s sovereignty for purposes of authentication (1969:306).
3. The historical author is dispelled convincingly in a statement that has far-reaching implications for the current study: “It would be as false to seek the author in relation

to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the ‘author-function’ arises out of their scission – in the division and distance between the two” (Foucault, 1969:308).

4. The author-function as “rational entity” is a *projection* whose work is believed to reflect (problematic) notions of coherence and stylistic uniformity that Foucault (1969:307-8) compares to the desire to establish the value of a text by ascertaining the holiness of its author in the Christian tradition of exegesis. It follows that the author (as the “name” or “category” – for example, Flaubert or Rembrandt) is not present in the work in any obvious sense as it might have been believed at different points in history, and that he [or she!] can be separated from the writer and narrator of the work. However, and this is the important point, in the case of some installation artworks the artist-author who is the person producing the work could be conflated with the narrator function and with the character function. Nonetheless, such cases are not necessarily the norm – installation art is, after all, characterised by exceptions to the rule.

The case of Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1972; fig. 3.30 and 3.31) challenges distinctions between the presence (or absence) of the human figure *in* the artwork – which relates to the section above that dealt with character referenced in the artwork – and the presence (or absence) of the *artist* as character – in this case, both as agent inside the artwork and as creator of the work. In *Seedbed* the gallery space is “fertile soil” for imagining the body – in this case, the artist’s body which is “buried” beneath the floor (which has been made into a curved slope). The artist is *in* the artwork, which means that he is the central character – or at least one of the central role-players in the work (together with the viewer, whose movements prompt sounds such as grunts from underneath the floor). Acconci is therefore both present and absent – he cannot be seen and thus this work undermines one of the most prevalent conventions of visual arts, namely that the “work” must be *seen*. Since he is “under” the viewer, he is also “dead” and buried.

Death and fertility here converge in a manner that reminds of effigies buried in ancient fertility rituals. Regardless, however, of interpretations like these, the fact remains that Acconci foregrounds and problematises the notion of character, viewer and author in the context of an artwork. Neither present nor absent, neither character nor artist, neither narrator nor narratee (he only responds to the shuffles of the viewer-participant so that the

latter is actually the one given agency and made into the central character and perhaps also into the narrator); this work highlights that narrative theory has much to offer installation art in terms of interpretative avenues. It also demonstrates another art-historical assumption: that the artist is regarded as integral to the work of art in some or other way, very likely more often than is the case with other art forms. This is a contentious issue, but nonetheless an art historical axiom ever since the dawn of art history as a discipline. Of course, more autobiographical works - as Van der Merwe's often are - have a more explicit suggestion of the presence of the artist.

One way in which one can avoid oversimplified conflation of the artist-author and the artist as an historical person (speaking of more conventional art forms) is to apply Bal's (2006a) use of the name of the artist in inverted commas (compare her use of "Rembrandt"). This is done, as noted above, in order to highlight that it is *not* the actual person one talks of, but rather the oeuvre – especially in view of how little is often known of an artist's life – so that the artist is present as a cultural text at the centre of "a body of reflection on art, visibility, and discourse" (Bal, 2006a:10-11). In literary theory, in turn, the term *implied author* is used to denote the "manipulating hand in the text" (see Schönert, 2014:1, 4). This term is used to distinguish the function of making the artwork from the person of flesh and blood as well as from the "narrator" or "focaliser" within the text. Thus, the artist may or may not play a role in the storyworld, and may or may not have the quality of a character – in all instances, however, mixing categories of artist-author and writer-producer and narrator-character is likely to result in embarrassing oversights, as Foucault (1969:299) scolds himself for having done before correcting himself by writing *What is an author?* This brings the present discussion to a consideration of the role of the viewer (or beholder, participant, or receiver) as character.

### **3.4.8 The viewer as character**

Up to the time when the death of the author was proclaimed in 1968, the two agents (namely figure[s] in the artwork and the artist) held sway over the world of art history. The introduction of the central role of the reader/viewer that coincided with the death of the author and, also, with the rise of post-structuralism, brought another player into prominence which means that the receiver in Jacobson's model – the viewer in art terms –

came to occupy arguably the most important position. (Works like *Las meninas* [fig. 3.47] may have hinted at the viewer's complicity, but such works do not make up the bulk of the art canon.)

In the section on space earlier in this chapter (3.3) it was noted that a number of strategies have been used to keep the viewer at a distance from the artwork's world. Linear perspective played a salient role in demarcating not only the viewer's world, but also prescribed his or her viewing position. The particularities of the viewer's role came to the fore first in the conceptualisation of the art historian as connoisseur. In this regard, Salomon (1991:345-6) suggests that while Vasari emphasised the artist and his genius, a certain Raffaello Borghino (a follower of Vasari's) published a book called *Il Riposo* in 1584 in which he for the first time proposed a new theoretical viewing position: that of the *connoisseur*; an art lover and educated individual who wanted to use the proper appreciation of art as a route to becoming cultured.

Borghino made it possible for an educated and sensitive *viewer* to judge art – unlike Vasari's position that an *artist* was the only one eligible for the job. (Vasari was also an artist.) This began a process where the *art historian* (perhaps not entirely unproblematically) gained the authority to evaluate artistic greatness. Panofsky's iconological model ([1939]2009) is a fairly prominent one in a tradition of art-historical judgement – it is typically applied with reference to the artist's biography. Panofsky also talks of art being emblematic of “symptoms” of an age (see also Preziosi, 1998:165); but nowhere does this model require artistry – instead Panofsky argues for the importance of a “synthetic intuition” when interpreting works of art.

The pre-modern and also, on occasion, the modern viewer was therefore assumed to be abstractable to an ideal or model viewer and (Kemp, 1998:183), concomitantly, an ideal viewing situation (such as is also determined by linear perspective). However, with the rise of among others feminism and post-colonialism as theoretical positions that sought to de-centre all practices, the position of the viewer of the artwork (and the reader of the literary work) changed. From being a passive recipient prescribed by the work, towards an active participant whose engagement with the work determined its meaning, or completed the work in an act that Bishop (2005) calls de-centring.

Much of what is meant by active spectatorship in the context of installation art echoes the concerns of reception theory. The implicit beholder prescribed by the work of art (Kemp's 1998:183 words) and his or her task of completing the artwork and "filling in the blanks" has not been frequently explored in the visual arts (see Kemp, 1998:183). A more elaborate interrogation of reception theory is not pertinent at this point, although it is important to note that the interaction between the reader and the work of art which necessitates active viewer involvement is a characteristic of installation art.

More than involvement, actually, Bishop (2005:66) talks of immersion and embodied perception when describing the experience of the viewer-beholder of installation art. In this regard, the contributions of Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) are often mentioned in terms of the beholder's embodied experience of the artwork. Merleau-Ponty did not specifically address installation art in his writings (he published before installation art became a prominent reality in the art world)<sup>29</sup>. His work explored the lived, embodied nature of human consciousness and perception. Using a phenomenological approach as point of departure, Merleau-Ponty extended the premises of lived perception (as propounded by Husserl) and insisted that, "human identity – our subjectivity – is informed significantly by our physicality, our bodies" (see Emerling, 2005:215). In his 1945 book *Phenomenology of perception*<sup>30</sup> he critiques the Cartesian body/mind dichotomy – much like Levebvre's (1991) point of departure in his spatial critique of this dichotomy. Merleau-Ponty's important contribution was the notion of embodiment which held that our access to understanding the world is through the body and not through or only through the mind. Indeed, his work was seized upon by installation artists who wanted to democratise the viewing experience (Bishop, 2005:54-57; Sretenovic, 2004:189) and who focused on the corporeal, embodied nature of the viewer who enters the artwork in order to participate in the work.

By engaging the viewer's body in the artwork, an awareness of actual surroundings is created that unifies space and time (Sretenovic, 2004:196). The emphasis on body and viewing experience means that the viewer assumes the role of a participant "in the

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<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty's work focused on painting (in essays such as "Cézanne's doubt", 1946) by the time of his death in 1961 installation art was still emerging.

<sup>30</sup> *Phenomenology of perception* was translated into English in 1962; Bishop (2005:50) hails this as a crucial moment for Minimalism and then for installation art.

storyworld” of the installation artwork (see Jannidis, 2009:14 for this definition of character); the immersive experience that installation art offers (Bishop, 2005:14) is analogous (but not exactly the same) as the real world (Bishop, 2005:11); thus the world of the artwork is close to but not exactly the same as the real world. This last notion completes the requirements of Jannidis (2009:14) that a character has to exist “in contrast to ‘persons’ as individuals in the real world” (this distinction is challenged in chapter 6 of the current study). In short, the central role of the viewer is *the* distinguishing characteristic of installation art (see Bishop, 2005; McTighe, 2005:9; Sretenovic, 2004:182; De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:167).

Important also is the idea that the artist relinquishes part of his or her authorship to the viewer in the process (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003:167). Consequently, the roles of artist, viewer-participant and character inside the artwork tends to either merge or the boundaries that separate them are at the very least problematised in installation artworks. Therefore, as was the case with time and space that are self-consciously foregrounded in installation art, character as element is similarly foregrounded. Usually, also, the character complexities are related to the participant’s body that experiences, so that what Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied experience comes to the fore.

### **3.4.5 Character and event in (installation) art**

This last and very brief sub-section of the discussion of character considers the fourth element of narrative – the one left out from Bal’s (2001a:214) quotation that has guided much of the current chapter. Pointing out how the representation of time and space takes place in the visual arts generally and also in installation art required noting fairly obvious things; in the case of character I propounded that certain peculiarities arise that can be traced to visual art but that are also quite specific in terms of foregrounding and embodiment to installation art. When speaking of event, and trying to find parallels to the representation of event in the visual art and in installation art, a few provisional suggestions can be made.

If, for example, there is a pre-text or the work is clearly based on reference to an existing text or historical event, the event in the artwork can be reduced to the “pregnant moment” that Lessing ([1766] 1962) posited as the distinguishing characteristic of the visual arts.

Therefore, in the *David* sculptures by Michelangelo and Donatello (fig. 3.1 and 3.2), the broader pre-text may be the Bible story of David killing Goliath, but the event of the artwork is either the moment of concentrated contemplation before the slingshot is activated (in Michelangelo's version) or the triumphal moment after the giant has been slain and is beheaded by David in a final act of what can be read as bravado (Donatello's *David*). The event portrayed in the two artworks therefore share a larger pre-text but the artworks show different moments, and hence different events, and also different emotional charges.

The relationship between the pre-text and the event, and between these and the fabula can be phrased in Bal's (2006a) sense – that the pre-text itself is not actually “represented”; only one event that occurs in the broader pre-text. Therefore, based on what the viewer sees and makes of the event portrayed in the artwork together with knowledge of the pre-text, a fabula has to be constructed. (Here I would like to reference the discussion on *Bathsheba at her bath* in chapter 4 (under 4.4.2) where I refer to Bal's (2006a:227) point that: “it is not easy to construct a fabula” out of connecting the dots of minimal schema in a way that would do justice to the artwork.)

Two types of event can be distinguished, both of which essentially entail a change of state. Firstly, a *type I* event refers to a change of state that is either explicitly or implicitly represented in a text. On the other hand, one is dealing with a *type II* event if it is “accredited — in an interpretive, context-dependent decision — with certain features such as relevance, unexpectedness, and unusualness” (Hühn, 2013:1). These changes of state (or changes of situation) usually refer to a character (agent or patient) or a group of characters (Hühn, 2013:2). Furthermore, because there is a change of state, some sort of sequentiality (the temporal dimension) is inferred, and the change also takes place somewhere, so that space is implicated – although this may be inner space since a change can also take place in someone's mind. Of importance here is that an event is regarded as such – usually a type II event – if it is hermeneutically interpreted as such. Type II events are contingent upon interpretation, whereas type I events can be judged as events in a more objective sense (ibid).

In the visual arts such as painting and sculpture, the event may often tend to be a type II, unless the artworks is fairly obviously narrative or has a clear relationship with a pre-text.

Artworks such as still-lives, abstract works and portraits are thematic categories that do not point to changes of state that overtly suggest sequentiality. The apparent lack of event in such works does not, however, deem them entirely non-narrative. In this sense, Ryan distinguishes between “being a narrative” and “possessing narrativity” (2005c: 347, 2006a: 10–1). The difference between the two is as follows: where a narrative is a “semiotic object,” narrativity consists in “being able to inspire a narrative response” (Ryan, 2005c: 347). Thus while a still-life painting or a portrait need not tell an actual story, it can clearly have narrativity. Such instances would therefore be type II narratives, in Hühn’s (2013) typology.

Similarly, Kemp (2003:70 – 71) notes that transformation (which can be a change of state) is essential for narrative to exist. Transformation may refer to materials that are transformed; Van der Merwe’s rusted surfaces as well as the moving video images are examples of transformations. Bal (1999b:30) duly notes that materials that have been entangled or folded, or even painted versions of folds or entanglements, for example, are “events rather than things” because they suggest “becoming rather than being”.

Other forms of event entail communicative actions between the artwork and the viewer. With reference to visual art with a narrative quality, Kemp (2003:72) refers to Alois Riegl’s argument (from his 1902 publication *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*) that a work achieves a sense of unity if a link is forged between the physical and psychological functions of figures (which seem to include the viewer). The change of state is then related, according to Kemp’s (2003:72) understanding of Riegl, to the communication that is made possible by this link between the physical and psychological functions. Such communication, and such changes of state, is possible in artworks that propose an “open” interaction-type relationship with the viewer. This is opposed to Fried’s idea of “the nonexistence of the viewer” where the artwork does not enter into a relationship with the viewer (Kemp, 2003:72).

If, as is the case with installation artwork, the viewer not only has a relationship with the artwork but actually participates in the work, there are clearly – according to Kemp’s argument – sufficient physical and psychological links to warrant an open interaction with the work, in order to effect the change of state that results in the event of transformation. Transformation, in turn, may entail the change from viewer to participant, but may also

entail other changes – for example seeing the work from different angles, constructing one’s own version of possible narrative possibilities, and other changes of a physical and mental nature.

Corollaries of the notion of event (and also narrativity) in installation art - I argue, certainly the case with Van der Merwe’s works - may therefore entail the change felt by navigating through the artwork. For example, walking through Bruce Naumann’s *Corridor* (fig. 3.28 and 3.29) would certainly count for a change of state, both physically and mentally speaking. Anne Hamilton’s *Dominion* (fig. 3.24) would inspire awareness of narrativity in the sense that the viewer-participant contemplates the life-cycle of moths as a cyclical narrative. Doris Salcedo’s memory-inspired works such as *Atrabiliarios* (fig. 3.61), as well as Rachel Whiteread’s large installations of buildings (compare *House*, fig. 3.43) likewise draw on memory to generate significant narrative awareness.



Fig. 3.61. Salcedo, Doris. 1992-93.  
*Atrabiliarios*. Detail of installation.

What is the event of *Atrabiliarios*? It may be the thought of the moment the shoes left their wearer, or the placement and encapsulating of the shoes inside their niche (to make them transform from having use-value to having the narrativity of aesthetic contemplation), or it may be the moment when the viewer becomes a participant by actively imagining the story and “feeling” the empty shoes’ emptiness. Here the change of state may either refer to the

shoes losing their wearer (who likely has perished) or the change may be the inner realisation of the participant – or both.

This brief consideration of event in art and in installation art purports to demonstrate that unlike space and time, and more like character, one can speak of event in (installation) art, but in a more complex, less obvious sense. However, the event is important: especially in installation art, the change of state is likely to be felt either in the participant's body or mind, or both of these. This is because the participant is physically involved in the work but is likely to be prompted to form emotional and cognitive responses that are likely to result in narrativised imaginings. Therefore event, like space, time and character, has a special quality in installation art. It is foregrounded, and it is more acutely experienced than the case would tend to be when apprehending a visual artwork that is more conventional in nature, such as a painting or a sculpture.

Event can be associated with Lessing's "pregnant moment", or with the pre-text referred to by the work, or with narrativised aspects of the work. It can relate to the interaction between the viewer and the work, or in the actions performed by the viewer-participant inside the installation artwork. Clearly, event which is noted as a change of state, is either integral to the fabula, or – as noted in the subsequent chapter on theoretical points of departure, the transformation or change of state itself may indeed be the fabula itself.

### **3.5 Chapter summary**

This chapter is quite extensive because it set out to provide a different angle on installation art by means of incorporating the elements of narrative as a guiding principle. Following the definition and historical overview in the previous chapter, installation art was thus interrogated with reference to Bal's (2001a:214) point of departure for a narratological reading of visual art that entails:

... issues of semantization of characters, the concretization and subjectification of space into place, the thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices, and, most important of all, *focalization* [Bal's italics].

It was noted that although event (the fourth element of narrative) does not occur here, it is implied and was briefly explored in the section that discussed character.

In each instance, a narrative element (time, space, character – and event) was analysed as it appears in the visual arts generally and then, with reference to a few exemplary works, in the context of installation art. It was found that character needed more reference to narratological definition because this term is not often used in the visual arts. The same was true for event.

In each instance, the argument was that installation art has peculiar ways of foregrounding the elements of narrative. Time, for example, was found to be thematised in installation art so that the time one needs to traverse a work, temporal suggestions such as video material and other devices such as removing the frame that “freezes” time cause time to “thicken”. Therefore, temporal strategies are foregrounded in installation art and become a self-conscious element. The same was true of space. A consideration of space in the visual arts yielded the insight that conventional representations were contingent upon keeping the viewer at a distance, and also confined to a prescribed viewing position. Both the frame and the plinth were responsible for this distancing, along with strategies such as linear perspective; the viewing position was “centred”. The viewer’s physical presence inside installation art meant that his or her experience was embodied, in real time and space, and was “de-centred”.

As regards character, the active role played by the viewer in installation art means that his or her physical presence (and often mental and emotional response) is necessary, and therefore he or she becomes a participant. It follows that if a character is a participant in a story world (Margolin, 2007:66; Jannidis, 2009:14), the viewer becomes a participant who becomes a character. This role is further complicated by the sometimes presence of the artist inside the artwork (as seen in Hamilton’s *Dominion*, fig. 3.24; and Acconci’s *Seedbed*, fig. 3.30 and 3.31) who is then both artist/author and character. Installation artists sometimes surrender the authorial agency, at least partly, to the viewer-participant; and finally there may be absent characters whose presence are recalled in installation artworks – compare, for example, Christian Boltanski’s *No man’s land* (fig. 3.22) and Salcedo’s *Atrabiliarios* (fig. 3.61) where clothes and shoes respectively recall their absent wearers. Another category of character is where the artist directs a number of agents to be present in the work as characters – here one can think of Vanessa Beecroft’s *Show* (fig. 3.55) where the naked or scantily clad models play the role of characters. The event in each instance is

contingent upon the interpretation thereof as such by the viewer-participant, who may experience the change of state physically or mentally. Event may therefore be of the type I category (physical movement to bring about a change of state) or type II, where mental or emotional changes dictate that something has changed.

To summarise, the elements of narrative have been applied to an investigation of installation art, first by exploring how these elements are found in the visual arts in general and then in terms of installation art. In each instance, it was posited that the elements are foregrounded in installation art, and that they appear to manifest themselves in a self-conscious manner. Following Bal's proposition quoted above, the way in which these elements are focalised in order to construct a fabula will culminate in the last section of chapter 6 that deals with characters and fabulae in the selected installation artworks by Jan van der Merwe.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

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#### 4.1 Introduction

It was noted in the introduction to this study (chapter 1) that Jan van der Merwe (Walkabout, 2013) feels that his installation artworks depict poetic moments, and that they tell stories. To these ideas one could add that these stories probably come into existence once the person who apprehends the works connects the elements of the moments into a narrative. Thus, as also noted in the introductory chapter of this study, Van der Merwe's installation artworks are narrative in nature (and, as noted in the previous chapters, many installation artworks are).

This chapter sets out to trace a theoretical path through the various processes by means of which these works achieve a sense of being narrative in nature without recourse to literary "telling". This peculiar kind of narrating is traced to processes in the mind and experience of the interpreter (or viewer-participant) whose consciousness transforms the works from the rusted and uninhabited interiors they are (with here and there a screen or monitor that show looping images) to the status of narratives that also entail recall, like monuments do. For this to happen, then, some manner of narration is implied. In this section the argument is that this narrative process, which entails the "transformative alchemy" of material objects (Van der Merwe, s.a.:20) into narratives that convey a sense of the sacred and of memory, is brought about by means of focalisation. Through focalisation processes, a level of the narrative called the fabula comes into being.

Focalisation as it applies to literature is generally understood to be a text-internal function of narrative that comprises the following:

1. the author's (or, in this instance, the artist's) selection, ordering and filtering; his or her and manipulation of various elements that are presented in the artwork so that one can speak of a physical, emotional or conceptual vantage point that indicates

where the mediation of the narrative is situated (Genette [1972] 1980:161 et seq.; Bal, [1978] 1986:108-119; Margolin, 2009:45) furthermore

2. apart from the author (artist), focalising processes in a text may also include a character's focalisation of elements in the story (that entails similar mediating features as those of the author).

When exploring possible interpretations of how focalisation can apply to installation art, the situation is different in a number of ways. In the context of this type of art, the argument is made in this study that focalisation is also performed by the viewer-participant who essentially comes from outside the work as a necessary component of realising the artworks. This viewer-participant, I further argue, becomes a *character* in the storyworld of the installation artwork. The viewer-participant is, therefore, argued to become a text-internal part of the storyworld of the installation artwork when he/she enters the work and begins to engage with it – meaning that focalisation here remains a text-internal issue, albeit in a different and unusual sense. And thus the consequence is that both the artist (whose function corresponds with that of the author in, for example, a novel) and the viewer-participant participate in focalising activities.

Herman's understanding of focalisation as corroborated by Hühn (2009:4) applies to both these focalising actors, namely that it is a: "process of conceptualization and construal of a storyworld scene by an embodied mind". These construal operations are shaped by: "perspective or viewpoint, but also by temporal, spatial, affective and other factors associated with embodied human experience" (Herman, 2009:128). These statements resonate with the issues addressed in the section on installation art (chapter 2 and especially in chapter 3) where emphasis was placed on the narrative potential of temporal, spatial, character and event (the latter only briefly) in installation art.

Furthermore, the embodied aspect of focalisation as a form of human experience that is mentioned above (see also Grünbaum, 2013:112) is foregrounded in installation art. This is the case because installation art is usually experienced kinaesthetically, corporeally, in space and time, by a person who enters with his or her body into the work. This corporeality has been related to Merleau-Ponty's view of the human subject as embodied, and the body

being a “*lived body* through which we view the world” (Sretenovic, 2004:23, italics given, referring to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of perception*, 1945).

In Bal’s (1981:202) view, focalisation then gives rise to the fabula by the viewer<sup>1</sup> who makes semiotic sense in connecting the elements of space, time and the like into a chain of plausible events. Bal (1999b:27) explains in a more recent context that: “[T]he point of view [which Bal 1999b:28 notes, entails focalisation] from which the elements of the plot, or ‘fabula’, are presented is often of decisive importance for the meaning the viewer will assign to the fabula”. As a level or tier in the larger constellation of narrative, the fabula in narrative theory refers to an abstracted understanding of the “natural order” (Scheffel’s term 2013:2) of events, as opposed to their artificial arrangement in the narrative. It is also significant that the *viewer* in Bal’s (1981; 1999b) explanation is the one who assigns meaning to the fabula, because such an understanding resonates with the way in which the fabula is conceptualised in this study (that it is constructed in the process of reading the visual text).

Scheffel (2013:2) refers to various binary pairs that have been proposed to distinguish between the levels of narrative constellation: *fabula/sujet* (or *shuzjet*<sup>2</sup>) (e.g. Tomaševskij [1925] 1965), *histoire/discours* (e.g. Todorov 1967) and *story/plot* (e.g. Forster [1927] 1972). Du Plooy (1986:139; 205-7) mentions similar pairs and adds Genette’s ([1972] 1980) *histoire*, *récit* and *narration*, Bal’s (1980) *geschiedenis*, *verhaal* and *tekst* as well as Rimmon-Kenan’s (1983) terms *story*, *text* and *narration*. Plot is, in some formulations, regarded as one level of abstraction that is constructed by the reader based on the reading of the narrative, and is part of the narrative design (Kukkonen, 2014:1, 10). The fabula would be the most abstract level in the narrative constellation. It must be noted that much confusion and diverse uses of these terms exist – some clarification follows in the section on the fabula in installation art below (4.4). In visual artworks (including installation art), the fabula as it is

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<sup>1</sup> Bal’s (1981) discussion here uses as point of departure the visual images in a seventh-century Indian bas-relief of laughing mice, a cat and Arjuna (the latter both in the tree pose) with the title *Arjuna’s penance*. In other words, her argument for the construction of the fabula here is based on a visual reference, which she then transposes to literary focalisation. In many subsequent texts, Bal explores focalisation more strictly in a visual sense; see Bal (1999a; 1999b; 2001a; 2006a; 2011).

<sup>2</sup> I use this spelling of *sjuzhet* for consistency, although different variations exist.

conceptualised by Bal especially (2006a and other texts), refers to narrative causality suggested by visual clues in an artwork that are connected semiotically into a possible chain of events by the viewer.

The theoretical framework as set out in this chapter therefore focuses specifically on the concepts of narration, focalisation and the fabula, with emphasis on how these are related in the context of installation art. The motivation for focusing on these three terms is because narration in installation art proceeds along peculiar lines that problematise the notion of telling (even showing); and thus the argument is that narration becomes possible through focalisation – of the artist, but especially of the viewer-participant. Furthermore, focalisation of narrative elements is necessary for discerning, or as I argue, rather constructing, a plausible fabula.

The central premise of this chapter is that an understanding of narration, focalisation and the fabula that leans towards definitions emphasising the *constructive and synthesising* potential of these terms is most useful for engaging with installation art, especially in this instance Jan van der Merwe's, in order to gain access to certain interpretative possibilities of his work. In essence, this chapter sets out to sharpen these existing narratological tools (Nieragden's, 2002:685 term) in ways that are hoped will provide illuminating insights in terms of how attempts at interpreting installation art could draw on these tools. It is also hoped that this rethinking of certain narratological terms or tools can contribute towards a more multifaceted understanding of what these tools can do in other contexts.

## **4.2 Problematising narratological concepts in installation art**

Installation art is inherently a narrative art form (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003), but narration in installation art<sup>3</sup> problematises conventional understanding of how narration takes place. This is because, most obviously, a visual artwork lacks a language-based narrator with a narrating voice such as the type of voice that can be distinguished, for example, in a novel. This is also true of Jan van der Merwe's installation artworks.

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of narration in installation art situates this discourse in the postclassical sphere of narratological studies which are broadly called "narrative in new media"; "intermedial narrative studies" (see Herman, 2004; Hoffmann, 2010) and which are also addressed under appellations such as "narrative across media" (Ryan, 2004) and so forth.

Therefore, the narrating “voice” has to be located in other facets of the work; in this sense, it is a “multimodal” narrative that uses multiple semiotic resources for telling a story (see Herman, 2004.; Hoffmann, 2010:1).

As such, narration in installation art can be seen as the way in which the text (i.e. the installation artwork itself) gives rise to a narrative by means of these multiple semiotic facets and channels, which can also be seen as different narrative relations and agents. An understanding of the multiple semiotic facets in installation art is likely to benefit from theoretical arguments pertaining to narration in filmic and digital gaming contexts that also make use of multiple semiotic channels; relevant sources in these spheres are consulted. From the various narrative relations suggested by the multiple semiotic facets, one can posit that a fabula can be discerned or constructed – albeit also in a problematised manner (I will deal with this in greater detail under section 4.4).

These processes of narration take place in installation artworks because, as noted by De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry (2003), many installation artworks are highly suggestive of a narrative – one therefore feels compelled to look for ways in which the narration can be seen to proceed. Again, this is very true of Van der Merwe’s works which ostensibly use *spaces* and *temporal devices* to tell about *people* (i.e. characters) who are associated with *events* that are shown, experienced or implied. Therefore, the viewer-participant (who is also the interpreter) of the installation who wants to access the narrative content of Van der Merwe’s works is tasked with discerning the possible narrative devices and prompters in the works, and also to come to terms with how these devices may suggest narratives.

This theoretical overview therefore aims to prepare a framework from which one can demonstrate how the narrative devices and prompters in the installation artworks give rise to semiotic activity in the mind of the viewer, that in turn work to construct narratives. These devices and prompters are found in the elements inherent in installation art, namely space and time, as well as human agency and (physical and mental) action. Human agency, or the suggestion of character, has a peculiar presence in installation art; the implied viewer’s role is complicated here and is even conflated with the function of an inside

participant<sup>4</sup>. The installation artwork is, to be more precise, often set up by the artist in such a way as to invite the viewer-participant to become a character who co-narrates; therefore functions of viewing, narrating and character activities merge. Such a situation is contrary to Margolin's (2000:70) supposition that a character (in a literary text) is a non-actual individual.

Therefore in installation art, while the viewer who becomes a participant is an actual individual who remains him- or herself, he or she may well experience themselves temporarily *also* as part of the storyworld's cast and ontological status. This means that narratological terms such as character are also foregrounded and problematised in installation art. For my purposes, theorising about the character function can usefully but selectively draw on existing formulations. Margolin's (2007:71) description of character as the "total population of a narrative universe" may, then, still be usefully applied to character in installation art even in the current situation where a conflation of character and viewer-participant roles occurs. A character, more precisely, is:

[A]ny entity [that] can exist in the fact domain of the storyworld (= the set of facts that make it up) or in any of its subdomains: the beliefs, wishes, intentions, and imaginations of one or more characters, or in a secondary embedded world projected by stories the characters read, plays they watch, etc. In addition, characters form in their minds mental versions of other characters who, like them, exist in the fact domain (Margolin, 2007:71).

This study contends that in installation art, this entity can be stretched to include the viewer-participant as character – he or she becomes part of the *space* and *time* of the work, and his or her physical *actions* play a role in the construction of the *narrative*, while his or her *focalising* actions help to organise the way in which the elements make sense in an affective and imaginative manner to give rise to a *fabula*.

In the context of installation art, the narrative elements of time, space, character and event therefore work together in peculiar ways to convey, or rather generate a narrative. However, as noted, this narrative is not related in words (with the exception of titles and

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<sup>4</sup> This situation differs from art forms such as painting where the viewer may identify with someone inside the artwork, but cannot physically become a character inside the artwork. Some painters challenge such and excluded viewing position; Giotto's *Lamentation* discussed in the previous chapter (fig. 3.33) and Rembrandt's *Titus at a desk* (fig. 3.36) are examples of framed, painterly space opening up to the "real" space of the viewer. Still, it is not possible to physically enter into the artwork to join the painted actors.

the like; see paragraph below with reference to paratextual elements) but comes to be understood by the viewer-participant *by means of his or her focalisation* which occurs as a complement to the focalisation choices of the artist.

Other aspects that contribute towards narration in installation art are thematic concerns, which may have a bearing on (suggested or “real”) events. Such concerns may be evoked by paratextual devices such as titles and artist’s statements – using words – or where themes are inferred in the works themselves. For purposes of this study, the main concern is to show how these constituents of the narrative are associated with (possibly a number of) processes which can be seen as aspects of focalisation – which will entail focalisation shifts, ontologically transformed/transforming focalising windows and so on. Through focalisation, following Bal (1981:2006a; 2001a:214), the constituents of the narrative become meaningful: one may interpret how space becomes place, how time thickens and becomes tangible, and how agency or character transforms into dimensional personas who can convey or make sense of thematic concerns that may involve actions and events.

The exact nature of the focalisation process in installation art (itself an approach towards art-making that complicates existing ways of understanding visual art) has not yet been explored in the scholarly literature of the field; what can be said is that focalisation, which is a complex and even problematic concept, is further complicated by installation art so that new questions and possibilities emerge in the process of unravelling how focalisation works in installation art.

Briefly, reference can be made to a number of publications on focalisation in non-literary fields that have been relevant to this study. These include several of Mieke Bal’s book-length studies. *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary art, preposterous history* (Bal, 1999b) takes as point of departure a line by TS Eliot that one should not “find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past”. Bal especially engages with artists like Andres Serrano (b. 1950) and David Reed (b. 1946) who “quote” the Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio by using various avenues to reference his works. “Quoting Caravaggio changes his work forever” (Bal, 1999b:1) because when one sees the original, it is through eyes accustomed to the quoted image. Especially when reading the abstract painter David Reed’s work she explores how these works are

narratively multivalent because of her interpretation of a second-person focalisation involved. This is an argument she repeats in *Looking in. The art of viewing* (2001a) when discussing Reed's art. In this publication she gives greater attention to focalising issues in the visual arts. Bal's *Louise Bourgeois' Spider. The architecture of art writing* (2001b) presents a reading of one of Bourgeois' installation works (one of her *Spider* works), but focalisation does not feature even though she talks of "embodied visuality with a story-telling activity" in the works and of "refocusing attention" (2001b:50, 51) – both statements may imply focalisation, but are not unpacked with reference to focalising processes.

Bal has also published an article on Bourgeois' *Spider* (1999a) where she explores how the artwork can be understood as a "theoretical object" but again the focalising possibilities as such are not discussed. Her extensive study of Rembrandt's works (*Reading Rembrandt*, 2006a) explores focalisation in very useful ways, but with reference to paintings, not installations. In another book by Bal, she engages with Doris Salcedo's political art (*Of what one cannot speak*, 2010). These are installation artworks. The word "focalization" has two references in the back index of the book; the issue is not addressed but only mentioned. Bal's body of publications on narratology in the visual art is vast – but interestingly, when she investigates conventional art forms such as painting, she uses focalisation; however, when dealing with installation art (Salcedo and Bourgeois, for example), she does not pay more than passing attention to focalisation issues.

Other publications on focalisation in non-literary contexts frequently explore graphic novels: Badman (2013); Horstkotte and Pedri (2011); Mikkonen (2012); Nixon (2010) as well as film (Horstkotte, 2009), or three-dimensional video games (Nitsche, 2005:unpaginated). This is not a comprehensive list, but these sources are representative of the argument that an interpretation of focalisation may help to develop "a shared vocabulary that will enable a more nuanced discussion of the works [the visual, non-literary works] themselves" (this quote by Badman, [2010]2013:1 summarises the intent of this body of texts).

Some of these sources read focalising activities as the function of a character or narrator by a consciousness "prior to and/or embedded in narratorial mediation" (Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011:330; this sentiment that focalisation is *discerned* by the viewer is echoed in some of the other texts). On the other hand, Nixon (2010) and Nitsche (2005) suggest that

focalisation may be a function *shared* by the viewer (or the player of a computer game) and is *not* only an issue that can be traced to an activity “prior to” the reading experience (in other words, only lodged in the author’s/artist’s choices). This point is important for my study where the argument is made that focalisation happens also in the now, and mostly takes place in the experience of the viewer-participant.

In line with the general approach of the texts noted above, the contention of the current study is that focalisation offers greater interpretative possibilities for installation art than, for example, formal analysis or analysis of narration only. This is also the argument particularly because focalisation has to do with a *subjective and embodied* understanding, ordering, selecting, evaluating and transformation of things and people (as argued in later sections of this chapter and especially in the interpretations of the artworks in subsequent chapters). Both focalisation as a narratological process and installation art as an art form are contingent upon this subjective, embodied engagement. Subjective engagement is a significant starting point because it also includes the particular and salient role played by the viewer-participant – thus reception and participation assume similar functions in installation art. Therefore, the process(es) of focalisation as they could proceed in the context of installation art (and therefore in Jan van der Merwe’s installation art) need to be untangled and unpacked in a systematic way.

To further this section’s exploration of how installation art problematises narration, the specific ways in which focalisation is problematised in the installation artworks under discussion are highlighted:

1. Seeing versus the cognitive and affective dimensions of focalisation is a first concern. When thinking about the visual arts, one may tend to imagine that the visual dimension of focalisation (formulated in Genette’s initial [1972] 1980 “who sees?”) that has been associated with many other earlier definitions of focalisation<sup>5</sup> would

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<sup>5</sup> Huck (2009:204) makes the interesting and relevant point that classical narratology (James, Genette, Stanzel) was developed in response to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century novels; these centuries were also the “heyday of the primacy of visual observation” and thus it makes sense that theories of this age favour visuality. Bal’s insistence, at times, on “vision” and what is “seen” seemingly corroborates this. However, Bal mostly uses words that infer seeing in inverted commas, which can be understood as an indication that seeing and vision should be regarded metaphorically (as in the mind’s eye, for example). Genette (1988) also famously changed

guide the process of focalisation in this sphere, as the name “visual art” may suggest. Not so, this chapter proposes; the contention here is that the visual dimension may indeed be a starting point for unravelling focalisation processes in installation art, but this visual input generates cognitive and affective responses, which suggest that focalisation here operates as a process of (subjective) interpretation and even synthesis (constructing and adding dimensions) rather than a process that is mainly concerned with selecting (cutting off and filtering out).

2. These processes of focalisation can then, in their turn, work to connect the elements synthetically into a discernible fabula. If focalisation is regarded as a subjective process that involves affective and cognitive dimensions, such a possibility would suggest a specific understanding of the nature of the fabula. In particular, this study aligns itself with authors who propose the imaginative (re)construction of the fabula<sup>6</sup> – in line with how focalisation is understood to be a more complex, synthesising process that entails more than sifting and selecting. Furthermore, the argument is proposed that installation artworks tend to suggest the possible construction of a fabula or, more likely, fabulae; or what has been called an extended fabula/story (see Du Plooy, 1986:302-303; Eco, 1979:29-32). Somebody’s subjectivity reacts to cues; here the visual as well as the cognitive, psychological and other dimensions understood to form part of focalisation are included. This, in turn, guides the sense of narrative in order to constitute the fabula and its extended version(s).
3. Here another complication begins. In a written narrative like a novel, the reader unravels, or finds, or discovers the fabula as the various events in the narrative are presented through the focaliser or focalisers. This process usually means that the character-focaliser is inside the text. Nonetheless, focalisation can take place in

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his “who sees?” ([1972] 1980) into “who perceives?” (1988) to encapsulate a broader and less overtly visual understanding of the focalising process.

<sup>6</sup> This study argues for an understanding of the fabula as both (re)constructed and discovered. These seemingly incompatible views coexist much like the wave/particle theory of light; in physics, scholars use whatever conceptualisation is necessary in order to perform certain calculations or interpretations; so that there is a temporal alignment with one of these without categorically rejecting the other. Similarly, the fabula is both discovered and constructed, although for the current discussion the latter understanding is regarded as more useful. See 4.4 below.

various ways; focalisation shifts can occur and all these can be traced, analysed, weighed and so on in the process of reading, taking cognisance of shifts between levels of focalisation, filling gaps, and deciding what the fabula is (unravelling or uncovering the fabula). However, it remains so that in written texts, the reader, even though he or she may actively fill gaps and reconstruct/find the fabula, does not focalise but rather works to identify focalising agents, shifts and so on in order to make sense of the story. Essentially, the reader is outside the text and therefore does not become either a character or a focaliser.

4. In similar ways, the viewer of visual artworks such as paintings or sculptures (apart from a few rare exceptions; see footnote 4 above) has the experience of standing outside the “text”<sup>7</sup> (i.e. the artwork) as a disembodied eye (and mind), and may look at/into the artwork to try to make sense of the narrative, as it were, and determining what the fabula could be. Particularly in visual artworks that are frozen in time and space by frames or plinths – as paintings and sculptures conventionally have been – and also especially in artworks that make use of Renaissance perspective, the viewer is assigned a particular position outside the artwork-as-text from where he or she can look. From this position, the viewer can identify focalising agents in the artwork and determine how they guide the understanding of the narrative by means of tracing gazes and the like. In cases where different types of perspective (such as medieval herringbone perspective) are used, the same can happen although the viewer may feel less bound to a particular, singular, ideal viewing position. Again, the viewer stands outside the visual text.

In such instances, the viewer is neither character nor focaliser. However, Bal (2006a) has argued that the viewer of a painting may in certain cases co-focalise with (implied) characters in paintings (for example, in Rembrandt’s *Bathsheba at her bath* (fig. 4.11) when one looks “with” an outside viewer implied by the painting. For

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<sup>7</sup> The viewer being outside the visual text (the painting, for example) here refers to his or her physically not being inside of the text, and looking as a disembodied eye. Bal (2006b:70 et seq.) problematises the flatness of the picture plane; Derrida ([1967] 1976:158) famously proclaimed that “there is nothing outside of the text”. Not being inside the text here refers to the text-externality of the viewer’s physical position.

example, King David is not in the painting; he is implied and he looks with the viewer at the naked figure of Bathsheba (also see the reference to this work below under 4.4). Other visual art forms such as graphic novels and film explore ways in which focalisation can be achieved, for example, by visual devices such as the over-the-shoulder shot (or the identifying shot) so that the viewer may identify with the character who looks<sup>8</sup> (see Badman, 2013; Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011; Kukkonen, 2011; Mikkonen, 2012). Although the viewer therefore may feel drawn into the action, as if he or she were seeing what a character sees, this feeling may remain an illusion that is made manifest by the array of technical and conceptual tools available to help viewers empathise with a character by means of identification.

5. What actually happens in terms of focalisation has to be reconsidered when this concept is applied to installation art. This is because in installation art, the viewer does not only scrutinise from the outside but becomes part of the work, and becomes an active participant when he or she physically enters the artwork and begins to co-narrate – and focalise. The conventionally prescriptive perspectival position of the viewer (with reference to Renaissance perspective, or in the case where a frame or plinth creates a sense of distancing) is therefore negated by the nature of the installation artwork. In installation art, he or she can move around, or may do something, all *inside* the artwork itself.

In summary, the processes of narration and focalisation, and of fabula construction in the context of installation art are contingent upon the viewer-participant's cooperation. Participation on the side of a reader or viewer is always necessary, although there is a scalar increase of this participation in installation art. A number of devices or processes have been argued (under the five points above that list focalising issues that are problematised in installation art) to work together in order to achieve this viewer-participant situation. These include the subjective aspect of focalisation, the way that the fabula is (re)constructed

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<sup>8</sup> A particular instance of an article that explores viewer co-focalisation in the filmic adaptation (2007) of the graphic novel *Persepolis* (2000) will be referenced in the interpretation sections (in chapter 6) to sustain my argument, namely that the viewer-participant in installation artworks can also focalise. See Nixon, L. 2010. I focalize, you focalize, we all focalize together: audience participation in *Persepolis*. *Image & Narrative*, 11(2):91-99.

(subjectively) by the viewer-participant's assumed text-internal position. The notion of de-centring of the viewer (as articulated in the context of installation art by Bishop [2005] and others) heightens awareness that the viewer is embodied, and is also free to assume any and different vantage points *vis-à-vis* the artwork.

This embodied yet de-centred viewer position, together with the insistence that viewer participation is a *de facto* necessity in installation art, so much so that the viewer actually *co-constitutes* the work, gives rise to a situation where the viewer (more correctly, the participant) cannot be thought of as a text-external agent anymore. Instead, he or she is absorbed, literally, into the work. For if it is true that he or she co-constitutes the work, it means that the work comes into being only once he or she is engaging with it, participating with it inside the (story) world of the artwork.

Given, then, the definition of a character as a participant in a storyworld (Jannidis, 2013:1; Margolin, 2007:66), the installation artwork allows the viewer to enter the storyworld, and also the text, physically. Installation art therefore offers the viewer-participant access to the spatiotemporal and ontological possibilities of the storyworld so that the participant becomes a character. This character status may be shared with other agents in the artwork – whether such agent is another person who is present, or an inferred character that is partly present.

Partly present characters appear, for example, in some of Louise Bourgeois' works (compare indices in installations such as body parts or images that suggest the body in *Passage dangereux* of 1997 [fig. 4.1]).

In turn, Acconci's 1972 work *Seedbed* (fig. 4.2) uses the significance of the artist being present but invisible as character; Serra's *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes* (fig. 4.3) of 2000 plays on the invisibility not of the artist, but of the subjects of the work (the workers) so that characters exist as absent presences. Indeed, many installation artworks play with absence; Salcedo's (fig. 4.4) and Van der

Merwe's (fig. 4.5 and 4.6) works often reference absent characters whose absence is felt tangibly in metonymic signs such as clothes, furniture or shoes that "house" the absences<sup>9</sup>.



Fig.4.1. Bourgeois, Louise. 1997. *Passage dangereux*. Detail.



Fig.4.2. Acconci, Vito. 1972. *Seedbed*. View of slanted wooden ramp under which the artist lay.



Fig. 4.3. Serra, Santiago. 2000. *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes*. Installation view with gallery-goer.

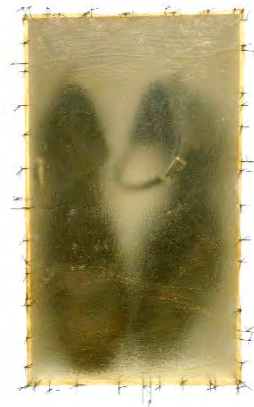


Fig. 4.4. Salcedo, Doris. 1992-93. *Atrabiliarios*. Detail of installation.

<sup>9</sup> The works of these artists that are relevant for this discussion are represented and briefly discussed in chapters 2 and 3.



Fig. 4.5. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Guests*. Installation view.



Fig. 4.6. Van der Merwe, Jan. 1998. *Soldier's bed* from the *Final inspection series*. Installation view.

From here it is logical to infer that the viewer-participant as a character (as any character may do), should be able to contribute to the narrative either by co-narrating by connecting the narrative prompters, both achieved by means of his or her focalisation. The viewer-participant is therefore a fully-fledged character and focalising agent; both narratee and co-narrator, focalised and focaliser, addressed and addressee (and therefore a very multifaceted agent in which numerous functions are conflated). Furthermore, he or she is both interpreter and actor. This conflation of roles is perhaps unusual, but given the context of installation art as a postmodern phenomenon, it could point to a supremely postmodern state of identity: fragmented, non-unified, mutable, transferable, merged, hybrid; in a state of flux<sup>10</sup>.

In this sense, the neat distinctions of Onega and Landa (1996:10) between various categories of textual figures, roles or subject-positions are complicated because the role of the viewer-participant in installation art is not constant. Refer to the table below – each figure/role/subject position has a direct object (if it is transitive) and an addressee:

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<sup>10</sup> Bamberg (2013:2-8) notes that the construction of identity in narration allows for reflection on issues of self, otherness and identity transformations that suggest an interchange between identity in fictional narratives and “real” situations. These issues: self, otherness, transformation and the interchange between the storyworld and the “real” world are essential elements in my exploration of narration in installation art and its relation to character as a storyworld function that conflates with a “real” person in the world outside the artwork.

**Table 4.1:** Onega and Landa’s (1996:10) topology of subject, activity, direct object and addressee in the context of literary narrative indicating fairly clear distinctions between functions and relations

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Direct object</b>	<b>Addressee (indirect object)</b>
Author	Writing	Literary work	Reader
Textual author	Literary enunciation	Literary text	Textual reader
Narrator	Narration	Narrative	Narratee
Focaliser	Focalisation	Focalised (story)	Implied spectator
Agent	Performance	Action	(Agent)

Van der Merwe’s works, like many installation artworks, blur the boundaries between these categories since one subject (the viewer-participant) can be narratee, co-narrator, the one who takes action, who focalises and who reads, sees and constructs the focalised story or fabula. Because of these complications, the narratological terminology that will be applied towards an interpretation of a selection of Van der Merwe’s installation artworks needs to be clarified in terms of their application in this study. And as mentioned, those narratological constructs that are specifically problematised in terms of their potential as analytical and interpretative tools in this context are narration, the fabula, and focalisation.

Focalisation entails the process of binding all the narrative elements together in order to generate a fabula, and is therefore a salient concept for this study. However, the focalising function will not be dealt with first in this chapter: narration needs to be clarified first, and then the fabula, so that the more complex function of focalisation can be brought to bear based on the ideas propounded about narration and its relation to the fabula.

The questions that guide the remainder of this chapter therefore are: In what ways can narration proceed in installation art, and which conceptualisations of narration are helpful in this regard? Secondly, how can the role of the fabula be understood in this context? How is the fabula constituted? And lastly, how can focalisation be conceptualised in view of its expanded function which includes the participant-as-character’s focalising actions? The section on focalisation is the most extensive, because it will become clear in the discussion that follows that focalisation is central to the present argument but also needs further articulation in order to adapt it to the situation of installation art.

### 4.3 Narration in installation art

Bennett and Royle (1995:41) propose that “stories are everywhere”; the authors continue to say that we tell stories, but stories tell us; and that stories always tell us something about stories, in other words, all stories are in some ways self-reflective and metafictional. These assumptions may also inform how one could go about looking at ways in which narration takes place in the context of installation art. Firstly, because “we tell stories and stories tell us” (ibid.) – this section argues for an interactive approach towards narration in which the narration takes place through a give and take between the artwork’s narrative prompters and cues (planted by the artist), and the mind, emotions and embodied experience of the viewer-participant (and interpreter) who engages with the artwork. Secondly, the way in which narratives are constructed in an installation artwork is likely to prompt the interpreter to reflect on the mode of narration suggested by the “text”. As noted in chapter 3 which dealt with narrative elements as these can be discerned in installation art, this type of art often invites meta-reflection on the elements (space, time, character and event – as well as their narrative potential).

Narration is not a term typically associated with the visual arts, especially not since the rejection of narrative elements in the modernist view of art (a view that was exemplified most acutely by Fried, [1967] 1998). Therefore, while medieval images may have used various strategies to relay a narrative<sup>11</sup>, and while Renaissance and Baroque artists in their pursuit to depict a selected “pregnant moment” from a given narrative (Lessing’s [1766] 1962 terminology), the very idea of narrative became a stranger to the avant-garde visual arts for a number of decades time until it was revived in the context of postmodern trends that approve of, and thus helped to reinvigorate narrative and historical content in art (see Hertz, 1985; Levin, 1985).

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<sup>11</sup> These include using architectural features such as arched rooms as framing devices for different scenes (as often found in medieval Biblical illustrations), or using metaphoric devices such as a long winding road for plotting different moments in a story, or by simply telling a story in a long “strip”-like fashion (as one may find in the Roman Trajan Column, or in an instance like the Bayeux Tapestry). Wolf (2005) has distinguished, in a similar vein, between what he calls monophase works that show one instant in a narrative by means of a single image; polyphase works where several moments are shown in the same image; and series of pictures that show a sequence of events. Of significance is here, again, that most narrative artworks tell a pre-existing story so that the artwork is actually a re-telling (Kemp, 2003:62).

Ryan (2014:28) suggests that to read a picture narratively is to ask who the characters are that are shown in the picture; what their interpersonal relations may be; what they have done before, what they are doing now, what their reasons for acting are, what will be brought about by their actions, and how the characters will react to the event. Obviously, she brings to bear the basic elements of narrative here – character, time, event or action (and space, which can be assumed, since a picture is made up of space).

In this argument, Ryan may be seen to look for what Bal (2006a) calls the pre-text, which is the pre-existing narrative such as a Bible story or historical event that predates the actual artwork, and of which the artwork is an elaboration or illustration. My contention is that the situation is very different in installation art where narration is more actively constructed and is not a matter of “retelling” an existing story. It has been indicated that installation art is often regarded as inherently narrative, but tracing the way in which narration takes place in the context of installation art will help to develop this concept into a functional component of the analytical toolkit necessary for exploring narration in Jan van der Merwe’s installations. Specifically, narration is understood as a generative activity – the narrative is co-constructed by the viewer-participant (who responds to cues planted in the artwork), and this viewer-participant is likely to also feel that the narrative has a bearing on him or her.

#### **4.3.1 What narration does, and how narration happens**

A premise of this study is that narration is not confined to literature, or even to sequential art forms such as films – as indicated above, stories are everywhere; we tell stories, and they tell us. The discussion that follows sets out to clarify how non-linear narration illustrates the “medium-transcending” nature of narrative (Ryan, 2014:8). Meuter (2013:2) notes that in the case of literary narration, the narrative is fully formed – or more or less ready-made from the outset (“outset” refers, it seems, to the time when a reader begins to engage with a text)<sup>12</sup>. Scheffel (2013:2) reiterates that the conventional approaches to

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<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the fabula in Meuter’s view also predates the text so that the reader actualises the story while reading (also see Jooste, 1986:92; this article provides a very useful overview of basic definitions of key terms in narratology).

situating the fabula and sjuzhet on different levels presuppose that happenings narrated are logically antecedent to the narrative itself.

The situation is different for those disciplines where more implicit references to narratives exist<sup>13</sup>, such as historical subjects, sociology, theology and so forth (Meuter's, 2013 examples): here the narrative objects have to be *constructed* to a lesser or greater degree, which also results in a tendency to thematise the very notion of narrativity, and as a by-product, the concepts of content and methodology of the particular discipline may also be subject to self-conscious scrutiny. More complex narrative situations such as the so-called "anti-narratives" found in modern and especially postmodern literature in their own ways undermine conventional notions of, among others, a narrative as having a beginning, middle and end (Meuter, 2013:9). Narration therefore can assume various guises, but always entails a communicative dimension.

A range of agents and activities works together in the process of narration to achieve narrative communication. Although these agents and activities can be called by different names, they include the narrative text (with its diverse relations to plot or sjuzhet and fabula), the various conceptualisations of author and reader (historical, implied), the narrator and the narratee, as well as ancillary dimensions such as narrative distance, narrative levels and narrative perspective (see Lothe, 2000:11-46). Different opinions exist regarding the way in which narration comes into being; Margolin's (2013) reference to the narrator as the one who answers Genette's *who speaks?* – and who is distinct from the author – is representative of generally held views in the sphere of narratology.

Since my study is concerned with installation art where the active role of the viewer-participant is emphasised, narration is for the most part not sought in speech or writing. Therefore, a reception-orientated approach such as Iser's that regards the: "interplay, the *interaction*, between text and reader" (Lothe's, 2000:19 italics) as the heart of the narratorial process is most useful here, because such a view allots to the reader/viewer a great deal of participatory responsibility. Such a view also allows for the notion of (co-)

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<sup>13</sup> These instances are examples of interdisciplinarity, where the narrative turn in the humanities and, somewhat rarely, also in the economic and scientific fields, allow for applying narrative concepts to new fields of enquiry.

constructing a narrative. In order to elucidate how the responsibility for narration is also lodged in the viewer-participant's function, it is necessary to look at views of narration as being constituted in the semiotic activity of different components in the text (such as space, time and causality – see Lothe, 2000:11) that become meaningful once the reader engages with them.

In the first instance, the present discussion turns towards Bundgaard (2010:65) who regards mode of narration (what he also calls mediacy) as “one of the symbolic forming tools in literary art” (Bundgaard’s analyses focus on novels but his general interest includes the visual arts) that help to make meaning in the sense that it answers the question: “What happens if I tell things this way, and not that way?” To tell things in a particular way, the meaning-making processes that happen between the author<sup>14</sup> and the mind of the reader is important. Essentially, Bundgaard (2010:66) proposes that:

Meaning effects are by and large constrained and motivated by objective features – viz. the meaning shaping performed by the author thanks to the symbolic forming tools he has at his disposal. In other terms: the theoretic reading of texts consists in motivating meaning effects by systematically linking them to publicly accessible textual features which can be rationally accounted for in terms of the meaning making operations or symbolic forming tools that have given shape to them.

While the author of a text provides the features, the reading process is concerned with linking these meaningfully. Bundgaard unpacks this definition – which could stand for the interpretation process of almost any kind – with reference to focalisation, type and mode of narration, and what he calls granularity. The latter refers to the amount of detailed attention an aspect in the narrative receives, which helps to give texture to that aspect: the more “grainy”, the greater the focus on this particular object or experience<sup>15</sup>.

For the present discussion, the quote above highlights a very important issue that will be further explored below, namely how narration can take place in the *mind of the reader (or viewer)* without an overt narrator being present, but rather by means of responding to

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, references to author in this discussion may also refer to the artist.

<sup>15</sup> Bundgaard’s use of the term granularity (which is synonymous with the idea of graininess) runs counter to the possible intuitive association of this feature; in photography, where this term is very often used, a grainy image is slightly *unfocused* or *unclear*, and it is hard to make out detail whereas a sharp image with *little* graininess makes for better, more detailed rendering of the image. However, the spirit in which Bundgaard explicates his views can make some sense if granularity is understood as referring to things that are presented as more tangible, more fully “there” and thus more foregrounded.

features provided by the artwork (more about granularity also follows in the section below on focalisation, because it has a bearing here, too). Bundgaard's "meaning effects" can be likened to the different components of a narrative (such as style, space and time – see Bordwell, 1985); features that act as cues and can be said to have semiotic significance (here one can add objects and characters; see Bal, 1981) in the mind of the reader/viewer. The "symbolic forming tools" that are also "meaning making operations" can clearly refer to the way in which the components of a narrative become narrated. In fact, what is important here is that narration takes place by means of "meaning making operations" that are semiotically traceable, and not necessarily by means of a narrative voice.

### **4.3.2 Narration and narratorial agency**

Who narrates? The question of narratorial agency is interrogated in this section. Understanding narration as not emanating from the words uttered by a human or human-like narrative agent necessitates an understanding of the narration process that is not common in narrative theory (where the voice or verbal act of narration is at the basis of what narration is – see Bamberg, 2013). Furthermore, narration, story and plot are difficult to separate in a complete or satisfactory manner; specifically, narration is the most slippery of the three while story is often felt to be the "sturdiest", according to Abbott (2007:40-41). For example, narration has been equated with narrative, or in the case of film theory, with most of the narrative discourse, or elsewhere with the production of narrative discourse, or even with all the words by the narrator with the exception of direct discourse (see Abbott, 2007:42-43; when referring to film, the author refers extensively to Bordwell's 1985 *Narration in the fiction film* whose arguments are referenced below). Nonetheless, for the present discussion a closer look at what narration is, and how its agents can be thought of, is necessary.

In order to elucidate narration in installation art, it is useful to consider conceptualisations of the term that do not require a human-like voice or agent who utters words in order to transmit the narrative. Specifically, the conceptualisation of narration in fiction film as proposed by Bordwell (1985) provides a number of useful insights. In his historical overview of narration in film, Bordwell (1985:9-25) traces a number of cinematographic theories of

narration. While the author is *au fait* with narrative theory as it applies to literature, he lingers on theories propounded by filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and V.I. Pudovkin<sup>16</sup>.

With reference to these two, Bordwell notes that in early film theory, the camera lens was often at first regarded as standing in for an implicit observer; when sound was added to the motion film in 1927, filmic sound consequently meant that the microphone took the place of the observer's ears. This invisible and extremely agile observer (who was not only incarnated in the camera, but who was very much idealised since he or she had to be able to "be" everywhere a camera and sound technology could be – from, say, a bird's eye view to an extreme close-up shot), "could [also] be identified with the narrator" (Bordwell, 1985:9). Thus the camera was believed to "tell" the story. Anthropomorphic conceptions of the camera-as-eye of the observer posed a number of problems; however, not least of which was that the imaginary observer was conceptualised as a subject before an objective world of story action. Such a view discounts the fact that storyworlds and the actions inside them are equally *constructed* – and are thus not pre-existent elements that can be isolated or framed in the act of narration by the camera.

The same is true for post-production processes like editing: it helps to tell the story, and thus must be part of the narration and "reflects a certain vision of the world" (Schmidt, 2013:15-17). The anthropomorphic narratorial function in film is therefore discounted also because editing can be narrative in nature. Therefore, a more expansive understanding of the source of narration has been suggested. Broadly, Bordwell (1985:11-12) proffers that the notion the camera position, *mise-en-scène*, the unfolding of time and the representation of space, the figures, lighting, setting, and costumes are *all* constructed, and specifically constructed to make sense only from certain vantage points (referring to the way the camera records these things in order to address the spectator). And, therefore, all the components of the film, all its techniques and styles and editing choices "function narratorially" (Bordwell, 1985:12). These components speak of the "generative capacity" of the filmic text (Branigan, 1984:18).

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<sup>16</sup> Eisenstein is especially well-known for his epic film *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in which he applies, practically, Pudovkin's theory of montage, which is a form of constructive editing in which the viewer is tasked to connect often wildly divergent shots in order to make meaning as he or she synthesises these in his or her mind (Gianetti, 1990:313-133). These filmmaker-theorists are, interestingly, both aligned with the Soviet formalist school of filmmaking; Russian contributions to formalist theory (such as Šklovskij) and narrative theory (Tomaševskij) were also significant around the first decades of the twentieth century.

This de-anthropomorphising of the narrating function is radical because it flies in the face of Jacobson-grounded notions that a narrative must have a narrator (a sender) who is fundamentally human-like<sup>17</sup> (Lothe, 2000:15 also refers to the problematic position of narration in Jacobson's communication model). Another important point made by Bordwell (1985:15) in conjunction with ideas proposed by Eisenstein and his peers are that taken together, the various components that make up the motion film are narrative prompters and the narrative is actually constructed by the spectator<sup>18</sup> when he or she receives these as stimuli. Narration in film, as in installation art, may therefore comprise mental pictures prompted by visual images that are connected *by the viewer* (or participant), and the process is informed by knowledge and memory (this last part of the argument is made with reference to Jahn, 1996:255).

To summarise: Bordwell's (1985) argument is that in film, narration emerges in the consciousness of the viewer, who connects diverse sets of stimuli in order to make sense of these as narrative (concurring with Schmidt, 2013:22). Therefore, in spite of the fact that cinema is a sequential art form – like literature and mostly unlike visual art – it requires an understanding of narration that does not include one “voice” or similar personification. In his turn, Lothe (2000) in *Narrative in fiction and film* draws extensively on Bordwell's views in *Narrative in fiction and film*. His grounding arguments are more firmly lodged in narrative theory than Bordwell's and he also frequently refers to the importance of semiotic activity and especially to reception-based ideas – he often muses about the way in which meaning is produced inside the mind of the reader or viewer.

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<sup>17</sup> Kuhn (2009) notes a few well-known attempts at defending the notion of a narratorial agent in film – he refers to Metz's (1971) “grand imagier”, Kozloff's (1988) “image-maker”, Gaudreault's (1988) “fundamental narrator” and Chatman's (1990) “cinematic narrator”. Chatman's opposition to the de-personalised filmic narrator is perhaps best known and is cited in most studies in the field. From a purely cinematic position, Gianetti (1990:297-300) briefly mentions narratorial aspects – noting what he describes as the “bewildering assortment of terms” such as *fabula* and *shuzjet*. He seems to concur, without stating his position clearly, that narration is a function of the implied author who is, in turn, a conglomerate of all the elements such as style, perspective, plot and so on that contribute towards the story and the way it is told.

<sup>18</sup> Possible exceptions are films where an overt narratorial function in the form of a voice-over or narrator-character appears; however, even in films that make use of such devices, the voice-over and teller-character usually become part of the larger network of components that constitute the narrative drive of the film (see Bordwell, 1985; Gianetti, 1990).

Lothe (2000:19-21) engages pertinently with the identity and nature of the narrator as explicated in narratological contexts. He mentions Bal's (1997:19) view that the narrator is the most important concept in the analysis of literary texts. Also, he refers to Rimmon-Kenan's (1983:88-9) definition that the narrator is an agent who addresses a narratee, even if this address is implicit. Then he reminds the reader of Prince's (1991:65) contention that the narrator is: "the one who narrates, as inscribed in the text. There is at least one narrator per narrative, located at the same diegetic level as the narratee he or she is addressing".

Lothe does not clearly demonstrate allegiance or difference from these views (in terms of the narrator as human-like agent). He does concur, however, with the generally accepted narratological position that the narrator and author are two distinct agents – especially since the narrator's position is "inscribed in the text". The view that the narrator is inside the text, and is distinct from the author, paves the way for Lothe's contention that the narrator could also be seen as a: "narrative instrument [thus, not necessarily an identifiable human agent, one might add] that the author uses to present and develop the text, which is thus *constituted* by the activities and functions that the narrator performs" (Lothe, 2000:20-21; my italics). Constituted by whom is not explicitly stated, but Lothe's clear affinity with reception-based views may suggest that he allows for narration to be situated along the textual cues planted by the author *and interpreted by the reader or viewer*.

While a narrator is inscribed in the text, narrators can nonetheless be outside or inside the action<sup>19</sup> (most typically speaking, to represent third- or first-person narration, respectively). If, therefore, narration is born from certain textual cues and if it then comes into being in an interactive process that depends on the mind of the reader/viewer who is also a protagonist, narration is likely to be situated on the inside, as part of the action. This is, I argue, the case with narration in most installation artworks: the viewer-participant engages with the work from the inside, from within the storyworld where the narrative unfolds. Immersion into the storyworld (Grünbaum's, 2013:115 term) happens literally in the

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<sup>19</sup> The best-known distinction used is that between external, internal narration as well as narration bound to a specific character. There are finer distinctions of narration (heterodiegetic and homodiegetic, even autodiegetic); these are useful terms that may illuminate narration from other angles (see Coste & Pier, 2013:2). However, since the narration in installation art is argued to have a de-antropomorphised quality, these terms are also further complicated in this art form. Exploring such complications would likely expose yet another opportunity for redeploying narratological tools in the context of installation art.

installation artwork. It is possible that second-person narration may also be discerned in installation artworks, since the viewer-participant contributes to the narration and may also, in some instances, engage in a dialogic first- and second-person situation.

Compare, for example, Acconci's *Seedbed* (fig. 4.2) where the viewer-participant's movements elicit a response from the (hidden and thus invisible) artist: here the artist identifies with the role of a narrator *while he is part of the artwork*, but the narrative is equally constituted by the viewer-participant whose actions such as noise or movement create a dialogue with the response by the artist-who-is-also-partly-narrator. Such a situation suggests a first- and second-person narrator where "I" may respond to "you" and vice versa. Another example of narration in a first- or second-person format, complemented by third-person echoes, is found in Boltanski's *No man's land* (fig. 4.7). Here the viewer-participant who walks across the clothes of the dead and departed may infer narrative fragments from his or her own experience and memory, which are in dialogue with the "you" and with the "him" or "her" on whose clothing he or she walks – the tattered clothing, of course, metonymically standing in for the dead people; the fabric is heavy with the smell of the dead and signifies their absence in this dialogue of moving and smelling.



Fig. 4.7. Boltanski, Christian. 2010. *No man's land*. Detail of installation.

Objects like these are narrativised in the visual arts – that is, they "have narrativity" (Ryan, 2004:9). This term, narrativity, is often used in postclassical narratology to suggest that something may elicit a narrative response without actually being a narrative (Ryan, 2004:9; Abbot, 2011:4-5). Typical narrative expectations such as eventfulness or sequentiality do not

predominate in one's estimation of something's narrativity; rather, one senses that a story, "even an unreadable one" (Bal, 1999b:252) has been inscribed onto something, usually in a visual artwork. This is one of the reasons also why narrativity is a favoured concept for explorations in transmedial studies. Space, temporal strategies in non-literary works, objects, marks and traces can all be seen as potentially narrativised if the interpreter deems this to be the case. Narrativisation is therefore one way of narrating by involving the viewer and without having a voiced narrator. It may also set up the viewer as co-narrator, depending on the extent of his or her inferences from the narrativised issues.

In an installation context, the narrating may proceed by making sense of the narrativised elements (or clues/cues). The viewer-participant may be a co-narrator (with the artist) or may narrativise what he or she has experienced, or is experiencing. This means that the I-narrator will characterise most instances of narration in installation art, where the experiencing-I will also quite likely perform the role of the main character or one of the main characters, together with other characters that are either inferred, present or recalled.

This experiencing-I will typically act upon what Lothe (2000:26) calls the textual intention – a term that steers clear of the usual problems of artistic or authorial intent because it refers to the thematics suggested by the implied author in relation to the value system of the text. This last term (thematics) refers to a fairly complex conglomerate of viewpoints, priorities, evaluations, criticisms and so on in the text as a whole; it also includes the narrative technique in which the fictional content is conveyed. This can be understood to entail the emotive and, for want of a better word, philosophical underpinnings (Lothe, 2000:26 also refers to ideological orientation) that bind the text. Even though the text needs not be a stable unitary expression, it will tend to show unifying features or convergent interpretative possibilities in its thematics and philosophical basis.

Narration in Lothe's (2000) formulation as it pertains to cinema, is applicable to the context of installation art insofar as this phrasing may include various narrative cues (narrativised elements) that have been inscribed in the text by the artist-as-implied-author (in film, by the director, cinematographer, editor and other role-players) and internalised by the viewer-participant. This reflection on how narration in filmic narrative theory relates to installation art has shown that the parallels between these two communicative instances (film and

installation) are useful and applicable. However, there are differences: the main issue at stake is the more active role of the viewer-participant in installation art who is inside the storyworld, and who is a character also charged with much more responsibility in terms of constructing the narrative from certain cues than the case would be in film, where the viewer is not physically immersed in the storyworld. In film, the viewer is wont to construct the story to a degree, too, but filmic narration arguably provides more “meat” to the narrative than installation artworks do, where the participant’s subjective engagement with the work may actually constitute the central narrative.

While a great deal of narratorial responsibility is therefore lodged in the installation artwork’s viewer-participant, his or her co-narration is not necessarily confined to a simple unified “I” – in the same manner that the narration itself may reflect an unstable and disrupted situation. This is because, as demonstrated in the discussion below and also in the chapters dealing with the interpretation of the artworks (chapters 5 and 6), the viewer-participant is likely to experience a narratorial position that concurs with Margolin’s (2013:12) reference to “unnatural voices” in postmodern narratives. These voices are:

... indeterminate and floating between the character [who may be the viewer-participant as well as absent characters evoked by the artwork], the narrator [in a sense, ditto; narration emerges in the participant and emanates from other cues] and the persona of the biographical [and/or implied] author [whose presence is often suggested by inscriptions accompanying the artwork] (ibid).

Since this viewer-participant is very likely to experience such a narratorial position in the context of installation art, this also has a bearing on how character(s) other than the participant him or herself is/are understood as belonging to, and acting in and out of the storyworld. These characters refer to either the artist or other agents who may be present, or characters evoked by references. An example of present characters is Vanessa Beecroft’s *Show* (fig. 4.8) where live models, who can be seen as characters, make up the artwork. On the other hand, absent characters abound in works by artists such as Boltanski (fig. 4.7). Notably, “[I]n some postmodern narratives narrators go one step further [than asserting that X may have existed, for example] by first asserting the existence of a given individual in the fact domain and then *denying* it” (Margolin, 2007:72; my italics).



Fig. 4.8. Beecroft, Vanessa. 1998. *Show*. Installation view.



Fig. 4.9. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/Confessional*. Installation view of sink and other objects.

Thus the viewer-participant of an installation artwork may either imagine hypothetical characters, or recall real people from the actual world, or impossibly constituted characters, all or some of these as possible co-characters with him or her – and then proceed to deny such a character was part of the story. Furthermore, he or she may have met these real characters or not (for example, Van der Merwe's *Biegbak/Confessional* [fig. 4.9] may recall someone that the viewer-participant knew such as a grandmother, and/or the artist's grandmother; and/or oneself standing at ease in this person's place, and/or oneself intruding in this person's space, and/or the abstract idea of a person doing dishes, such as a grandmother<sup>20</sup>).

Other examples are works such as Boltanski's *No man's land* (fig. 4.7) where the viewer-participant is unlikely to have met the absent characters suggested by the heaps of clothing on the floor. He or she nonetheless imagines them; they were "real" people who are fictionalised in the artwork but whose actual suffering, annihilation and death are highlighted in the work. Characters who may have had a similar plight are inferred, and

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<sup>20</sup> Margolin's (2007:78) description of the process of character formation reminds one that a character is also a *mental model* that is constructed on the basis of the reader's identification in the text of a referring expression that designates a character. The reader then inscribes the character's features on his or her mental map; the features may be adjusted as the reader continues to engage with the text. In the same way, the understanding that a viewer-participant of an installation artwork has of a particular character that was prompted by cues in the artwork may be altered or more firmly inscribed as the viewer proceeds physically and mentally through the work.

together with the viewer-participant's ability to imagine him or herself in such a situation the cast of characters or character facets is layered.

These characters or facets of one character come into being because their existence is metonymically evidenced by cues such as objects in space, and other devices such as "empty" objects that suggest gaps or absences. Such devices form part of the narratorial instrumentation that give rise to the narrative. Since character can only be inferred in certain cases, one is reminded of the potential uncertainty associated with character as well as the potential instability of identity. Meuter (2013:31) reminds us that while personal identity "is formed and stabilized only through the telling of stories", it is also true that narrative identities are constantly reconfigured through the telling of stories (ibid.). This view of character and identity is, this study hopes to prove, eminently suitable for engaging with the installation artworks under discussion.

There is another instance of non-literary narration that has been explored by scholars of narratology, namely digital narration (in, for example, computer games) that may be relevant here. This type of narration is inherently interactive – to the extent that an interactor (player) can "go beyond exploration [of digital worlds] to influence these worlds, in a mode that has been called *ontological*" (Montford, 2007:172). The ontological dimension has to do with shifts<sup>21</sup> between storyworlds (also see Ryan, 1991 for a more comprehensive overview of possible worlds and artificial intelligence). In essence, one can manipulate one or more characters and achieve shifts between worlds in a virtual space of divergent narrative potential and possibilities (Montford, 2007:173-6).

In this way, the player generates a type of interactive fiction in which he or she can influence events and proceed through complex narrative levels – while browsing around different spatial layers in the fictional space of the game (Gibson, 1996:11). Thon (2009:279) reminds us that a narrative approach towards computer games should take the complexities of the digital sphere into account and that a multidimensional approach is likely to be suited to this area. Such an approach means taking into consideration useful ideas gleaned from

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<sup>21</sup> These shifts may, as this study aims to demonstrate, also relate to focalisation shifts that pertain to different temporal levels, different characters and different narratorial situations that are not necessarily taking place in a digital environment.

literary and filmic narrative theory, but properly re-appropriating these for application in digital contexts.

In terms of how character comes into being through narration, the digital sphere makes use of avatars which are digital stand-ins for players. A vast range of philosophical speculations about the implications of disembodiment that such an avatar suggests, and the various ethical and identity implications thereof, have ensued in academic circles and also in popular scientific literature. The possibility of transcending the body and its limitations have given rise to concomitant notions of a disembodied soul-like state in cyberspace, and to the possibility of achieving immortality through disembodiment – as well as a range of other implications that are outside the scope of this study (Wertheim's 1999 book *The pearly gates of cyberspace* is very informative, even canonical in this regard).

One can, in summary, discern a number of parallels between narration in digital gaming environments and installation art: the player or viewer-participant enters the storyworld and navigates around in it – immersion is a term used in digital environments as well as installation art. Then one can make choices and influence the direction of the narrative; for example, one can decide where to look or where to turn the camera in order to direct one's point of view. Narrative choices are directed, to an extent, by the cues or narrative prompters in an installation artwork, while the digital world comprises of encoded narrative possibilities. Navigating through these entail fairly similar processes in terms of how narration in installation art can be understood, although it would be possible to argue that narration in the case of installation art would tend to be more subjectively orientated. In digital environments, narrative choices are limited by the script while in installation art fewer actual limitations exist, although the semiotic cues function as signifier signposts to guide narration to a degree.

Perhaps the most salient difference between narration in installation art and its counterpart in the digital sphere is that of embodiment. While digital environments and activities are largely an escape *from* the body (so that one can choose to be stronger, differently gendered and so on than one is in the "real" world), installation art draws one *into* awareness of one's body and its gendered, mortal physicality. Indeed, as noted in the chapter on installation art contexts, Merleau-Ponty is a favourite among scholars on

installation art<sup>22</sup> because he stresses the profoundly corporeal nature of all human experience: he claimed that the thing perceived is inseparable from the perceiving body, and that perception transcends the function of vision to involve the whole body. The interrelationship between the self and the world is one of *embodied perception*: “I do not see [space] according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me” (Merleau-Ponty in Bishop, 2005:50).

Therefore, while interactive digital media may at first sight seem to offer an almost perfect narratological fit for installation art, given the insistence of both media on the primacy of participation, the fundamental importance of bodily experience in installation art remains a crucial difference and a narratology of installation art would have to account for this. This emphasis on embodiment links focalisation to installation art. Grünbaum (2013:112) has argued that focalisation is embodied; Bal (2006a:140; 227) concurs and notes that and viewing, too, is embodied – and that both viewing and focalisation are gendered.

In the sections below under focalisation, I use Bal’s (1981) argument that the *meaningful connections* between semiotic elements (which may be stimuli, in Bordwell’s words, or narrative cues) come into being through a focalising agent when he or she (re)constructs the fabula – this agent is the viewer-participant who becomes a text-internal agent through the processes described above.

Before, however, issues of focalisation are dealt with, a discussion of the fabula and its relation to installation art is presented below. In particular, the discussion interrogates how the fabula is problematised in installation artworks because the narrative is “filled in” or, perhaps more accurately, produced/constructed by the viewer-participant in a manner that suggests the undoing of any presumed unitary essence of the fabula. An installation artwork is a text that may entertain the notion of a “reader” who is capable of “trying out” several interpretations, and consequently where he or she may be confronted with several *fabulae*. Although the term fabula is contested, therefore, it remains useful for current purposes. For example, it makes little sense in visual art to find parallels between terms like “plot” and “story” that are situated, in terms of narrative constellation, on a slightly less abstracted but possibly more prose-specific level from the text than the fabula. As a concept, the fabula is

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Sretenovic, V. 2004. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ontology in relation to contemporary installation art. PhD thesis submitted at Syracuse University.

utterly useful for the visual arts not least because of its close association with the point of view that guides its meaning (see Bal, 1999b:27) but because there are useful insights to be gleaned from the notion of the extended fabula in the visual arts.

#### 4.4 The fabula in installation art

Joke told one evening at a dinner party:  
“I just finished *War and Peace*. It’s about Russia”.

This joke neatly illustrates one of the difficulties one may run into when trying to pinpoint a particular narrative’s fabula, not only in the visual arts but also in literature: different people may well present different versions, with significantly more or less detail, of the fabula. This may suggest that one can make a case that the fabula as a construct is not necessarily a fixed, deep-rooted, unchanging thing “underneath” the text. The greater the role of the interpreting agent, and the more gaps he or she has to fill and thus generate narrative flow, the more it is arguably possible to find variations, even at fabula level, between various interpreters’ understanding of a particular narrative.

Henry James famously proclaimed that: “... there are five million ways of telling a story”<sup>23</sup>. With this statement, James insinuated that of a given, basically similar fabula, five million *sjuzhets* can be moulded, and each of these will have its own temporal structure and narrative strategy and will therefore have its own effect on the reader.

James’ words highlight the generally held assumptions regarding the concept of the fabula, and indicate some central concerns about focalisation that are addressed in this section. In the first instance, the fabula may give rise to so many variations because of choices made by narrators who tell, and focalisers who order, filter and perceive, and who also feel and think (more about this later) – and the effect of these on the reader – and these effects are also relevant but not unproblematic.

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<sup>23</sup> More well-known is James’ ([1881] 2003:7) statement in the preface of *The portrait of a lady* that: “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million ...” – this notion of windows features again in the section on focalisation (4.5).

#### 4.4.1 Defining the fabula

A reminder of the broadly accepted definition and position of the fabula is in order at this point, before proceeding to a number of related issues that arise from the use of the concept (see also the introduction to this chapter for more authors and distinctions). Onega and Landa (1996:6) refer to Tomaševskij's<sup>24</sup> famous and possibly first distinction between fabula and shuzjet in the context of Russian formalism. The authors (ibid.) take as starting point of their discussion Bal's (1977:4) French text (*Narratologie: Essays sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes*. Paris: Kincksieck) and provide their own translation of Bal's text of a number of crucial concepts that help to situate the fabula in its narratological sense. These are:

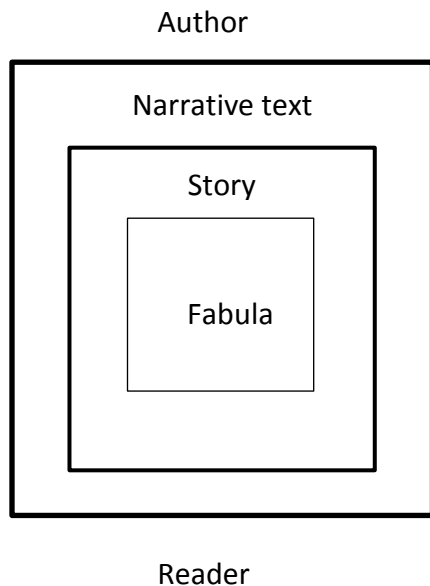
1. A TEXT is a finite and structured set of linguistic signs;
  - 1.1 A *narrative* text is a text in which an agent *relates* a story ...
  - 1.2 A *story* is the signified of the narrative text. A *story* signifies in its turn a *fabula* (*this would mean, as indicated in this chapter, that the fabula has been regarded – not unproblematically, but nonetheless, as a fairly “fixed” signified or signifié*)

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<sup>24</sup> The authors refer to the following text: Tomashevski, B. 1925. Thematics. In L.T. Lemon & M.J. Reis (eds. & transl.) 1965. Russian Formalist criticism. Lexington: University of Nebraska Press. pp. 61-98.

Onega and Landa (1996:7) propose that one can represent these levels in a diagram that looks like this:

**Diagram 4.1:** Onega and Landa's (1996:7) distinction of textual levels



In this diagram, the fabula is the bare scheme of narrative events (also called an action scheme) that does not take into consideration specific traits that may contribute towards individualising agents or actions into characters or concrete events, respectively (Onega & Landa, 1996:7). Rather than a full-blown concrete range of actions which would be quite elaborate, these authors propose that the fabula refers to the deep (and relatively fixed, simplified) structure underlying the narrative (Onega & Landa, 1996:7). Therefore, the fabula is an action scheme which has the nature of a synthetic abstraction that the reader retroactively puts together. This means that the fabula is the most abstract of all narrative levels (also see Bal, 1985)<sup>25</sup>. Eco ([1979] 1984:27) adds that the fabula is “the basic story stuff, the logic of actions or the syntax of characters, the time-oriented course of events”.

A story, on the other hand, is a fabula that has been given a presentational shape, according to Onega and Landa (1996:8); the story presents a specific point of view and temporal scheme. The story can therefore be understood as the fabula as it is represented in a text by

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<sup>25</sup> From here it follows, as noted above, that one can barely speak of the fabula without acknowledging the role of the reader who has to do the (re)construction work. A reception-orientated approach is therefore part and parcel of the conceptualisation of the fabula in such a view of the term.

means of certain manipulations (temporal, narrated, focalised and so on). However, the story *is* not the text, because a story is still on the level of synthetic abstraction produced by the reader based on the text. From here, it follows that a text is an aesthetic, linguistic construct (in art, of course, it will be a broader semiotic sign-system using pictorial or other material to achieve the status of an aesthetic construct) while a story can be said to be a cognitive scheme of events which can be seen as the result of certain modifications of actions (Onega & Landa, 1996:8). These authors hold that in order to arrive at the level of the fabula, the reader has to proceed – retroactively – through a process of “undoing” the transformations to the raw material that gave rise to the story (Onega & Landa, 1996:9).

The various formulations of the fabula suggest that a story can be told in different ways, and can be understood in different ways (but the essence would remain the same). Culler [1980] 1996:94-95] notes that this means that the fabula, which is more abstract than the text or its narration, makes the study of point of view (and, indeed, of focalisation) possible exactly because its existence draws attention to the fact that there must be more than one (possibly even contrasting) ways of viewing and telling a given story (or fabula – it seems that Culler for a moment here conflates story and fabula; see also the different terms used by various theorists mentioned on p.183 of this chapter)<sup>26</sup>. This is addressed shortly.

In summary, the fabula refers to the abstracted series of actions produced by the reader, which can be presented in a number of different ways – through focalising and narrating actions – that can be narrated as a story, or as part of a plot (depending on one’s terminology) and related by means of a text.

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<sup>26</sup> Culler ([1980] 1996:95) feels that a fabula can be regarded as a given, and also as a constant, since it is a sequence of events which the narrative presupposes (this again points to the active role of the interpreting agent who must unravel that which the narrative presupposes) and which, importantly, the narrative could proceed to describe in various ways. In light of Eco ([1979] 1984; [1979] 1985) and Du Plooy’s (1986) notions of the possible and the extended fabula discussed below, “relatively” constant may be more accurate.

#### 4.4.2 The fabula problematised: installation art

If the reader or interpreter has to establish what the text presupposes, retroactively, in order to discern or discover the fabula (or, somewhat paradoxically, to construct it) the argument can be made that different interpreters are likely to come up with variations of a fabula. The idea that the fabula makes the study of point of view possible, as Culler suggests above, is exciting. However, different interpreters or readers come to a text and an artwork looking and feeling different from each other; they come from different positions and with different knowledge bases and memories, in different timeframes. Whether these people are likely to “discover” the same fabula is not a certainty – especially not if the fabula is a “given” as Culler suggests ([1980] 1996), and must therefore, in this view, be the same one for all readers.

Furthermore, in the case of an installation artwork (and visual artworks in general), another layer of variation is inevitable. Viewers may experience a work at different spaces or museum contexts – all which may have a bearing on the construction of the fabula. Indeed, Culler ([1980] 1996:95) himself adds that the fabula is actually not a given, but rather a construct. This argument reiterates the issue that this section of the chapter sets out to address: that the fabula in installation art seems *not* to be a deep and relatively fixed phenomenon (“down below” the levels of narrative constellation), since it is something constructed, abstracted by the reader (abstraction suggests a higher level – but, paradoxically, the words deep and abstracted suggest the same thing in the descriptions of the fabula). In essence, it seems contradictory that the interpreter has to *construct* the fabula, while at the same time some regard it as something that has actually existed as a deep structure prior to the telling of events in the narrative and the creation of the text.

Such a deep structure would mean that the fabula – as indeed its structuralist ancestry (since the concept was coined in a Russian formalist context) would suggest – with its deep and unchanging nature is a fixed signified. Clearly, such a view of any concept does not sit comfortably with the poststructuralist imagination and its view of signification processes which is predicated on language as a slippery but necessary building block of reality – without a final, fixed signifier (like the notion of the fixed fabula). Rather, the fabula could

be seen as a construct that allows for some variation but which would tend to correspond roughly between different interpreters.

Both understandings of the fabula – viewing it as relatively fixed or as a more slippery, variable construct – position the fabula in relation to other structures such as frames and scripts (again, either fixed or slippery, but structures nonetheless) in the broader narrative constellation. The process of making meaning, and finding a plausible fabula, draws on the human tendency to operate in patterns. In the case of artistic texts, the artist or author may activate the ability of a text to disrupt pattern-expectations by means of manipulation of material in order to create artistic defamiliarisation (a formalist term, but still useful in post-formalist situations<sup>27</sup>).

Perhaps a suitable way in to accommodate the diverse views of how the fabula can be understood is to argue that a sufficient number of “signifier signposts”<sup>28</sup> in a narrative would tend to give rise, in the minds of different interpreters, to recognisably similar fabulae, even if the narrative has different narrators, focalisers and interpreters. Referring to any story (consider, for example, Oedipus story which is not presented chronologically in the textual/dramatic version) the re-structuring of events (into a fabula) that are related in different non-chronological temporal instances (on the textual level) from my and another interpreter’s perspective would probably be fairly similar, although not entirely so.

The textual level usually gives a sufficient number of pointers or clues to suggest that most interpreters’ versions of the fabula would be similar enough to make shared sense. This is, then, the abstract as well as the deep nature of the fabula: on the one hand, for argument’s sake, one could agree that there is indeed a deep “true” series of events that we call the fabula and which anchors all interpretations of the story – and all focalised and narrated versions. On the other side of the coin, one has to acknowledge that if the fabula is a construction, the version one person constructs may not be perfectly matched at all to the

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<sup>27</sup> See Šklovkij, V. [1917] 1988. *Art as technique*. In D. Lodge, ed. *Modern criticism and theory*. pp. 15-30. London: Longman.

<sup>28</sup> See Johnson, A.L. 1985. “Broken images”: Discursive fragmentation and paradigmatic integrity in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. *Poetics Today*, 6(3):399-416. Although Johnson applies the concept “signifier signpost” to Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in this article, the usefulness of the concept spans across genres and across theories. A signifier signpost can be conceived of as a tent peg, a marker, a hook, and anchor or some other metaphorical image that suggests a firm connecting point or node.

version another interpreter constructs. In a sense, it would be helpful to imagine the fabula as functioning on a vertical plane of coherence and unity, which has a basic integrity that remains within certain boundaries regardless of the interpreter since there are signifier signposts that point the interpreter in certain directions.

However, the reader or interpreter is not only tasked to construct the fabula – while so doing, he or she participates in the narrative: by being a character, by filling in temporal and other gaps, and by generally working to make sense of what the text can mean. This contention drives much of this chapter. Eco ([1979] 1985:19) warns playfully, however, that: “You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it” – hence my contention that signifier signposts guide how the text wants to be used.

In summary, the following arguments are important for this discussion. In a text, one may say that narrators and focalisers tell and see (feel, evaluate and so on) while they help to transmit a fabula. In such a sense, the fabula pre-dates the text. The reader or interpreter retroactively disentangles or abstracts what is transmitted in order to discover – or, indeed, to reconstruct – the fabula. Thus emerges a central concern of the current discussion, which also sets out to highlight a fundamental dichotomy: on the one hand, the fabula can be said to pre-date the text (so that, from the different folds of time and other narrative strategies, it is *discovered through abstraction* by the reader or interpreter). This view is generally associated with Genette whose emphasis on focalisation’s limiting function (i.e., that focalisation can be thought of as a filtering activity) suggests as much. For purposes of interpreting installation art, this view may be helpful where a pre-dated fabula informs the artwork. Consider, for example, Boltanski’s *Monument Odessa* series (fig. 4.10) that commemorate the Holocaust – here the Second World War and the Holocaust form part of the pre-dated fabula that is inferred.

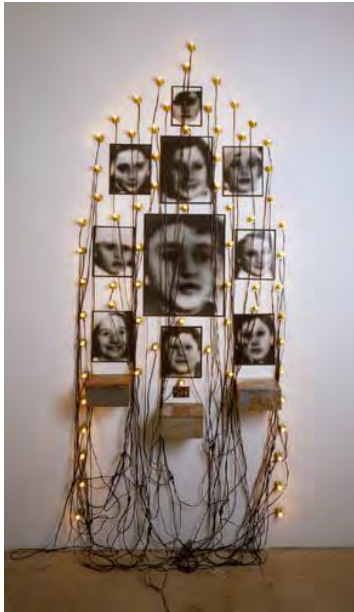


Fig. 4.10. Boltanski, Christian. 1990. Work from the series: *Monument Odessa*.

On the other hand, the fabula is also regarded as something that the reader *constructs in the process of reading, once again through abstraction*. This fabula construction can, therefore, be seen as part of a process that marks the reading of an installation artwork by, among others, tracing focalising processes. The fabula is constructed anew, while nonetheless drawing on cues or signs “planted” in the text and which infer meaning potentials that pre-date the current interpretation. For example, Boltanski’s Holocaust-related works such as the *Monument Odessa* series draws on pre-dated fabula information that functions like an intertextual frame. Events and actions may only be inferred by looking at the work; they are not “told”, and a new fabula has to be constructed for the work using one’s knowledge of the Holocaust, in this instance, as guide.

Such notions are congruent with Bal’s (1981; 2006a) understanding that focalisation is really a matter of activity and of relationships that *produce* information that has already been selected (also see Kubíček, 2009:184). In tracing focalisation processes, and attempting to establish the fabula a Rembrandt painting (*Bathsheba at her bath*; 1654, fig. 4.11), for example, Bal (2006a:227) stops her train of thought and notes that: “For it is not easy to construct a fabula ... Elderly woman cleans nails of naked woman’s foot? Woman holds a letter she just received? There is a sense of focalization in the woman’s pose ...”



Fig. 4.11. Van Rijn, Rembrandt.  
1654. *Bathsheba at her bath*.

Bal (2006a:226) also indicates that even the pre-text – the biblical story “behind” the painting and the usual recourse for those looking for the “right” fabula – is barely there in the artwork; the Bible does not tell about Bathsheba being prepared for meeting the king, her future husband. This was part of what the artist brought to the work, and the viewer is tasked with imaginatively tracing these possibilities as part of the interpretation process.

A requirement for constructing a purposeful fabula, according to Bal (2006a), is that the viewer has to find an identificatory position: in this painting, he <sup>29</sup> must identify with King David, who is the implied voyeur but who is not shown. Only then can one *construct* a fabula that makes sense in the context of the painting – but this necessarily complicates the viewer’s position because it places him in a position complicit with the king whose conniving resulted in the death of Bathsheba’s husband on the battlefield. And so the viewer is

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<sup>29</sup> In the painting’s original Baroque context the viewer was more likely masculine than feminine. Patronage and reception of the era were therefore decidedly masculine, but today we can add a viewing she – acknowledging that this gender issue further complicates the viewing and sense-making process. The gendered nature of vision is also addressed by Brooks (1993:13-14 et seq.), who repeatedly notes that vision is, in Western culture, typically a male privilege – and that, concomitantly, the female body is usually the object of vision (but of course also the site of mystery, absence of the phallus and the general confusion that accompanies this sense of absence). Indeed, Brooks (1993:88) suggests that this cultural model is so pervasive that even female novelists do not reverse its vectors.

watching *with* the king as the woman, the object of his desire, is being prepared for the king, all the while reading a letter. The letter does not even exist in the Biblical pre-text<sup>30</sup> – it has been inserted into the work by Rembrandt; it is thus the artist’s constructive choice which is also an act of focalisation. The letter now serves to facilitate a focalised fabula for the viewer where Bathsheba’s circumstances can be interpreted as such: the letter informs her about the death of her husband, and while she reads this, she is being prepared for “the violent appropriation of the woman by David” (Bal, 2006a:229). “Violent appropriation” is how the viewer’s focalised construction of the fabula stands; and this is why he is placed in an uncomfortable, complicit position.

We gather a few important insights from this reading by Bal. The first is that the obvious, first-level connecting of conceptual ‘dots’ or syntagms in an artwork<sup>31</sup> does not really serve to constitute a fabula. This is because the fabula has to be constructed of clues in the work, particularly in cases where the meaning of the work is not pedantically obvious. Fabula construction has to be pursued by means of active, subjective, often embodied and gendered, transformational understanding that guides the joining of the syntagms: it must be done by means of focalisation, from the side of both the viewer and the artist. Again, clearly, this process highlights that “uncovering” the fabula here (either the silly “elderly woman cleans young woman’s nails” or, significantly, even the Biblical pre-text) would be wholly insufficient; the fabula must be constructed out of cues *in the painting* that are imaginatively activated as narrativised segments by means of focalisation.

Bal (2006a:228) proceeds to construct a version of the fabula predicated on the possibility that, since the only letter mentioned in II Samuel 11, is the letter in which David requests that the leader of the army mortally expose Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband. And thus, Bal (*ibid.*) maintains, one is dealing with elements in the original story being re-arranged (the letter here held by Bathsheba indexically pointing to the letter that David wrote). Such a doxic (Bal’s 2006a:228 term) rather than a literal reading renders elements such as the

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<sup>30</sup> Hogan (2012:53) makes a similar case with reference to paintings that use real events as narrative pre-text, such as Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) and Goya’s *The Third of May 1808* (1814) that depict moments from larger historical stories of violence; the author describes these moments as “clearly embedded” in larger, more familiar narratives.

<sup>31</sup> “Syntagms” in Bal’s (2006a:227) sense is a reference to Bryson’s (1983:56-66) use of the term; it is closely related to the notion of signifier signposts.

letter dramatically more effective and activates the visual imagination in order to allow for the construction of a fabula that arises from the pictorial textuality of the work, in other words, from the visual telling shown by means of things in the artwork. The letter is emblematic for both the murder of Uriah and the appropriation of Bathsheba; this violence, Bal (2006a:229) suggests, is hinted at by means of the red corner (the lower left one) of the letter that can be read as metaphorical for both at blood and the wax used to seal letters. The fabula, in such a reading, has rich resonances with thematised issues such as violence, desire and gazing.

In such an interpretative process, there are gaps between the signifiers and signifieds, Bal (2006a:230) contends, that can only make coherent sense if they are connotatively understood – the letter stands for Uriah’s death request as well as being a displaced connotation of her being desired by the king. Time-shifts (when the letter was sent versus when the woman was bathed, for example) and spatial suggestions (between the letter being written, sent to the commander and Bathsheba being implicated as desired) merge in this one presentation. Consequently, the painting is both text and scene, narrative and display, painting and woman (Bal, 2006a:245). Bal’s very engaged reading of the work with reference to the fabula and, without naming it so, the extended fabula, adds weight to the notion of a fabula that is *constructed* in works like these – and the active role of tracing narrativised signs through chains of meaning that do not necessarily make linear sense.

Bal’s argument here clarifies the idea that fabulae, even in the case of paintings with existing “stories” such as biblical themes attached to them, must of necessity often be constructed by means of tracing semiotic inferences and chains. Furthermore, the fabula construction here is often predicated on a subjective, embodied understanding of what is shown. As a consequence, even bodies can focalise (refer to Bal’s 2006a reference to focalisation in the woman’s pose in the paragraph above the illustration of the artwork). This sense of embodied focalisation is also found in installation art – here one would often be aware of the viewer-participant’s focalisation that proceeds in a corporeal fashion.

In order to interrogate how the viewer-participant-character’s focalisation influences the narrative, the relationship of the fabula to focalisation is explored in a subsequent section under 4.5. This is important because I argue that in the visual arts and specifically in

installation art, the fabula itself is problematised and that this complication can be traced to processes of focalisation (it may well be, of course, that similar complications could be traced in the literary arts, especially in postmodern narratives). Since the fabula's conceptualisation as a "deep" or "fixed" signified has come under scrutiny, the processes of revealing and constructing associated with the fabula may provide useful insights into how the notion of the fabula can be applied to the visual arts, especially to installation art.

#### **4.4.3 The extended fabula**

The current discussion of the fabula can also benefit from elaborating on the idea of the extended fabula. The section that follows below draws heavily on Eco's book *The role of the reader* ([1979] 1985); this anthology also contains his *Lector in fabula* ([1979] 1984). Between these two texts, extremely comprehensive discussions of the fabula and its implications can be found. Du Plooy's (1986) ideas regarding the extended fabula as set out in her book *Verhaaltheorie in die twintigste eeu* (Narrative theory in the twentieth century) are used to clarify or expand on Eco's treatment of the concept.

Eco ([1979] 1985:14 et seq.) distinguishes at least four levels of abstraction as cooperative activities that take place in the mind of the reader (he prefers the term boxes, not levels, and also distinguishes between intentions and extensions for each level). Eco's levels or boxes include the fabula's relationship to possible worlds, themes, actantial roles and characters and ideological structures, among others. While it is not in the interest of this discussion to elaborate in great detail on the specifics of these, it is worth noting that in Eco's constellation, different propositions are made by the reader regarding the process of constructing the fabula. Du Plooy (1986:296) notes that although relational processes between textual levels (which correspond with Eco's propositions between levels of abstraction) happen automatically in the imagination and mind of the reader, these processes can be purposefully traced and analysed.

Eco's ([1979] 1985:27) argument is that once the discursive level of the text has been actualised (i.e. once the reader has read through the text and begun with making sense of it) he [*sic*] can summarise it, "therefore reaching a series of levels of abstractions", which is where the fabula comes in. He also speaks of a "*possible fabula*" (Eco's italics), which is made up of a series of macro-propositions (inferences of possibilities) made by the reader at

some stage of abstraction. However, *fabulae* can be realised by the reader at different levels of abstraction – meaning, closer to the surface of the text, or deeper into the levels of the reader’s mental abstractions. The “possible *fabula*” therefore is a contentious but useful term. To illustrate this point, Eco notes that the *fabula* one would abstract from a text would be different for different functional purposes: a book jacket, filmic screenplay adaptation of a novel, or three lines of advertising for a magazine are all variations of the possible *fabula*, and all require the reader who constructs the *fabula* to use different levels of abstraction from one text ([1979] 1985:28).

Therefore, a *fabula* may be a reduction or simplification. The example Eco uses is *Oedipus Rex*, where the *fabula* may be reduced to “find out the guilty!” (i.e., reducing the discursive features of the text to their smallest, simplest “essence”). A *fabula* may, however, also be an *expansion* of discursive structures. To illustrate this, Eco refers to the first two verses of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as example, where he suggests one may find at least four *fabulae* that are “each expanded beyond the first surface level” (ibid.).

Such a differentiation points to the reader who either abstracts the *fabula* through many levels, reducing it to Propp’s series of narrative structures (in this way, Eco suggests, one approximates the deepest intentional levels of the text). Or, the reader can work with a “shallower level” to present the *fabula* as constitutive of binary disjunctions (Eco here refers to Bremond’s work) or by reducing the *fabula* to fairly standard themes or motives ([1979] 1985:28). These last two, namely binaries and themes/motives, seem likely to provide a sound anchor from where to explore the semiotic chain activated by a text – in Van der Merwe’s case, temporal and spatial axes may give rise, for example, to considering a *fabula* constructed around issues of character presence and absence.

In a similar fashion as Eco but perhaps more concise, Du Plooy (1986:297) also distinguishes between four levels of abstraction that inform the reader’s process of constructing the *fabula*: (1) the ordering of narrative elements into causal, chronological sequences; (2) the extended story (the Afrikaans term *uitgebreide storie* corresponds with the notion of the extended *fabula*) that presents a reconstruction of events that is automatically produced by the reader; (3) teleological relations between actors and events that point to actantial

relations; and (4) series of events as logical structures. These four levels all contribute to larger sphere of the extended fabula.

In short, the fabula is a virtual story carried on in the mind of the reader; it can be an outline of a story or a path through it. Eco ([1979] 1985:29) notes that one should “either accept a large or a more restricted definition of fabula.” But, nonetheless, he propounds a relatively flexible notion of story (a term he intersperses into the discussion) in which “it is enough to isolate an agent (no matter whether human or not), an initial state, a series of time-oriented changes with their causes, a final (even if transitory) result.” He continues that “thus one can recognize one or more *fabulae* even in those avant-garde texts where there is not story at all” (Eco, [1979] 1985:30).

Even a text that does not tell a consistent fabula may indeed narrate, where narrating consists of “the various steps in its construction” (Eco, [1979] 1985:31). These steps then become the fabula, which is “always experienced step by step”. When a reader wonders about the next step while busy with these abstracting operations, he or she understands that the story may offer “a state of disjunction of probabilities”. These disjunctions the reader must consider by weighing macro-propositions that, at their eventual juncture, suggest the fabula (Eco, [1979] 1985:31). Part of this process entails that the reader takes “inferential walks” (interpretative moves consisting of intertextual frames); in other words, he or she considers possibilities *outside the text* as probabilities that can be inferred. These are elicited by the text and are the components of constructing the fabula (Eco, [1979] 1985:32). What Eco ([1979] 1985:36) calls “common frames”, for example, refer to information from “outside” that is used to furnish more or less expected information in a text (in a house there are rooms, in rooms there is furniture). These common frames are enriched by other, inferential and semantically charged frames in the text that oblige the reader to reconsider inferences based on first hunches of probability – in order to suggest multiple interpretations.

Therefore, Eco ([1979] 1985:33-36) even allows for open and closed *fabulae*<sup>32</sup>. The former refer to those *fabulae* that do not fulfil the reader’s expectations and inferences in the way

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<sup>32</sup> Eco’s terms *open* vs. *closed* texts were derived from Roland Barthes’ *lisible* and *scriptable* texts (readerly and writerly) set out in his 1967 essay *The death of the author* (also appearing later in an anthology of Barthes’s

he or she would expect, while fabulae of the latter type do not yield these surprises. Open texts invite co-productive interpretations and concurrently, open fabulae; In Barthesian terms, it is a game that tantalises the reader to experience *jouissance* (Barthes, 1967; [1973] 1975). Therefore, “[T]he aesthetic dialectics between openness and closedness of texts depends on the basic structure of the process of text interpretation in general” (Eco, [1979] 1985:39). Free (open) interpretative choices are elicited by the text’s “purposeful strategy of openness” (Eco, [1979] 1985:40) and by the interpreter’s willingness to participate. Eco ([1979] 1985:19) notes that: “An open text, however ‘open’ it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation”, but it does point to the (smart, ideal, or model) reader’s generative, critical, participative process of making sense of the text. As an art form, installation art can be argued to tend towards being an open rather than a closed text. Similarly, then, the textual openness of the installation artwork would have a bearing on the nature and construction of the fabula in this art form.

Any understanding of the fabula (discovered, constructed, extended) confirms the importance – indeed, the centrality – of the fabula for narrative sense-making. Of course, with this narrative sense-making one keeps in mind that readers, viewers and interpreters almost automatically try to make sense of a given text, visual or written, by almost unconsciously attempting to [re]construct the fabula. That the artist may distort and hinder this process by means of various devices is an aesthetic choice<sup>33</sup>.

Furthermore, both processes involving the fabula – discovering and constructing – require active participation from the reader or interpreter. A workable assumption is that the words by Steinberg with reference to James highlighted above can be kept in mind, namely that the text produces in different interpreters a “basically similar fabula”. In broad terms, a fabula must be understood in a fairly similar way by different interpreters or readers in order for it to function as a fabula. However, it is more than possible that variations will exist in this regard between readers or interpreters.

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essays, *Image-Music-Text* in 1977). Open and closed fabulae are notions only found in Eco’s thinking, but basically echo the qualities of the open and closed text.

<sup>33</sup> See Branigan (1984:18-19) for a brief discussion on the way in which hypotheses and assumptions interact while trying to make sense of signifying chains in filmic situations; Branigan does not use the word fabula, but suggests as much.

I return to the relationship between the fabula and focalisation shortly; below is first a consideration of focalisation in narratological terms and with reference to installation art.

## 4.5 Focalisation in installation art

### 4.5.1 Focalisation: a brief historical consideration

Focalisation refers to a multifaceted range of concepts and processes; its potential meanings and functions have been reworked and hotly debated by a great many authors who typically add to, refine, and contest existing formulations of the term<sup>34</sup>. It is therefore apposite to state one's position on the subject (briefly) since there are so many possible opinions that overlap or mutually exclude each other. While certain concerns are regarded as pivotal for this study (for example, the fairly radical argument that the viewer-participant-character is the main focaliser) with many other aspects, a functional eclectic approach (the word used by P.W. van der Merwe<sup>35</sup>;) seems most useful.

In the first instance, a number of historical formulations of focalisation are discussed, followed by a scrutiny of a number of definitions of the term. For purposes of developing a working understanding of focalisation and its applicability to the visual arts (and of course installation art) different opinions regarding the range and function of focalisation are explored. Perhaps ironically, this study suggests that focalisation should be understood in its expansive possibilities (of cognition, evaluation and so on), so that the visual associations of

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<sup>34</sup> More often than not, an author begins his or her contribution on focalising issues with something like (I quote here from Nünning, 2001:207, but similar openings to chapters or articles are abundant):

If there is one thing that narratology does not seem to need it is more suggestions for the introduction of new concepts. Yet this is exactly what I will try to do.

Badman (2013:2) in turn cites Bal (1997) and Rimmon-Kenan (2002) as examples; he feels that Bal complicates the issue with: "layers of complication and terminology" that result in a large system with too many micro-levels of focalization; Badman prefers Rimmon-Kenan's expansion of focalisation into different facets (such as perceptive, cognitive and ideological). Some reworkings of the concept have been extremely useful, but it seems as if almost every author deems it necessary to add to the issue so that any type of consensus on the matter remains out of reach.

<sup>35</sup> To avoid confusion with Jan van der Merwe, I give the full bibliographical reference here: Van der Merwe, P.W. 2011. Fictional worlds and focalisation in works by Herman Hesse and E.L. Doctorow. Ph.D. thesis in Applied Language and Literary Studies at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University.

Du Plooy (1986:295) also suggests an eclectic approach that seeks to employ tools that are apposite and relevant for interpreting a particular text.

the concept are precisely *not* of primary importance in the context of installation art. This is because I aim to demonstrate that the interpretative consciousness of a viewer-participant becomes a focalising agent when he or she becomes a character and fully engages in the unfolding of the narrative: visually, cognitively and bodily. In turn, the processes of participation have a bearing also on the way the extended fabula as variant of a fabula develops.

The notion of focalisation is a refinement of the novelist's Henry James' term point of view, which appeared in his essay "The art of fiction" in 1884<sup>36</sup>. Schmidt (2010:89) adds that point of view and perspective are often treated as synonymous. These terms are regarded as predecessors for the notion of focalisation. Point of view and perspective both give an indication of *what* is seen and from which *angle* – and issues like these have of course also guided thinking about focalisation. However, recent shifts<sup>37</sup> in narratological research indicate an increasing interest in the *process* of focalisation rather than its *product* – so instead of exploring *what* the perspective of a story is, one rather asks *how* the perspective has been achieved (Van Peer & Chatman, 2001:7). The emphasis on process is of interest for this study, because it sets out to trace focalisation processes in installation art with a view to demonstrating the necessity of, and interpretative possibilities facilitated by these processes.

Gerard Genette first introduced the concept of focalisation in his *Narrative discourse* ([1972] 1980) in an attempt to expand and particularise the meaning of the term point of view (Badman, 2013:1). This gave rise to "much ink to flow – no doubt, a little too much", as Genette (1988:65) later lamented (see Nelles, 1990:365). Jahn (1996:250) notes that Genette took his inspiration for his distinction between mood and voice (and thus between focalisation and narrating) from Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's theory of focus and point of view (set out in *Understanding fiction*, 1943) . These authors, in turn, had extended Jamesian poetics of the "house of fiction" with "a million" windows that allowed watchers a measure of visual information – through the apertures of the various windows,

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<sup>36</sup> See Bessard, W. & James, H. 1884. *The art of fiction*. Boston, N.J.: The Algonquin Press.

<sup>37</sup> These shifts in narratological research can to an extent be ascribed to theorists' attempts at refining ways to respond to innovations in fiction writing – including experiments with time and space, as well as point of view, character and narration (see Heise, 1997:36-37; Bal, 2006b:100-101).

each pair of eyes had a unique range of impressions (Jahn, 1996:250 refers to James' 1881 preface to *The portrait of a lady*).

In spite of the often significant differences in opinion on the matter of focalisation, Genette's work on the issue remains the foundation upon which various scholars have constructed their variations, expansions and refinements (see, for example, Bal, 1981; 2006a; Jahn, 1996; Nelles, 1990; Phelan, 2001 and many more).

The publication of a number of fairly recent books, devoted in their entirety to issues of focalisation and related terms, testifies to the relevance as well as the problematic nature of perspectival concerns. In 2001, Van Peer and Chatman brought out *New perspectives on narrative perspective* in which the editors make a plea for more interdisciplinary research in this area, stating that: "The study of narrative perspective has entered a stage in which interdisciplinary cooperation has become inevitable" (2001:3, 6). The book features contributions by linguists, literary and film scholars, philosophers and psychologists, and also includes a number of empirical studies on aspects such as readers' responses to issues such as shifts in perspective. Such a widening of the scope of narratology and perspective studies aims, ultimately, at understanding our human nature and our universal predicament better, according to the authors' introduction.

A more recent publication also warrants mention here. In the introduction to *Point of view, perspective, and focalization. Modeling mediacy in narrative* (edited by Hühn, Schmidt & Schönert, 2009) the authors refer to the idea of mediacy as the primary source of discussion and debate that ultimately encompass the notion of focalisation. The editors indicate how mediacy profoundly impacts on the various processes and agents of transforming and transmitting in a story. Mediation or mediacy is a broad term that aims to accommodate diverse arguments pertaining to the construction and communication of a story in a discourse, and – importantly – allows one to consider the selection, ordering, and segmentation of a story world as it is transmitted through a presenter who does this presenting from a particular standpoint or perspective (Hühn, Schmidt & Schönert, 2009:2).

Variants such as perspective and other terms have been proposed, but the term focalisation has enjoyed enduring and broad acceptance more than other, although it remains one of the most contested concepts in the field of narratology.

#### 4.5.2 Defining focalisation

Since Genette's initial differentiation between seeing and speaking, or mood and voice – which is where focalisation as we understand it today originated – a central contentious issue with any definition of focalisation has been the inherited emphasis on visuality and vision that the term may seem to suggest. Looking is implied in terms such as perspective and point of view; but even “views” of ideological, affective or cognitive nature presuppose vision. Furthermore, at issue is the exact nature of what takes place during the process of focalisation – does it refer to filtering, selection, orientation and regulation of narrative material? Inherent in such a position would be a concomitant view of a fairly complete universe from which appropriate bits can be selected in order to give a story a particular form – and this in turn reflects the possibility of discovering a fairly fixed fabula (this argument is considered above under 4.4 in terms of a rethinking of the nature of the fabula).

On the other hand, focalisation can be seen to play an evaluative, interpretative, and constructive role. These functions are related to, but also arguably more complex synthesising processes than selection, filtering or orientation may suggest. In this sense, focalisation as applied in contexts like installation art may be argued to lean towards being a more constitutive and constructive process that reflect a similarly *constructed* (not *discovered*) conceptualisation of the fabula.

The questions that guide this sub-section of the chapter are: What are the various opinions expressed by scholars regarding the visuality (or not) of focalisation? Why, and how has visuality been expanded? Following this, where is focalisation positioned? In other words, what are the opinions regarding the positioning of focalisation in terms of the level of narrative constellation, and the position of focalisations in terms of narrators and characters as possible focalisers?

The discussion that follows provides a brief overview of opinions regarding the issues of visuality followed by some function(s) of focalisation (here reference is made to words that hinge on selection on the one hand, and/or interpretative mediation on the other). These opinions are tied in various ways to arguments pertaining to the positional level of the focalising process, namely whether focalisation is lodged at the level of story, or discourse;

and whether it is a function of the narrative, the narrator, or part and parcel of character(s) only.

### 4.5.3 Focalising issues: regulation and mediation; visibility and cognition

Central to many opinions regarding focalisation is the notion of “the regulation of narrative information” (Genette, 1980:162; see Badman, 2013:1). Associated with “regulation” are verbs like “filter” and “slant” (used by among others Chatman, 1995). Extending the notion of regulation, Genette’s “mood” relates to the regulation of information – and “voice” which, in essence, means the narrator who can be distinct from the consciousness that regulates the narrative information (see Schmidt, 2010:91)<sup>38</sup>. (Another Genettean category on the level of mood and voice is “tense”, which refers to temporal arrangement and presentation – to include order, speed, and frequency – see Jahn, 1999:85.) Genette’s “mood” here pertains to the question “who sees?”, relating to “the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective” (see Badman, 2013:2). These questions indicate the close affinity that focalisation has, in Genette’s initial conceptualisation of the term, with the more traditional understanding of “perspective” as seeing (also see Herman, 2009) and “point of view” (Simpson, 1993), which more overtly indicates looking.

Terms like these in their turn gave rise to a host of debates and criticism regarding the too strict visibility they would suggest (see Genette, 1980:186 in Badman, 2013:2; Schmidt, 2010:91). However, as Jahn (1996:243) notes, Genette has revised, modified and expanded his original conception a number of times (especially with reference to Genette’s *Narratology revisited* of 1988)<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Many theorists have since assumed different positions on the validity of narratorial focalisation; the notion that the narrator must be either viewed as a focalising instance or not has been intensely debated; some of these positions are discussed in some detail below. Some publications are dedicated to arguing for these positions. For example, Phelan (2001) and O’Neill (1994) argue that narrators can hardly *not* focalise, while others (Chatman, 1978; Prince 1982) feel that the narrator can *sometimes* be a focaliser. Prince later (2001) argues that the narratorial and focalising functions are *always* in lodged in separate entities.

<sup>39</sup> In *Narratology revisited*, Genette (1988) favoured the notion of perception over seeing. Most recent opinions regarding focalisation not only expand the visual emphasis that the concept is often burdened with, but also refrain from locating focalisation in the domain of the senses (hearing, smelling, touching and tasting). There are, sporadically, fairly tedious distinctions such as ocularisation (referring to visual focalisation); auricularisation (Schlickers, 2009:243-258; for the “aural point of view” – see Jost, 1983); gustativisation, olfactivisation, and tactivisation (Huck, 2009:205; referring also to Nelles 1997:95-96). However, for a body of terminology – the terminology of focalisation – that is already knotted with complex sub-terms and

A frequent point of contention pertains, therefore, to the too narrowly visual emphasis that “perspective” and “point of view” may seem to imply. Huck (2009:206-207) proposes, in this regard, that the persistent emphasis on the purported visual aspect of focalisation is likely an extension of the “hegemony of the scopic regime of perspective” in western culture. Huck bemoans this state of affairs and rather locates focalisation in its mediating function – concurring with Nelles (1997:79) who argues that focalisation is positioned as “a *relation* between the narrator’s report and the character’s thoughts”. No mention of the visual aspect here – in much the same way, Huck (2009:207) indicates, as Jahn (2005:173) speaks of focalisation as the “restriction and orientation of narrative information relative to somebody’s (usually a character’s) perception, imagination, knowledge, or point-of-view”. Jahn mentions visual aspects, but expands his definition to include imagination and so forth which play a role in the regulation and channelling of narrative information. Therefore, one needs to distinguish between literal and non-literal seeing (Jahn, 1996:157)<sup>40</sup>. Focalisation is also cognitive, and affective – it is concerned with consciousness. This is true also for the visual art: Bal (2006a:181) contends that: “The image that we *see* is subordinated to the meanings we *know*”.

Of importance is the location of this consciousness: it entails the character who focalises, as well as the reader who imagines herself in the place of a character. Jahn (1996:254) talks of “gradient possibilities” when referring to the reader’s adoption of a view (or transposition to) a particular focalising window that entails the point of view and/or the consciousness of a character. Furthermore, if focalisation is concerned also with ways in which the reader imagines him or herself in the position/thoughts of a character, it follows that the role of the reader in this process can hardly be overestimated.

The mental picture that a reader creates of, for example, an event (together with mental add-ons such as memories of similar events featuring similar characters or types) suggests an affective involvement on the side of the reader (Jahn [1996:256] notes that Iser’s [1971:288] views of the reader’s active reception are helpful in this regard). If a “reader”, or

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refinements, I contend that these distinctions are best filed under “use only when really, really necessary”. The enterprise of locating, identifying, defining and discerning focalisation strategies is already brimming with possibility and, alas, conflicting opinions.

<sup>40</sup> This point is further expanded below when the discussion refers to the various texts that apply focalisation to different media.

viewer-participant of an installation artwork became a character, as this study argues, it follows that he or she will also be able to focalise. This focalisation is prompted by visual information, but is more expansive than the visual domain and includes memories, affective responses and other related subjective issues. Indeed, the reader/viewer-participant may “adopt (transpose to) fictional points of view” (Jahn, 1999:91) that in installation art entails transposing into the space of the work’s storyworld, into the point of view of an imagined or absent character, if the work suggests this, and still *also* being a “real” person with one’s own point of view who exists in “real” as well as narrativised space.

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It remains to be explored whether authors who formulate definitions of focalisation that emphasise *visuality* (even implicitly) also tend to emphasise the *selecting* and orienting role of focalisation. Such a position may imply that the very notion of *selecting* from a given, fairly comprehensive universe in order to focalise a narrative (point of view) is in some way tied to seeing in a more *physical* sense. Conversely, it may be the case that definitions favouring *evaluative* and cognitive focalising functions – that is, functions that also construct or *synthesise* instead of selecting – understand focalisation’s “seeing” more metaphorically.

Notwithstanding other shortcomings of understanding focalisation to be visually based, the visual emphasis also overshadows two other important issues in the debate on focalisation, namely reception (that is, the role of the reader – or, in the case of visual arts, the spectator and in installation art, the viewer-participant) on the one hand, and the idea of cognition, on the other. The role of the viewer-participant will be addressed in the section on positioning focalisation below. Under cognition one could refer to those non-visual aspects of apprehending a storyworld or events that are often included in the understanding of focalisation (see Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011; Jahn, 1996). The contention of the current discussion is, in summary, that vision-based definitions of focalisation are impoverishing since not all aspects that filter, orient and synthesise the narrative are visual in nature. Emotional, cognitive and ideological dimensions may have greater import than the visual, even in visual artworks.

This contention may seem odd because my study is concerned with focalisation in a medium that is not primarily literary – indeed, most visual art forms are essentially ostensibly visual

although the embodied experience of space, time and cognitive function of memory and the like are also part of installation art<sup>41</sup>. The issue of visuality as this pertains to focalisation must be addressed in a study such as this one which sets out to broaden the use of focalisation into installation art (with its visual ties) by arguing that too much emphasis on the visual aspects of focalisation would be less fruitful than issues of focalisation as cognition and synthesis.

This paradox exists elsewhere. For example, Horstkotte and Pedri (2011) take issue with Bal (in various publications by her) for apparently over-emphasising the visual aspect of focalisation – this criticism, although perhaps not entirely just, needs to be considered in light of the desire of scholars of various (often visual) media to account for focalisation as a range of “orientational restrictions of narrative presentation” (see Jahn, 1996:241). These restrictions are not purely perceptual (which would remain fairly vision-bound); furthermore, the idea of restriction should be reconsidered to instead embrace the cognitive understanding of focalisation which includes mental processes such as thought or memory as well as the attitude and cultural, moral and ideological orientation of the focaliser (I draw here on ideas presented by Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:71 in Jahn, 1996:244). In short, the main concern for my study is that focalisation, even in the visual arts, is a process that may (where relevant), be visually conceptualised in terms of the metaphorical terms used to describe this process. Nonetheless, the workings of focalisation cannot be restricted to a visual domain. Thus even if one speaks of point of view, perspective, vision, seeing, observing and so on, these words should be understood as referring also to the inner eye. Specifically, this refers to the cognitive and affective dimensions that function in an interpretative manner as expressions of a subjective human consciousness.

Therefore, even when applying focalisation to a reading of the visual arts – whether painting, sculpture, graphic novels and installation, to name a few – it is essential to include cognitive aspects in one’s understanding and application of focalisation. This is because the filtering (or constructing) process includes perceptions, emotions and evaluations that are not primarily visual. Such focalising is at times not visual at all – consider, for example, when one engages with focalisation in a painting that also references focalising issues suggested

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<sup>41</sup> The notion that this embodied experience is a quality of focalisation in Van der Merwe’s installation art is explored in the chapters dealing with the interpretation of the artworks (chapters 5 and 6).

by a pre-text (i.e. an *a priori* story such as an historical event or a Bible story which can be seen as relating to the fabula) on which the artwork is based. (The role of focalisation as interpretative process mediated through consciousness to produce the fabula is addressed below.) This discussion is guided by this reference to the visual art, namely that there is a precarious relationship between the process of focalisation and the fabula. This is a concern that quite possibly has a bearing on how one can also conceptualise the process of focalisation in the literary arts. The discussion therefore now returns to the fabula and its relation to focalisation.

#### **4.5.4 Focalisation and the fabula**

Focalisation is understood by some as: “the filtering of a story through a consciousness prior to and/or embedded within its narratorial mediation” (Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011:330). This “prior to and/or embedded” aspect is important: it is related to the issue of the fabula which is both reconstructed and also “discovered” by the reader; this issue is also addressed in the terminology section dealing with the fabula under point 4.4 above. In terms of the focalising process, the reader’s understanding (the viewer of the visual artwork) of how the material is filtered, and through whose consciousness, is purportedly guided by questions such as whether narrative information is filtered through a single character; whether the reader is privy to a character’s thoughts or to his or her actions only; whether the reader can see through the character’s eyes or whether the reader instead looks on from an external position.

Therefore, the reader should ask him or herself if the narrative seems filtered or not; whether he/she has access to the thoughts of one or many characters, and if he/she can see actions that no other character is privy to seeing (Badman, 2013:1). In installation artworks, the reader sees through his or her own eyes, but may share focalising activities with characters whose presences are implied. These focalising activities then give rise to possible fabulae.

Bal’s (1981) exposition of this relationship with reference to the picture of the laughing mice in the bas relief of Mahaballipuram entitled *Arjuna’s penance* is taken as first point of

departure for this part of the discussion. In a response article by Bronzwaer (1981)<sup>42</sup> on Bal's Laughing mice article, in Bal's *Narratology*<sup>43</sup> (1985) as well as in the edited anthology of Omega and Landa, 1996, Bal either makes use of, or is referred to as making use of a visual image in order to make her view of how focalisation is related to the fabula explicit (also see footnote 1 of this chapter). A brief recapitulation of this argument goes like this: in the image of the relief that Bal reads, the wise man Arjuna is showed in the upper left section in a yoga position. A cat stands at the bottom right, and a number of mice stand around the cat. The mice are shown laughing. Bal (1981:202) argues that unless the spectator interprets the visual signs, the image will simply be a strange one. The interpretation is as follows: the cat sees the wise man's absolute calm and is so impressed by him that he, the cat, imitates the sage. At this point the mice realise that the cat won't chase them, and they laugh. There is a "and then" relationship (Arjuna poses, then the cat imitates him, and then the mice laugh) as well as logical, causal links between the signs in the image. Bal asserts that: "according to every definition [she] know[s], this is a fabula" (1981:202).

My contribution to this explanation would be that the paradox of *constructing* the fabula (an active process of working out the sequence of events and imagining how they fit together) while also *discovering* the fabula as it has been there all the time is neatly illustrated here – and also resolved to a sufficient extent: the story has been there before the visual text was created and therefore the reader or interpreter *discovered* it, but the reconstruction of the fabula as an active interpreting process holds equally true here because the interpreter has to put together the different signs in order to connect them causally.

Both processes, in this example, bring one to a similar fabula: the yogi assumes a meditative pose; then the cat sees him, envies him, imitates him; then the mice laugh because they are relieved and happy to be safe. This is a simple story with a simple fabula which would likely

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<sup>42</sup> Bal, M. The laughing mice: Or: On focalization. *Poetics Today*, 2(2):202-210. This article is a response to Bronzwaer's critique of Bal's notion of focalisation as she described it her 1977 publication *Narratologie: Essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes*. See Bronzwaer, W. 1981. Mieke Bal's concept of focalization: A critical note. *Poetics Today*, 2(2):193-201.

<sup>43</sup> Bal, M. 1985. *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*. Transl. Christine van Boheemen. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. This is an English version of the original Dutch text *De theorie van vertellen en verhalen* which was published in 1980.

be discerned by most interpreters; more complex stories might problematise the fabula as argued above.

Bal's argument is that "the semiotic activity of the actors" (which is taken to refer to the meaning-making effects of their actions) makes the events that happen possible – and we trace this meaning by "following the chain of events in reverse" (1981:202) – again, the idea of working backwards through the textual chain of events in order to arrive at the fabula (in this case, clearly, both by constructing the fabula as well as "finding" it). In all, this means that there are spatial and temporal dimensions to this process. In the first instance, one needs to find a causal connection between the *spatial* arrangement of visual signs (the images of mice, cat and Arjuna) in order to be able to call the connected signs a fabula.

Also, this process of finding the fabula requires an understanding that the various perceptions – from Arjuna who sees nothing, to the cat who sees Arjuna, to the mice who see the cat seeing Arjuna, and finally to the spectator who sees the mice seeing the cat seeing Arjuna – also run over *time*. The different perceptions are, however, not simply in a temporal succession, but are also in an embedded relationship with each other (Bal, 1981:203). The notion of an embedded relationship hinges on different levels of focalisation – hence the importance of the idea of perceptions noted above. These levels of focalisation include shifts between what is perceived and what is imaginary perception (Jahn, 1999:103).

In a nutshell, the take on focalisation and its relationship with the fabula that Bal (1981) emphatically proposes here is that there are (in this case, visual) signs which require a semiotic-systemic interpretation for such signs to be understood as actions. Semiotic interpretation therefore makes it possible to see links between signs in order to understand the links as actions, which are seen as parts of a causal chain. For these actions (and the actors who is responsible for action) to function meaningfully, the different levels of perception (such as who sees who; or who sees who seeing who) need to be understood, and also interpreted, as focalising activities which occur at various levels.

These levels, in turn, can be described as types of embedding or embedded focalisation (see the discussion in the following paragraph for an elaboration of this notion). Bal (1981) argues therefore that the interpretative function of focalisation is, in the end, the "glue" that links signs into meaningful relationships, actions and perceptions. She also, importantly,

extends the focalising activities of seeing (visual perception) to include mental acts (i.e. verbs of physical as well as psychological perception) – thus remembering, feeling and so on are focalising actions as much as seeing is. As such, Bal (1981:205) reiterates that she regards focalisation as a semiotic activity.

Furthermore, when constructing a fabula, Bal (2001a:43) speaks of the futility of a figurative, realistic reading and instead advocates (2001a:8, referencing Louise Bourgeois' *Spider* – also an installation) that one should explore the way in which a work “does not *tell* a story but *builds* one, a different one – but one that, in a multiplicity of ways, *matters*” (Bal's italics). Building and constructing: the fabula is a work in progress that will, I contend, take shape once a few other building blocks are in place. The discussion has dealt with the inadequacy of extracting a fabula out of what seems to be the obvious prompters; in Van der Merwe's works as in perhaps most fairly nuanced and open-ended artworks, the fabula needs more meat, literally, in the form of character and event in order to become a suitably constructed, extended fabula. For this, the location of focalisation – at what level of the narrative constellation it can be situated – is addressed below.

#### **4.5.5 The location of focalisation**

The location of the focalising process in terms of the levels of narrative constellation is not obvious: in the example of the laughing mice, Bal seems to suggest that focalisation is located at a very basic level: that it is indeed itself the process that makes possible the transition from signifiers (agents – such as the cat, mice and the yogi) into a logical flow of events in the fabula. In this example, thus, it seems to be the case that focalisation takes place in at the level of the fabula – almost preceding it (because the focalisation takes place when the cat sees the yogi and the mice see *and thus interpret* the cat seeing the yogi, and here the fabula comes into existence).

The creation of a semiotic chain of signification by means of readerly interpretation is hardly distinguishable, in Bal's description here, from focalisation. This is not necessarily an issue that needs further interrogation at this point – because the more salient point is that focalisation is always also an act of interpretation. In the laughing mice example, the focalisation is an interpretation because when the mice see *and* interpret the cat's actions,

they know they are free to laugh. The spectator sees all this, interprets what is going on by working back through the logical chain of events retroactively – by working back through the focalising levels. The interpreter may then find the chain of events funny, Bal suggests, because of ascribing semiotic significance to the interpretations of the actors. This brings one to the question as to the location of focalisation.

Focalisation is, most would agree, to a large measure an authorial activity since an author selects certain things and perspectives from which a narrative is relayed. In the context of the actual unfolding of a narrative, however, there are different schools of thought regarding where focalisation is positioned. These different opinions have given rise to much conflict and arguments; “are always ready to erupt” (see Kubiček, 2009:179). Focalisation in Bal’s (1981) view is located, in the laughing mice example, at the level of signs in the story – here signs refer to agents who see, and focalisation is found in the relationship between this vision and what is seen – in order to bring about the fabula. She positions focalisation between the agent who sees and the object that is seen. “This relationship is a component of the story part, of the content of the narrative text: A says that B sees what C is doing” (Bal, 1985:104). Bal’s positioning of focalisation is on a different structural level from Genette’s, who instead propounds that the narrative itself is located on the level of narration, and that narrative is therefore mediated by a focaliser. This focalisation is, then, achieved by means of the narrator’s focalisation which is logically implied in first-person narration.

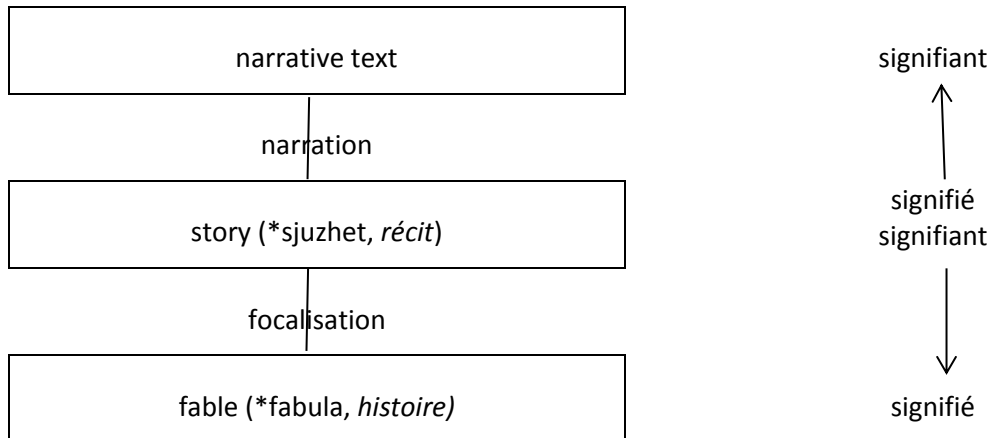
Bronzwaer’s<sup>44</sup> (1981:193) description of the levels of operation (narration and focalisation) that Bal has proposed elsewhere (in her 1977 *Narratologie*) is useful here, because (in order, actually, to critique Bal’s typology) he sets out a clear scheme that situates focalisation between the story/sjuzhet/récit and the fable/fabula. The scheme represents a frequent usual position ascribed to the focalising process. Of significance for this discussion is Bal’s view of operations at work during focalisation, namely (1) the semiotic function of signified or signifié ascribed to the fabula (see discussion above); this reinforces the paradoxical

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<sup>44</sup> Bronzwaer (1981) takes issue with what he regards as Bal’s erroneous replacement of the “implied author-narrator” with “narrator-focaliser” and the linguistic, communicative and pragmatic problems that such a replacement may cause. The particularities of Bronzwaer’s disagreements with Bal are less important here than some of the points raised in Bronzwaer’s article which are, perhaps ironically, neat and useful summaries of some of Bal’s views.

position of the fabula as both deep structure and abstract construction; and (2) the position of focalisation which is situated at an intermediary level that serves to transform the fabula into a story.

**Diagram 4.2:** Bronzwaer's (1981) positioning of focalisation



Bronzwaer's (1981:193) diagrammatic positioning of focalisation with my additions marked with an asterisk (\*).

#### 4.5.6 Focalisation and narration

In the process described above, focalisation may direct the attention of the reader or interpreter with greater or lesser urgency towards a particular object or event, or to another instance in the story, to foreground or to indicate significance. Here the role of focalisation in narration can be addressed.

For example, the term granularity has been introduced as a focalising strategy that is related to "meaning making" in narration. Granularity is Bundgaard's (2010:76) term, and refers to the density, richness and fineness/coarseness of a (focalised) description; defamiliarisation or other aesthetic complexities may be thus created. If an object or situation has great significance for a character, the description of said object or event would tend to be rich in order to make it stand out and to show the importance assigned to it. This process is in line with everyday perceptual experiences where one selects the object of interest and experiences it in greater detail to see it more vividly and to disconnect it from the jumble of details surrounding it. Such a process involves schematisation and stylisation – core

properties of perception (Bundgaard, 2010:78) and are used in narration to direct the reader's attention to the character's experience of a given object or event.

An interesting case made by Bundgaard (2010:82) that may be applicable to Van der Merwe's installations is that of overly emphasised and detailed descriptions. Van der Merwe's installations contain video loops of constantly repeated movements such as washing or stroking. This may, following Bundgaard's argument, indicate an abnormal state of affairs and a compulsive focalising action, where the telling is "phenomenologically opaque". One may even have a form of disrupted consciousness since the looping video "flattens" the focalising process into a never-ending, trapped image. This possibility will be addressed in the chapters that present the interpretation of Van der Merwe's installations. The video loops that suggest focalising processes at work do point towards a further issue in focalising theory, namely which agent is tasked with, or even allowed to focalise.

#### **4.5.7 Can narrators or characters focalise? Or can both?**

Much scholarly debate has focused on whether a narrator can be a focaliser (Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011:330). In fact, some authors seem to conflate the functions of a narrator and focaliser. For example, Schmidt (2010:58) argues that the indexical representation of the narrator is achieved by means of indexical signs created by, among others, the selection of elements (including characters, situations and so on) as well as explicit or implicit evaluation of these. Selection of characters may indeed be a narratorial function, but the selecting activity as it unfolds in the narrative situation is closely associated with focalisation – as is evaluation (Margolin, 2009:46).

Another example of how narration and focalisation can easily become entangled is found in Culler's argument ([1980] 1996:94). He argues that every narrative must have a narrator – regardless of whether he or she is explicitly identified. Then he adds that a necessary condition for interpreting a narrative is that the interpreter has to identify the implied narrator and what in the story belongs to his *perspective* – and by using this word, Culler's argument seems to conflate narration with focalisation. He continues that one must distinguish between the action itself and the narrative perspective on that action – for, as Culler maintains, one of the central thematic issues of a story is the relationship between the implied narrator (who comes with knowledge, certain values and so forth) and the story

which he or she is narrating. Logic seems to suggest that the idea of a narrative perspective hinges on focalised action.

A strong advocate of the merging of narrating and focalising functions is expressed by Phelan (2001) in his contribution “Why narrators can be focalizers – and why it matters” (chapter in Van Peer & Chatman, 2001:51-65). His argument is that the position (taken by Chatman and Prince), namely that narrators only *report* on the story world but cannot *perceive* it, is impoverishing and does not account for narratorial self-consciousness or for narrators who seem to be inside the story world (Phelan, 2001:51-54). O’Neill (1994:90) has noted earlier that “the narrator is always a focalizer, having not choice whether to focalize or not ... only *how* to do so”.

Not all concur: If narrators can experience the storyworld, this may threaten the ontological difference between the discourse and the story held dearly by Prince and Chatman (see Phelan, 2001:55-56). Prince (2001:46) postulates that a narrator is never part of the diegesis that he or she presents, being an element of the discourse and not the story; he refers to Chatman (1990:155-56) to reinforce his argument that the narrator presents but does not focalise. Prince undermines his own argument by saying that a movie camera (again, paraphrasing Chatman) “does not focalise situations, it *presents* them (at such and such a distance, from such an such an angle)” [Prince’s 2001:46 italics]. One would, however, be hard pressed to find a definition of focalisation that does *not* include the selection of distance and angle. Prince’s non-focalising narrator does not seem tenable.

If one were to, for the sake of argument, take Prince’s logic further, it follows that such a conceptualisation of focalisation concurrently also positions all focalising action on the level of the narrated, not of the narrating. And the only way, Phelan (2001:57) argues, in which one can maintain such an artificial divide, is to reduce all narrators to “reporting machines”. This issue raises an important point because it is also connected to the levels on which focalisation functions. As noted above, Bal (1981, in her discussion of the laughing mice) positions focalisation on the story level. Genette ([1972] 1980; 1988) feels it belongs to the level of narrative, and Phelan takes it one step further to include discourse as well as the effect on the reader. The expansion of focalisation’s area of influence, as it were, is

important because it may be taken to suggest that narratives themselves are always focalised. Phelan (2001:57) is quoted at length to make this point:

A human narrator, I submit, cannot report a coherent sequence of events without also revealing his or her perception of those events. The story/discourse distinction itself helps to explain why. From the perspective of story, the distinction implies that any coherent sequence of events can be reported in more than one way; from the perspective of discourse, it implies that any narration takes only one of many possible paths through the story world. Consequently, any path marked by the narrator's perspective (whether we call it "slant" or "focalization") will be not only a report on the story world but also a reflection of how the narrator perceives that world which, in turn, influences how audiences perceive that world. In other words, as the narrator reports, the narrator cannot help but simultaneously function as a set of lenses<sup>45</sup> through which the audience perceives the story world.

It would not be impossible to regard texts as already focalised phenomena, given this argument. Texts are, no matter how one defines them, one author's view (i.e. selection of) on the world. They are already-made interpretations of people, places and events – although this argument may be far from winning general consent in the current heated debate.

For purposes of this investigation, it is proposed that narrators may focalise, that narrators and focalisers may indeed be the same entities; and that they may also be text-internal characters. They may nonetheless fulfil different functions in the narrative, also at different points in the narrative: telling on the one hand when they narrate, and *colouring or subjectivising* the telling with evaluative and selective choices on the other.

The focalisation in a narrative is, as just noted, not always consistently located; over the length of a narrative different shifts may occur (Genette, [1972] 1980:191; Badman, 2013:3). Genette coined the terms "zero focalisation" or "non-focalised" (this is also described as "vision from behind" – see Jahn, 1996:244) to refer to a narrative with "access to the perceptions of any character" – this access position was conventionally labelled *omniscience*

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<sup>45</sup> This choice of visual metaphor of lenses is rather unfortunate here, but the possibility that a lens can be understood metaphorically may be helpful.

(Badman, 2013:3)<sup>46</sup>. Shifts may occur between the (“omniscient”) narrator and a character’s focalisation of a situation.

Focalisation may also shift between characters inside the story world. “Internal focalisation” refers to “vision with” and here the presentation of events is restricted to the point of view or one or more focal characters; internal focalisation is either fixed, variable or multiple in nature (Jahn, 1996:244). “Fixed” focalization refers to a situation where only one character is accessed – this is referred to as “limited point of view” (Badman, 2013:3); variable focalisation refers to situations where several focal characters may take turns to focalise, and multiple focalisation entails that the same event or events may be presented through several focal characters. A final category is external focalisation, which refers to “vision from without” – presentation has the nature of “behaviourist report and outside views” (Jahn, 1996:244 referring to Genette’s typology). Most narratives can be situated between the extreme instances described here; that is, focalisation tends to shift, especially between characters. In instances of fairly fixed focalisation, deviations in focalisation may still occur; Genette’s term *paralepsis* refers to “small moments where information outside the focalising character’s perception/knowledge is available” (Badman, 2013:3).

Character can also help to explain the cognitive aspect of focalisation. If there is narrative access to a character-focaliser’s inner thoughts, feelings, memories and so on, one speaks of internal focalisation. On the other hand, external focalisation refers to a situation where these can be perceived only from a character’s words and actions (Badman, 2013:3). If focalisation is lodged in a character or another sentient being, this being not only perceives, but would also judge, evaluate, think and so on in an explicit way. The anthropomorphic agency of the focaliser is acknowledged by most publications in the field, although a few scholars have suggest that it is also possible to have “disembodied” focalisation which means that it is located at a narrating/telling point of view in space without a concretely perceiving being at work (Bundgaard, 2010:66; Jahn, 1996).

Shifts between focalising characters who exist in different spaces (real or imaginary) can be accounted for as ontological shifts – characters may emerge in one spatial context and re-

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<sup>46</sup> Badman (2013:3) notes the term “free focalisation” as a variant in this terminology; this last term was proposed by Nelles (1990).

emerge on another. Frames such as quotations or shifts between ordinary perception and imaginary perception could account for what has been called “interference between concurrently active windows [of focalisation]” (Jahn, 1999:103-4; this author concurs with Galbraith’s 1995:46-9 notion of ontological shifts that are prompted by textual clues that infer changes in deictic status that, in turn, are understood thus by the reader).

The focalisation continuum (meaning internal or external perspective – *vision-avec* vs. *vision-dehors*) spans fully embodied perception on the one hand and may include real and imaginary perception, as well as a disembodied, more abstractly located perspective on the other (see Bundgaard, 2010:67). An interesting thought here is the following: one could imagine the untenable situation that embodied focalisation may suggest, in a strictly technical sense, that seeing is favoured (because the eyes are part of the body) while a more disembodied understanding of focalisation would then emphasise cognitive, affective and ideological dimensions. This distinction could, however, be reversed so that the emphasis on seeing would correspond to the disembodied eye implied by Renaissance perspective (as discussion in the section on installation art argued). Consequently, this may mean that the more multifaceted cognition, affection and so on – abstract or at least non-tangible dimensions – could be associated with the embodiment of focalisation. For current purposes, however, embodied focalisation is understood to fully embrace visual, corporeal and mental/affective faculties.

It is unlikely that one will find a typology that can fully account for all the variations in focalisation, but of significance for this discussion is not only that definite variations of focalisation can be distinguished on this continuum, but that these variations may shift in one narrative text, which means that shifts in focalisation may occur quite frequently – with correlated meaning effects (Bundgaard, 2010:67 et seq.). Focalisation shifts may occur between different characters, or between different aspects of a single character (for example, the viewer-participant who focalises for him- or herself, but also focalises together with a character who is inferred, as is the case in Van der Merwe’s works – Galbraith, 1995:37 significantly also references shifts between different selves). This type of focalisation relates to the way in which thought, subjective analepsis (“a kind of recollection that a character has ... an inward narrative, a second narrative, neither oral nor written [or

visually shown, I would add]” – Genette, [1972] 1980:231) and other characters, dimensions of characters’ selves or other inferences of characters are understood to focalise.

Furthermore, one can choose to speak of defocalisation where one perspective is abandoned and another takes over (Bundgaard, 2010:69). Also, different focalising instances may conflate at some point in a narrative (so that internal and external focalisation, for instance, may be transposed or merged) and this may result, semiotically speaking, in meaning-effects such as a protagonist’s experience of something that corresponds with this shift (Bundgaard, 2010:70). When the reader steps into the consciousness of one character, or when he/she is excluded from this consciousness, a focalisation shift takes place. Such a shift may be a formal, presentational counterpart of the content of a section (Bundgaard, 2010:71) but may signal ontological and/or temporal shifts. Shifts in focalisation have been diversely interpreted. In many narratives, focalisation would shift between characters – this means that a narrative may have narrator-focalisers who are also character-focalisers (see Jahn, 1996:256).

#### **4.6 Chapter summary**

In keeping with the way in which the experience of installation is conceptualised, narration, the construction of the fabula and focalising processes can be understood as being guided by a number of particular concerns. In the first instance, narration proceeds from a co-operative process between the viewer-participant in conjunction with the text which has been supplied with signifier signposts or cues so that the reader can form mental pictures that work towards actualising the text. The narratorial agency is a conglomerate of signifying aspects that include the style, space, temporal aspects and objects inside the text; these signify because the viewer-participant is inside the story world as a character who both co-narrates and focalises.

The fabula is also subjectively constructed although since it is predicated on the connection of signifier signposts, different interpreters are likely to come up with like fabulae. The notion of imaginative reconstruction governs narration, focalisation and the construction of the fabula.

Focalisation, in its turn, is described as a subjective process that transforms the signifying aspects in the artwork as text into meaningful chains of events, which are referred to as the fabula. Focalisation in installation art is embodied and tends to be located on the level of character – given that the viewer-participant becomes part of the storyworld and assumes the nature of both character and “real” person at the same time. Focalisation may include memories of focalising activities, focalisation of absent characters as well as shifts between the now-focalising activities of the viewer-participant and any other characters. These shifts relate to the notion of windows of focalisation. In all, focalisation’s constructing, synthesising, transformative functions are stressed over its selecting and filtering functions.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### READING THE WORKS – SPACE AND TIME NARRATED AND FOCALISED

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#### 5.1 Introduction

The main aim of the following sections that deal with the interpreting process is to read Van der Merwe's work in the light of the processes of focalisation and narration. Two works are interpreted in this chapter: *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003) and *It's cold outside* (2004). Both these works consist of elements made of rust that suggest domestic interiors; both works contain looping video imagery; and both works seem to suggest a space associated with one person, specifically a female. (As indicated in the note to the text, the looping video imagery is attached in DVD format, and stills from these are presented in the discussion.)

The first section of the chapter focuses on the narration and focalisation of space and time, and the subsequent section addresses issues of character and fabula construction. As was the case with the chapter on installation art, the interpretation chapters take their cue from the elements of narrative (space, time, character and also event). These are addressed in terms of how they are narrated and focalised to suggest a fabula or extended fabulae. Specifically, Bal's (2001a:214) point of departure guides this structure in her statement that:

The way in which the fabula is presented so as to come across as a *story*<sup>1</sup> concerns issues of the semantization of characters, the concretization and subjectivization of space into place, the thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices, and, most important of all, *focalization*.

The discussion also takes note of Bal's (2001a:63) contention that: "[T]he dynamics of focalisation are at work in every visual work that contains traces of the representational work as seen and interpreted by the viewer, since it is precisely in those traces that the work becomes narrativized." "Traces" in this sense are regarded as any aspect of the work

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<sup>1</sup> Story here is understood to form part of Eco's ([1979] 1985) and Du Plooy's (1986) notion of the extended fabula; see 4.4.3 in the previous chapter.

that has semiotic significance – space, objects, temporal devices and so on; traces are often indexical (Bal, 2006a:32). A few important issues emerge from this quotation of Bal's (2001a:63) above. Firstly, it is the viewer (here the participant) who interprets. However, the argument proposed here is that he or she not only interprets the *focalisation strategies used by the artist* when he selected and manipulated the given signifiers, but that the viewer-participant who interprets actively, experiences the narrated world of the installation artwork by means of his or her *own* focalisation.

This own focalisation is possible because he or she becomes, as this study propounds, firstly, a character (perhaps *the* central character) in the installation artwork (together with multiple other possible characters, as the interpretation sections below on character aim to demonstrate). Secondly, the participant makes sense of the narration of the work as the meaning-bearing traces in the work are *narrativised*<sup>2</sup> in light of his or her focalisation.

Regarding narration, the premise of this study is that narration in the installation artworks coincides with how Bordwell (1985:11-12) conceptualises narration, namely that narration emerges from a spectrum of things, and not necessarily from a personified human-like narrator. This spectrum of things includes the actual arrangement of objects, as well as references in the works to experiences of space, time and character (and event). These are *all* constructed, in film and in installation art. Of significance here, then, is axiomatic assumption, in accordance with Bordwell (1985), that the narratorial function in the artworks (as in most films, excluding those with a narrative voice-over) is de-anthropomorphised. Therefore, narration proceeds from the interaction between various spatial, temporal and other components, and narration is further given depth by means of how these are focalised. Together, all these components constitute the narratorial function.

Furthermore, narration in any text has to do with opening and closing gaps in which the interpreter sees interpretative possibilities – even “whole worlds” that can be either actualised or not (Abbot, 2007:50). This aspect of narration hinges on the importance of a subjective process of focalisation that this study emphasises. The interpretations offered in

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<sup>2</sup> Narrativisation refers to the quality that objects, spaces and the like may “have narrativity” (Ryan, 2004:9); in other words, that they have the potential to have narrative significance. Such narrativisation is particularly evident and also useful in Bal's application of the term to her reading of visual artworks where object-type elements such as cloth and folds are understood to signify in ways that point to causal and narrative content. See Bal, 1999a; 1999b for more extensive engagements with the notion of narrativity in the visual arts.

this study are therefore mine; while the methodological points of departure will be presented as transferable to other artworks, given that certain artwork-specific considerations may be necessary, the insights derived here are informed by my subjective understanding based on the narrativisable cues and clues “planted” in the work by the artist.

The narratorial spectrum set out above, adapted from Bordwell’s understanding of film narrative, is a summary of the various components of the artwork that contribute towards making the work *narrative* – all these components are therefore consequently narrativised in the context of the artworks. Therefore I propound that Bordwell’s (1985) argument – namely that in film, narration is synthesised in the consciousness of the viewer – can be applied to installation art. The viewer in film, and the spectator-participant in installation art, connects diverse sets of stimuli, as a function of focalisation, in order to make sense of these as narrative. Indeed, the participant is in a collaborative narratorial position – he or she; the artist (implied and historical, as postulated in the section on character below); and the artwork’s cues work together to make narrative sense of the various things that contribute to narrating in the works.

Finally, the narrative sense that is made from the works relates to the way in which the fabula is understood in this study. On the one hand, the artist may have had a version of the fabula in mind that guided the way in which narrative cues/clues were planted in the work. Instead of working single-mindedly to “recover” this fabula, however, the interpreter in this study works differently. He or she (she, if referring to myself) takes note of pre-textual elements related to the fabula and made known by the artists in contexts such as walkabouts and personal interviews; unravelling how these pre-textual elements have a bearing on the work is related to the notion of “recovering” the fabula. However, the interpretation also works the other way round: to construct more extended fabulae that are related to the pre-text but that are constructed around the viewer-participant who interprets and who becomes a central character in the artwork, without whom the emergent and extended fabula(e) could not exist. The argument is that the way in which these works function, as is the case with many installation works, that (1) there is a pre-text that has the nature of a fabula and which one can know about or not; this is knowledge on the side of the artist and may be imparted by him. The works also function by means of (2)

cues/clues planted in the artworks, from which the interpreter actualises the work on the fabula level by “connecting the dots” between elements represented or interpreted as space, time, character (and absent character) and possible events. This second process is contingent upon the interpreter’s embodied, mental and affective responses to the works.

Putting these ideas into practice brings the discussion to the methodological approach that will be followed when interpreting the relevant artworks.

## **5.2 Methodological procedure for interpreting the installation artworks**

The methodology set out here applies to both the interpretation chapters (5 and 6). When reading the artworks in the sections that follow, the various narrativised elements will all receive attention (space, time, character and event; as these signify and are focalised in order to suggest a fabula or extended fabula[e]). For now, the methodological aspects pertaining to the interpretation are presented – in other words, how will the reading of the artworks proceed in order to account for all the narrativised components, and how does this process relate to focalisation and the construction of the fabula?

The process of reading the artworks is predicated upon the *embodied* experience of the viewer-participant in space (and his or her awareness of the significant absence of other characters in this space, as well as all the other components discussed above) whose focalising activities (proceeding from embodied experience towards subjective understanding in his or her *mind*) allow for a fabula or fabulae to become more elaborated and extended.

From here, the importance of focalisation in the process of charging space, time and character with meaning is apparent. Margolin’s (2009:42) five (or six, depending whether one uses the last tentative component, which I do) components of focalisation provide a useful methodological process or structure for this interpretation process. I discuss these five components and note my own additions or comments in italics. The most important issue in each component is that each element, aspect, or agent is understood subjectively, and is transformed by the focalisation process. In the exposition below, Margolin’s (2009:42) components are set out with comments applicable to the current interpreting

situation in italics. Insertions in non-italicised sections by myself are indicated by the initials L.C.

1. The story-world state or event focalised is the first component, and the emphasis here is on **space and time**. The object focalised (such as the story world or event) refers to states, entities, actions, events, processes – in **time and space**, or internally located (e.g. memories of previous acts of focalisation) which reflect the focaliser's attention and inner processing. *This means that the focalised object is subjectivised by means of focalisation. Practically, this implies that a descriptive reading of the works should be undertaken with reference, in each instance, to the layered quality of **space** in the work and the objects present in the work; this in turn requires an awareness of the material aspects of the work. The reading explores how space is experienced as embodied and as signifier of absence, and how it is narrated and focalised in the specific artworks. This consideration of space will highlight a number of aspects related to the multifaceted and layered qualities of **temporality** – among others, the duration needed to contemplate and analyse the work; the laboured time-layers inherently suggested by the sculpted and rust-coloured surfaces, and the sense of time suggested by the video loops – and in the interplay between them, the different time-spans suggested by the fabula as it is constructed from the focalised interpretation of narrative time. This guides the process of beginning to identify possible narrative events, complications, as well as cause and effect. Such an awareness of temporalities also generates a heightened sense of emotional involvement.*
2. An exploration of the **focalising agent(s) (or focalising character – L.C.)** follows. The focalising agent(s) and character(s) may or may not be the same person(s); these entities are human or human-like participant(s) in the story world. *Here the interpretation addresses the layered qualities of the central character (and/or other inferred characters or aspects of characters, as the discussion will demonstrate).* A mind is at the core of this agent, but the embodiment, space-time position, and values and attitudes of this agent are important – as noted in the point above. *The notion of an embodied, evaluative focalising agent is emphasised here. These also*

*apply to the specific human agent(s) whose absence drives the narrative but who can only be imagined by means of semiotic traces (see the quote by Bal, 2001a:214 on p. 247 above). In this process, the viewer becomes an active participant-character who focalises; but other focalising processes also come into play, thus underscoring the multifaceted layeredness of focalising and character construction. Apart from him/herself as focaliser, the participant identifies other potential character-focalisers (internal, external, or confluences of these) suggested by the work in the form of **absences**.*

3. Then follows the activity of perceiving and **processing** this object-focalisation *nomen actionis*. Modelling or processing takes place, and refers to either a momentary act or a more extended activity: perceiving, viewing, selecting, **evaluative** discriminating, matching, categorising, configuring a gestalt, connecting, **interpreting** and evaluating are mentioned by Margolin (2009:42). *These are all subjectively driven activities with the possible exception of viewing which may be understood as predominantly retinal – although viewing is itself never purely objective; all activities are therefore deeply personal. In this step, the emphasis is on processing potential signifier signposts (titles, associations prompted by objects, time-switches suggested by the different media – video loops next to rusted objects, for example). The participant gages the **narration** from these. Reading the video (looping) material in conjunction with the physical, large-scale, rusted objects (the main physical features, in this sense constituting the main Gestalt) in the space creates an awareness not only of the absent human agent or character, but also of the narrativised temporal layers and tensions in the work.*
4. The product of the activity is a mental scene or inner **representation** – “in other words, the product of the construal operations brought to bear on the segment of reality serving as the focus of attention” (Margolin, 2009:44). Degree of detail (or granularity, or foregrounding) is included here. *The importance of **subjectivising** by means of focalisation is clear: the very notion of an inner representation is subjective. Here, the participant discerns or generates a possible **fabula** or extended fabulae based on semiotic suggestion of events, character/absence of character and cause*

*and effect. These are likely to play themselves out in the spaces between temporalities where focalisation is active. The varied temporalities and shifts in focalisation point to the interaction between the participant and the specific human agent whose absence drives the narrative but who can be imagined by means of semiotic suggestion such as traces (again, see the quote by Bal, 2001a:214 on p. 247 above). This process demonstrates the subjective nature of temporality (noted by Ricoeur, 1985a; 1985b). It also indicates how focalisation as a subjective process (Bal, 2001a:56) operates in installation art by means of, among others, metalepsis<sup>3</sup> and embedded narratives that guide the understanding (or construction) of the fabula(s). Shifts of rhetorical and ontological nature, between characters, narrative levels and storyworld levels are addressed here.*

5. How all these are understood as **textualised constituents** of the text is also highlighted by Margolin (2009:42) – this last issue is: “the only thing directly accessible to the reader and *not requiring his imaginative reconstruction*”. Textual representation includes devices that suggest a perspective: linguistic [or artistic/visual] and stylistic devices such as tense and modality. *These representational devices remind one that the text requires a subjective process in a human mind to exist as a text.*
  
6. Margolin actually adds a sixth point to the five elements; this is optional and refers to the self-consciousness of **self-awareness** that may run parallel to the focalising act and which makes the perceiver aware that he or she is engaged in perceiving something. [This **self-reflexive** quality is a characteristic of installation art and draws attention to the subjective experience of the viewer-participant – LC]. *While this step need not constitute a separate phase of the interpretation process, a general sense of*

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<sup>3</sup> Metalepsis refers to the crossing of boundaries between narrative levels, or between the levels of the storyworld and the “real world”. Like metaphor and metonymy, it is a transformative trope (Pier, 2013:1, 3). The term has been explicated in temporal terms, often as an illocutionary act by the author who may decide to “enter” the storyworld. This causes a breach in the illusion that the time of the telling and the time of the told are the same (in this way transgressing the experience of ‘me-here-now’ associated with reading). Metalepsis that entails a transgression across narrative levels has also been described as an ontological shift, especially where a primary narrative and a secondary narrative cross. The same type of ontological crossing is associated with the “doubling of the narrator/narratee axis with the author/reader axis” (Pier, 2013:3). A persona in the narrative world (a character or narrator, for example) may intrude from one diegetic level to the other (Nelles, 1997:152). The term was coined by Genette ([1972]1980) who denotes its meaning as: “a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells” ([1972]1980:236).

*self-reflexive awareness permeates the participant's interpreting processes in installation art (refer to chapter 3 where the central argument was that space, time and character are foregrounded in a self-conscious manner in this art form).*

Margolin's (2009) six points guide the interpretation as follows: **The first point, namely the narration and focalisation of time and space**, is addressed first under 5.3 and 5.4 below. The "textual" aspect mentioned under point 5 in Margolin's list will inform the reading here as well as it does subsequent interpretative sections.

**Point 2 above (dealing with character construction and focalisation)** follows in chapter 6 under points 6.3-6.5. The **author as character, as well as authorial paratextual elements**<sup>4</sup> is addressed under 6.3. Under 6.4, a **reflection follows on the absent character(s)** (based on point 3 above) and the participant's character is explored under 6.5. This is followed by a consideration of the construction of the **fabula** (under 6.7) which is closely connected to the extrapolation of character and absence. In all instances, Margolin's last point (that of self-awareness), is posited in this study as a necessary precondition for the construction of character categories and absence, mostly because the self (me, the participant) who is inside the work constitutes a character, and generates a sense of character by the awareness of absence from a self-reflexive position.

Below is a scheme that represents how Margolin's six points can guide the interpretation process and how these components also determine how the chapter is set out.

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<sup>4</sup> Paratextual elements among the dimensions of a text that, as noted in Margolin's **point 5** above, are directly accessible to the reader. He or she may infer meaning from these, but need not reconstruct anything (as the case would be with the [re]construction of the fabula or the construction of character). Paratextual elements inform aspects of character and fabula construction. Paratexts have functionality especially as regards their reflection of the point of view of the author (Genette, [1987]1997:407) – here the artist Jan van der Merwe – who is one of the character-like agents in the *dramatis personae* of Van der Merwe's installation artworks (more so because the artworks have autobiographical impulses). Genette ([1987] 1997:408) takes note of the presumed naïveté of foregrounding the author's point of view regarding his or her text, but maintains that the "presentation" of a text by means of paratextual elements either by the author or by publishers cannot be disregarded. He also notes ([1987] 1997:407) that "plastic arts" and music have paratextual elements like literary texts do.

**Diagram 5.1:** Margolin’s (2009) six points applied as methodological procedure

	<b>Margolin’s six points</b>	<b>That concerns</b>	<b>Appears in section</b>	<b>Chapter layout</b>
1	Storyworld construction	Time and space	4.3, 4.4 (space and time narrated and focalised)	<b>CHAPTER 5</b> 5.3 <b>Space</b> narrated and focalised 5.4 <b>Time</b> narrated and focalised
2	The focalising agents and the storyworld participants	Focalising agent(s)	Throughout, but especially 6.3-6.5 (the various character categories narrated and focalised)	
3	Evaluating, processing	Interpreting the narration	Throughout chapters 4 and 5	
4	Mental representation	Subjective construction of fabula(e)	Throughout, especially 6.6 (narration and focalising: fabulae)	<b>CHAPTER 6</b> <b>Character</b> narrated and focalised 6.3 The <b>artist’s</b> character category (including paratextual elements) 6.4 <b>Absent</b> characters 6.5 The <b>participant’s</b> character category 6.6 Narration and focalising: <b>fabulae</b>
5	Textualised constituents	What is given in the texts, including paratexts	In 4.3 and 4.4 as regards time and space; especially 6.3 (paratexts and the author’s character category)	
6	Self-awareness	Self-reflexive nature of interpretation	Throughout where time, space, character, and fabulae are foregrounded and problematised	

The interpreting process set out above is consistently informed by an emphasis on the visual artwork as point of departure; Bal (2001a:54) pertinently notes that focalisation in visual art is found in the “content of visual signifiers such as lines, dots, light and dark, and composition”. The signifiers also include the components discussed above derived from Bordwell’s filmic narrative theory. Of importance for the present argument is the contention, which I offer, that the artworks themselves *suggest, even generate* potential narratives (in the sense of fabulae) – based and guided by cues and prompters *in* the artwork. The generative nature of narration is central here. Of course, the work of making sense of narratives, of connecting the dots that appear in the works as signifier signposts, is done by the participant who actively engages with the work. This process is part of the narration in the work, and sets installation works (including Van der Merwe’s) apart from those visual artworks often appearing in narratological analyses that illustrate or rework existing stories/pre-texts (compare, for example, paintings that relate Biblical stories – see Steiner, 2004:145-177<sup>5</sup>) or even films, which can be argued to tell a slightly more “fixed”

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<sup>5</sup> Steiner (2004) performs a very illuminating interpretation of the pictorial narration in medieval biblical illustrative paintings with her central focus on the tripartite visual and narrative structure in Benozzo Gozzoli’s altarpiece predella featuring the *Dance of Salome* (see fig. 3.3 in chapter 3).

version of a narrative than the installation artworks do. In the installation artwork, the text is therefore quite open, or in the words of Barthes, the installation is a *scriptible* text<sup>6</sup>.

The process of reading and interpreting the artworks takes into account, to reiterate, the *embodied* experience of the participant in space (and his or her awareness of the significant absence of other characters) whose focalising activities (in his or her *mind*) allow for a fabula to be constructed.

### 5.3 Space narrated and focalised

Everyone carries a room about inside him.  
Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*

One may speak of outer space and inner space: rooms of the house and rooms of the mind. These do not exist entirely independently: they may evoke each other, and inform or supplement the existence of each other. The discussion of focalised and narrated spatialities is directed towards the two artworks by Van der Merwe that represent intimate domestic interiors with a distinct suggestion of an absent female. The *mise-en-scène* of the works can be said to contribute to the portrayal of a character, as Mainar (1993:161) argued in the context of cinematographic analysis where space likewise informs character.

*Biegbak/Confessional* (2003) shows a life-size washing-up section of a kitchen; given the general division of household labour and the association of tasks like dish-washing with females, this space is femininely gendered. There are looping images visible in the sink as well as on the wall (these are discussed in greater detail below). Similarly, *It's cold outside* (2004) clearly represents a female space, again life-size, with women's things: a chair with a negligée draped over it, and a woman's vanity case on a stool with a "mirror" in which is shown a looping image of a woman applying in lipstick (only the lips and hands are seen). All elements apart from the monitor inside the vanity case are made of rust.

These *spaces* become, through focalisation, *places* with a concrete, familiar feeling; the symbolic properties of the space rendering them understandable as places (see Levebvre,

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes' distinction between *lisible* and *scriptible* texts (readerly and writerly) was set out in his 1968 essay *The death of the author* (published in English in 1977); see footnote 32 in chapter 4.

1991:210). Therefore, the washing-up area becomes a sanctuary with sacred content and the space of *It's cold outside* becomes a last vestige of domestic comfort before leaving for the outside world – these possible transformations of space into place are indicative of the close relationship that space has with time, character and narrative, and further attention is devoted to particularities in the course of the discussion. This narrativisation of space is also what Bal (2001a:214) refers to as the: “concretization and subjectivization of space into place” – in other words, when a space becomes a material place imbued with memory and symbolic meaning. Memory, and one could add narrative, takes root in the concreteness of spaces, gestures, images, and objects (Nora, 1989:9). All these are present in Van der Merwe’s works. Place and memory of place contribute towards the formation of identity (Sheldrake, 2001:1).

Bal (2006a:167) furthermore advocates that focalisation is the function of the work that binds otherwise unrelated elements together. When considering the binding together of the spatial components, the actor whom one may expect to encounter here, the one that the work is “about”, is oddly not there. The space seems out of sorts; as if the absence of this person haunts it. McEvelley (1996:52 in Coleman, 2000:164) notes that one can hardly imagine *space* without *figure* (i.e. character); also, the author adds, space tends to set into motion narrativity:

Space, the figure, and narrativity turn curiously into one another as if they were almost one – or one possible triangulation of forces somehow perilously remaining in balance. *Space is the medium that enables the figures to exist*; the figure, in turn, is the agent that activates space. Their collaboration, finally, is the necessary cause of the special situation in which narrative can occur: where event horizons explode into *events* [my italics – LC].

This “turning into each other” then happens, following Bal, through focalisation. Geczy and Genocchio (2001) note that space becomes charged in installation art; this interpretation posits that the “charge”, i.e. the sense that space is activated and imbued with meaning, is the result of a subjectivising process – focalisation.

From here, the viewer-participant begins to make sense of the narrativisation of space, and the way in which space becomes place as it is narrated and focalised. The persistent

awareness of absence, which “necessitates a relation to a lived space-time” (Frers, 2013:434), pervades the experience of the space.

### 5.3.1 Space in the works selected: individual consideration

#### *Biegbak/Confessional (2003)*

The work is wholly enclosed in a white cubicle, the size of a very small room, made of laminated wood. The gallery-goer or viewer-participant (who will become a participant-character; this transition to character happens soon enough and will be dealt with more thoroughly in the section on character in chapter 6) enters the white cubicle through a plain white cotton curtain hanging over a door-sized opening. This curtained cubicle and curtain are the only objects in the artwork that are not made of rusted metal, apart from the obvious technological objects such as the monitor and the projector that show looping images.

The curtain is drawn so that one has to open it and peer inside, before stepping across the threshold of the curtain into the enclosed space. When one does this, one “leaves” the gallery space and enters into the narrative space of the storyworld.

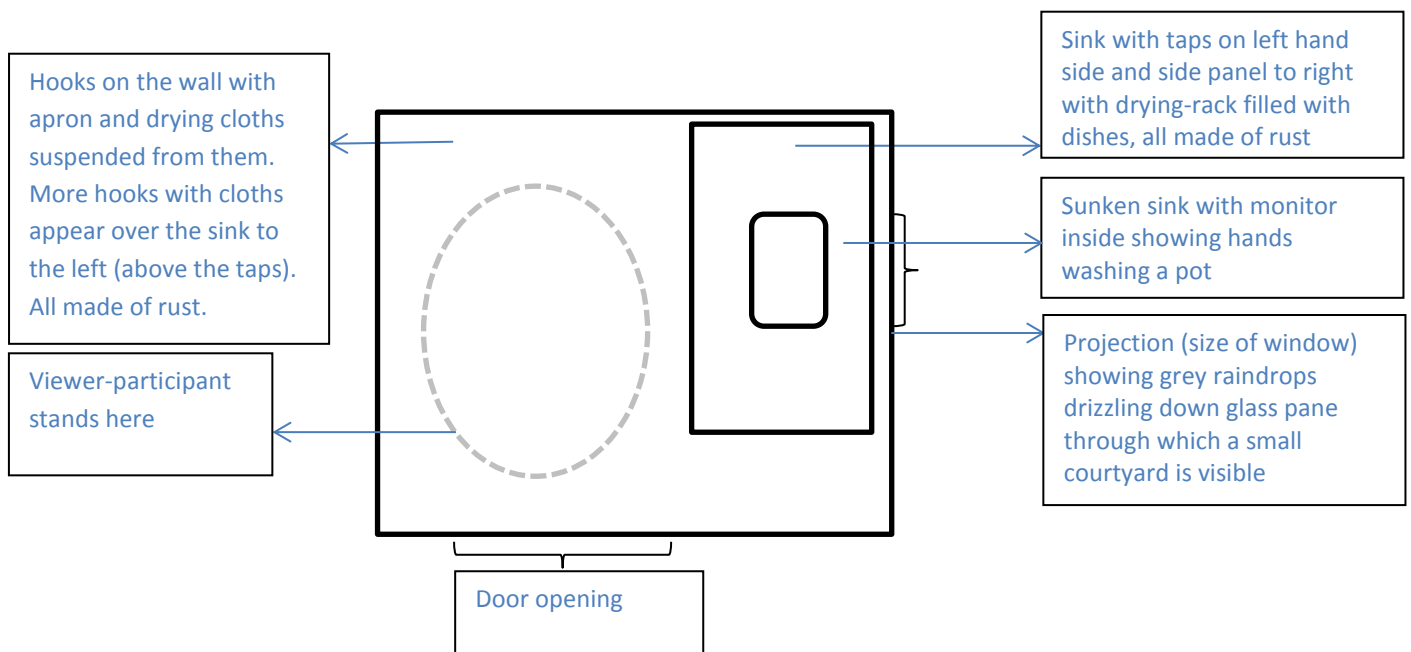


Fig. 5.1. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/Confessional* (outside view of cubicle).

The enclosed nature of the cubicle space is perhaps why *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003) is one of Van der Merwe's works that can be shown at various places without really changing the content of the experience – it was shown, for example, at the Pretoria Art Gallery in 2006 as part of the show *The archaeology of time*, and in Oliewenhuis in Bloemfontein in 2013 as part of *Time and space*. Because it is enclosed, there is not so much of a sense of the work in dialogue with its surroundings as one may find in the case of, for example, *The End* which is not in its own enclosure and therefore had a different atmosphere in the Pretoria Art Gallery and the Oliewenhuis Reservoir respectively, based on the atmosphere of the gallery space.

A ground plan of the installation of *Biegbak/Confessional* looks like this:

**Diagram 5.2:** Ground plan of *Biegbak/Confessional*

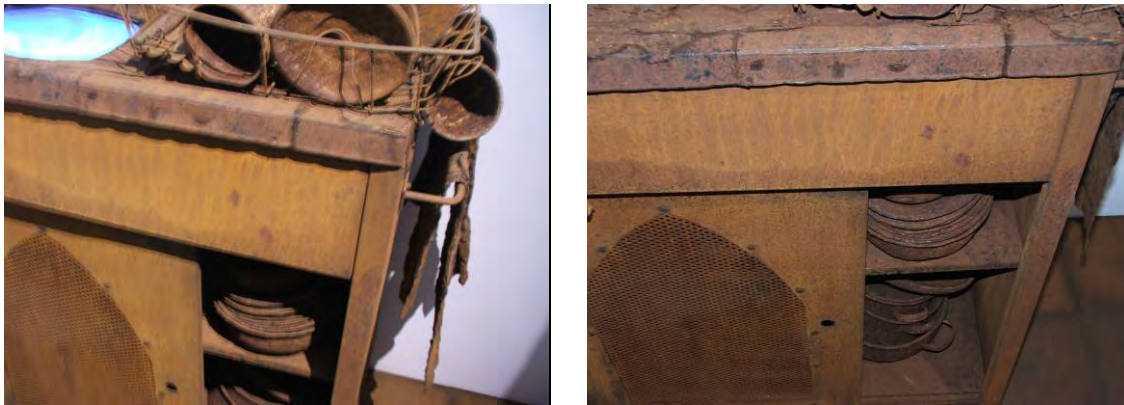


The undated catalogue with the title *Unknown* describes the space inside *Biegbak/Confessional* as private and confined – walled in and curtained-off, to create a shrine-like presence (Van der Watt, s.a. :8). The notion of being shrine-like is in effect a focalised, experiential comment that hinges on what Margolin (2009:42) calls “memories of previous focalisations” – but since these memories necessitate calling into life other characters, this could be part of the second step. “Shrine-like” also situates the content of this work in the sphere of a religious experience; the ambient sense of a shrine transforms the mundane into a ritual space that reverberates with meaning (see Coughlin, 2013:376).

For the moment, however, what is important is a physical description. The washing-up area is small; in embodied focalised terms, its space is intimate – only one or at most two people in a tight squeeze can fit into the cubicle at any one time. The cupboard with its sink is life-size, although humble in proportion – possibly speaking of working-class simplicity. Typically one would be alone inside the work, and in this isolation one may feel quite mesmerised by the intimacy of the things inside the space.



Various views of Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/Confessional*. Clockwise from above left: Fig. 5.2. View of sink showing monitor with hands washing; Fig. 5.3. View of dishes in dish rack; Fig. 5.4. View of cupboard under sink; Fig. 5.5. Three-quarter view of cupboard.



What also grips one are the physicality and tangibility of the rusted metal objects inside the space that – in what can be described as uncanny – looks very, very much like a *real* but battered (and slightly old-fashioned) kitchen sink, cupboard and other kitchen objects, but not: the objects are stiff and do not respond with movement to, say, human breath or the gust of wind one makes when entering a space. They are rigid and unyielding sculptural simulacra, as if the actions and movements of long ago are now fossilised. Yet the sense of uncanny familiarity is persistent amid the strangeness of rust instead of gleaming metal, porcelain and other possibly scuffed surfaces that would be inside a space like this in a house. Inside the recessed sink is a monitor showing two hands washing a cooking vessel, and a scrubbing sponge slightly immersed in water (fig. 5.6).



Fig. 5.6. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/Confessional*. Still image from looping video monitor showing hands washing the cooking vessel.

The washing motion proceeds in a circular fashion, and then repeats, again, looping infinitely over and over. Since there is a conceptual and thematic link between the actual sink and the monitor showing the hands washing dishes, the monitor appears as a type of *mise-en-abyme* or a framed cameo narrative, a silent soliloquy, inside the larger structure of the *mise-en-scène* that conveys the aesthetic text.

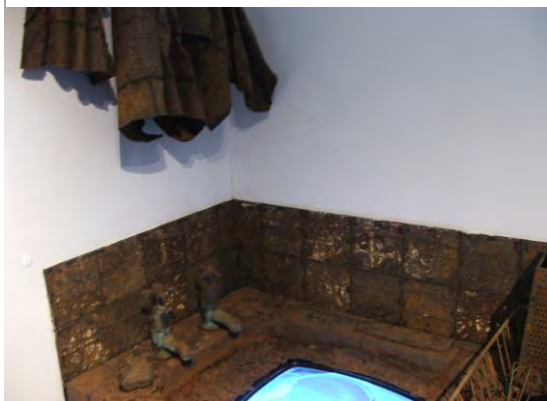
In this structure, the half-open door of the cupboard that houses the sink shows a stack of plates and other objects vying for space; objects are jammed together possibly to suggest that their owner has to make do with a small, tightly packed space – this again generates awareness of a humble, simple domestic space. Rust-coated pots, plates, a cheese grater, and other well-worn kitchen utensils such as a whisk and pieces of cutlery rest in the drying rack; these have been intricately shaped to exhibit small individual irregularities and an uneven appearance (to appear “used”). In part, this clutter is also the reason why the space is perhaps more aptly described here as a washing-up area and not a scullery; a scullery is associated with fairly elaborate kitchens (and more luxuriously spacious ones) that have separate and usually less cluttered areas or rooms for washing up and cooking – and for storing kitchen things like crockery<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This domestic setting reminds of the so-called ‘kitchen sink’ drama of the post-World War II theatre scene in Britain – plays like John Osborne’s *Look back in anger* (1956) depict domestic settings denoting working-class surroundings and the physicality of ordinary living to portray the realities in which these people are trapped (Padley, 2006:99-100). Rather than portraying the ordinariness of working-class life as a deadening trap, however, Van der Merwe elevates it into something he venerates because of his fond memories of this place;



Various views of Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Biegbak/Confessional*. Clockwise, from above left: Fig. 5.7. View of dishcloths; Fig. 5.8. View of dishcloths with image of window on adjacent wall; Fig. 5.9. Detail of apron on wall opposite dishcloths; Fig. 5.10. View of dishcloths to show their position relative to the sink.



This area that comprises the artwork, which is a representation of a space that may typically be in one corner of a simple kitchen, is separated from the more convivial kitchen activities such as eating and preparing food. It is clearly centred around one person's presumed presence, because it is too small to accommodate more than one comfortably. Thus the space is quite private and intimate. The work seems to tell about someone else who could have been standing here, privately, washing these strange but life-like kitchen things. There are dish cloths, an apron, and oven gloves hanging on hooks from the wall. This is like

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in other words, we are dealing with his focalised remembering and re-remembering of the subject (the notion of re-remembering is elaborated in the sections dealing with character in chapter 6).

someone's space, lived-in and well-worn, with ordinary things placed in easy to reach places<sup>8</sup>.

It is worth noting that the artificially aged found objects (such as the cupboard with its taps) that have been covered with rusted cans, as well as the sculptured objects made from cans and sculpted to resemble their counterparts in the "real" world (such as the apron and cloths) are distanced from the real world. This distance obtains not only in time but also to the appearance of objects, because the rusted surfaces and the stiffness of sculpted objects make them appear like abstracted forms that have been derived from images from the world outside. In that sense, the objects function like language – they defer meaning by producing difference; it is a case of *différance* (see Derrida, [1967] 1976:63). This difference is lodged in their being constituted of traces: traces of cans, of rust and time, and of the artist's hand, most notably, but also traces of referential counterparts. Then some of the objects such as the utensils in the drying rack also suggest traces of use – which would in their current state be impossible because they have not been used for their purported purposes since being covered in rust. They are nostalgised, if one can use such a word, by the artist: this is a case of being narrativised in order to evoke a sensation and a meaning that speak of longing and time gone by. Derrida's ([1967] 1976:70) discussion on trace when dealing with Levinas' thoughts on ontology is illuminating for this context; namely that trace connotes "the alterity of a past that never was and can never be lived in the originary or modified form of presence". In the works, the objects with their traces do not exist as actual objects with traces; they are functionaries of "memories". Thus, the use of traces is a narrative strategy used in this spatial context to also evoke temporal narrativity.

Wylie (2009:279) notes the importance of traces and signs of human use to signify absence and presence:

The shreds and patches of things, whether treasured possessions or soiled ephemera – handled, venerated or discarded – all the traces of presence of those now absent are worked in such a way so as to show, synchronously, the absence of presence, the presence of absence, and so in the final analysis the threshold assumes the status of

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<sup>8</sup> Davies (1997:13) aptly contends that installation art is about the habitation of physical space, which in turn has a connection with real historical and social spatial experiences. The historical associations are addressed in next chapter dealing with characters.

an enlarged, uncannier zone of indiscernibility and dislocation, disrupting all distinctions.

This quote captures the consequence of following through on the narrative potential of traces when these traces (rather than simply the objects on which the traces are) become the object of focalisation – pointing also to the importance of transformation of things into signifying, narrativised components of a text. The transformative power of thresholds comes into play here, where the entry into the installation is one such crossing that finds its conceptual corollary in the transformation of objects into rust and trace, as well as the transformation of character, the latter which will be dealt with in the relevant section (4.6) of the current interpretation. These transformations have a bearing on the notion that spaces are in themselves, often, multi-layered – in the sense that “actual locations are many different ‘places’ at the same time” (Sheldrake, 2001:21). Here, a washing-up area is also a confined prayer room, and multivocalities (or a variety of agents) may be heard or imagined in this multi-layered space. One may add that places are texts, and signify in excess of what can be seen or understood at any one time (Sheldrake, 2001:17). This space, where simple domestic labour is performed, is also sacred: *ora et labora* made concrete. Ricoeur’s notion of hagiography, that sense that an ordinary space can be home to an eruption of godly or mythical activity, thus rendering the place liminal, seems apt here (see Sheldrake, 2001:40-41 on Ricoeur). Apart from being multi-layered, therefore, in a heterotopic sense, the simple area is invested with infinite narrative potential as a place where fiction and memory, prayer and labour all coincide.

There are a few more aspects that require consideration regarding the reading of space inside the cubicle of *Biegbak/Confessional*. When the participant looks up from the sink, another image is visible – this time a projection (from a projector hidden from view, slightly to the left on a high shelf behind the participant). The projected image falls onto the wall above the sink to show a window pane divided into small sections. Raindrops drizzle down on the window; a plain suburban courtyard is visible behind the raindrops. This is where the gaze of the person who is standing there, washing the dishes, is directed (and now, in this work, I the participant who is myself sees what this person would have seen). Again, the projection renders the space liminal. The simulation of projection, on a wall inside a cubicle

in a gallery, in a storyworld that relates a real as well as imagined narratives, act to heighten awareness that this space is narrativised on many levels.



Fig. 5.11. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003.  
*Biegbak/Confessional*. Still image of the projected looping video projection of the window showing rain drizzling down the window.

The projected image loops and repeats the same drizzling effect, every few seconds. Windows signify acutely; they symbolise an “other side”, a place beyond and a place of dreams – again, they signify thresholds and, conceptually, the possibility of different ontological positions. The window also echoes the Jamesian house of fiction<sup>9</sup> – as well as

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<sup>9</sup>In Henry James’ now famous preface to *The portrait of a lady* ([1881]2003:v), he introduces the window metaphor that resonates closely with what focalisation can do. In particular, the window metaphor explains the idea that agents see part of the story through their windows. The last sentence in the quote below where the reference is made to neighbours who “see the same show” may confirm that James’ metaphor of windows also points to an existing narrative, that can be understood as a pre-existing fabula, that is partially viewed and discovered by different agents – the notion that the fabula necessarily predates the text. This study contends that the fabula may predate the artwork, but that it *also* comes into being as an extended fabula in the course of interpreting the work. Nonetheless, James’ explication of different interpretations of what is seen, also in the last sentence below (“one sees black while the other one sees white”, for example) suggests that the window metaphor allows for variations of the fabula. The reference to the individual figures who look through their own windows and who are “unique instruments” of sense-making corroborates this. James’ explanation of the window metaphor is quoted at some length here:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine.

the window metaphor of focalisation proposed by Jahn<sup>10</sup> (1996) who contends that focalisation in terms of windows is determined by things like the shape of the window, the view it affords (both metaphorically speaking), but above all by the consciousness that looks.

Once again returning to the space into which the viewer-participant enters, it should be noted that one may experience a sense of transgression upon entering the work. Since anyone inside the art museum or gallery is allowed to enter into this space – which is narrativised as “belonging to someone” whose things these are, whose gaze the participant assumes, and the result of whose daily activities in this intimate space he or she experiences, the feeling makes itself manifest that one is in another’s space. When this happens, the spheres of public and private space are conflated<sup>11</sup>. Such conflation of private and public spheres adds to the sense that the agents inside the space (the viewer-participant, as well as imagined characters) are multi-layered in their presence and absence.

In Van der Merwe’s work, the washing-up area is in the obvious sense a private space. It is an inner space, with reference to its domestic inside-ness and intimacy, but it is also an outer space and not only suggestive of a mental space – i.e., a tangible arrangement of things in a cubicle – inside the gallery space – available to those wanting to enter it. The inner space extends to include the mind-space of the participant whose focalising transforms this space from an array of things into a place, and into a narrative. Here, Levebvre’s (1991:50) notion holds true: the “geniality” (Levebvre’s term) of spaces refers to the meaning of spaces that are socially negotiated and subjectively understood. A washing-up area in a real house is a place where the dishes go after a meal, and the social negotiation of the space here is found in the fact that the space in this artwork, as often in real life washing areas, is too small to accommodate more than one person. Thus the washing-up area in this artwork might be subjectively understood to “belong” to a person who is probably female (see Butler, 1990 for the performance of gender; this area plays into traditional divisions of household labour) and whose daily ritual of washing (others’, mostly)

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<sup>10</sup> Jahn, M. 1996. Windows of focalization: deconstructing and reconstructing a narrative concept. *Style*, 30(2):241-67.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, 1997:13 mentions this spatial transgression of public and private as a characteristic of installation art –also see Perry (2004:231) on private spaces in installation art.

dirty dishes is played out here<sup>12</sup>. Nonetheless, as also suggested above, there seems to be “more than one” person inside the cubicle – the viewer-participant and the person whose place is narrated.

The house with its intimate spaces is often conceived of as “a site in which female identity is always on the point of formation and yet also always on the point of dissolution<sup>13</sup>” (Smyth & Croft, 2006:24). Therefore the domestic space here provides a platform for reflecting about the identity/identities of a character – especially here the dimension of the implied female. Gender relations and the roles and identities mostly of women are “inscribed in the design, organisation and content of our houses” (Perry, 2004:237). Van der Merwe is aware of this genderedness – he speaks of the “masculinity” of the metal he works with that is used to portray “feminine” work such as washing (a recurring theme in his installations) and also work like ironing (in *Final inspection*; see fig. 5.12 and 5.13) (Van der Merwe, s.a.:24).



Objects from Van der Merwe, Jan. 1998.  
*Final inspection.*

Left: Fig. 5.12. *Clothes horse.*

Right: Fig. 5.13. *Ironing board.*



Since the hypothetical person whose domestic place this is, is absent from the artwork – and the viewer-participant is there, the obvious possibility emerges that the identities of these agents may be subject to a renegotiation of boundaries between their selves. However, this again hinges on character and will therefore be addressed in the chapter on

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<sup>12</sup> Van der Watt (s.a.:8) notes that Van der Merwe – in a “decoding of his metaphorical text” in *Biegbak/Confessional* – suggests that the washing refers to “each generation” that cleans up and tries to “start afresh”.

<sup>13</sup> The identity and gender of the hands washing the dishes are dealt with in the sections on character in chapter 6.

character (chapter 6) where the notion is explored that the viewer or participant, in these works, can occupy several positions at once (see Bal, 2010:72-73).

For the moment, other themes suggested by the focalisation and narrativisation of the space/place can be explored. Of significance here is the sense of nostalgia one experiences. Nostalgia, junk aesthetic<sup>14</sup>, a sense of romantic incompleteness – these are echoed especially by the use of rusted material. The narrativising potential of these material descriptions, when focalised, is revealed also in the temporal connections between the space and the objects in the space. For example, the work is *nostalgic* because one feels that the rusted objects and even the awkward intimacy of the arrangement in the cubicle refers to a time long past (albeit fondly remembered); the objects have been made precious and immovable in rust to concretise this feeling of longing. In this way the objects assume the stillness of preservation, and a sense of the archaeological and the timeless. The junk aesthetic here entails both the recycling of industrial waste (Van der Merwe gets his tin cans from a restaurant close by his house and studio) as well as a re-working of readymade objects such as the sink cupboard that is covered in rust.

Reiss (2001:22) notes that junk and discarded materials add a sense of the ephemeral to installation art, and Bishop (2005) emphasises that objects and waste of everyday use tend to evoke memory.

Furthermore, Geczy and Genocchio (2001:2) hail the readymade as the real beginning of installation art, since it works towards “*suspending* the utility of an everyday object, *enlisting* it into the halls of art and *engaging* the viewer into his or her complicity in the religion and game of art”. Van der Merwe’s use of readymades or found objects complicates the usual understanding of how these function as discourse-instigating institutional critique, among other things. (One needs only be reminded of Duchamp’s infamous *Fountain* of 1917 that illustrated how readymades work to suspend ordinary use of things, and invited the viewer into a philosophical game about the nature of art.)

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<sup>14</sup> As a critique of both commodity culture and so-called high art practices, installation artworks – like Van der Merwe’s – use junk aesthetic, i.e. “real” but discarded/discardable objects. This practice aims to bring art and life more closely together by referencing “non-artistic” materials in a manner that recalls the found object and the readymade (see Alexander, 2006:64-67).

Van der Merwe's readymades and found objects are not included in the installations "as is" without changing their appearance (Duchamp's readymades were often very slightly manipulated by turning an object around or mounting them, but the objects essentially remained in a fairly untreated state). Van der Merwe's objects are therefore not "bona fide" readymades because they are altered quite significantly, and exemplify what he refers to as the transformative alchemy of the artistic process. He discusses this issue in his Master's dissertation (1999:71-68) as well as in his catalogue (s.a.:17-21). He notes that he finds bits of discarded objects, but that he also incorporates objects that have been collected and selected for use in artworks because they have a personal connection with him (tables, chairs and the like). These "doctored" readymades or more accurately, found objects, are treated with rust and otherwise manipulated and interspersed amongst the hand-crafted sculptural pieces.

Everything he employs has been processed in some way and might well be equally "removed" from their possible original meaning / significance whilst simultaneously serving to evoke nostalgia in the spectator. The artist succeeds in deferring the process of ascribing meaning, and does so through the mediation of labour traces and surface strangeness (difference) that give rise to the narrativisation of objects (Derrida, [1967] 1976:62-63 notes that "*the pure trace is différance*").

Engagement by the viewer-participant is crucial because it reiterates that this agent's experience is responsible for appreciating the deferment and difference suggested by the traces. Also, he or she is directly responsible for the *transformation* of a material given (such as a found object) into narrativised content – a co-narrator with the artist who has transformed the material by covering it with metal and rust. Furthermore, the incompleteness of the material and the artwork as a whole is lodged in the processual nature of rust: it has been transformed by the oxidising process, and it decays over time, all the while both increasing in weight because of the oxidation, but literally losing particles and shards as these weather and fall off. The participant beholds the rust and appreciates it as transient and fragile, as a pointer of transforming and of time passing – in the sense of the ephemeral and memory-imbued material that Bishop (2005:26) and Reiss (2001:22) refer to. Finally, the processes that make metal rust are never complete; while time is, it seems, stopped by means of material, the continuing corrosive deterioration of the material

reminds us that time cannot really be stopped; it seeps away even if we cannot see it. In this sense, the rust as trace functions like an aporia: a trace signifies without making anything appear (Ricoeur, 1988:156).

However, before taking these rather temporal possibilities further, the current discussion introduces the exploration of the spatial narration and focalisation of the second work selected for interpretation, namely *It's cold outside* (2004). This work was positioned right next to *Biegbak/Confessional* in the 2013 show *Space and Time* at Oliewenhuis in Bloemfontein. During the walkabout that the artist conducted after the night of the exhibition opening, he commented on the way that the space inside Oliewenhuis allowed for the fortuitous placement of the two installations, since *Biegbak/Confessional* was made in honour of his grandmother, and *It's cold outside* commemorates his mother<sup>15</sup>. The two works, both dealing with significant female relatives, both intimate and domestically portrayed, are therefore in a dialogue. The characters who are implied here (and artistic intentions with their possibilities and complexities) are the subject of chapter 6.

Both *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside* create the sense of intimate spaces; use of such private spaces that also have feminine associations is often used by female artists<sup>16</sup>;

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<sup>15</sup> One does not necessarily need to know this; the works are very likely to evoke, in any event, older female persons who are (cherished) relatives. Since the paratextual information about the identities of these protagonists was shared by the artist on different occasions (during a 2012 interview in Pretoria as well as during the 2013 walkabout in Bloemfontein), I make use of this knowledge. However, it is entirely possible to perform a comprehensive interpretation of the works without reference to these specificities simply based on what is given. The role of artistic intent is discussed in chapter 6 under 6.2.

<sup>16</sup> Perry (2004:238) refers to the term "femmage" that was coined in the late 1970s to represent collage and installation-type work by women produced to explore things like "women's practice" and "feminine spaces". The artist-theorists Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer (1977-78<sup>4</sup>) posit that work qualifying as femmage must display at least a number of the following characteristics: 1. It is a work by a woman. 2. The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients. 3. Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work. 4. The theme has a woman-life context. 5. The work has elements of covert imagery. 6. The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates. 7. It celebrates a private or public event. 8. A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work. 9. There is drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work. 10. It contains silhouetted images which are fixed on other material. 11. Recognizable images appear in narrative sequence. 12. Abstract forms create a pattern. 13. The work contains photographs or other printed matter. 14. The work has a functional as well as an aesthetic life. Van der Merwe's work contain elements of saving and collecting, of scraps and of themes dealing with women's contexts; the work has "sewn" elements and are narrative – thus while the artist is male, his work can be aligned with that of artists working with women's issues.

compare, for example, Louise Bourgeois' *Passage Dangereux* (1997, fig. 5.14) and Miriam Schapiro's (b. 1923) *Dollhouse* (1972; fig. 5.15). *Dollhouse* was part of the larger project *Womanhouse* which was installed in a derelict house in Hollywood (in a feminist art students' programme headed by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago). "Womanhouse became the repository of the daydreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean and iron their lives away", notes Faith Wilding (1977) in the official website of the project ([womanhouse.refugia.net/](http://womanhouse.refugia.net/)). Feminine spaces in art (such as Schapiro's and Bourgeois') tend to expose private, female themes (Perry, 2004:237).

Van der Merwe's works therefore show a slightly unusual concern for these types of private, feminine, and especially domestic spaces and their being imbued with narratives of women's work and concerns, since the artist is male and the exploration of feminine spaces, especially the exploration of everydayness of such spaces, is more typically associated with female artists.



Fig. 5.14. Bourgeois, Louise. 1997. *Passage dangereux*. Detail.

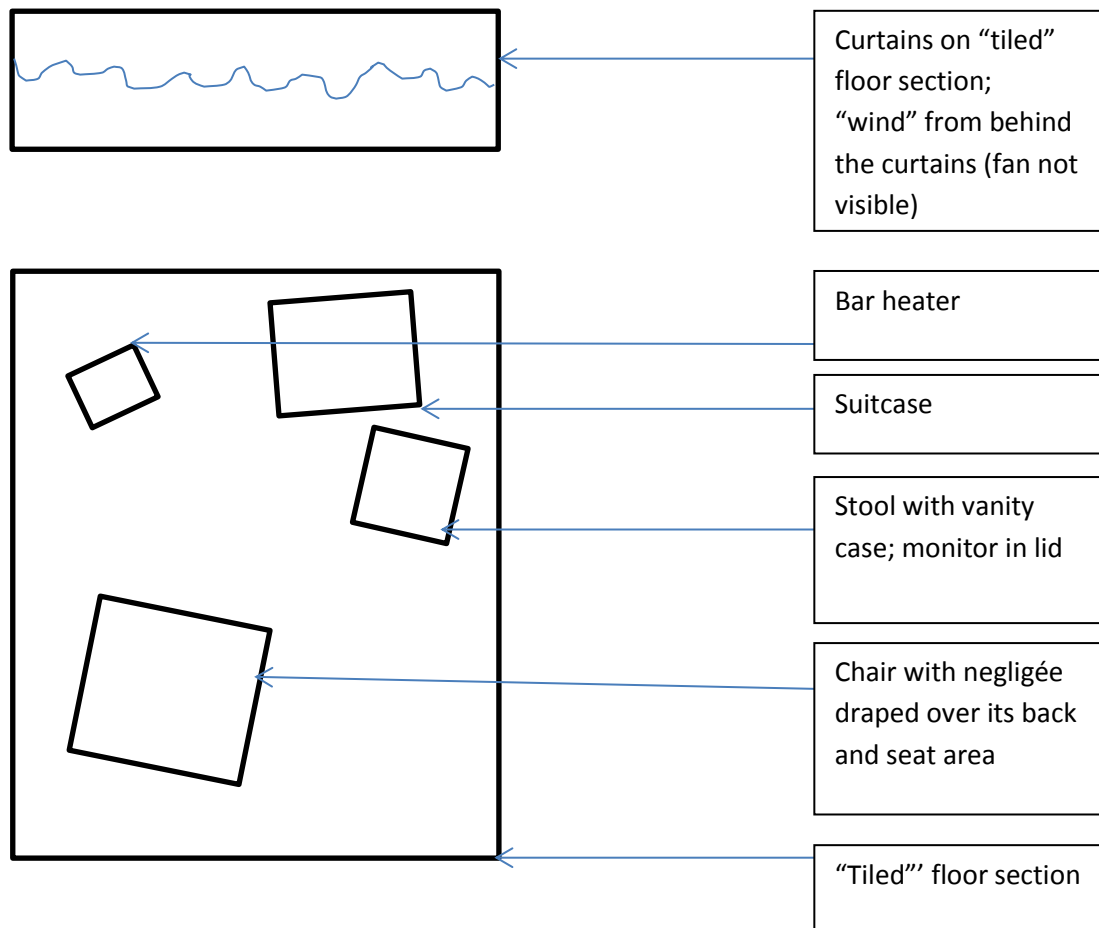


Fig. 5.15. Schapiro, Miriam with assistant Brody, Sherry. 1972. *Dollhouse*.

## *It's cold outside (2004)*

Diagram 5.3: Ground plan of *It's cold outside*

A ground plan of *It's cold outside* looks like this:



All the visible objects in this work are either made of or covered in rusted metal. The viewer's position may vary; he or she would tend to stand on the edge of the rust-covered floor sections and peer into the work. This viewing position interestingly allows one to almost enter the work, but not quite – because one does not step onto the "tiles". As is the case with all Van der Merwe's works, the convention of a gallery is not to touch. The tactile appeal of the rusted surfaces in view of this taboo stimulates tactile looking and the haptic imagination (see Bal, 2010:148).

The spatial configuration of *It's cold outside* (fig. 5.16 – 5.19) can be set out thus: the artwork consists of a chair (that is reminiscent of a dinner table chair made of wood - upright, with a “padded” seat and no armrests), over which a woman’s negligée is draped. Consisting of the same metal fragments as the rest of the work, made to rust and draped, the piece of clothing that clearly stands in for the absent female seems to slide downwards to where the shoulder straps touch the edge of the seat part of the chair. Clothes also stand in for people in Van der Merwe’s work: jackets or army uniforms for men, quite often, and delicate garments such as dresses or petticoats for women. The chair stands slightly diagonally on a surface made of blocks of rust in the size of floor tiles.

Facing the chair, slightly to the right, is a stool (a wooden structure before it was treated with rusted metal) on which a vanity case is positioned. In the lid of the vanity case, where one may expect a mirror, there is a small video monitor in which one sees a looping image showing the lower part of a woman’s face. Lipstick is neatly applied: first the one half of the upper lip in a sweeping outwards motion, then the other half, then the lower lip. And then the motion repeats, looping over and over (fig. 5.20).



Views of Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *It's cold outside.*

Clockwise, from above left:

Fig. 5.16. Installation view;

Fig. 5.17. Installation view;

Fig. 5.18. Detail of stool with vanity case;

Fig. 5.19. Detail of chair with negligée.



Fig. 5.20. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *It's cold outside.* Still images from looping video showing lipstick being applied.

Next to the stool with the vanity case is a larger suitcase on the floor. Like the chair, the suitcase is a metaphorical image that recurs very regularly in Van der Merwe's installations. For example, *Luggage trolley* (2004, fig. 5.21) features suitcases, and *Sunday Suit* (2003, fig. 5.22) contains a chair, and many other pieces in his oeuvre contain chairs and/or suitcases. The chair and suitcase in various ways stand in for people and seem to suggest, inter alia, both the idea of a journey and restful reflection. The notions of life as a journey, or of a person, thematised either as a man or a woman, leaving the safety of home find clear symbolic reflection in the suitcases. In fact, the journey was to transform the absent person whom this particular work memorialises across the threshold of death – it was the last time that Van der Merwe's mother would leave the house; she died shortly afterwards in the hospital.



Fig. 5.21. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2004. *Luggage trolley with Baggage arrival* (2001) in the background.



Fig. 5.22. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Sunday suit*. Installation view.

Some implications of this narrative thread are further explored in the section of chapter 6 that addresses the fabula (see 6.6). Bal (2010:105-6) notes that the viewer (participant) may find him- or herself co-producing, fleshing out the story (fabula) because he or she brings along his/her own baggage (the phrase "own baggage" significantly echoing the baggage so frequently occurring in Van der Merwe's works). She (2010:95) also notes that there may be an interplay between singular and more universal interpretations of a narrative or event: the singular can be seen as the universal, and vice versa.

In front of the chair holding the draped negligée, one sees a small bar heater on the floor. It is not connected to an electrical socket. This is another visual cue that this is not reality per se, but a storyworld in which real and imagined characters and fabulae roam. The chair faces a set of floor-length curtains made entirely of rusted metal against the wall. One cannot see the “window” that is covered by the curtains. Where the hem of the curtain “fabric” meets the floor, another section of rusted “floor” has been inserted. From behind the curtains, if one were to stand slightly to the front and left of the chair towards the curtains, a light gust of wind is felt; it is generated by an electric fan not visible behind the curtains. Hot and cold emerge as binaries together with inside and outside: the heater is placed on the floor, and the cool breeze stirs on the participant’s skin; so that one has inside and outside, warm and cold, here and there.

The narrativisation is clear: one would rather stay inside – because, as the title notes, it is cold outside. Van der Merwe noted in the walkabout (2013) of *Time and Space* that this area of the Oliewenhuis gallery is warmer than the rest of the space; this helps to generate a sense of cosiness inside and a tangible reluctance to go into the coldness outside. *Time and Space* was, quite serendipitously, shown in late winter in the cold Free State so that the coldness outside was clearly felt by the participants.

Light falls from the left of the chair, so that the red-brown patina of the rust that covers every inch of the objects glows; shadows play across the rust-carpet. Objects attain the preciousness of relics: it is a display of meaning-charged private things. The atmosphere is very quiet – not only because one is inside a gallery, but because this is someone else’s intimate space. The sense of closely scrutinising another person’s place and things, intruding into her space, peering across her suitcases, chair and negligée (a very personal item) gives rise to this feeling of silence. The correlative of this sensation the feeling of rummaging through another person’s drawer, quietly concentrating on the silence, because noise may indicate that one has been found out.

It is not clear where in a house this area would be or what type of room this is: the chair is positioned in front of a heater in a way that suggests seeking the comfort of artificial heat, but it is not a comfort chair in which one can slouch (Van der Merwe’s chairs are all upright, like office chairs or dining chairs). The stool with the vanity case next to which a suitcase is

positioned may suggest an entrance hall where one puts bags down before leaving (perhaps to quickly add a dash of lipstick, as is the case here). Much rather, one could suggest, the slightly odd combination of these bits of furniture and travel cases is not indicative of a specific domestic setting. Instead, it would seem that they have been organised in such a way that they will only make sense, and will begin to narrate, if the participant connects them conceptually instead of logically (e.g. to form a sitting room out of the overall *Gestalt*). Conceptually speaking, there is a dialogue here between the objects *in* the space, and between the objects *and* the space. This combination of objects and space suggests, for one, that the interior we are seeing is a non-space, an unreal part of a house. It is a house of the mind, a multi-layered space.

Trigg (2006:17) notes that: “aesthetic experience is framed by a correspondence between the object of aesthetic contemplation and the shape of the mind in which the object is recognized. As the two aspects converge, the exteriority of the object is seized through lived experience”. This may mean that the mind that focalises determines the shape and thus the meaning potential of the objects that are seen.

Regarding the outside/inside tension, it is worth noting that the title<sup>17</sup> only refers to the outside so that the inside is absent from the title, but the objects that make up the work are inside, and so – strangely – is the suggestion of an absent female person who applies lipstick. Everything is positioned to suggest invisible causalities between each other. The vanity case in which we see the face and lipstick being applied is turned to face the chair, which in turn bears the negligée – both the chair and the garment stand in for the absent woman whose image we see in the “mirror”. It is the space of an unknown woman, and her lips are (or were once) painted, it is she who feels, or who once felt the gust of wind and who senses, or once sensed the coldness outside. However, it is also the subjective “I”, the participant, who is inside where she should have been, or once was. This last remark introduces the element of figure, embodiment and character, but the discussion of time and space will for the moment refrain from engaging further with these at this point and return to the current concern, namely the narration of space and how it connects to the next

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<sup>17</sup> More elaboration on the significance of titles follows in the next chapter where the paratextual elements as functions of the artist’s character are explored (6.3.2).

element, namely time. An exploration of character follows shortly, although it is not always possible to keep the artificial divide between the elements in place.

### Space as a domestic place

The domestic interior, in fact, is a central stage in the everyday drama of humanity. Smyth and Croft (2006:12) note in their quirky anthology *Our house: the representation of domestic space in modern culture* that the house is such a fundamental part of our lives that there is something primordial about it – “something elemental hovering just below the surface”. Houses reflect both shelter and identity; the latter including human experiences, desires, fears and so on – indeed, meanings *in excess* of the plainly functional meaning of house as shelter (ibid, 13)<sup>18</sup> – the authors coin the functional, disciplinary meaning of a house masculine, and identity-related aspects thereof, feminine.

The house is often seen as a sanctuary that is flooded with associations like childhood memories of safe and comforting places; these often include remembering the bedroom and kitchen (ibid, 19). However, these spaces may be complicated by memories of their fearful aspects (such as the scary creatures of the imagination that live under the bed) and potential horror in the kitchen (hot stoves, sharp knives in drawers). As the narration of time and character below will demonstrate, the meaning of domestic space is lodged in the layered interweaving of memory<sup>19</sup> and everyday usage (see Smyth & Croft, 2006:21).

The addition of video loops in monitors (the washing hands, the lipstick application) and projection (the outside scene with raindrops) in spatial terms means that a physically embedded element with certain technologies associated with it, telling its own repetitive story, as it were, is added into an existing structure. This literal embedding of the monitor showing looping images into the fabric of the rusted surfaces suggests, on the level of

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<sup>18</sup> Slightly outside the confines of the present discussion is Heidegger’s extrapolation of being housed and homeless (physically as a corollary for the spiritual) which, according to Smyth and Croft (2006:15) implied a “romantic attachment with home and homeland which flirted dangerously with the principal political philosophy of his own time: fascism”.

<sup>19</sup> Van der Merwe’s works all function as sites of memory; in this sense, his domestic interiors recall the significant work *House* (1993, fig 3.34 in chapter 3) by Rachel Whiteread which explored the relationship between memory and domestic space. Whiteread’s work comprised filling the house of a tenant stubbornly refusing to move after his street had been demolished with white concrete and removing the outer halls. This *in situ* work exposed intimate personal spaces to public scrutiny and drew attention to the banality of everyday living routines, while almost heartbreakingly speaking of absence, memory and loss (see Moran, 2006:26-28).

narration, literally an embedded narrative. What these video loops do, and what the further implications are, will become clearer in the course of the discussion. For now it suffices to note that the moving images relate conceptually to the domestic (hands washing inside a washing sink, lipstick being applied in a situation that suggests a woman leaving a house) interiors and add a nuanced dimension to the human drama hinted at by the works.

Indeed, the house “represents a peculiarly privileged location for the enactment of the human drama” – even more so because it is the site of the “battle for subjectivity”. The house is not a neutral space (Smyth & Croft, 2006:16, 20). Furthermore, there is a deeply symbiotic relationship between domestic architecture and the experience of the people who inhabit it. For this and numerous other reasons, analyses of the house in sociological terms often tend towards a strong autobiographical impulse (Smyth & Croft, 2006:21). Van der Merwe’s domestic spaces seem to have this tendency, since the works addressed here are concerned with his recollections of his grandmother and mother respectively. Bachelard’s (1994:47; xxxvi; 17, 5 in Smyth & Croft, 2006:28) contention that “inhabited space transcends geometric space” points to his conceptualisation of the so-called “oneiric house”. This is a “synthesis of immemorial and recollected” in the sense that a house, any house, poetically considered conjures up distant autobiographical memories of the house in which we ourselves grew up. This house, in Jungian terms, relates to the “the shared, timeless past of humanity” (Smyth & Croft, 2006:28).

This argument is at the heart of the current interpretation of Van der Merwe’s work: that his spaces are densely layered and are likewise inhabited by layers of personas. In this manner, the washing-up area is both his grandmother’s area, an area in a gallery, a distant memory of my own (the participant’s) grandmother’s washing-up area (and of course all the layered associations I have with that space, together with the associations I infer the artist has of his grandmother) as well as the space of all the people whose labours in sculleries and other insignificant spaces are recalled. In short, the washing-up area becomes poetic, oneiric. It is both specific to Van der Merwe and his grandmother, and sufficiently mutable, even universal, that the meaning and ownership and connotations of the space can be filled, gap by conceptual gap, by me, the participant, as well as by my thoughts of others. It follows, then, that the narrative cues in the space, once connected by me, will have various

meaning-connections that are shared by most other participants but which narrate the space for me in a particular narrative sense.

### **5.3.2 Concluding remarks: space narrated and focalised**

The implications of space as multi-layered place in which the real and the fictional, the imagined and the historical can converge invite further consideration of whose narrative, and whose narration, is/are at stake. The transformation of space is itself an event (Bal, 2010:190). If the spaces in Van der Merwe's works are understood as transformed, transformative and layered, it means they can shift conceptually and even ontologically across mental places. Therefore, the place that the viewer-participant conjures up co-exists with the place that Van der Merwe had in mind. More than likely, these are places that may be associated with our respective grandmothers. It follows that if the viewer-participant stands in that space where the washing is narrated, or where the lipstick is applied, he or she stands in a place charged by narrative suggestion.

Part of this suggestion is that the viewer-participant, in this space, can get "under the skin" of different people, different characters. For now, it needs to be stressed that the layered quality of character that is inferred by the current interpretation of the works under discussion is reflected by spatial corollaries. The gist of the current argument entails that the spatial layeredness and mutability that inform the character mutability are characterised by correspondingly layered *temporal* shifts, because the space cannot be my grandmother's unless it moves back in time about four decades. Neither can it live in my imagination unless it is both permanent (like a cherished memory) and incredibly transient, like a sliver of time inserted into my consciousness.

In summary, and to answer the question as to how space as element of narrative is focalised and narrated, the following can be said. Space and the things in a space are part of the narrative apparatus (please refer to 4.3 on the nature of narration in film and installation art). Space becomes concretised into place by means of the focalising activities of the artist who placed things inside the space, who conceptualised the space and who manipulated the materials into narrativisable entities. From here, the viewer-participant focalises the space; understands it to become place with both "universal" and specific connotations. The spatial arrangement of *Biegbak/Confessional* as well as *It's cold outside* suggests intimate, female

domestic interiors in which simple, ordinary actions such as washing and applying lipstick are shown to take place. In these spaces, narrative suggestions have been planted and are understood as such by the viewer-participant, who activates these suggestions and begins to construct his or her version of a/the fabula.

Objects in installation artworks “invite[s] the spectator to *find stories* that will somehow explain the work. It has also been proposed that the actual process of viewing *constructs* its own “narrative”. As spectators move in and around the work, they *explore different viewpoints* – and explanatory stories – as they go along” [my italics] (Perry, 2004:234)<sup>20</sup>. Perry’s words highlights again two not necessarily incompatible views with regard to a work’s fabula (or story as Perry calls it here), namely that it is discovered or constructed; the former seems to suggest a greater level of authorial guidance and the latter places greater emphasis on the spectator’s contribution – in this sense the latter approach towards constructing seems to echo the de-centring process that Bishop (2005) argues for in her book *Installation art: A critical history*.

Apart from the spectator-participant’s work in connecting the various cues in the work that are narrativised because of their connectedness to each other, the entire process takes place with the awareness that the participant’s experience is (1) embodied in space; and that the experience (2) takes place over time (see Perry, 2004:235). A number of aspects pertaining to time are now explored.

#### **5.4 Time narrated and focalised**

Perry (2004:237) notes that “a house contains evidence of the intimate relationship between space and time”. Building a house may take a certain length of time, and the shelter function of a house suggests extended timespans as well as momentary activities that have emotional and spiritual corollaries. And inside the house, transitory moments as well as drawn-out activities take place. The temporal strategies that can be discerned in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside*, both “inside” an imagined house, are similarly

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<sup>20</sup> Perry (2004) refers to objects in the domestic interiors of Louise Bourgeois’ work *Passage dangereux* (see fig. 5.14) as well as to her work *Spider* (various *Spiders* were created by this artist between 1994 and 2001). Similar narrative evocations are present in Van der Merwe’s domestic interiors.

multivalent: drawn out temporal layers exist concurrently with momentary and transitory suggestions. In the works, time is therefore focalised and narrated, thickened indeed, in various ways. For example, time is halted, frozen or suspended by the rusted material as well as by the repetitive looping images that seem to stall time. In another sense, time is drawn out by viewing frozen aspects of time at length. Time seems to be contracted because a narrative that may encompass an entire life or large part thereof is focalised into narratives that are ephemeral.

Time is, therefore, also foreshortened because layers of memory are interspersed with the now-time of viewing. An important aspect is how the now-time of viewing (the present; see Bal, 2011:211) interacts with the other temporal manipulations. “The present ... doesn’t exist and it is the only thing that exists”, notes Currie (2007:8), so that this present is a site of apprehending time-space representations that display a diverse co-existence of temporalities.

#### **5.4.1 Time in the two installation artworks**

##### *Biegbak/Confessional and It’s cold outside*

Both *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside* suggest a range of temporal clues (layers, simultaneities) that can, with reference also to the discussion of space above, be extrapolated in spatial terms. As shown later (in chapter 6), time also relates profoundly to the layered quality of character. What Abbot (2007:49) succinctly calls “the burden of narration” (to refer to the often complex nature of the narratorial agency) is completely entangled with the spatial and temporal cues in the work. These create the possibility of an interplay of interwoven perspectives (Ricoeur’s 1988:207 term) not only of temporalities, but of experience and of agency.

##### *Temporal zones*

The time-levels in *Biegbak/Confessional* can be interpreted as large zones of temporal organisation that can be chunked together into three sections for the sake of argument. The first temporal zone is the time when the participant enters the artwork by crossing the threshold of the curtain – this is the “now”, and can be described as “real” time. Thus, it may be two o’clock in the afternoon, on a Wednesday in August 2013. Added to this, it may

take the interpreter thirty minutes to stand inside the work and experience it, while for a period afterwards he or she will rework the processes set into motion inside the work in order to revisit the work, mentally, again and again. These temporalities are grouped together as the first time zone. Time is experienced as integrated with space here; therefore temporal awareness here is embodied – in the participant’s body, who enters the space, and perceives time inside that space.

In *It’s cold outside*, the same three zones of temporalities can be distinguished. Again, in this work, the participant’s “now” with its historical situatedness constitutes the first time zone. In both artworks, there is a sense that one crosses a physical threshold into the space of the work that correlates with a temporal threshold. Crossing a threshold often constitutes a decisive event in a narrative (see Du Plooy, 2014); furthermore, a threshold signifies a transgression of sorts, as well as a transformation. Here the transgression takes place *into* the space and time of the missing character, and the transformation is lodged in the transformation of gallery goer to participant to character in the narrative. Other transformative experiences include the way in which temporal shifts suggested in the now-experience activate imaginary narrative and actantial shifts, often of characters that exist in memory. Trigg (2006:37) succinctly, even poetically, notes that “the passing of time becomes noticeable the more we are startled by the ruins of memory”.

The second overall time zone that can be highlighted in both works encapsulates all the various narrated temporalities “planted” by the artist – that is, the focalised selection of temporal nuances that he presents to the viewer-participant. This temporal zone can likewise be sub-divided into a number of temporalities. Firstly, there is the time that the artwork tells of: the era in which the person whose domestic space this is lived, and during which she may have entered her washing-up area and began work, or when she applied her lipstick while considering making her way out (an obvious link to the fabula can be seen here, because these temporalities are narrativised and suggest sequentiality). For both works, the time period during which the works “took place” seems to be located some decades ago (given the period-like appearance of the cupboard in *Biegbak/Confessional* and the shape of the suitcases in *It’s cold outside*). This temporal layer resists, however, an uncomplicated sense of historical linearity – there is no first this, then that, at times that can be pinpointed. And so consciousness is not neatly categorised into a clean temporal

symmetry; doing so would also allow for a centred sense of selfhood or personhood (see Trigg, 2006:35).

There is, as part of this second temporal zone, a sense of constant repetition and becoming in the looping image of the hands, making a circular (looping) movement in the sink. This ritual plays itself out over and over. The duration is approximately four seconds in each loop – and there is also the looping projection of raindrops making their way in a zigzag fashion down the glassy haze of the window pane above the sink (both these looping images are from *Biegbak/Confessional*). In *It's cold outside*, the video loop showing the lips having lipstick applied is considered concurrently here; the movement is circular, repetitive, a few seconds in duration. These temporal strategies, then, include repetition, frequency and duration (these strategies are addressed shortly in the section of Genettean time schemes). They repeat, all the time, every few seconds – without the slightest variation. Although the looping imagery takes place in the now when they are viewed, they talk of event-like happenings that relate of some time ago. Yet, by virtue of their repetitiveness, they seem to present a literal reflection, a meditation of what was, what is now and how that has a bearing on what is yet to come.

When these temporalities – those of the participant's experience in the now and the looping images that are physically embedded in the installation spaces – begin to converge, and to resonate in various narrativised terms, the viewer-participant becomes aware of even more intricate temporal layers, curls and shifts. These have to do with character and with concomitant ontological and historical circumstance. For example, the participant whose focalising processes are set into motion by the temporal narrativity of the work begins to experience him or herself *in the subject position* (and hence simultaneously in the different temporalities) of one or various absent characters whose varied and variable identities correspond with the temporal shifts are focalised.

This new and rather abstract temporal zone, together with the spatial layers suggested by the works, is imbued with a rich narrative suggestion that has multifaceted meaning-potentialities especially for character. Therefore, as Smyth and Croft (2006:22) argue, spatial meanings and character implications are “always in part an effect of a *temporal* shift (one which the observing subject is always obliged to negotiate) from past to present” (my italics

- LC). The temporal planes narrated in this second time zone can similar to those of the first zone (the time of viewing), be understood as thresholds – every time the interpreting agent shifts his or her focalisation between the monitor or projection and the rusted objects, a threshold is crossed and correlating temporal universes or ontological spheres are activated.

But, as noted there is a new temporal plane that comes into being when the past is felt to erupt into the present. In this plane, the now-time converges with the past more acutely than the case would be when one reads in the present about something that happened in the past. This is because the viewer-participant co-produces the narrative content so that there is a heightened awareness of shifting between temporalities, and between two worlds, in the process disintegrating the temporal and ontological boundaries between the two. The past and the present are imaginatively reconciled and the thresholds between the two become difficult to discern<sup>21</sup>.

In the third place, closely related to these temporal thresholds, there is a time zone embedded in the material itself. The temporal clues in this zone have also been planted by the artist, but the focus is here on the material aspects of the works. Here a number of temporal varieties can also be discerned. First, there is the rust that suggests time that has passed, and that seems to speak of a time long gone. This gives the work its archaeological resonance; the appearance of rust slows down time and stretches it until time becomes heavy and viscous; it may also serve to draw out the time spent looking to impact on the first time zone, that of the now-time. Then, there is the evidence of time-consuming labour in the transformed surfaces (the trace as indexical of the *work* of art – see Bal, 2006a:4, 32); and finally, as regards the rust, the ephemeral romantic quality mentioned above which suggests nostalgia, evanescence and deterioration (with reference to the idea of time slowly melting away) counterpointed by frozen time (a moment fixed, fossilised in rust). This,

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<sup>21</sup> These ideas on temporal planes and worlds were partially drawn from McGlothlin (2003:180-183). This author argues that a convergence of past and present is achieved in Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: A survivor's tale* ([1973] 1986) and *Maus II: My father bleeds history* ([1986]1991). In this graphic novel, the main character of the present, Art, experiences his father Vladek's narration of his Holocaust horrors in a way that creates a merged, abstract temporal, ontological and narrative plane in which present and past cross boundaries in a new story unique to the co-experience of Vladek and Art in the narrating situation. Van der Merwe's works achieve a similar feat, although the co-experience is achieved by an interplay between the viewer-participant, the artist and the implied or imagined characters.

incidentally, is one of the ways in which Van der Merwe achieves the “poetic moment” he speaks of.

These material qualities discussed thus far pertain to the nature of rust – the fixing agent that, like the image of a ghost, constitutes itself while slowly disintegrating. But there is another material temporality that adds further temporal strata, namely the videotaped looping images noted above as constitutive of temporal thresholds that also have a bearing on the understanding of character that is set out here. Time is dense; it transmutes and crosses the thresholds between the monitor/projection time (often called screen-time) and the time of the physical objects, doubling up upon itself but also merging into new understandings of (narrative) time (this interpretation is indebted to Bal, 2008:38 for the notion of doubling up of time). Because these material temporalities present themselves so urgently (through repetition of images, and through the persistent and overwhelming presence of rust), time is consistently foregrounded as a central theme. Time is a host of contradictions: transitory, archaeological, full of memories and essentially unstable – not least because it lacks a sense of boundaries between then and now<sup>22</sup>.

### *Genette’s understanding of time applied to Biegbak/Confessional and It’s cold outside*

If one were to unpack these three temporal zones (the time of viewing, narrated temporalities planted by the artist, and temporalities suggested by the materials) briefly by means of Genettean conceptions of time, a number of further insights are possible. Taking as point of departure Genette’s (1980:33) contention that “one of the functions of narrative time is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme”, one clearly deals in these works with temporal schemes belonging to different ontologies that are represented adjacent to, and in context of each other. Briefly, Genette refers to three large temporal aspects namely sequence, duration and frequency. Some facets of these that are relevant for the current discussion are highlighted below. Of importance is that Van der Merwe’s installation art (as visual art in general does) differs from one of the cornerstones of temporal understanding in literature – namely that the linguistic *signifiant* in a literary text

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<sup>22</sup> See Huyssen (2003) for an illuminating consideration of how fractured boundaries of temporal understanding impact on the politics of memory. This issue is outside the scope of the current discussion, however.

is necessarily linear. In visual art, the linear unfolding of time is not bound to one textual set of linguistic signifiers that follow each other in a set sequence. Rather, the viewer or participant engages with temporalities in a much more self-directed manner. In Deleuze's ([1968]1994:71, 80-81) view, time and especially the impact of repetition and difference on the understanding of time are closely related to memory and imagination. His contributions are noted in the discussion below in relation to the Genettian term of **frequency**.

**Sequence** in Genette's extrapolation (1980:36) is concerned with the order of events and is often characterised by anachronisms, which refer to discordances between the ordering of the story (reconstructed from the text) and the narrative that is presented. Genette proposes a hypothetical zero point where there would be an exact correspondence between the story time and narrative time. Any interference of this correspondence in the form of, for example, flashbacks, can be thought of as either objective (the story moves into the past and back by itself) or subjective (where flashbacks occur in a character's thoughts) anachronisms. In Van der Merwe's work, the given text – the interior spaces and their screen-based components – are objective only in the sense that they are provided in the artwork as text; once these begin to signify as temporally significant through the focalising action of the participant, they become instances of subjective anachronisms.

Sequential facets of time overlap with what has been posited in the current discussion as the first temporal zone (that of the present time of being inside the artwork) because the now-time while the viewer-participant stands looking at the washing-up space or the interior with a vanity case is embedded with an analeptic "then" (see Genette, 1980:40) as well as on-going "now" proposed by the looping images that proceed to move in the present while evoking another time<sup>23</sup>. Coincidentally, this now-time is also echoed and complicated by the rusted material – because the rust is deteriorating, fragmenting: it suggests archaeological, mummified or embalmed (even fossilised) time, but also time that slips away in the now as the rust imperceptibly continues its slow decay. In this charged

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<sup>23</sup> The way in which time unfolds at different experiential and representational speeds in the physical rusted surfaces and the looping images recall the passing of time in some versions of the tale of *Jack and the Beanstalk*: while a year or so has passed since Jack last climbed the beanstalk towards the giant's castle, only one week or so has passed up in the castle in the clouds.

environment, the monitors and projection of video images provide a clearly non-linear way of looking; Bal (2008:41) categorically states that “Video is heterotopic”.

While one does see the video material *now*, the actions portrayed suggest things that were actually done by actors long ago but that are nonetheless repeating in the present. The process of narrating, Grethlein (2010:325) confirms, is always posterior to what is narrated. The viewer-participant looks at something that works like a flashback, physically embedded in the material space of the artwork. (The fact that *recorded* images are used in the artworks helps to achieve the effect of looking at something that already happened.) Of course, the fact that the moving images are repeated constantly is acutely significant and will be dealt with in the sections on frequency and duration below.

Another issue regarding analepsis raised by Genette (1980:40) is the *reach* of the analepsis – i.e., in this context how far back this analepsis is from the present time of viewing. What is shown in the looping images suggests a person who performed this action (washing dishes, applying lipstick) fairly long ago – maybe a few decades. However, the looping images are *not* an image of that particular person, and it was not even shot during that person’s life (conceptually, the looping image “is” that person, but that person was not actually filmed) – so that there is another temporality with its own ontological difference, namely the time of making the video, and the actors used to re-create a fictive remake of the action shown. However, this is a contracted time because the works in one sense attempt to “hide” the time when the videos were made (an insignificant time compared to the time narrated). What is shown and seen is important, not the fact of shooting a series of frames that simulate an action that took place long ago.

Also, because the content of the looping images is related to the physical space in which they are situated (where the physical spaces make up the large temporal contexts or main story line and the videos can be read as flashbacks embedded in these), one can speak of a homodiegetic analepsis<sup>24</sup>. Although visual artworks are not linear in the way that literary works are, a sense of sequential unfolding in the midst of this temporal multivalence can therefore be postulated on a conceptual level. Interesting – although video is intuitively

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<sup>24</sup> Du Plooy (1986:197) explains that heterodiegetic analepsis provides additional information that does not relate to the primary story line while homodiegetic analepsis is more closely related to the primary story line.

understood as sequential, Van der Merwe's work undermines this aspect by making the video images freeze time through repetition: the looping images both freeze time and draw it out endlessly.

Regarding sequence, in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside* one is dealing with what seems like one very long moment (a roundabout movement of washing a pot, or applying lipstick to the right, then the left upper lip and rubbing top and bottom lips together). Sequence as a function describing "and then, and then" in a causal order implodes: the same thing is repeated and achieves a sense of folding time into itself. The meditative sense that the works achieve can be ascribed to both the constant repetition and the measured length of the time-span of each section in the loop – exactly as long as it would take to complete one cleaning sweep inside a cooking vessel or one swath of lipstick on both lips. This repetition causes a tension between expectation and experience (a phrase used by Grethlein, 2010:317). For example, experience teaches that after sweeping a cooking vessel once, one may make a different movement or turn it over, or after applying lipstick one may powder one's nose or put away the lipstick.

This creates an expectation that after some time inside the artwork one *knows* that one will be disappointed; rather, one waits for the next repetition – this next repetition has become the expectation, narrativised by repetition, spawned by experience standing inside the work and looking at the images. Sequence would have a bearing on the way the fabulae are expressed, for purposes of conveying the interpretation, in some linear fashion. This brings the discussion to the notion of duration.

Genette's (1980:87-88) explication of **duration, and specifically of the related notion of speed**, seems at first glance to be at odds with the nature of a visual artwork:

... the speed of a narrative will be defined by the relationship between a duration (that of the story, measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years) and a length (that of the text, *measured in lines and pages*) – my italics.

While a visual artwork does not have lines and pages, there are nonetheless different temporal lengths at work here – the length of time suggested by labour inscribed into the rusted surface, the time spent inside the work, and as noted above, the long moment shown by the video loops (a few seconds, then the loop begins again).

Between the time spent looking at the work and the time proposed by the video loops (somewhere in the not so recent past), there is an ellipsis (Genette, 1980:106) that is not definitely determined; exactly how many years ago these works narrate is not specified. This ellipsis can be seen as a window (metonymically suggested by the monitors and by the projected image of the window) onto a past, in a manner that evokes longing for that past (because in that past, the person associated with that time may still be there). The indeterminacy of the ellipsis is absolutely crucial here, because it is in this indeterminacy that the participant finds the gap, the subjective and focalisable aporia which is an abstract and fictional level, onto which to project *his or her* own version of the event, the time lapse. Indeed, the person who is absent and who is the object of longing is also projected into this lapse. In this way the participant can be said to long for a particular person's time – most likely his or her own family members but he or she may also feel a general longing for an unknown person.

Thus the temporal structure of duration helps to accomplish the participatory agency of the viewer-as-participant. From his or her focalising of this temporal complexity emerges also his or her incontestable position as *character* and sense-maker in the narrative. What remains to explore now is the strange effect of the repetition of the video loops in the context of the rusted interior. This has to do with frequency.

Genette (1980:113) discusses **frequency** with reference to the repetition of events – which may or may not be exactly similar – “what we will name here “identical events” or “recurrence of the same event” is a series of similar events *considered only in terms of their resemblance*”. Usually, things do not repeat without some form of alteration; hence Genette (1980:114) refers to precise repetition as an abstraction. Since the looping images in Jan van der Merwe's works are exact repetitions of the same event, these can be read as abstractions. This first point – that the particular use of frequency here entails an abstraction of time – can be further extrapolated with reference to a second important point, namely that: “Schematically, we can say that a narrative, whatever it is, may tell once what happened once, *n* times what happened *n* times, *n* times what happened once, once what happened *n* times” (Genette, 1980:114). These variations of frequency and repetition each brings their own meaning-making qualities to a text – but as argued below, the works

under discussion problematise these since, in the looping images on the monitors and the projection at least, there is no variation.

The monitors in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside* show exact repetitions of simple actions that are on their own entirely insignificant and yet, for some reason, utterly moving – emotionally speaking. The reason for this emotional reaction must be lodged, at least in part, in the subjective nature of the temporal abstraction (suggested by the exact repetition) of something very ordinary that happened frequently and which does not have much significance on its own (in every household, across the globe and spanning centuries, someone washed dishes and almost as often someone applied lipstick). The key is in how the frequency generates meaning through focalising this repetition, by narrativising it. In the paragraph above, the second type of Genettean frequency (“*n* times what happened *n* times”) conflates with the fourth type (“once what happened *n* times”). “*N*” times the telling takes place: the video repeats exactly the same thing (thus one could say it “happens” only once) but since the action is shown over and over it is shown *n* times – an infinite number of times, in this case. The act of washing dishes, or of applying lipstick of course took place so many times – in almost exactly the same way, every time. Washing the dishes happens, say, every night at eight, after dinner. Applying lipstick happens every time a woman would plan to leave the house. The video loops become moving still-lives that have in one sense an iconic relationship to the actual acts of dishwashing and applying lipstick.

### *Deleuze on repetition: time thickens*

Deleuze provides illuminating insights into some implications of repetition. He describes repetition as a transgression of natural law that favours a more profound artistic reality ([1968] 1994:3) – echoing Genette’s reference to exact repetition as an abstraction. Deleuze ([1968] 1994:17-18) interrogates Freud’s death instinct as a driving force of repetition; this death instinct causes repetition to be interpreted as symbolic. And, because it is symbolic and works with disguise, what is repeated cannot be represented “rather, it must always be signified, masked by what signifies it, itself masking what it signifies”. This notion of masking what is actually represented is important for the discussion on how the fabula is constructed (4.6), because the washing itself, or the lipstick being applied (the repeated) is not really what is represented. Instead, what is represented is a series of identical moments “which

necessarily refer back to a latent subject [the absent characters, for example] which repeats itself through these elements [Deleuze refers to the coexistence of physical and psychic repetitions], forming an “other” repetition at the heart of the first” (Deleuze, [1968] 1994:25). One instance cannot appear unless the other, an identical one, has disappeared. So, when one repetition disappears in Van der Merwe’s works, the imagination guides one to expect the same repetition to reappear.

Deleuze ([1968] 1994:70) refers to Hume’s thesis that “Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it”. Repetition becomes iterative. Furthermore, repetition opens up aporias between instances that are repeated, and in these aporias the difference between the present that is past and the reflexive past of representation can be apprehended (because, as Deleuze notes, difference lies between two repetitions). This apprehension of difference is achieved by means of an active synthesis of memory and understanding (this is reflection on the temporal spaces brought about by repetitions), that is “superimposed upon and supported by the passive synthesis of the imagination” (ibid, 71). Making sense of the appearing and the disappearing aspects of repetition requires memory, imagination and a multifaceted sense of time. For example, in Van der Merwe’s works the time of the past (what happened) the present (in which disappearing and reappearing take place and also doesn’t take place, because the repeated object is always already over) as well as the future (anticipating the repletion) co-exist.

The repeated actions shown in the looping images did not occur at the same time, so that every washing movement or lipstick application at once stands in for *all* the times when this took place. Hence the repetition works like memory that flattens everyday recurring events into one never-ending cycle of repetition, and to one moment of remembering. This is how frequency and repetition become abstracted: they become facets of memory and imagination.

Repetition in these works can be taken even further, following Deleuze. He argues that the present can be seen as a contraction of different dimensions. In this present, other presents succeed and encroach upon each other. Regardless of possible oppositions between successive presents, they can all be seen to play out “the same life’ at different levels”

(Deleuze, [1968] 1994:83). The same story is played out at different levels, with different resonances, in a way that transcends spatial locations and temporal successions. The difference between destiny and freedom, according to Deleuze (ibid.) is that freedom allows one to choose levels. On each level of the present a whole life may proceed, even though all the levels of the present co-exist and each present actualises a repetition. Furthermore, each present is a contraction as well as a relaxation of a whole. This means that “what we say of a life may be said of several lives”. Following this, the author argues that a life may replay at another level: the same past may be played by different agents singing the same tune on different pitches (ibid:83-83). What is important about this argument for the present study is that multivalent temporalities give rise to analogous multivalent narratives that involve various lives (or characters).

Furthermore, in the context of repetition, Deleuze ([1968]1994:125) notes that when two diverse stories unfold at the same time, it is not possible to privilege the one over the other. In short, each level of the present, each narrative, would be equal. For the interpretation of time in Van der Merwe’s work, this argument means that it would be possible to discern multiple narratives from the different temporal suggestions, and that these are all equal. It may be a case of a similar story sung in different pitches, but retaining the tune, to paraphrase Deleuze. For the interpretation of the way in which the fabula and possible extended fabulae are constructed in Van der Merwe’s work, this argument means that the temporal spheres contained in space, in the rusted material, and in the looping images work together to create possible narratives related to others who are not there, and to the I who is. Indeed, it would be possible to argue with Deleuze ([1968]1994:261) that to populate a world (in this instance, a storyworld in an installation artwork) with others may also mean to think of the other and the self in this way: [F]or it is not the other which is another I, but the I which is an other, a fractured I”. In the installation artwork, this fractured I whose others are problematised, narrativised and narrated, would be traceable to the consciousness and body of the viewer-participant. He or she would always experience the I in relation to the others whose not being present at the time of viewing, of experiencing and interpreting the temporalities, creates the gap in which fabulae can come into existence by means of focalisation.

#### 5.4.2 Concluding remarks: time narrated and focalised

This discussion of time narrated and focalised in Van der Merwe's work yielded the insight that there are multiple temporal suggestions in the works that have spatial corollaries. Time was shown to be foreshortened, contracted, drawn out – among other temporal strategies. Three temporal zones were identified in terms of time of viewing, temporal clues planted by the artist and temporal suggestion in the material. Time is multifaceted, in a manner resembling what Heise (1997:46) associates with postmodern novels: that the world cannot be structured along a common temporality. Heise (1997:46) considers human time as one temporality in a multiplicity of time-scales – here aligning with Ricoeur (1984:52) who notes that time becomes “human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence”.

All these complex, more humanised temporal concerns – also the way Genettean frequency, duration and repetition can be interpreted, as well as the three temporal zones identified under 4.4 above, point to an existential understanding of time in an existentially constituted storyworld. Time becomes meaningful through focalised interpretation of its narrativised meaning-potentials, by an experiencing subject (the viewer-participant) who is immersed within the various time-zones and who experiences the narrativised suggestion contained within these time-zones. Causality and chronology, as these traditionally co-existed in a meaningful way, are disregarded in a manner reminiscent of how time is represented in contemporary novels (see Heise, 1997:113). Instead of linear time, the works with their rusted surfaces, emblematic of both decay and transience, with their looping images that stall and abstract time, create a temporal dreamscape in which subjectivity and memory come unbound<sup>25</sup>. In this process, time becomes wholly subjectively understood – compare Ricoeur's (2002:38) statement: “(w)ithin-time-ness ... possesses its own specific features which are not reducible to the representation of linear time, a neutral series of abstract instants”. Van der Merwe's works achieve a reinvention of time in this fusion of temporalities. This fusion generates meanings and announces new temporal possibilities; a

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<sup>25</sup> Trigg (2006:134) connects the sense of decay found in ruins with the notion of dreamscape time – as opposed to the clarity of linear time.

series of liminal temporalities that, as argued below, conceptually works to facilitate the co-existence of a series of liminal characters or character dimensions.

Time therefore has a bearing on character, narration and on the reader, not least because temporal planes in postmodern novels (as in Van der Merwe's works) can be contradictory, unpredictable, even labyrinthine. In the postmodern novel, for example, repetition works not to achieve stability and unity, but contingency and dispersion (Heise, 1997: 53-59). Much the same is true for Van der Merwe's work – temporal planes intersect in unexpected ways and bring to bear implications for how the reader (here the viewer-participant) makes narrative sense of the works. Because the repetitive looping images, for example, work to suggest *present and past and future* by activating the imagination and memory, the repetitions can also be said to be pseudo-iterative: the looping images repeat the actions precisely, in a manner entirely impossible in real life<sup>26</sup>. Technology makes perfect repetition possible. The loops are “physically” framed, even nested, and create a humming sense of repetition that is narratively embedded in all the planes. These temporal planes (as discussed above) constantly intersect: the time of making, the time told of, the time imagined, and the time of viewing, as well as the abstracted convergence of temporal planes. In this convergence, memory and imagination can be acted out.

An interesting notion is that the repeated images in the monitors and projection would find a linguistic corollary in the imperfect sense (*she would ...* much rather than the simple past tense *she went*). This tense is associated with recall of things that take place regularly, habitually, of which the movements and the types of actions that are repeated in the works are examples. Also, this tense is used for ghost stories. The participant in the installation therefore assumes a reflective stance, imbued with nostalgic remembering, thinking about the absent person who “would always” do this and that.

It would be possible to speak of the temporal dimensions in Van der Merwe's works as transformative: the I who apprehends the works in the first time zone is transformed,

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<sup>26</sup> Referring to Proust's use of the pseudo-iterative in his repeated versions of events, Genette notes that: “their [the rendering of events] richness and precision of detail ensure that *no reader can seriously believe they occur en reoccur in that manner, several times, without variation*” [my italics]. Similarly, in Van der Merwe's installations, the repetitions in their exactly repeated form stand in for all the times the person performed that action, and become a subjective and existential engagement with the actions and the person they stand for.

mentally and emotionally as well as by means of memory, into a character in a storyworld. The role of this character is to co-narrate and to focalise the multiple temporal suggestions planted by the artist in what was discerned as a second time zone. Here the time as focalised (telling a story of decades ago) suspended in the looping images of the monitors and projection (frozen and repeated, yet transforming the mind of the viewer-participant) were explored. The temporal density (Bal's 2010:149-150 term) of the materials demonstrated that the suspension of time by rust as preservation material was counterbalanced by the deterioration of rust, which lends it an ephemeral, transient quality. In all, neither the rust (which gains while oxidising, loses particles while deteriorating) nor the looping images that never cease point towards a comfortable or predictable narrative ending. Instead, there is in these works the sense of suspension, what Troyan (1993:73) refers to as a "compulsion of imposed delay" which is, according to the author (1993:77) a filmic and narrative device that allows for re-enactment and remembering to be foregrounded.

The next chapter presents an exploration of different categories of characters that may be argued to people Van der Merwe's storyworlds in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside*. This next chapter also sets out to present possible fabulae that are constructed in the context of these works.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CHARACTERS AND FABULAE NARRATED AND FOCALISED

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*To live is to leave traces*  
Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates how the element of character is narrated and focalised in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside* – also taking into consideration relevant issues of space and time narrated and focalised. This takes place in the first sections of the chapter in order to, in the subsequent section, realise (a) version(s) of the fabula(e). In the previous chapter, it was argued that the works under discussion are multifaceted in terms of space and time: space and time are narrativised and layered in complex ways. Temporally anachronistic, the works also incorporate fictional as well as real spaces. Time and space transform and are/have been transformed – this transformational aspect informs the focalisation and narration of characters in Van der Merwe's works. This chapter also aims to demonstrate that this transformational quality informs the construction of fabulae and extended fabulae pertaining to the works.

Margolin's six points that have been adapted into the current interpretation are again reproduced below.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, W. 1986. *Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books.

**Diagram 6.1:** Margolin’s (2009) six points applied as methodological procedure

	<b>Margolin’s six points</b>	<b>That concerns</b>	<b>Appears in section</b>	<b>Chapter layout</b>
1	Storyworld construction	Time and space	4.3, 4.4 (space and time narrated and focalised)	<b>CHAPTER 5</b> 5.3 <b>Space</b> narrated and focalised 5.4 <b>Time</b> narrated and focalised
2	The focalising agents and the storyworld participants	Focalising agent(s)	Throughout, but especially 6.3-6.5 (the various character categories narrated and focalised)	
3	Evaluating, processing	Interpreting the narration	Throughout chapters 4 and 5	
4	Mental representation	Subjective construction of fabula(e)	Throughout, especially 6.6 (narration and focalising: fabulae)	<b>CHAPTER 6</b> <b>Character</b> narrated and focalised 6.3 The <b>artist’s</b> character category(including paratextual elements) 6.4 <b>Absent</b> characters 6.5 The <b>participant</b> as character group 6.6 Narration and focalising: <b>fabulae</b>
5	Textualised constituents	What is given in the texts, including paratexts	In 4.3 and 4.4 as regards time and space; especially 6.3 (paratexts and the author’s character category)	
6	Self-awareness	Self-reflexive nature of interpretation	Throughout where time, space, character, and fabulae are foregrounded and problematised	

The central questions that guide the current chapter concern the second point, namely the identities of the characters that inhabit the artworks’ storyworlds (the spatial and temporal dimensions of these storyworlds were elucidated in the previous chapter in answer to Margolin’s first point). The activities noted in the third point – namely that of evaluation and processing – permeate the interpretations of both chapters 5 and 6. The fourth point, namely the the nature of the fabulae that are constructed, is explored in this chapter. The fifth point set out in the diagram above receives greater attention in this chapter under 6.3.2 where paratextual elements are foregrounded. And, as was the case in chapter 4, the last point – that of the self-reflexive awareness of interpretation – is of the utmost importance also in this chapter since much of what is argued here about character concerns self-reflexive thought, memory and imagination.

As a preliminary answer to the concern of point 2 that is related to the “who?” in the diagram above, this chapter proposes that there are three character categories (categories, or even groups, because the sections that follow set out to prove that each character is, in fact, a multiple agent that functions across ontological boundaries).

These categories are:

1. the artist in various guises;
2. the person(s) suggested by the works, namely the cast of absent characters, and finally,
3. the viewer-participant who interprets (that is, myself<sup>2</sup>) also with a number of aspectual dimensions.

The subjective construction of the fabula(e) as noted under point 4 of Margolin's diagram is the task of the participant, but he or she takes his or her cues from elements presented by the artist in the artwork (textual constituents – point 5 in the diagram).

In order to address the various points in Margolin's steps that need to be addressed or addressed more fully, a number of specific questions have been formulated to guide the current chapter. They are:

1. What theoretical tenets can explain the character complexity identified in these artworks?
2. How is the artist, historical and/or implied, involved as a character, given the autobiographical impulses in the works?
3. What is the nature of the absent characters whose presence is implied?
4. Furthermore, how and why does this question have a bearing on the way in which the participant can be understood as a character?
5. Finally, how do these relate to the narration and focalisation of events into fabulae?

Answers to these questions suggest that the chapter can be structured along these lines:

1. A consideration of **postmodern characters** as proposed by Fokkema (1991) provides a number of salient character dimensions that guide how character in Van der Merwe's installation artworks can be interpreted and constructed (under 3.2)
2. This is followed by a discussion of **each character category** under 3.3.
  - The **artist's** character category is addressed first. Here, the artistic text and its narrative prompters (**paratextual** elements) that have a bearing on character, event and fabula are discussed with reference to Genette's ideas set out in his

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<sup>2</sup> While most of this interpretation is fairly subjective, certain statements are even more so. When statements are made that involve my intuitions, memories or associations. these will be presented in the first person.

book entitled *Paratexts. Thresholds of interpretation* ([1987] 1997). Paratexts will propose some elements that are also building blocks of fabulae that are more extensively explored in the second part of the chapter.

- The **absent characters** and their situatedness on different ontological planes follow. The themes of absence and embodiment inform the focalised construction of character.
  - The character role of the **participant**, who is also the **interpreter**, in terms of focalising and making sense of the narration is highlighted throughout and is considered in a consolidating discussion.
3. Following the construction of characters, an exploration of the **fabula** (under 6.6) and extended fabula is attempted – informed by the interpretation of character, and focalising and narrating processes. Absence as a function of memory and mourning informs some of these arguments.

Axiomatic to the interpretation is the understanding that space and time are layered and multivalent in the installations. For example, the spaces are both fictional and historically (re-)imagined, but they are also tangible and real – and they resonate with different symbolic associations as far as their domestic nature and their suggestions of absence/embodiment are concerned. These interpretations are understood to function as subjectively focalised components of the narration in the works. Time-wise, the installations present a series of temporal zones that are interpreted, through focalisation, as constantly transforming, folding back and abstracted temporalities. The readings of space and time lay the foundations upon which the interpretations that follow are built.

## 6.2 Dimensions of postmodern characters

In order to draw a theoretical framework for answering questions pertaining to character construction in Van der Merwe's works, Fokkema's (1991) consideration of postmodern characters is considered before the individual character "categories" are considered in light of her arguments.

So-called postmodern characters vary greatly, according to Fokkema (1991:15), but some tendencies of characters in postmodern novels can nonetheless be extrapolated and these tendencies can be usefully transposed to the characters in Van der Merwe's works. For one,

characters often exhibit qualities of intertextuality (i.e. the character is constructed out of references to existing texts); they may foreground aspects of plurality (of identity issues, or of worlds). Furthermore, there is no real consensus as to whether characters are, indeed, like human beings as traditional views held by authors such as Henry James would have it, or whether they are, as promulgated by thinkers in the linguistic turn, fragile subject positions constructed by means of language. Five specific issues related to character are extrapolated from Fokkema's study for use in the current interpretation. These are (1) human-like aspects of character; (2) the ontological status of characters, (3) characters as closed versus open entities, (4) multiple or fragmented selves in character constructions, (5) characters as selves in search of others.

A **first** point on character pertains to their possible human-like aspect. Fokkema (1991:19) contends that in spite of attempts that can be traced back to Greimas<sup>3</sup> actantial model (where the human dimensions of characters are replaced by actantial roles such as senders, helpers and opponents based on teleological relations), and given that variations between views of characters as textual-linguistic entities versus human beings do exist, the understanding of most critics remains that characters are "people". Some variations on this theme may include that authors either reproduce images of themselves in their novels, or they find a supply of character "stuff" in the actual people around them. Characters take on lives of their own, almost as autonomous beings (Fokkema, 1991:20). This means that there is an inherent overlap between the real world in which these people on whom characters are based live, and the fictional world that the text sketches and that the reader actualises in the reading process. Van der Merwe's works entail that the participant (who is an actual person) becomes a character, together with the artist's roles and the absent character(s) who have quite likely existed as real people, but who are now imagined and/or remembered.

This brings the discussion to the **second** point, namely that some overlap may exist between the ontological dimensions of character in the "real" world and in the fictional world of the text. A character may be metafictionally aware of his or her status as a character and may, to complicate matters, cross boundaries between fictional worlds or pretend to cross

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<sup>3</sup> For a brief overview of the actantial model and Greimas' points of departure in this regard, see Du Plooy, 1992b:3-5).

boundaries between fiction and reality (McHale, 1987:121-3). Significant for the current study is that in fiction, characters cannot literally cross these boundaries, but it may be possible to have a character (such as the interpreter of the installation artwork) *literally* crossing the threshold between the real and the fictional world in the course of entering the artwork and engaging with the fictional world set out in the artwork as text.

Also, the absent characters that are inferred by Van der Merwe's works, as with many installation artworks, may be said to inhabit ambiguous ontological ground (a phrasing borrowed from Fokkema, 1991:100) that shifts between their imagined presence and their absence recounted through memory and imagination (the artist's and the interpreter's). These absent characters are fictional constructs *and* real people whose lives are remembered and/or imagined. In this sense, Van der Merwe's characters concur with postmodern texts that "deconstruct the distinction between of [*sic*] facts and fictions" (Fokkema, 1991:120). Shifts in terms of ontological ground entail also intrusions of the past into the future; the stalling of time and space and the transitoriness of life and memory in spite of techniques that freeze time<sup>4</sup>. Characters that violate presumed ontological boundaries may even cross over between allegorical and 'real' (fictional real) worlds.

A **third** point that informs the understanding of character is closely related to the above two, namely that character has conventionally been regarded as a fairly closed entity whereas humans are open and unresolved (Fokkema, 1991:21). This is the case even though characters may be so-called round characters who are psychologically developed as opposed to flat characters who do not have this inner life, in Forster's ([1927] 1980) famous distinction. Such views of character have been challenged in postmodern fiction where the borderline between fiction and reality, possibly precarious at best, is often self-consciously erased or problematised. Such postmodern problematisations have been linked to the crisis of the self. Fokkema (1991:58) is, however, sceptical about the weight of claims that postmodern characters are necessarily violently subversive of more conventional understandings of character; it is a matter of degree of testing boundaries.

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<sup>4</sup> A novelistic corollary is the characters of Hawksmoor and Dyer in Peter Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* (1985); these characters "merge and reflect each other; they share quite a few signifiers" (Fokkema, 1991:142).

Part of postmodern characters' openness is lodged in the frequent use made of intertextual references to other texts, in ways that reconfigure the way a character is understood. Characters may be either partly or entirely constituted by intertexts, according to Fokkema (1991:186), so that the boundaries between textual constellations are challenged). Also, intratextual references between characters may cause the selves of characters to have unclear boundaries (Fokkema, 1991:148).

Paratextual elements (titles and preface-like statements, as well as anecdotal evidence) as well as the participant's own associations and connotations (historical, affective, cognitive) inform intertextual inferences in the context of Van der Merwe's works. These intertextual elements help to guide the focalisation and narration because they function like cues, but are slanted to encapsulate a subjective point of view. Furthermore, the discussion below will demonstrate that the works allow for, even invite, open character construction that entails perforated boundaries between character dimensions.

Related to the notion that the self may be in a state of crisis are postmodern characters that have multiple selves or at least a fragmented self. This is a **fourth** point about character that is important for current purposes. A character may be an autonomous agent while simultaneously displaying a tendency towards being dispersed, disintegrated or otherwise not unified (Fokkema, 1991:63). A more extreme dispersal of character essence would be the Derridean sense of character floating about fictional structures as part of a discourse; a grammatical subject constituted in language; Fokkema (1991:64, 69) contends that "postmodern characters appear to hover between representation [in the mimetic sense] and presentation" – the latter referring to the constitution of characters by language. Most postmodern characters show a tendency to search for their identities in the context of their having multiple and fragmented selves (Fokkema, 1991:70).

An extension of this point pertains to the construction of character. Characters are usually constructed in the reader's mind based on physical descriptions (omitted in Van der Merwe's works), first names (in these works, names are not given for the absent characters; the artist's name and the interpreter's, as well as names they remember or imagine may come into play) and the like. Such omissions occur sometimes in postmodern fiction. Characters are also constructed around metonymical inferences; these are the fragments

from where characters can be imagined in the text. Therefore, postmodern characters, like most characters in fiction, are incomplete – but perhaps more so in some postmodern fiction. They therefore require much input from the reader or interpreter to come to life. In Van der Merwe's works, metonymical fragments such as washing (in *Biegbak/Confessional*) and applying lipstick (in *It's cold outside*) are incomplete events that stand in for something more profound about the nature of the characters.

Person types, bits gleaned from actual persons, as well as aspects of the self may blend in the creation of character (Wellek & Warren, 1949:89 in Fokkema, 1991:27) – supposing this refers to the author's construction. Similarly, this study argues, the (re)construction of character in the mind of the interpreter may draw on these sources from various people in his or her imagination. Indeed, character is “abstracted from the text” and can be seen as embedded in the texts while also being detachable from the text (Fokkema, 1991:28, 29; she also refers to Hochman's views on character). Indeed, readers may retrieve characters from a text that they are reading in a very subjective and personal manner – “utterly ‘detaching’ them, so to speak” (Fokkema, 1991:42). In this process, the reader may add attributes to a character by applying codes and so on from the real world – attributes that are not necessarily inscribed in the text or even running counter to textual information<sup>5</sup> (Fokkema, 1991:47, 48). This means that the reader is the locus of character construction, especially in contexts where one looks at subjective interpretations of *scriptible* texts (Barthes' term again; see Fokkema, 1991:61). In Van der Merwe's works the reader may attribute qualities to characters (to the artist's dimensions as well as to those of the absent characters) that emanate from memory, or from probabilities in the real world – so that if *it's cold outside* and *one applies lipstick*, inferences can be made that one is apprehensive about the cold, that one is a refined lady who would apply makeup before facing the outside world.

Finally, in the **fifth** instance, postmodern characters are selves in search of others. The many selves, or diverse aspects of the self, and the lack of coherent boundaries between selves and others culminate in a state that is not either/or but rather either/and; difference may be at the basis of the self (see Fokkema, 1991:179). The self, like character(s) of a story, is in process of becoming, of discovering secrets, and unveiling possibilities that can be

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<sup>5</sup> This happens when, for example, a fair heroine is visualised as having dark hair (Fokkema, 1991:48).

actualised in the process of interpreting the text. This last point is a salient one in the context of Van der Merwe's characters; a host of presences "live" inside the viewer-participant in whose imagination and memory characters become, and whose experience of a self as an other is a culmination of this imaginative process.

## 6.3 The artist as character

### 6.3.1 The authorial role of character focalisation

How can the artist (i.e. Jan van der Merwe) also be a character in the installations under discussion as hinted at in the introduction to the chapter above? How does he relate to the fictional world of the texts? As a preliminary argument, this chapter proposes that the artist is a character in the works specifically, in the guise of the implied artist and co-narrator, as well as a real historical person (comparable with the historical author/artist) *and also* therefore in the role of a fictional absent character. This means that the artist's character is a conflation of many functions that are worthy of separate contemplation, but whose integrated existence in the reading of the artworks adds a special dimension to the works. Of importance, also, is that Van der Merwe assumes the guise of an autobiographical character who is *not* the hero of the narrative, neither is he positioned on the centre of the conceptual stage of the work (compare Genette, 1980:259 who suggests that an autobiographical work usually presupposes the author-as-hero). In fact, in a truly installation art-like and postmodern inversion of the artist-as-hero, Van der Merwe *de-centres* all aspects of himself and becomes a marginal character in his own works<sup>6</sup>.

Nonetheless, in walkabouts and the like he generously offers his version of what the works are "about", and thus provides a great deal of information that can be problematically linked to intention. The problem arises as to what a serious student of his work should do with such information. What has been heard certainly cannot be unheard – and his version of the story does not necessarily obliterate my version, or the marvellous array of character dimensions that I can imagine in the context of the works – but it may add to the interpretative avenues that I can explore. Indeed, hearing the artist's version could deepen

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<sup>6</sup> This renegotiation of margins and centrality recalls the British seventies playwright Paul Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) where two marginal characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* become the central focus of a new play.

the sense of empathy and endearment that his works tend to generate – and sets up possible tensions between characters, such as between the real (grandmother) and the (grandmother and generally women like her) characters – with the added dimension of doubly fictionalised characters (that his grandmother recalls from a radio show) for whom she prayed alongside her prayers for her family. These characters are explored under 6.4.

Taking an artist's version into account when interpreting the work is therefore, on the one hand, related to the problem of what to do with intention, famously problematised by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their 1946 publication *The intentional fallacy*. To incorporate intention not only compromises more formalist/strictly "academic" (read "objective") approaches and the later "death of the author"<sup>7</sup>-based interpretative angles, but also complicates the position of the artist in the work. Arguing for artistic context, Perry (2004:239) feels that, when interpreting especially autobiographically-based installation art, certain meanings can actually only be accessed once one has knowledge of the artist's biography and some intentional pointers provided by him or her (this notion explains why many installation artworks are accompanied by textual statements)<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, a more profound understanding of such works can arguably be achieved by this type of knowledge. Biographical knowledge, intentions and other textual elements function like the paratexts of literary art forms – front matter, biographical and other contexts, interviews, prefaces, blurbs and so on (everything that is not strictly part of the text as such) are paratextual elements. Nonetheless, different interpreters will very likely still attach different meanings to the various components of the artworks, in spite of such knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> Barthes, R. 1967. The death of the author. Originally published in *Aspen*, 5-6. Barthes writes: "It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice [writing the words that one reads], consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (page 1 of internet version). While Barthes argues against attributing the voice that writes to the actual person with his or her vices and so on – thus countering somewhat my argument that Van der Merwe the man *is* also complicit in the artworks as a character, his argument of 'many voices' is not entirely unrelated to what I am arguing here.

<sup>8</sup> Bal (2006b:236-263) also engages with intentionality, calling it "a concept we hate to love". Her take on the matter entails, among other views, that the reception-like work of the focaliser outside the artwork – the viewer – is crucial, perhaps more so, than trying to figure out the artist's intentions. Also, she suggests that the "instance of response constitutes a narrative" (2006b:257).

In the end, Perry (2004:239) contends, biographical or intentional knowledge “is not a prerequisite for reading the work”.

A preferred provisional answer regarding the artist’s biography for the current study is that one can use such paratextual knowledge if it is available (also see footnote 15 in chapter 5). The complexities surrounding authorial intention, however, require a brief consideration of the notion of the author of the text (whose authorial position I here relate to that of the artist’s)<sup>9</sup> in order to gauge how and why the artist can function as a type of character in the works under discussion.

The distinction between the historical author or artist and the implied author/artist, and also the narrator has been introduced by Booth ([1961] 1983) whose understanding of the implied author refers to the “author contained, but not represented, in a work” (see Schmidt, 2013:4). It is therefore situated between the narratorial function and the real author, and is a reader-generated construct. “The author’s image ... is the concentrated embodiment of the work’s essence” as well as the “ideal-stylistic center” [American spelling] of the work (from Vinogradov’s posthumous notes [1971] quoted by Schmidt, 2010:37).

This notion was taken up by scholars such as Mukařovský who also distinguished between the biographical person and the creative corpus of work bearing his or her name. However, Booth’s ([1961] 1983) more famous term “implied author” has gained much currency and has been refined – not without controversy – by a number of authors. Schmidt (2010) highlights: Nünning (1989), Rimmon-Kenan (1983) and Chatman (1978), among others. Without attempting to address the diverse reactions to, and criticisms of this concept, it suffices for the present discussion to note the following:

1. The concept “implicit author” is useful insofar as it renders understandable the artist’s body of work as a whole, as an oeuvre with connecting concerns such as recurrent themes, motifs and characteristic use of materials. It can also be regarded as a contractual paratext, as noted in section 2 above. Hogan (2012:51) adds that the implicit artist’s oeuvre (Hogan applies the term implicit painter to his reading of the

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<sup>9</sup> In the chapter on installation art (chapter 3) I have already referred to the author’s or artist’s position; this discussion relates to that section and highlights further aspects of this issue.

works of the Indian painter Rabindranath Tagore [1861 – 1941]) is present in our understanding of an individual work<sup>10</sup>.

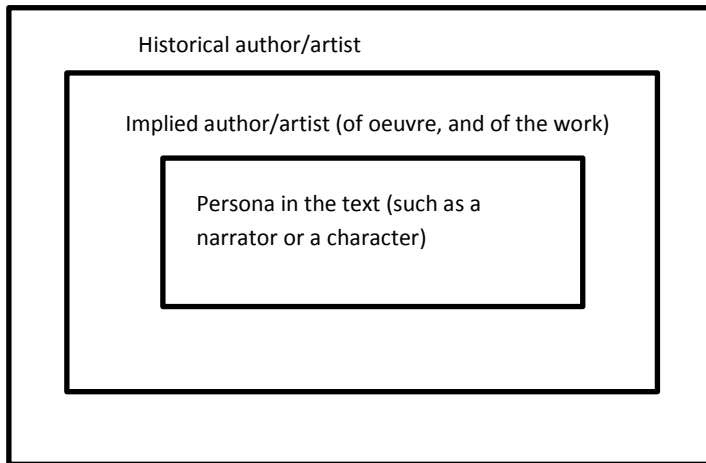
The notion of oeuvre provides an understanding of continuity in an artist's work – of what one can call canonical implied authorship of the oeuvre, versus “subordinate” implied authors of each work (Hogan, 2012:59-60). This is related to Bal's (2006a) explication of Rembrandt's works. A reading of Rembrandt's paintings (or etchings), for example, is informed by a broader awareness of the artist's output as a cultural text “rather than a historical reality” (Bal, 2006a:8) – by an awareness of his output as the implicit artist, I would add. For Bal (2006a:7-10) “Rembrandt” signifies the corpus of work or the oeuvre, the entire tapestry of associations with and responses to the artist as genius and master of high art. Therefore, the notion of the implicit artist (or, of course, author) can be related also to Foucault's questioning of the author-function which bears the likeness of a signature in our projection of knowledge of that author onto an individual work: “A text has inaugurative value precisely because it is the work of a particular author, and our returns [to the meaning of the discursive practice that relates the author to his/her work] are conditioned by this knowledge” (Foucault, 1969:332).

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<sup>10</sup> Hogan (2012:62; my italics) takes this matter of the implicit artist into the field of reception: “Recall that the implied author is, so to speak, the real author's *receptive intent*, his or her experience of the work as a reader—or, in this case, his or her experience of the painting as a viewer”.

A schematic representation of this state of affairs may look like this:

**Diagram 6.2: The author's functions**



These three are distinct functions in a text, each with their own ontological position. However, when texts with an autobiographical quality are considered, as is the case with Van der Merwe's work, the boundaries that keep the functions apart seem to be perforated by the osmotic exchange of functions between categories – in a manner that suggests transgression of the lines that pertain to keep each in its place<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, the historical artist himself imposes on, or extends himself into the implied artist's space, and this may even suggest that the narrativised space and time are both his and the implied artist's. (This is related to what Genette [[1972] 1980:201; 234-5] refers to as a plural or polymodal state of narrative metalepsis, where one is inside and outside, and transgressions between different diegetic universes are achieved in spite the seeming insurmountability of such transitions.) And therefore the artist can be imagined as being, at certain shifting points in the narrative, one of the absent characters proposed by the work. Quite clearly it would also appear that Van der Merwe's works challenge the distinction between the canonical implied artist and the "subordinate" implied artist of the particular work, because the highly personal suggestion of his presence in the works may but does not

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<sup>11</sup> See also Pier (2010:13); drawing on Genette's exploration of the functional relations between author, narrator and character; Pier notes that "[i]dentity between the three characterizes autobiography".

have to imply exactly the same historical and implicit artist. He is “present” in the works as a character who is, like the central female absent characters, nonetheless suggested. He is also present in the embodied traces of the rusted surfaces that he made, in his name that is written next to the works and pasted up on the wall, and as the discussion will show, also in the screen in *Biegbak/Confessional*. Absent, like “all” authors are; “present” like in some installation artworks where the boundary between performance and installation is sufficiently vague to attribute a character function to the artist. (Compare, for example, Acconci’s *Seedbed* where the artist is invisible – absent – but also audible – and thus present; he is an active agent in the narrativised unfolding of events; he even creates a causal link between himself and the participant since he ‘responds’ to movements by making noises. Therefore, Acconci is clearly a character.)

What is important for the current discussion is that the historical author or artist, and the author/artist as a “real person” are usually distinguished from the “inferred authorial element” – the implied or abstract artist/author (Schmidt, 2010:43) of a work. Thus “Jan van der Merwe” is the artist and public persona known for his installations featuring rust-covered interiors “peopled” by absences and liminal spaces (see Kruger & Van der Merwe, 2010; Hundt, s.a.; Boshoff, s.a.). He is also a real person who lives in Pretoria whose female relatives, and his memories of these relatives, are invoked by *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside*.

The autobiographical dimension here gives rise to what Genette (1980:213) concedes as “perhaps [a] legitimate” confusion between the “writing author” and the “author” (another distinction between the different personas of an artist) – and, significantly, also between the recipient of the narrative and the reader (who is here cast in the role of participant-character). In summary, the artist transgresses the boundaries between implied artist, historical artist, narrative agent and character in these installations (without assuming a the role of the protagonist, as works with an autobiographical bent often do – also see Firth, 2011:573). Rather, he assumes several more peripheral positions – or fulfils the role of various agents in the narrative. He also appears on different ontological levels and in so doing blurs the lines between fiction and reality, and between historical/real and implied/imagined.

The autobiographical element that informs the artist's choices, and thus his focalising processes, introduces a complication, or rather a conflation, of the notions historical artist, implied artist (the corollary of implied author), character and also the narrating function, in which this character category play a role since he "planted" the narrative cues. I have argued in chapter 4 that the narration in installation art proceeds from the connectedness between the various elements or cues in the artworks as selected and placed there by the artist, but the influence of the autobiographical angle of the work is also pertinent here in the sense that the work is imbued with the presence of people related to the artist in significant ways (in the works I discuss here, his mother and grandmother).

The artist is therefore implicitly present in the works – however, importantly, not only as the implicit author whose canonical presence can be recognised by means of recognisable themes and materials, for example – but also as a real historical person whose work speaks of real historical people (as well as the interpreter's imaginings of these people – this layered character manifestation will be addressed throughout the discussion).

A discussion of paratextual elements concerning *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside* will bring to the fore pertinent authorial issues that pertain to the works.

### **6.3.2 Paratextual elements – titles, prefaces and artist's statements in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside***

The question arises: how can paratexts be interpreted as focalisable or narrating meaning-making devices that relate the author's various positions in Van der Merwe's installation artworks, or in installations in general? The Greek preposition "para-" means "sideways", or "stepping aside in order to see", according to Bal (2006b:258). In this sense, the paratextual elements may be said to fulfil a Derridean supplemental role: paratexts point to the absence of the author who produced them. Being the only written parts of the works (titles, preface-like statements and so on) these paratexts also exemplify some of the issues associated with writing as added to, supplemental to the spoken word (see Derrida, [1967] 1976:144). The paratexts are also supplemental in the sense that they are de-centred; the supplement does two things: it "adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence". Furthermore, the supplement "adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; it fills, it

is as if one fills a voice. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence” (Derrida, [1967] 1976:144-5). These thoughts illuminate the paratextual elements in Van der Merwe’s works (and other works) from a different angle: perhaps paratexts as supplements play an even more pertinent role than one might have suspected.

This section therefore interrogates titles and other linguistic/written textual material that accompany Jan van der Merwe's artworks in order to extrapolate how these contribute to narration, to the artist’s role as character (or character category) and to the focalised construction of the fabulae. This last point, namely possible relationships with the construction of the fabulae, is presented under a final sub-heading of this section. Issues of content and style are taken into consideration.

Four types of paratexts are considered, namely (1) the artist’s statement of the *Time and space* exhibition, (2) titles of artworks, (3) preface-like statements that accompany works<sup>12</sup>, and (4) biographical information (including anecdotes supplied by the artist) and the name of the artist. Finally, initial possible fabulae are offered.

### *Title of the exhibition and the artist’s statement*

The **title of the exhibition** directs the gallery goer’s understanding of the broad theme of the exhibition. In the instance of *Confessional/Biegbak* and *It’s cold outside*, these were shown as part of the 2013 exhibition *Time and Space* as well as in 2006 as part of the Pretoria exhibition *The Archaeology of Time*. Thematic concerns of time, space, and archaeology have been identified as regular features of Van der Merwe’s work and are pertinently named in exhibition titles.

The statement to *Time and Space* at the entrance of Oliewenhuis contained the following:

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<sup>12</sup> These statements that accompany individual works are not artist’s statements as such; the latter are typically broader statements by the artist and usually refer to an entire exhibition – overarching themes, current concerns and so on.

# Time and Space

Installations by  
Jan van der Merwe

“At present I work with artifacts<sup>13</sup>[sic] of our time and attempt to transform them into archaeological remnants ...

The tin cans are ordinarily used for preservation.

The fragile rusted tins in these works become metaphors for waste, loss and consumerism. Their use may be seen as an attempt to “preserve” something transient and vulnerable.”

- Jan van der Merwe

The narrating voice in this statement, as also with the preface-like statements discussed below, seems to be that of the (historical as well as implied) artist. In other words, the artist is the guise of text present in the narration of the artworks while much of the overall narration takes place, as was argued in the sections on space and time, in a de-anthropomorphised fashion through the interconnected and narrativised elements inside the works.

Illocutionary information presented in artist’s statements and other statements can make known intentions, even interpretations by the author (in the guise of the implied author/artist, or by the publisher – in the case of an art exhibition, by the curator or other gallery official tasked with things like press releases). The functions of paratexts such as

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<sup>13</sup> The spelling used here (artifacts) is also used by the American translation of the Prague structuralist and semiotician Mukařovský’s ([1934] 1976) publication *Art as a semiotic fact*.

these vary, but generally the idea is that paratexts have a **contractual** aspect: they create expectations, work with conventions, serve as disclaimers, introduce themes and so on – all with effects on the addressee. In Van der Merwe’s case, the words are his – so that the artist/author’s role in meaning-making also on this level is foregrounded.

Incidentally, even the addressee is a complex matter here, as is the case when considering the various types of readers<sup>14</sup> in narratology, but on a different level here. The addressee is either the general public (everyone passing by a gallery or museum like Oliewenhuis and who sees the name of the show on the outside walls) or the public who visit the gallery<sup>15</sup> (a smaller number of people) or those who take the trouble to get to know more about the artist from websites, radio interviews and so on (again, an even smaller and more focused number – more like the notion of the ideal reader, perhaps). The transformation of the addressee into participant and into character can be mentioned here, although the section on the participant’s character explores this in greater depth (under point 6.5).

### *Titles of artworks*

Genette’s (1997:55-64) discussion of titles does not yield a definition proper, but rather an overview of components of a title – sub-titles, genre indications and so on. Generally, however, the title of a text (and of an artwork, by extension) is taken as (1) an identificatory device – it is the name by which the work is known, and also (2) an indication or commentary by the (implicit) author that the work should be approached with the particular signifying, mediating concept the title suggests in mind. In works with biographical or autobiographical content, the boundaries between the implicit and historical author become permeable – as Van der Merwe’s works suggest. Since the works are based on his versions of particular people, the actual event(s) or other connotations that gave rise to the works have a bearing on the titles. Without his memories of these people, the works could

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<sup>14</sup> Prince (2013:2-23) highlights various readers: Booth’s ([1961] 1983) postulated reader, Iser’s (1972) implied reader as well as the so-called ideal reader, and Eco’s (1979) model reader. Related terms are the narratee (Chatman, 1978; Prince 1987) and Rabinowitz’s (1977; 1987) term narrative audiences.

<sup>15</sup>The official exhibition report on *Time and Space* notes that “Oliewenhuis Art Museum received an exceptional number of visitors with 151 people attending the exhibition opening, 53 attending the first walkabout of the exhibition on 10 July 2013 and 63 attending the second walkabout on 3 August 2013. A total of 14 690 people (this includes the numbers above) visited the exhibition from the evening of 9 July 2013 to Sunday 18 August 2013” (Le Roux, 2013). Several radio interviews and a television clip are mentioned in the report.

have been named differently and they would have had different meanings – titles are clearly narrative clues.

Generally speaking, titles of artworks may add a measure of ambiguity or clarify (especially in artworks where there is a pre-text such as a Bible story such as a crucifixion or a scene of Noah's ark, or when – as in Van der Merwe's works – certain title connotations add rich narrative dimensions to the works). It is widely believed, then, that titles usually help to disambiguate an artwork (Hogan, 2012:56). Some titles, however, may actively confuse – Surrealist paintings are famous for playing nonsensical games or presenting riddles instead of clarifying – but these strategies are actually part and parcel of how the work should be understood. In other words, the work may be constructed like a riddle, or may play certain games with the interpreter.

Of significance for current purposes is that a work of visual art usually has a variable amount of text profoundly connected to it, most obviously in titles but also sometimes inscribed in the artwork. Examples of texts inside artworks are the famous painting *The treachery of images* (1928-9; fig. 6.1) by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte where the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe) play on the notion of representation and reality – it is a picture of a pipe, of course, not a real one. The paratextual function of Magritte's title here is an interpretative key that points to the un-semiotic misapprehension of a picture being equated with the real thing; that is why images are treacherous. By the same token, writing (also present in this work by Magritte) defers meaning as Derrida ([1967]1976:7) has noted. The joke that Magritte makes with these written elements is therefore (at least) twofold.



Fig. 6.1. Magritte, René. 1928-9.  
*The treachery of images.*

As regards titles of artworks and also of exhibitions, if it is a solo show, the default assumption held by most tends to be that titles are the product of the implied author – which, as demonstrated in the section on the authorial role(s), may be complicated by different levels of authorial presence in Van der Merwe’s installation artworks.

Titles such as *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside* provide information that sets the narration and focalisation processes into motion; this is because the titles imply narrativised content and a sense of causality, even if the actual linear train of said causality is not made explicit.

The title and related information on the label pasted up close to the work to identify *Biegbak/Confessional* are set out thus:

Jan van der Merwe  
Confessional/Biegbak  
2003  
Installation: Rusted metal, found objects,  
TV monitor and data projection  
1565 x 1480 x 2200 mm

For *It's cold outside*, the title appears like this:



Giving a title *Biegbak/Confessional* to a work that features an “ordinary” washing-up area prompts one to consider a religious dimension in this work. Confessing suggests privacy (the confessor shares his or her confession only with a priest, or with another trusted person, or with God). The Afrikaans word “biegbak” reverberates with meaning: not only does it have alliterative qualities (the b-sound) but also points more specifically to the idea of bak (bowl) as the focus and locus of the confessing in this work – the confessing and cleansing are projected into the activities inside the sink.

While the small cubicle of the installation recalls the confessional of the Roman church, the word “bak” here confirms the centrality of the sink where the participant sees the hands that wash, in a circular motion. Washing and cleaning is charged with religious connotations; Scripture abounds with references of sinners being washed clean, or sins being washed off following confessing<sup>16</sup>. The Afrikaans and English versions of the title are not identical;

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<sup>16</sup> Compare, for example, Ps 51:2: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”; also Is. 1:16: “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil”; another verse is I John 1:7: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin”. Furthermore, one can refer to 1 Cor. 6:11: “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (all texts from the *King James Bible, Authorized Version, Cambridge Edition*). Finally, baptism is a symbol of washing clean of sins; compare 1 Peter 3:21: “... and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but

there is no Afrikaans word such as “biegbak”; it is a neologism but is easily understood to refer to a place and a site of confession. Furthermore, the notion of a confessional is not associated with Afrikaans religious practice where Catholicism and confessional rituals are arguably quite rare. The title therefore allows a newly formed space, an imaginary world, into place where the absent character’s own version of confessing, praying and religious meditation can take place. In this way, the title refers to a basic fabula construction: a woman, most likely, stands and prays at the sink while doing the dishes. The possible extended fabula(e) are explored below under 6.6.

The metaphor of cleaning is a transformative one: the subject who is cleaned emerges new, purified, reconstituted, and the sins are dissolved and forgotten. Van der Merwe refers to this notion when he, in his catalogue, remarks of the work: “Each generation ‘cleans up’ and tries to start afresh” (Van der Merwe, s.a.:38; also on the preface statement to the work). Other installations by Van der Merwe that reference cleaning include *Sunday suit* (2003, fig. 6.2) where a clothes stand with jacket, hanging screen with shirt and tie, and a chair are shown – all made of or covered by rusted metal and positioned on a floor section of rust.



Fig. 6.2. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2003. *Sunday suit*.  
*Installation view*



Fig. 6.3. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2005. *Water and rust*.  
*Detail.*

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the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (New International Version).

Over the back of the chair is draped a pair of men's trousers, and on the seat of another – the seat of the absent human being inferred in the work – is a wash basin (the Afrikaans word “wasskottel” is perhaps more descriptive), towel and soap (in rusted metal). Inside the basin is a television monitor with the looping image of a razor being rinsed in water. This intimate moment, where the absent subject's personal ritual of cleaning is implied, also has religious undertones in the reference to cleaning and to the “Sunday” in *Sunday suit*. A Sunday suit is worn for special occasions – the artist refers to weddings, funerals or important meetings. Rituals like weddings and funerals usually take place in church, and the Sunday reference imbues the work with the anticipation of going to church for the week's sermon (compare the Afrikaans word “kisklere” that refers to the now lost habit of storing one's only good set of clothing in the wagon kist (“wakis”) for use in church-related activities.

The point is that without the paratext of the title one would know that the subject is preparing for something and using a razor, but the dressiness specifically associated with the Sunday element would be absent – at the cost of a significant loss of meaning. Another work, *Water and Rust* (fig. 6.3)<sup>17</sup>, overtly references the washing metaphor (baptism as cleansing) in a religious context by showing a pulpit and baptismal font, with the minister's gown draped over the side of the pulpit as if to show his relinquishing of authority<sup>18</sup>. One can imagine him (masculine, fairly likely in the older Afrikaans sister churches) standing with the parents of children to be baptised next to the font. Inside the font is a television monitor with a looping video of water gently dripping, forming concentric circles. A larger monitor showing the same looping video of water appears on the pulpit – the preacher is subject to

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<sup>17</sup> In the spiritual and symbolic sense of washing and baptism and cleaning, *Biegbak/Confessional* therefore relates thematically to *Water and rust*. In this work, the ephemeral nature of rust is conceptually emphasised if one were to relate it to the text in Matt. 6:19-20: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (*King James Bible, Authorized Version, Cambridge Edition*).

<sup>18</sup> This interpretation is quite obviously informed by knowledge of a particular era, and of Afrikaans religious culture, in a way that reminds of Bal's insistence that the time and context of viewing, as well as the interpreter's baggage, all have a bearing on how one interprets a work. In particular, she (Bal, 1999b:15) notes that the production of meaning when confronted by an artwork entails the “inevitable mixing” of intertextual aspects such as cultural positions of the analyst with the signs perceived in the work. In this case, the artist's cultural position (as an Afrikaans person) has further suggested the likelihood of reference to Afrikaans religious practice in the work. This information, which has the nature of an intertext, can be usefully employed but arguably does not have to be brought into play.

cleansing, too. This example reiterates the frequent use of religious allusions, overt or more implicit, in Van der Merwe's installations.

It was noted in the chapter 2 of the thesis that introduces the artist and his oeuvre that Van der Merwe's domestic spaces are mostly private and often relate stories of specific people who are absent, and that his public spaces reflect anonymous and more numerous absences. Most of his spaces, however, are interiors of man-made structures (houses, airports, cinemas). The "inside" quality creates awareness of the difference between inside and outside, to conceptually echo the presence-absence dichotomy that pervades his installations. The person(s) who is/are evoked by the work, or who would typically be inside these spaces is/are not present, but the viewer-participant is; and is keenly aware of the absent person(s)<sup>19</sup>.

The hot/cold opposition in the title of *It's cold outside* appropriately plays on life and death: the inside is warm, as opposed to the coldness of death on the outside – and more ominously suggests preparing for death since the application of lipstick either precedes one's leaving the house or receiving someone from the cold outside – possibly the spectre of death. This is indeed what the artistic intention was, because the work portrays the last time that artist's mother left home; she indeed prepared for death by applying lipstick on her way out (paratextual intention statement given during personal interview, 2012). These possibilities suggest variations of the fabula in the work which is addressed in greater detail under 6.6 below. Similar awareness of the tensions between opposites of warmth and cold, and inside and outside can be imagined in the suggestion of warm water in which the hands are washing dishes in *Confessional/Biegbak* as opposed to the cold rain on the outside shown in the "window".

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<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the only exception that does not portray an inside space is *Eclipse* (2002, fig. 6.4) which features a gravel pathway illuminated on either side with spotlights. A few steps to either side of the path, parallel to its borders, are barbed wire fences with pieces of clothing hanging randomly here and there on them. The path leads to a wall with three vertically mounted monitors, on which are visible (1) a hand dropping rose petals, (2) petals floating downwards and (3) petals falling onto the dark floor of a grave. The grave is yet another reminder of the death/life binary that permeates Van der Merwe's installations. This work was not shown in the 2013 Oliewenhuis exhibition.



Fig. 6.4. Van der Merwe, Jan. 2002. *Eclipse*.  
Diagonal installation view.

### *Preface-like statements*

In an exhibition context, an artist may or may not choose to add written text to each individual artwork – Van der Merwe’s installations are accompanied by these short texts, which are printed on cards or laminated paper and pasted up in the vicinity of the work. Such statements accompanying works can either be read on a pedantic level as simply informative – “this is a picture of a dog<sup>20</sup>”, or as artistic intentionality, or as half-formed interpretations – because the statements are not merely informative.

Pasted onto the wall nearby the title card, and close to the entrance to the work *Biegbak/Confessional* at the 2013 show *Time and Space* at Oliewenhuis, this statement appeared, its verbatim wording reading:

The installation comprises of a kitchen sink with dishes, dishcloths, oven gloves and an apron, all made from found and rusted objects. Built into the basin is a TV Monitor [the capital M is used here; it is not clear why – LC] with the image of hands continuously cleaning a pot and above the sink is the projected image of a window through which rain on a courtyard is visible. The basin is installed in the corner of the exhibition space and “walled” and “curtained” off so that the viewer has to enter a small room.

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<sup>20</sup> This “picture of a dog” is an oft-used reference both to critics such as FL Lucas (1923, in Cos & Hinchliffe, 1968:11) who famously mocked TS Eliot’s use of notes to *The Waste Land* (1922) because, it was felt, notes to a poem really overshoot the role of the poet – textual notes are, indeed, also a form of paratext (see Genette, 1997). The irritation accompanying such statements as “this is a picture of a dog” in the context of artworks is also humorously undermined by René Magritte’s (in)famous painting *The treachery of images* (1928-9) discussed above.

The TV monitor and projected images lend a nostalgic atmosphere and also refer to repetitive processes in nature and in everyday rituals. Each generation “cleans up” and tries to start afresh. The cleaning and purifying ritual can also have religious connotations.

Rusted metal and technology is [sic] used in an “archaeological” way: time is shifted. The installation: Confessional [the full name including the word “biegbak” is not given in this statement – LC] aims to allow a moment for reconsideration and reflection. The enclosed room becomes, for a moment an enclosed personal and poetic space.

The wording gives the gallery-goer some pointers: he or she is alerted to the notion of nostalgia, of everydayness and of the meditative, even religious sense that this work can generate. Conceptually, the idea of temporal shifts is touched upon and the poetic and personal are highlighted. In short, many of the themes that an interpretation of this work would address are named, perhaps a tad pedantically, but since they are prompters that stir possible further interpretations, the less than poetic tone strikes one as plain and informative rather than “artistic” or contrived. Such an interpretation of the tone of the text points to the notion that the texts are focalised in a particular manner in order to convey a particular mood; they therefore narrate (voice) but also present a slant (see Genette, [1972] 1980:186). The interpreter can view this slant casting the work in an aura of simplicity and sincerity.

In the case of *It's cold outside*, these words appear on the wall next to the work:

In front of a barely open curtain, on a section of tiled floor are placed a chair with a woman's slip hanging over the back and seat, a small electric heater, and a stand with an open vanity case. In the lid of the case a small TV monitor with the image of lipstick being applied to lips is visible. The image is repetitive and the television screen acts like a mirror in the lid of the case. A suitcase lies on the floor. At the back of the curtain, invisible to the viewer, a fan blows air, causing the effect of a cold breeze moving over the scene through the gauze curtain. All the objects are covered or “preserved” by rusted metal.

The rusted metal surface acts as a metaphor for transience, vulnerability and the fight against time, and imbues the objects with an archaeological quality. The image on the screen is intangible; the technology has a spiritual quality, but also becomes part of the archaeological layers of events in history.

Contemporary issues and objects are set up in “archaeological time” in order to force an intense scrutiny of ourselves and contemporary technology, as with archaeological finds. The objects are preserved by the tins (the original function of

tins) while the process of gradual return to the original state is also emphasised through the quality of rust. In this installation there are other contrasts: inside/outside; private/public; hot/cold.

The work is meant to be a monument to women and ordinary people, to their vulnerability and powerlessness against loss, or the impact of social and political events and the face they show the outside world.

The same structure is followed – an informative yet simple paragraph followed by interpretative and thematically driven text that indicates comments on material, as well as an indication of intentionality (especially the last paragraph above that states “The work is meant to be a monument ...”). A remark or two about the wording of the statement that accompanies *It's cold outside* will help to set the stage for the discussion the artist's statement below. In the first instance, as was the case with *Confessionl/Biegbak*, the statement is informative – almost like didascalia in a stage production – as if to guide the curator who sets up the work as to how it should be done (although almost invariably installing a show takes place under the supervision and substantial manual input of the artist himself). The information first paragraph is, in each instance, followed by a more interpretative consideration of aspects in the work.

The transient quality of rust is reiterated in this last instance, and the temporal metaphors are extended to include “vulnerability” and “the fight against time”. The dimension of vulnerability, especially of “ordinary” people, is a persistent theme in Van der Merwe's installations. The words “fight against time” do not seem to relate to the contemporary fetish with youthfulness, but rather hinges on the notion of absence, to the idea that time steals our loved ones away; this battle is the “fight”: the loss associated with life, generations, and powerlessness against death. The unlikely subjects of a monument here are those (often almost invisible, often women) who have lost, who are powerless, and whose little lives often go unnoticed by the outside world. Hence the inclusion of the binaries inside/outside, public/private and hot/cold – these are useful interpretative cues.

### *Biographical information, the name of the artist and anecdotal information*

Genette elaborates on “other facts of contextual affiliation” as paratextual in nature: here knowledge of the **artist’s biography** (Genette cites reading Proust with the knowledge of his Jewish ancestry and homosexuality [1997:8.], or in this case reading Van der Merwe with the knowledge of his devotion to especially the older female members of his family) comes into play as biography-as-authorial context. Biographically speaking, Van der Merwe as an artist was contextualised in chapter 2 where it was established that he is a contemporary South African artist who lives and works in Pretoria. The artist has become known for his large installation artworks that feature rusted surfaces and often include looping images in monitors or projections.

Genette (1997:9) warns that: “[B]y definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it”. Official exchanges (such as walkabouts and lectures), interviews and conversations – semi-official in nature – count here since Van der Merwe is known for being willing to share his views, biographical background and so on. These paratextual events contribute towards the narrativity of the work by adding causal and other cues that the interpreter can decide to use; such knowledge can hardly be ignored and may have a more or less conscious bearing on the interpreter’s insights.

The name of the **author** has also been discussed above. This is a paratext that can in itself assume the nature of a contractual function as well as concomitant expectations – Van der Merwe’s work is widely associated with rust; the public may require some time to associate him with the appearance of his newer works featuring burnt out tree trunks and pieces of furniture on large strips of paper. The name of the author or artist refers to “the name of whoever is putatively responsible for the work” (Genette, 1997:40-41) – considering that especially artists who make large-scale work tend to appoint assistants. Van der Merwe has recently begun to make use of the services of an assistant to help with the physical work of connecting bits of rusted cans.

Having artist’s assistants is an age-old and extremely common practice; well-known examples of artists who had apprentices and assistants in their studios include Jean August Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) and more recently the infamous British artist Damien Hirst

(b. 1965). The attribution of the work in art historical convention is that of the “master”, although not incontestably so<sup>21</sup>.

An author’s involvement in the contractual understanding of his work is greater if the work is autobiographical (Genette, [1987] 1997:41). Various distinctions exist between real and historical authors; Booth (1961) famously coined the term “implied author” to distinguish between the historical author (who is a real person as well as a historical figure) and the implied author, who is a cultural text “rather than a historical reality” (Bal, 2006a:8).

What is important for the current discussion is that the historical author, or artist, and the author/artist as a “real person” are usually distinguished from the “inferred authorial element” – the implied or abstract artist/author (Schmidt, 2010:43) of a work. However, in Van der Merwe’s works his own authorial interference brought about by the autobiographical elements in his work (that are, one has to concede, not entirely publicly available but are made known upon request to the artist also as anecdotes, discussed in the next paragraph) means that this abstracted image of the artist tends to become confused with the real person. Thus “Van der Merwe” is the artist and public persona known for his installations featuring rust-covered interiors “peopled” by absences and liminal spaces (see Kruger & Van der Merwe, 2010; Hundt, s.a.; Boshoff, s.a.). He is also, as noted above, a real person who lives in Pretoria whose female relatives are invoked by *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside*. He assumes the dimension of an absent narrator-character in his works. Genette ([1972] 1980:234-5) refers to transitions from different narrative levels as narrative metalepsis. Van der Merwe’s position as both inside and outside the work echoes

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<sup>21</sup> Duchamp’s *Fountain* of 1917 has exposed a complexity that has troubled art historians concerned with attribution and its dangerous corollary, that of authenticity. Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “Art in the age of mechanical reproduction” ([1936] 1992) addressed the presumed aura of authentic (i.e. original) artworks. A related issue is highlighted by Bann (2003:128-138) who presents a consideration of, among others, problems with attribution in some of Titian’s paintings where “more than one hand” had worked the canvas. Rembrandt’s works present yet different concerns since his style was so popular that it was often quite successfully simulated. Closely related to issues of attribution, authenticity and authorship are the far-reaching contemporary debates about the relationship between art’s commodity value and its supposed authenticity; see Thomson’s provocative book *The \$12 million shark. The curious economics of contemporary art* (2012) on this topic. This book takes as point of departure the oddity that \$12 million was paid for Damien Hirst’s work *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living* (1989; 1991). The work features a real (dead) shark in a glass tank filled with formaldehyde. Hirst’s financial success was calculatedly managed by the advertising mogul Charles Saatchi and co-instigated an entire paradigm shift in terms of how (contemporary) art functions in a world where commodification follows uncharted trajectories.

Genette's ([1972] 1980:234) reference to characters and authors that would not be confined to one narrative universe.

Of further significance for this discussion on paratexts is the *anecdotal* information that the artist supplies. Van der Merwe's own take (also a paratextual element, as noted above with reference to the event of his mother leaving the house for the last time which prompted *It's cold outside*) on his installations is no secret. In his walkabouts he speaks extensively about his work as he does in public appearances in lectures and the like; he shows a general willingness to share his views on his work. Consequently, his version of the narration, in this case related to *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside*, is likely to reach any serious student of his work – as I noted in footnote 3, chapter 2.

For example, in an interview with me (2012) the artist confirmed my intuition that *Biegbak/Confessional* was “about” his grandmother, especially the way in which he would see her standing there by the sink, doing the dishes, and praying. Her prayers would be silent or muttered, or clearly audible. She would pray earnestly and incessantly for her family, all her loved ones, and would even at times pray for the characters in the stories she liked to listen to on *Springbok Radio*<sup>22</sup>. This marvellous touch of humour adds a gentle pathos to the exploration of character in this work; indeed, anecdotes like these can enrich interpretation. It also points to an interpretative possibility of another level of character, namely entirely fictional characters (those in the radio dramas) who are imagined or remembered by absent characters. Anecdotal information is a good example of transgressions between the position of the implied author/artist as aesthetic shape-giver and the historical artist as real person, whose loved ones are commemorated in the works.

### *How paratextual elements suggest character and point to first possible fabulae*

A salient paratextual element that contributes towards how the cast of characters can be interpreted, as noted above, is the artist-character (in the guise of both the implied artist whose traces mark the work, and the historical artist whose relatives are suggested) for whom the interpreter “looks” in the artworks. His narratorial contributions towards titles and preface-like statements are therefore also regarded as coming both from an abstracted

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<sup>22</sup> Van der Merwe told this anecdote to me during a personal interview in 2013, and repeated it at a lecture held at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University, on 25 October 2013.

artist-figure as well as from a man who displays his version of events, and his narration and focalisation of absent people whom he loved, in his artworks.

Paratextual information provided by the artist can be summarised thus: *Biegbak/Confessional* relates how his grandmother “would always” stand there, by the sink, praying (Van der Merwe, 2012b). That she would then pray for relatives, other loved ones, and for the fictional characters in radio dramas is significant: she was a real person, who is now memorialised and fictionalised in the work, and whose prayers extend to real people as well as imaginary characters. Knowing this confirms the sense of the current interpretation, namely that one is dealing with artworks in which each “member” of the cast of characters is made up of multiple dimensions. Van der Merwe’s (2013) poignant story of how *It’s cold outside* came into being, namely that his mother had to be taken to the hospital at night for her final trip, and that she first applied lipstick, “as if dressing up for death” (Personal interview and Walkabout, 2013) does not hide the fact that despite the work commemorating *one* instance of his mother applying lipstick, this action can be read as happening once, *and* as happening always before going out, and as another, more poetic recall and refiguration of this person, and others like her. The temporal structure of the rusted surfaces combined with the looping video images in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside* hinges on something that is repeated, stalled or recalled in the mind.

The exploration of the roles played by the artist in setting up clues pertaining to narration as well as character formations has paved the way for identifying the various character facets that remain; these are lodged in the figures of the participant, and in the (specific) absent person(s) who also suggest a more generalised cast of absent characters. These, I aim to demonstrate, play the same ontologically shifting game – especially in terms of layering presence and absence.

## 6.4 Absent characters

### 6.4.1 Introductory remarks on the absent characters: who are these people?

In Van der Merwe's works; the absent characters whose presence is suggested are *not* named, described, or otherwise identified; no personal pronoun helps with identification (compare Margolin, 2007:66). Gender (female) is inferred in *Biegbak/Confessional* from the domestic space, while in *It's cold outside* the act of applying lipstick shown in the 'mirror' suggests that we are again dealing with a female.

One can, therefore, imagine that the absent character most likely existed once, and that given Van der Merwe's oft-repeated reference to his grandmother (in whose memory *Biegbak/Confessional* was made, according to the artist's paratextual comments) and his mother (whom *It's cold outside* memorialises, also according to the artist) at least one dimension of the character can therefore be inferred to be based on an actual person who has had a significant impact upon the historical artist, so that the works gain a strong autobiographical aspect, as noted above under the discussion of the author's character and paratextual elements. These actual persons that the works tell of are now also fictional characters in the respective storyworlds of the artworks. Nonetheless, this possible reference to a specific person is complicated by the sense that the works also deal with more general "unknowns" (to quote the author whose phrase "monuments to the unknown" is often used in association with his works – Van der Merwe, 2012a; 2012b; 2013 and elsewhere).

This notion that a given work is not confined to one particular person's character, and to the memory of that specific person, represents my intuitive but confusing sense that the absences evoke particular persons, but *at the same* time also seem to represent other, unnamed people. Furthermore, they may activate remembrance of my own relatives as well as a more generalised image of humanity. A host of absences fills these works. This "host of absences" therefore constitute the character "group" of the absent persons in the artworks. How this host of characters can be conceptualised, is the focus of the present discussion.

Somehow, the person standing inside the gallery, experiencing the work, has to imagine the absent character. Doing so may be predicated on the assumption that the interpreting

participant has never met the actual absent person (i.e. the mother and grandmother in question). If one had in fact met her, the actual person is, however, still not there, in the work, and her character would thus be based on the sum of imaginings imbued with memory (of her, or of someone like her). The imagined character may be felt to assume the nature of a ghost, or a figment of the imagination, or some other unrealised or departed (non)being. Regardless of where one locates these characters, they are ontologically complex – living in the storyworld by inference, in memory by suggestion, and in the real world, in another time. Of course, the suggestion is also that “another time” signifies another place (the imagined or remembered space – such as a corner in a kitchen that I recall).

### *Are they ghosts?*

On a slightly macabre note, the works, dealing with absences and ontological shifting personas, may be about ghosts – they are about souls who have departed, and who have transformed from living bodies and souls into liminal beings. Therefore, the notion of being-there but not being-there emerges in the guise of present absences. Ghosts are absences that are temporarily felt as presences. Generally, it is believed they represent the presence of the souls of those who have died, and therefore are both absent and present. Absence, dislocation (in the sense that the body is removed from its usual location in, say, a house) and the consequent re-entering of some sort of corporeal likeness in the form of a ghost as well as distance (in the temporal sense) characterise our thoughts about ghosts. Ghosts tend to be scary and are associated with domestic spaces (the idea of the haunted house is typically associated with ghost stories; a ghostly presence changes the domestic location into a haunted space). The participant thus enters a haunted space, if the characters were indeed ghosts.

Ghost stories often have a particular grammar that suggests a repetitive, never-ending process of appearing and disappearing. With reference to Van der Merwe’s work, I have noted elsewhere (under 5.4.1) that the repetitive movements of the looping images become iterative. Indeed, the repetitions shown in the screens are endless, and seem to utterly transcend time. They do not purport to point to a particular instance in time but rather to a more general “always”, the grammar of such a description would use the conventional

ghost-story tense of phrasings like “every evening, she would ....” (wash the dishes, haunt the corridor and so on). In this sense, the works may invoke ghost-like characters.

Further ghost-like qualities in Van der Merwe’s works include the frequent use of uninhabited domestic spaces (bedrooms, kitchens and others may form part of a haunted house) as well as the suggestion of death in many works (compare the way the chairs in *The End* resemble gravestones, the open grave in *Eclipse* as well as the haunting quality of *Baggage arrival* where the owners of suitcases seem to have died or vanished – and *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside* likewise evoke people no longer living, although this is inferred). However, one crucial quality of the popular imagination of ghosts – namely that they are scary – does not apply to Van der Merwe’s works. Instead, the absent characters in the works make space for the participant, allowing the participant to stand in her or their space. Thus the absent character has in some way come into being by the participant’s mental imagining as well as his or her bodily presence. In this way, her (or their) uncanny presence is a re-membering without fearsome associations.

Derrida (1994 in Wylie, 2009:277) has posited that we do not simply disappear when we turn into ghosts. Instead, he argued, we pass into and are incorporated by other states and forms. This is so because the body, according to Derrida, is in any event a set of augmentations, substitutions and displacements, and thus: “For there to be a ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever” (Derrida, 1994:126 in Wylie, 2009:277). Here the abstract body diffuses into the (1) felt absence of the person, (2) the spatial and temporal states and forms – i.e. the space, things and material in the artwork, and (3) into my mental accommodation of the absent person. All these are substitutes and displacements in Derridean terms, but are also symbolic re-instatements, or re-enactments, in the psychological sense. In heightened form, felt as acute emotion, the ghost-presence and its absence can be interpreted in this sense, I would suggest, if the person whose absence we feel was much loved. This lends a peculiar depth to the experience – even if I am only empathising with the artist’s expression of longing for the absent person.

Remembering and forgetting, loving and losing are, in Wylie's (2009:278) words, "ghosted" when the absence of a beloved one, even if the one who apprehends this absence did not know the person who is ghosted. As an aside, it is interesting to consider that the experience of remembering and ghosting is set into motion once the outside-inside threshold is crossed, and once the outside onlooker is transformed into a character and participant.

Therefore, it seemed as if something more attuned to the artist and his thematic concerns, something more reconcilable with the emotional gist of the works, is necessary to come to terms with the way in which the function of character in the narration seems to belong to both me (and my body) as well as someone else whose body is not here but whose body matters, as it were.

#### **6.4.2 Re-membering the absent ones: the conflation of participant and absences**

Re-membering has to do with "fleshing out" – it entails that a person's physical body members gain some sort of physical existence. Looking at this process in terms of the absent characters requires actively working with narrative suggestion: it is a process of focalised attention. Margolin (2007:67) notes that characters in literary texts depend for their existence on actual objects in space and time. Seldom have these elements of space and time signified so urgently as they do in Van der Merwe's works – since objects in space and time are, really, all that the interpreter has, apart from his or her imagination and focalising abilities as prompted by cues in the artwork (which, in effect, are inextricably bound to time and space).

Once I am inside the works, my position, standing in a space, or rather a focalised concrete place "made for" somebody else, and looking at simulacra of somebody else's objects made by another person (the artist) forms part of the spatial narration and its temporal corollaries. Space and time also work together to constitute the screen-based material. The space of the works infer a human place in a domestic setting without a human – but once the participant enters, there is a human presence. Therefore, apart from the absences inferred by the work, the interpreter's position as character is also loaded with possible roles. Of significance is that the interpreter-character focalises what he or she imagines the

artist has focalised, when he created the works to suggest how the absent characters may have focalised their stories. However, the works are “open” texts and allow for the interpreter to expand on the cues provided by the artists, so that the character construction and the fabulae take given cues as starting points, from where the interpretation proceeds in the mind of the participant who interprets.

Exploring issues of character, space and time in *Biegbak/Confessional*, one can observe a number of things. On the one hand, I as the participant see the rain on the “window” created by the projection (and thus I see what the absent person’s position suggests her seeing, but it is a projected image and not the “real thing” – like she is not “real”). On the other hand, I may look down, directing my embodied gaze where the “looking” absent subject would also cast her gaze – at hands which are neither mine nor hers, but suggestive of being hers.

With *It’s cold outside*, I find myself around the space of a person who is not there; my presence inhabits the space in her place. Instead of seeing my own image in the “mirror” in the vanity case, I see “her” – or a focalised vision of “her”; a woman applying lipstick. Her “reflection” looks back at me – so that again, I see what “she” sees, even though she is absent and I look at a re-creation of her.

So far, then, in both works I seem to occupy someone else’s position, and I may feel as if I am “in her shoes”, identifying with her in quite a radical way, as if I in some strange way *became* her; this is difficult to grasp or explain. I see the segments or parts of human bodies: the hands in the sink inside *Biegbak/Confessional*, the section of a face in *It’s cold outside*. Brooks (1993:93) interrogates the idea of vision with reference to literature; he propounds that in some cases (notably Dickens and Balzac), novelistic worlds provide details that are legible as signs of the whole, or as keys to inward concepts such as “character”. This means that details, in such instances, are essentially synecdoches – parts of the whole that stand for the whole. Van der Merwe’s works exemplify the synecdochal: the hands that wash dishes and the lower part of the face that is shown applying lipstick are body parts that stand in for the whole absent person (see also the reference to the metonymical aspect of the incomplete event suggested by these body parts under 6.2 above).

Then a crucial awareness: in the image on the screen inside the sink, performing the synecdochal washing in *Biegbak/Confessional*, an unexpected (in)sight occurs to me: *the hands washing the cooking vessel are a man's – they are hairy and muscular*. This insight should have come earlier on. Perhaps because the space has such feminine overtones, and the work of doing dishes so immediately recalls a woman, the hands I thought I saw, or believed I saw, are not the same as the hands I now find myself seeing (this seems to be an instance of cognitive dissonance where one sees what one *thinks* one sees). Conversations with people who have seen *Biegbak/Confessional* confirm that the hands are not at first sight necessarily recognised as masculine, but once one notices this, it seems very obvious that they are not a woman's hands. These hands now seem utterly puzzling – the work is supposed to memorialise, even venerate, someone like a grandmother! And thus, quite clearly, those hands should have been a woman's.

At the surface level reading this piece of information may unsettle any assertion that the work actually invokes the absent *female* and concomitantly a time and space in the past associated with her; however, I aim to demonstrate that *this* character complication is an integral part of how the work as a whole makes sense, and how the complex character constellations can be read. For the current interpretation, a crucial dimension regarding the layeredness and complexity of character suggested by Van der Merwe's works is therefore lodged precisely in this incredulous appearance of a man's hands where a woman is imagined as standing.

I interpret these hands therefore not as a male artist suggesting something facile such as "washing up can be men's work, too", but instead as the artist-character saying something along the lines of "I made a place that is just like the one where my grandmother stood, and I invite you to stand there". So I now stand where she once stood, and where the artist and his work invite me to stand. I am there as myself, but standing in her place, "in her shoes", I am briefly also in the position of another. This means that, taking the cue planted by the artist, I may feel as though I "am" in some way the absent person, as well as the artist who identifies with this absence and who invites me to also identify with him and with her. The possibilities in terms of the multidimensional nature of character that suggest themselves here are quite bewildering and deserve careful unpacking.

Untangling these various guises or layers in which the characters can be interpreted requires emphasis on the notion that the *individual mind* (here the participant's, in collaboration with the artist) is necessary to actualise any character (Margolin, 2007:67). This is certainly the case with the complexities that arise in the characters in Van der Merwe's works. However, Margolin's contention is that the actualisation of a character will tend to result in "a relatively stable and enduring inter-subjective entity" – and here of the most saliently gripping revelations in Van der Merwe's works manifests itself: the identity of the character may *not* necessarily be stable at all. In fact, the main gist of the current argument is that the very instability of this character identity (as propounded by Fokkema, 1991:179; 186) is what makes the work so utterly perplexing, and which arguably renders Van der Merwe's works to be so emotionally engaging for those who experience it. The participant not only becomes a central character just like the central (absent) character he or she imagines, but he or she participant is also able to bring other character dimensions, suggested by the work and informed by memory, to the experience of the work.

Recalling, for a moment, the five qualities drawn from Fokkema's (1991) perusal of postmodern characters, one can briefly state that Van der Merwe's character categories (the artist, the interpreter and the absent characters) are firstly **human or human-like** (see Fokkema, 1991:20); they demonstrate both real and the fictional qualities in the sense that aspects of all these characters pertain to both the real and the fictional world of the artwork. The artist is both fiction (the implied artist whose paratexts guide part of the interpretation) and real (the person who lives in Pretoria); the interpreter is a real person but also crosses the threshold into the storyworlds of the works and becomes a participant in these storyworlds. Therefore, to emphasise Fokkema's (1991) second point, the *ontological* ambiguity between real and fictional is highlighted: characters are both people and fictional constructions; the interpreter at least is also aware of his or her metafictional status as character, as the artist may also be. Furthermore, the characters are more *open (scriptible)* than closed (*lisible*), as humans are (the third point raised by Fokkema, 1991:186).

Fokkema's (1991) fourth point can also be recalled: All the character categories in Van der Merwe's works therefore seem to be persons with *multiple* selves (the layers of implied and historical artist, the interpreter as self-character who participates and who constructs or

remembers characters) and the absent characters (who shift between probabilities – relatives of the artist, of the participant’s, or more generally of the unknowns of humanity; memory and imagination work together). Finally, the characters seem to infer a situation that allows for either/and (see Fokkema, 1991:179) – in other words, they accommodate different roles, and different temporal and spatial ontologies at the same time. In this sense, one can argue, as the discussion that follows aim to demonstrate, they are *selves in search of others* – Fokkema’s (1991) final point about postmodern characters.

### **6.4.3 Selves in search of others**

If one were to extend the multi-layered nature of the characters, their multiple selves, something like this becomes possible (taking *Biegbak/Confessional* as example): as noted above, Van der Merwe’s absent grandmother seems to encapsulate the identity of myself, the participant, who stands in the fictional place that commemorates “where she used to stand”. This absent grandmother may also “be” *my* grandmother whom I remember. I could re-imagine her as a presence, ghostlike or as some other manifestation – but I may imagine her standing there, washing, peering “out of” the window, and if I take the title of the work as a signifier, I imagine her performing some sort of sacred ritual such as praying while doing the washing.

This is in line with what Margolin (2007:71) says about characters – that they can “form in their minds mental versions of other characters” – all the characters or dimensions of half-imagined, absent characters are part of the narrative universe; myself as one of the central characters perform the imagining, but I am constantly shifting between being me, and imagining (being?) my grandmother, the artist, his grandmother, and a generalised notion of a dearly loved woman caring for her folk. This multidimensional nature of character makeup concurs with Margolin’s (2007:72) exploration of postmodern narratives – here, the author states, the existence of a given character may be asserted, only to be denied. Van der Merwe’s works, I argue, do not so much deny a given character, but expressly do not suggest a stable, single identity in a character.

One needs to keep in mind that the character(s) suggested by Van der Merwe’s works are not there (even though they seem to be the main characters); neither have they actually ever been inside those particular spaces (these spaces are, in actual fact, inside the gallery).

Instead, the spaces created by the artist are his personal monuments, or memorials, built to create imaginary worlds or textual spaces in which these absent characters could be imagined and remembered.

Among the personas that make up the cast of the works under discussion, the participant is the only character who is physically present. He or she, a real historical person, thus assumes the ontological status of a character in a storyworld by becoming part of this world, physically entering the world and psychologically engaging with it – as functions of the focalised interpretation of narration in the works. The business of transforming, then, from real person and participant into character constitutes a first transition accomplished by the installations<sup>23</sup>. The next transformation has to do with the self in search of the other.

Answering the question as to how exactly the works transform me into identification, or indeed some sort of conflation, perhaps even a unification with the implied character(s) requires exploring different avenues where such ‘getting under the skin’ of another may lead to a probable interpretation of what happens in the work. On the one hand, since another person from another time is invoked, one could suggest that something like reincarnation is at hand: the absent character is reincarnated in my body and has the chance to once again live, even if only temporarily. This possibility is handy, but does not correlate with the work which – especially the in the context of the artist’s use of themes that bear Christian echoes – and the work does not seem to sit comfortably with oriental belief systems propagating notions of reincarnation. Having said that, the circularity of the movements in the video monitors may hinge on the wheel of karma and thus the notion of reincarnation is not altogether preposterous. Still, a more suitable solution to establishing how the self can be interpreted as a character in search of another seems necessary. To begin with, empathy is explored as a way of making sense of what happens when putting oneself in the place of another.

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<sup>23</sup> This transition from real person into fictional character runs counter to the general ontological distinction between the status of real and fictional objects as these are presented in literature; compare Bundgaard’s (2013:171) argument in this vein that reiterates Ingarden’s theory of reader experience. On the other hand, the notion of filling the gaps in a story – also a reception-related concept – is precisely what narration and character construction in Van der Merwe’s works are about.

#### **6.4.4 Radical empathy: identifying with and re-membering the absent other**

Focalisation is a means of identifying with a character (Mainar, 1993:156). What we are dealing with in these works may be a question of giving voice, metaphorically speaking, to one who is not there, through identification – by means of the gaze, cognition and emotional involvement of the participant in a manner akin perhaps to Freudian projection. Accomplishing this requires identifying with a protagonist who does not have a voice (see Firth, 2011:573-4; 578). Especially in autobiographical narratives where fiction and reality amalgamate, such imaginative empathy may occur – suturing the reader (here the participant) into the “fabric of fiction and inserted into the signifying chain of the narrative” (Firth, 2011:576-577). More extremely, such empathic involvement may culminate in a more cannibalistic mode of identification where the absent other is possessed by the devouring self (Firth, 2011:585). Of course, this extreme is not necessarily part of the identificatory process; I would posit that some measure of identification characterises the participant’s experience inside Van der Merwe’s works based on, among others, the shared gaze, place and the embodied experience by the participant of these.

Delving further into what the absent characters are, what they signify and why this matters yields fascinating possibilities. If for example Van der Merwe’s works are compared to theatre (as they can be, since installation art is theatrical in nature – see Reiss, 2001:xiv), the way in which the absent characters assume the centrality of protagonists find a corollary in modern American drama as explored by Mahfouz (2012). The author explores plays by Sam Shepard as well as others like Edward Albee’s *Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) In these plays, characters that remain offstage but are inferred, such as the imagined son of the bickering couple in Albee’s play, for example, ironically occupies “centre stage”. It follows that the actual (present) characters are de-centred; in Van der Merwe’s work this notion is echoed when the participant who is the only present character is aware that the absent, inferred character is indeed the protagonist. This sensation relates to the idea of being de-centred as a feature of installation art (see Bishop, 2005:71). Since active participation is also a feature of installation art, it is worth noting that absent characters likewise demand significant participation by the audience in order to imagine them and to attribute meaning to them (Mahfouz, 2012:398).

Furthermore, Mahfouz (2012:398) notes that the audience (in this analogy, the participant in Van der Merwe's works is both audience and onstage character) "forms a mental picture of offstage characters" because characters are "filtered through someone else's point of view" (this last quote is by Rosefeldt, 1996 in Mahfouz, 2012:398). The implication is that the absent character – who is the other in the play – has to be imaginatively focalised in order to be apprehended (compare the use of the word "filtered" in the quote above). These liminal characters are "real" and depend on active mental work by the audience. Sartre's assertion that absence cannot be reduced to nothingness – because absence actually is an active process (see Mahfouz, 2012:398), holds true here – and refutes the argument raised by Kruger and Van der Merwe (2010:158) that absence – as suggested by the liminal space and time in Van der Merwe's works – "is productive nothingness".

The importance of this argument for current purposes, namely that the absences in Van der Merwe's works are productive, active and *there*, can hardly be overstated. Like their corollaries in theatre, they are "larger than life, causal, mysterious and omnipresent"; they evoke nostalgia and may be adored as if they were in some way sacred (see Mahfouz, 2012:406). In a great many cases where a character is not actually present, his or her absence is the consequence of having crossed the threshold between life and death. Such a character is therefore not only absent, but also remembered in the sense of mourning or bereavement. The identificatory process whereby the participant in Van der Merwe's works focalises the absent persons is guided by this sense that the absent protagonists are remembered and re-remembered (made real, and corporeal) – because the body and the self of the participant are in some way "home" to the absent other.

In a theoretical-scientific sense, this idea of embodied re-remembering and cognition has been described thus by Lakoff (1987:xiv): "Thought is embodied, that is, the structures used to put together our conceptual systems grown out of bodily experience and make sense in terms of it; moreover, the core of our conceptual systems is directly grounded in perception, body movements, and experience of a physical and social character" (in Gallese & Wojciehowski, 2011: unpaginated e-publication – page 13 of the printed version). Gallese and Wojciehowski (2011) relate this notion of embodied thought to issues of embodied simulation and Feeling-of-Body (these are theoretical premises that entail the capacity to

“share the meaning of actions, basic motor intentions, feelings and emotions with others, thus grounding our identification and connectedness with others”).

These the authors present as a complement to the Theory of Mind, which in turn proposes that we are able to reconstruct the intentions and minds of others by means of “our own mental meta-representational processes” – almost like a type of mind-reading which is one of the pleasures of fiction, according to the authors (and also part of the reader response process). Along exactly the same line, Ciccoricco (2012:257) makes the link between Theory of Mind, perception and focalisation: “whenever a human subject (fictive or not) is focalizing another human subject outwardly, which is to say making that subject a perceptible object, he or she is still constructing a model of their subjectivity in the mode of theory of mind”.

Furthermore, Gallese and Wojciehowski (2011:unpaginated; p. 12-13 in the printed version) note that embodied simulation, which is what happens when we identify and feel connected with narrated characters, is an empathic co-feeling that our bodies sense. In scientific terms, they refer to the existence of “mirror neurons”; these enable us to feel the content of somebody else’s actions and intentions – simply actions such as reaching for a cup of coffee or biting into an apple, or even when we imagine/read about doing or perceiving something. Consequently, this realisation paves the way for understanding why one may “feel with” characters so strongly, and also why this empathic feeling-with is so subjective. This embodied narratological approach explains, according to the authors, why the borders between the “real” and fictional worlds are more blurry than one may have thought. In other words, watching someone washing dishes or applying lipstick as is the case in Van der Merwe’s works may cause the participant to feel these actions and sensations in his or her own body, as if he or she were performing these actions – with the concomitant affective responses generated by the narrativisation of elements in the works.

How Theory of Mind relates to embodied thinking as such will not be explored further in these rather scientific terms since the current study lacks the cognitive-scientific context needed to do them justice. *Focalisation* as embodied activity that engages the absent other in various ways remains, however, a focus of the discussion. Thus, I would pursue the way in which embodied imagining hinges on the notion of identificatory focalisation *of and with* fictional characters. The fairly lengthy quotation below illuminates this well:

There is *never not* (authors' italics) reader response [in any given narrative], at the core of which is the Feeling of Body. The author's [of the narrative] subjective correlative guides us into the imaginative lives of others, though the synaesthesia of embodied metaphor – imagined bodily experience standing in for affective states and dispositions, for sensations, thoughts and memories, and liberated within the reading experience through the stillness of our own bodies. These things cannot be separated, though they can be creatively recombined, especially under the expert guidance of the writer (Gallese & Wojciehowski, 2011: page 27 of the printed version)

All the elements in this quotation seem plausible in relation to the absent protagonists in the installations: the participant, through empathy, experiences what the absent other is imagined to feel and do (even though technically the body of the participant in Van der Merwe's work is not necessarily entirely still). In short, the body and the mind as well as the affective dimensions of the participant are all involved in the process of profound identification with the absent other. This profound sense of identification hinges on a self that searches for, even strives to attain oneness with an other.

The notion of a self in search of another has been gleaned from Fokkema's (1991) exploration of postmodern characters. The complexity of the self and/as other has also been explored in a philosophical vein by a number of scholars, some of whom will presently be briefly involved in a discussion of this issue, this time with more emphasis on the role of the participant in this regard.

## **6.5 The participant's character functions: The self in search of the other; the self as other**

How do the works transform the participant by means of identification, or even unification with the implied character(s)? This requires exploring different avenues where such "getting under the skin" of an other may lead to a probable interpretation of what happens in the works. On the one hand, since another person from another time is invoked by the works (a female person, probably a relative – grandmother and/or mother), reincarnation has been considered above; the absent character is reincarnated in my body and has the chance to once again live, even if only temporarily. As noted, this possibility answers the identificatory process in part but does not correlate with the overall sense of the works.

Also, this identification has been indicated as being related to a profound sense of empathy, a co-feeling or compassion, not only with the absent character, but also with whoever longs for the presence of that character. This would of course include the absent mother or grandmother, the artist's persona who longs for them, as well as my own absent grandmother or other loved ones, as well as myself (who longs for her or them). This radical type of empathy, which constitutes embodied narration (and which relates to the theory of feeling of body – see the long quotation above) suggests part of the solution. Empathy and identification bring the interpretation up to a point, until it becomes clear to me that a more sustained and sustainable way of looking at the co-existence of these personas is necessary – that of a more conflated sense of self and other.

It would therefore appear as if a further theoretical or philosophical consideration is necessary, one that suggests that a person can transcend the differences between the self and the longed-for other, and one which makes it possible for the self (me, as the interpreter who is a participant-character in the artworks) to also feel a kinship with the artistic person – implied or actual historical artist, depending on how closely the autobiographical content is understood to approximate a real historical person who doubles as an artist of an oeuvre. All these layers of personas or characters are quite densely interwoven – the various aspects of the artist (historical, implied and the maker of an oeuvre who exists in cultural consciousness), myself (who looks and participates here, but who has an existence quite independent of the artworks), and the various personas and aspects of personas who absently people the works. They all “live” inside my body for the duration of my viewing, and yet while I “become” them I still remain myself. This is either a very philosophical question, or a psychological one (in which case I might be schizophrenic or one possessed by the spirits of others). This last point also hinges on a theological dimension or at the very least on the notion that coming to terms with character formation (and fabula construction) in the work suggests a spiritual aspect. Below, some philosophical and psychologically-related arguments aim to find answers to the issue of self and/as other.

One useful answer to this issue came from the Afrikaans poet T.T. Cloete's recent book *Die ander een is ek* (“*The other one is I*”) (2013). This book is a treatise on the poet's aesthetic, and his philosophy on the function of the poem. Mostly, it is a contemplation of how these relate to his longing for his other – his deceased wife Anna. Cloete emphasises our

embodied human nature (2013:34) yet marvels at the idea that the body (comprising fluids and chemicals, among others) is able to abstract – it can transcend, faster than the speed of light, into the non-corporeal: thoughts, feelings, conscience and *even another body* (2013:9).

Arguing that love is the most powerful medium through which I become another, he posits love at the centre of the creative endeavour. More radically, he argues that we are trans-corporeal and trans-personal; and “poetry and all the other arts” depend on this phenomenon (Cloete, 2013:12). The other one is I, he says, also because we are part of a larger universal expanse, a social unity and a cosmic unity. Drawing on insights of Transpersonal Psychology, Sanskrit expressions (such as I see the other in myself and myself in the other – Cloete, 2013:14) and the likes of Viktor Frankl (who experienced his wife’s presence even in their separate concentration camps during the Second World War), Cloete (2013:15) concludes that shared archetypes, profound experiences of the human collective and the holographic (I would add, metonymic or synechdocal) understanding that a small part of something suggests the whole marks the possibility that one can find oneself in others, and others in oneself – even if these others are unknown.

The transportation of one consciousness into another, of my body into and out of another, happens biologically in sexual intercourse and at birth, but metaphorically and symbolically this can take place in many other ways. We can, for example, put ourselves (emotionally, psychologically, experientially) in the place of another – something that the notion of a stable singular identity cannot explain; we can also read minds in a way that suggests a type of transfer that is not easily explained (Cloete, 2013:25-26). By this Cloete means more than “mere” (“sommer”) symbolical transfer: he posits that one may truly experience being transferred into another in a way that broadens the presumed spatio-temporal confines of the body (2013:27). This may explain why the participant in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside* may feel as if he or she is not only in the place of another, but may sense a more profound transfer of identity – as if one becomes her.

Placing ourselves in another’s shoes, as it were, or seeing through their eyes (both actions have extremely, excitingly intimate connections with focalisation) entails what Cloete calls transmutation. This he defines as “any conversion from the body into an immaterial, abstract guise, such as for example in a dream or love in his/her many guises, or when the

self experiences the sensation of going out of him/herself into or merges with another person or a plant or even an anorganic thing like a rock”<sup>24</sup> (“enige omsetting uit die liggaam in ‘n immateriële, abstrakte gedaante, soos bv. in ‘n droom of die liefde in sy/haar talle gedaantes, of wanneer die self die sensasie beleef dat hy/sy uit sigself oorgaan in of ingelyf word in ‘n ander person of ‘n plant of selfs in ‘n anorganiese ding soos ‘n klip” (2013:30). Transmutation is related to sublimation, especially since the latter celebrates the transformation into “something higher, purer” (Cloete, 2013:36). Transformation as purification is a concern of Van der Merwe who believes that such transformation can be attained by labour; here, a “purer” version of the self as an other is achieved through the “work” of focalising character identification in a sustained manner – towards transmutation.

Endless possibilities exist in terms of transferring the self into someone or something other. The process usually begins with spatio-temporal shifts (as in children’s stories or games in which a child may become a spider, for example – Cloete, 2013:37). The resulting transmutation, whether playful or more serious, is a way of attaining transcendence. The body is transcended by the mind’s ability to self-reflect. Self-transcendence, in particular, is concerned with a greater awareness that rises above the self. Herewith the body can transfer itself into another tangible or intangible, living or imagined entity. Cloete (2013:40) aligns himself with Fromm’s understanding that self-transcendence means to achieve “interpersonal union” or “fusion with another person”. Indeed, this self-transcendence is described as one of the deepest needs of man, and enables all love as well as creativity because it activates the self and awakes it from the passive role of being created (2013:40). In the context of Van der Merwe’s works, the emotional state suggested by the works – the tenderness the small washing-up space, the persistent movements of the hands in the sink in *Biegbak/Confessional* and the preciousness of the vanity case in which the “mirror” showing lipstick applied (*It’s cold outside*) – seem to corroborate a loving relationship between the artist and the absent person who is invoked. And therefore, a sense of tenderness, even loving closeness, is also fostered between the participant and his or her imaginings of the absent person.

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<sup>24</sup> This is reminiscent of the notion of transubstantiation which, poetically and not dogmatically speaking, hinges on the experience Cloete is referring to.

Cloete (2013:51) concludes that one's mind, and one's body, is able to keep on loving someone who has died long after he or she does not exist in a physical body anymore. Hence poetry (and art, one can add) is in natural symbiosis with love. What also strikes about Cloete's argument (2013:55) is his insistence that love remains unfinished after the death of a person – and this I believe accounts for the way an aesthetic construction (a poem or an artwork, say) can have that open-ended ability to recount while not telling the whole story (or person). The work, like the people it suggest, are open texts that must be completed by the one who engages with it. Cloete (2013:60) states it thus: “Die geliefde of ding kan vergaan, maar die mymering oor die geliefde of ding kan lewenslank in my voortbestaan. Mymering is transendering, eterifisering” (the Afrikaans wording is exquisite, and hence I quote first in Afrikaans; my translation reads thus: “The beloved or the thing may perish, but the rumination about the beloved or thing may continue as long as one lives. Rumination is transcending, etherification”). A function of self-transcendence is to see it in context of death – where transfiguration, becoming one, after the death of a loved one, becomes a means of discovering *life* in greater fullness – death becomes a teacher (Cloete, 2013:61, 62).

Cloete's ideas resonate with recent thinking and practices in contemporary Western societies that proclaim that the boundaries between life and death are becoming blurred. Here the contribution of Glennys Howarth entitled “The rebirth of death”<sup>25</sup> is worth referencing. Shunning the psychology that “in order to live, one had to give up relationships with the dead” as a “healthy” way of dealing with death and mourning, Howarth (2007:21-25) argues that the dead may “continue to be ‘significant others’ for the living”.

Freudian views of absence as a psychological paradigm (see Mahfouz, 2012:393) entail that in order to mourn healthily, one is supposed to “let go” of those who are mourned. However, these ideas are giving way to current thinking in which “living with”, or maintaining a relationship with the absent other (often one who is dead) is celebrated (Maddrell, 2013:506). Transition, transformation and continuity are key aspects in this regard (Maddrell, 2013:507). I interpret these three aspects as follows: there is a transition

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<sup>25</sup> Howarth's chapter appears in the book *Remember me. Constructing immortality. Beliefs on immortality, life and death* (2007) edited by Margaret Mitchell.

from life to death, and another transition is the shift from person who becomes a mourner who has to cope with the difference between and consequences of life and death; transformation refers to both the deceased (transforming from life to death) and the one is transformed by mourning and remembering, and finally, continuity refers to continuing a bond with those who have died

Individuals also retain a sense of inner continuity with *themselves* if they remain connected with the selves of others. *Memento mori*, monuments, memorials and other practices are part of what Howarth (2007) calls “good grief: a refusal to abandon the dead”. Acts of remembrance are examples of continued relationships with the dead. Van der Merwe’s *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside* invoke the presence of the deceased loved ones precisely by making their absence sorely felt – the works hinge on Hutcheon’s (1988:49) argument that postmodern discourse “constitutes absence within a presence”. However, Van der Merwe’s works go further than invoking: since they place the participant in the other’s place, suggesting that one gets “under their skin”, one may prefer Cloete’s (2013:61, 62) argument that art achieves a sense of transcendence and transfiguration – as I argue happens in Van der Merwe’s works.

How, then, does this process of transcendence, transfiguration work? According to Cloete, there is a brief sense that one becomes alien to oneself which often makes for great clarity during self-transcendence. This is a bodily experience of self-reflection on the notion that one is a collective entity, who comprises phantom persons, or guest persons (Cloete, 2013:65)<sup>26</sup>. From here, it follows that not only can the self be the subject of reflection – because it is alien and host to many aspects – it is also malleable (Cloete, 2013:69). The many selves – at least six or seven, perhaps a thousand, according to Virginia Woolf (referenced by Cloete, 2013) – are known or not, and hidden or not.

For an artist, self-transcendence takes place when he or she is transmitted into the artwork. This may happen in the guise of a character, whom the novelist may *become* (even if just for

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<sup>26</sup> Cloete (2013:65-68) quotes many scholars; one could mention Augustine’s self-reflections, Nijhoff’s reflections on these reflections, as well as Jostein Gaarder (whose philosophically informative novel *Sophie’s World* [1991] begins with ruminations on the self and its relation to naming) – arguing that self-reflection that gives rise to self-alienation is an archetypal experience. The discussion is illuminated by his indications of surprisingly corresponding viewpoints of poets, novelists, academics writing on literature, philosophers, psychologists, theologians, and mystics.

a moment) (Cloete, 2013:71). In visual arts, the artist's touch, the traces of his labour, may parallel this self-transmission on a physical level. On a more abstract level, the artist may transmit him- or herself into the work by means of the projected narrative, or style, or the general affective sense of a work. The Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood in her gem-like book *Negotiating with the dead. A writer on writing* notes that the artist's self (much like the implied and historical author/artist) is split into a real person and a double – the one who writes, seemingly without the consciousness of the actual person having a say. This second self is either “an evil twin or a slippery double” (Atwood, 2002:36). Projecting him- or herself into the story, this transition into another consciousness takes place in the act of writing, “the moment when Alice passes through the mirror” and the “glass barriers between doubles dissolves” (2002:57). Here either the writing double (akin to the implied author) or the imagined character is imbued with another consciousness<sup>27</sup>.

However, the individual whose consciousness is transcended – who indeed becomes the other I – needs not be the artist; significantly, one can become the other I by allowing the artwork to “fill your heart with its song” (Cloete, 2013:72; the Afrikaans words are “Jy hoef nie ‘n kunstenaar te wees om ‘n ander ek te word nie, jy kan dit word deurdat jy toelaat dat die kunstenaar jou hart volsing”). Cloete now adds a further facet to the notion of transcendence: transpersonification. This refers to when one takes possession of another through art. Transcendence or transpersonification is ephemeral – like the Mayfly, Cloete (2013:72-73) notes, the lifespan of which is between 30 minutes to a day (2013:72). When one is transposed, transported, lifted up by art or music, one has briefly transcended oneself in a process that can theoretically be repeated infinitely; in the “moment of the infinite” (ibid).

To reiterate what Maddrell (2013:507) proposed, the Freudian mourning that prescribes “letting go” is not necessarily the only option for people who prefer to understand absent

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<sup>27</sup> The Alice of the story who crosses into the mirror also merges with a double of herself – the other, imagined Alice who exists nowhere; this conflation-transformation is recounted to the cat once Alice brings her story back from the other side of the mirror (which, Atwood notes, solves the problem of audience). Here Atwood (2002:57) wonders about who the writer and who Alice is; she offers the guess that writing takes place in a space that is neither art nor life, there where Alice passes through the mirror – because time stops there, and “both writer and reader have all the time not in the world”. Perhaps Atwood would concur with the more extreme merging of selves and others that Cloete and Ricoeur propose – where writer and his/her double, characters and their doubles, as well as readers and their personas in some way co-exist in one body and mind.

others in terms of having an on-going relationship – one in which memorialisation is an active process that may involve transitions and transformations. For the current discussion, the notions of transitions and transformations are understood as ways in which absences are made present in the embodied focalising activities of the participant in the artworks whose being-there makes the absent person tangible, briefly, by re-membering her in one’s own body. This is possible because the individual consciousness is transcended in the physical and mental space afforded by the artwork – and thus what Maddrell (2013:5011) calls a liminal “Third Emotional Space” can be imagined. In this space, identities (especially absences and presences) are temporarily suspended and re-negotiated; place is likewise re-negotiated to “become” different places in which different character-dimensions and selves can now be imagined. Place, space, character and identity are all *constructed* in this imaging process; Ricoeur (1992:147) notes that “[T]he narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told.”

### **6.5.1 I focalise, you focalise, we all focalise together: transforming, engaging and becoming**

As noted in chapter 4 (under 4.3.2), the viewer-participant in installation artworks, as is the case here, tends to occupy a narratorial position that reminds of Margolin’s (2013:12) reference to “unnatural voices” in postmodern narratives, being voices that are: “indeterminate and floating between the character [who may be the viewer-participant as well as absent characters evoked by the artwork – L.C.], the narrator [in a sense, ditto; narration emerges in the participant and emanates from other cues] and the persona of the biographical [and/or implied] author [whose presence is often suggested by inscriptions accompanying the artwork]” (ibid).

What happens, more specifically, to character in Van der Merwe’s works, is that the participant-character assumes the guise of the absent other (both the inferred absentee as well as the artist’s character), while also being him- or herself, by means of focalising activities on the part of the participant (who responds to the artist’s focalised cues). This is an incredulous situation, but not wholly improbable – both life and art (fiction) are subject to multiple levels and interpretations.

These focalising activities can be related to reflections by Genette ([1972] 1980:209) who noted that it is possible to have two concurrent codes that function on two planes of reality that seem to oppose each other without colliding (he called this double focalisation). What Genette ([1972] 1980:209-10) calls a triple narrative position is when there are three modes of focalisation at once (a Proustian mode that occurs in *A la recherche du temps perdu*) where focalisation passes from the consciousness of the hero to the narrator, even inhabiting at times other diverse characters in a manner that transgresses the “‘law of the spirit’ that says one cannot be inside and outside at the same time”; neither does this type of narration and focalisation correspond with classical omniscience. This means, in effect, that one may be dealing with a “concurrency of theoretically incompatible focalizations, which shakes the whole logic of narrative presentation” – indeed, Genette (1972] 1980:210-11) notes, a “troubling feature” of Proustian narrative.

Ginsberg ([1991] 2011: p. 5-6 of unpaginated proceedings) makes a similar case about a novel (Christina Wolf’s *Patterns of childhood*) that integrates three characters, three story lines, and three time periods (involving thus also the same character at different time periods); she notes that focalisation holds the narration together, and that the narrative’s silences complicate the questions of “‘who sees that which is not (or cannot be) spoken?’ and “‘who speaks it’”. Her answer to this conundrum is that the reader’s role as focaliser (and as verbaliser of the silence) should be interrogated. This issue is not addressed in any detail, but the point has been made that focalisation may reside with the reader. Relevant for now is that Genette referenced the seemingly insurmountable issue of multiplicity in focalisation – being everywhere at the same time – and that Ginsberg indicates that focalisation can hold together divergent characters, times and story lines; particularly if taking the reader’s focalising processes into account.

For a more extensive exploration of this notion of reader-as-focaliser (or, in the visual arts and installation art, the viewer and participant, respectively) Nixon’s (2010) article is a fruitful source. It is provocatively titled “I focalize, you focalize, we all focalize together: audience participation in *Persepolis*”<sup>28</sup>. Combining cognition and empathy – both important

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<sup>28</sup> As noted in chapter 4, footnote 8, the author refers to the filmic adaptation (2007) of the graphic novel *Persepolis* (2000).

for current purposes because the mental imaginings of character issues as well as empathic co-feeling work to enable the notion of “getting under the others’ skin” – Nixon (2010:92, 93) explores “how audience engagement in fictional worlds are cued”. Readers are, firstly, flesh and blood people and, secondly, they are invited to immerse themselves in storyworlds as they resonate (identify) with characters, and as they project themselves into the storyworlds “without filtering their experiences through those of the protagonists on screen”. Thus, Nixon (2010:93) proposes adding reader/viewer focalisation to existing categories of external, internal and hypothetical focalisation and so on, as these have been theorised by Herman (2009), Bal (1981) and others. Empathy and active construal of perceptual positioning by the audience are key here, especially where material is detached from a (usually human) diegetic perceiver.

Nixon (2010:94) therefore argues for an expansion of existing models that answer the “who perceives?” question since she feels that the answer was never meant to be wholly limited to the storyworlds (and its actors). It follows that the viewers can, as is literally the case with installation artworks, insert themselves into the storyworld – in film this can be achieved by reception-like filling in and applying one’s own concepts to how one makes sense of a scene. Following this line of thought, viewers can insert recollections from their own lives in order to integrate their experiences with the experiences of characters – so that they enter the autobiography (the genre of *Persepolis*) as themselves (Nixon, 2010:97). Van der Merwe’s installation artworks allow for physically filling in the works, by *being* the self and the absent character, and for inserting one’s own recollections into the reading of the works<sup>29</sup>. Jahn (1996:243) adds that “perception, thought, recollection, and knowledge are often considered critical features of focalization”. These perceptions and so on may obviously in this instance be those of the participant who is the reader/interpreter.

Tying these arguments to Ginsberg’s and Genette’s ideas set out above, one could posit that the focalisation and narration proceed in Van der Merwe’s works with profound

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<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur (1992:164) concurs: he notes that “the narrative can finally [if one explores the self/other and history/fiction dynamics as integral to character] its functions of discovery and transformation with respect to the reader’s feelings and actions, in the phase of the refiguration of action by the narrative.”

involvement by the participant (which is the parallel to Ginsberg's reader). This participant is inside and outside at the same time – inside and outside another character, and another focalising and narrating instance, in this case. Triple narration, double focalisation, focalisation traversing between characters – these Genettean issues are echoed in Van der Merwe's works where the narration proceeds from the focalised prompters and cues planted by the artist who uses different semiotic channels – interior spaces, temporal devices, screen-based looping images and written as well anecdotal paratexts. The artist also features as historical person, implied author and narrator-character, and he applies a particular voice and mood. All these are interpreted by the participant as semiotic potentials that are meaningfully synthesised by means of his or her focalising activities. In the process, he or she acts as a character who explores the absent other(s) in an empathic manner as in some way part of him- or herself.

Jahn (1996:243) reminds that “perception, thought, recollection, and knowledge are often considered critical features of focalization, and all these mental processes are closely related to seeing, albeit only metonymically or metaphorically”. When the participant sees the works, his or her perception, thought and recollection are activated. Furthermore, the participant's *own* life, memories and emotions are projected onto the works, because – to concur with Nixon's (2010:93) point, this is possible when the viewer (or participant) does not see through a prescribed focalising actor. Instead, he or she “becomes” the focalising actor – the absent grandmother or mother – and so the focalising activity is my own as I imagine her, and how I understand myself imagining my recall of her as I stand “in her shoes”. This last point concurs to an extent with Genette's double focalisation, although it deviates from his argument since it suggests that most of the focalising work (with the exception of the artistic choices) is undertaken by the participant who is a self as an other.

This type of focalisation is a transformative action that re-members and re-imagines the very object of interpretation, and can be aligned with Derrida's ([1993] 1994:63) understanding of “performative interpretation”, namely that it is “an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets”. More precisely, I transform the self into an other, who is re-membered in my body since hers is absent. In terms of re-membering someone in a narrative inside one's own body, it is worth referencing Ricoeur (1992:33) who says of embodied telling that “[P]ossessing bodies is precisely what persons do indeed do, or rather

what they actually are". However, in the process of making sense of the narrative, I am myself narrated and I become a character; I also become an other: all these becomings are transformations brought about in the context of the artwork; in a process akin to what Ricoeur (1992:164) calls "the refiguration of action by the narrative".

Characters who are narrated (and who are not finite beings) and who become immersed in the self who reads and imagines them draw attention to the question of identity, and especially to the osmosis between self and other. Ricoeur (1992:134) muses that:

In a sense, the question of identity has always stimulated an interest in paradoxical cases. Religious and theological beliefs about the transmigration of souls, immortality, and the resurrection of the flesh have not failed to intrigue the most speculative of minds ....The literature of personal identity is full of inventions of this sort: transplanting, bisecting brains, duplicating the cerebral hemispheres, and so on, to say nothing of the cases offered by clinical observations of split personalities, cases familiar to the general public.....Let us confine ourselves for the moment to the following observation: this striking continuity in the recourse of imagination to cases capable of paralyzing reflection allows us to see that the question of identity constitutes a privileged place of aporias.

These aporias, Ricoeur argues, exist between selfhood and sameness, and between self and me. For present purposes, however, the point has been made: the question of character is a complex one that interweaves issues of identity, that in turn hinge on instability, mutability and transformability. This is true not only of the one who asks, but of the one who is addressed and the one who is implied. Ricoeur's (1992:17) division of the question "who?" into twin questions – "who speaks?" (the locator) and "of whom are we speaking?" (the designated person) actually deserves a third question – "to whom is the question addressed?". These three questions address all three characters, who are character categories (artist as layered character; absences as multiples; and participant as "host" of many).

And because part of the narration entails that a life is recounted in fiction, a life that also existed historically, Ricoeur's (1992:162) assertion seems apt in terms of the participant who interprets and who finds him- or herself not only at one with the absent other whose story is told, but also with the author-narrator (whose story, too, is told): "By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself its co-author as to its meaning." This meaning has to do with the *fabulae* of the works.

## 6.6 Narration and focalising: fabulae

At this point in the discussion, it is necessary to explore the manner in which the fabula(e) come(s) into being, and how these processes of fabula construction relate to character. Given the complexity of character composition as proposed above, one may begin with this process of making sense of the fabula(e) by attributing different versions of the fabulae to different character categories. These different versions belonging to character categories also pertain to different levels of abstraction. In the first instance, there is a fabula that may be inferred from looking at the obvious prompters in the artwork; this yields a fairly unabstracted, and also an unsatisfactory fabula. In the second instance, the author's paratextual information in the form of titles of artworks, preface-like statements that accompany the works as well as biographical information and anecdotal accounts suggest a pre-existing fabula (that may correspond in some ways to pre-texts of visual artworks that deal with existing stories). This level of the fabula, equally, is not really abstracted.

Then, at the last and most abstract level, there is the fabula(e) constructed anew by the participant by means of active focalisation and keeping in mind the space, time and character complexities – all of which suggest processes of transformation, the expression of affective content and the narrativisation of the ordinary. In particular, the focalising is ascribed to a large degree to the participant who is fully integrated into the artwork, both physically and mentally. However, knowledge pertaining to the artist's version may have an impact here – suggesting, for example, that a specific person's absence is mourned; however, I propose that such knowledge adds a dimension to the fabulae without offering the only way of dealing with the fabulae of the works.

### 6.6.1 Constructing the fabula: first levels of abstraction

Overtly, the first level, fairly unabstracted fabulae of the works under discussion would be that in the case of *Biegbak/Confessional* someone, possibly but not necessarily a female, washes dishes (*Biegbak/Confessional*). That she prays while doing so may be part of the fabula, given the name of the work – but here one is already taking into account the artist's directions of using the title as paratextual element (and hence, the artist's focalised choice of words). For *It's cold outside*, the first-level fabula may entail that someone, most likely a female, applies lipstick. This happens while it is cold outside – again, in view of the name of the work given by the artist.

Without considering the paratextual charge of the titles, the fabulae of the works may more simply entail that someone is washing dishes here, and someone is applying lipstick there. These actions take place in a space that looks like a rusted washing-up kitchen section and some sort of undemarcated domestic setting, respectively – but as the current chapter as well as the previous one sought to demonstrate, space cannot narrate unless it is focalised to become concrete place.

These facile versions of the fabulae also recall Bal's (2006a:227) remark in her reading of *The toilet of Bathsheba* (1654) (addressed in this study under 4.4) that to construct a fabula, one cannot simply connect minimal schema presented in the artwork. Such a pedantic exercise would, in the case of the Rembrandt painting, yield fabulae such as: "Elderly woman cleans nails of naked woman's foot" or "Woman holds a letter she has just received". The obvious insufficiency of these suggests, according to Bal, the necessity of active focalising efforts aimed at constructing a more satisfactory fabula that would be the result the focalising efforts *of the (implied) artist as well as the viewer* (the participant in installation art). One can speak of layered and multifaceted focalising efforts. Bal's (2006a:228) requirement that the interpreter assumes an identificatory position is salient – through focalisation processes one is able to connect the clues inside the work – both semiotically and affectively. These are pursued under 6.6.2 below.

For the moment, the inadequate fabulae presented above constitute the topic of discussion. Glaringly obvious in the pedantic versions of Van der Merwe's works is the fact that these fabulae both emerge from what the screen media relate (washing dishes and applying

lipstick). To reiterate, it would seem as if without a focalising subject who turns space into place, time into a thickened temporality, and who gives semantic depth to the various character categories (as well as a more extended consideration of event), an appropriate fabula remains elusive. In particular, it seems that one should rather look for open fabulae (extended ones, at that) that can account for the works in a more satisfactory manner. This is perhaps because the preceding unsatisfactory fabulae (washing dishes, applying lipstick) are based on “finding” or “discovering” a fabula in artworks such as Van der Merwe’s that are, I would posit, more suited to the notion of *constructing* rather than *finding* the fabula. Up until this point, the discussion considered fabulae that only took account of what can be seen without engaging with the works and allowing focalising activities to make more profound sense of the works.

A fabula can also be predicated on other paratextual elements (that is, apart from titles mentioned above) such as the artist’s preface-like statements (discussed under 6.3.2 above) where the artist explains his version of the story (in lectures, interviews or by other means). It is possible that these accounts may already have been coloured by his conversations with people; hence statements like “metaphors for loss, waste and consumerism” (in the exhibition statement to *Time and Space*) may not have been entirely the artist’s own thoughts. This issue aside, the paratexts provided are ascribed to the artist (as all paratexts are, apart from instances such as novel’s prefaces not written by the artist) and therefore constitute his version of the fabulae, together with anecdotes and biographical information.

Here the story of his grandmother washing dishes, all the while praying for family *and*, poignantly yet laughably, also for her favourite characters in Springbok radio dramas, adds an endearing twist to *Biegbak/Confessional* as does the highly charged background information to *It’s cold outside*: namely, that the artist’s mother was about to embark on her last journey, to the hospital, at night. She applied lipstick before leaving, as if preparing for death (Personal interview, 2012).

Added to these anecdotes there is certain biographical information, such as the knowledge that the artist comes from a simple background; that with very few means at his disposal found his way into the erstwhile Technikon and into the art world; that he is an Afrikaans male with a pleasant disposition, working as a painting lecturer and featuring in the art

circuit from time to time available where he also speaks about his own work. He has also written texts that accompany works, also for the catalogue *Unknown* in which his essay “Transformation of the found” appears.

In addition, then, to anecdotes, the interpreter is wont to incorporate some of this information in an expanded version of the previously mentioned, unsatisfactory *fabulae*. For example, the emotional value of the works certainly increases with the knowledge that the artist purports to comprise “monuments to the unknowns”, in other words, works that venerate those people whom one tends to hold dear but who may not receive much recognition apart from small gestures of appreciation from those who are close to them. The stories pertaining to the works as told by the artist may create such resonance in those who engage with his works that the possibilities of delving deeper, and finding more narrativised meaning, may pass one by. That may be the case since the artist’s paratexts – preface-like statements, titles, anecdotes and the like – seem to inform the works to a large degree.

I have demonstrated that reading the minimal schema provided by the works does not yield satisfactory *fabulae*. In another sense, the artist’s paratextual elements, including titles that guide the interpretation, preface-like statements attached to works, artist’s exhibition statements, and even anecdotal information (such as the grandmother who prays and the mother who is about to leave home for the last time) help the interpreter to gain access to another level of the *fabulae*.

The attentive student can take note of these paratextual elements but still the *fabulae* yielded by taking these into consideration will not suggest the type of *open* text (and extended *fabulae*) that the more active participation of the interpreter, reception-like and focalising, makes possible. To explain: if one simply added paratextual awareness to a first-level reading of the works, such an effort may yield *fabulae* such as: “This work allows the artist to tell poignantly of his grandmother’s endearing behaviour at the kitchen sink, always praying for family, characters from Springbok radio dramas and other loved ones” or “This work is about the artist’s mother whose last evening at home culminated in her making herself beautiful for death, because she applied lipstick before being taken into the cold night to hospital, where she died”. Such *fabulae* demonstrate at least two things: in the first

place, not having access to those particular anecdotes would render attempts at this type of interpretations impossible. Secondly, such *fabulae* miss the fact that all signs in an aesthetic context (or most contexts) signify in excess of their “obvious” functions. Furthermore, not everyone may have access to these anecdotes and thus some of these meanings may be lost. I would like to suggest, however, that in the current age of internet the avid researcher would very likely stumble across such anecdotes. Once these are published in theses or other research publications, a serious student of Van der Merwe’s art will take note of his versions of the stories that inform the works.

However, quite obviously the interpretative act demands that while one may include such information, one should offer an actual *interpretation* based on a synthesised meaning-making connection of theory and art that does not simply reiterate whatever information the artist has given. In light of this demand, a more multifaceted version of the *fabulae* suggested by the works can and should be offered. Making narrative sense of this excess meaning suggested by the works is why focalised interpretation – performed by the participant in the installation artwork – is proposed as the most meaningful avenue for reading Van der Merwe’s works.

### **6.6.2 The other one is I: the more abstracted, extended *fabulae* of mourning, absence and re-remembering – as memory**

Eco was quoted in chapter 4 as saying “it is enough to isolate an agent (no matter whether human or not), an initial state, a series of time-oriented changes with their causes, a final (even if transitory) result.” This section briefly recaptures some salient issues in this regard. Transformation of a character constitutes a change of state that is significant enough to pass as a *fabula*. Consequently, Eco ([1979] 1985:30) argues that “one can recognize one or more *fabulae* even in those avant-garde texts where there is not story at all”. Narration may therefore proceed as “the various steps in its construction” (Eco, [1979] 1985:31) that make up the *fabula*. Even when the interpreter is uncertain about the next step, one should keep in mind that the story may offer “a state of disjunction of probabilities” by weighing macro-propositions that are eventually connected to suggest the *fabula* (Eco, 1979:31). The interpreter takes “inferential walks” (interpretative moves consisting of intertextual frames); i.e., one considers possibilities *outside the text* (“common frames” – Eco, [1979]

1985:36) to try out. Elicited by the text, these are the components of the constructed fabula ([1979] 1985:32). And thus Eco ([1979] 1985:33-36) allows for open and closed fabulae, and given the work required by the interpreter of Van der Merwe's work, the contention of the current study is that one is looking at open fabulae.

It would be possible to see the one part of the extended fabula as a process of identity formation and negotiation – in other words, tracing the transformation of identity as it is suggested in the *spatial* transformations, the *temporal* transformations and finally how these enable character transformations (of the artist/author, the absent characters and the participant who interprets). All these take place in the so-called third space, which allows for such transformations and renegotiations to emerge.

Spatial transformations entail “the concretization of space into place” (Bal, 2001a:214). This concretisation is made manifest when rust is transformed into “furniture” and objects' surfaces; when looping video images in specific places become synecdoches; and when a space in the gallery becomes a fictional world that is felt as an actual place. In this place, the act of remembering a person and/or persons turns objects and furniture into a recognisable domestic setting. Moreover, spatial transformations house absences here. In particular, these absences may be associated with death, so that the spatial transformations in Van der Merwe's works demonstrate the connections between death, the experience of absence and the everyday stuff and routine human activities in which absences are often most sorely felt (see Meier, 2013:424). “Absences need memories to fill them with life”, according to Meier (2013:425); therefore the empty spaces of Van der Merwe's works that are filled by the participant trigger what has been noted as absences that arise only in the lived, embodied experience of absence – and therefore, absences are not voids but are manifested in “concrete places, people and things” (Meier, 2013:424-5).

Temporal transformations, in turn, concern the “thickening of time” (Bal, 2001a:214) that is achieved *inter alia* by the rust that speak of time passing and time preserved; the video loops suggest abstract time that has an iterative quality; and a time long ago is recalled in the time of looking. These transformations take place in the liminal “Third Emotional Space” that has been indicated above (under 6.4.4). In this space, as noted, identities are temporarily suspended, place is also re-negotiated to “become” different places in which

different character-dimensions and selves can be imagined. And thus, to reiterate, place, character and identity are all *constructed* and transformed in this imaging process Maddrell (2013:5011).

Furthermore, in this process of being constructed, the spatial and temporal transformations create gaps – between space and place, and between temporalities, and between the absence and the character dimensions in which the absences are felt. For example, there are gaps between the rusted surfaces that signify and the things or objects thus signified; there are gaps that emerge in the iterative abstraction of time in the video loops as well as between the time told and the time of experience. These gaps are the conceptual spaces with which the participant engages in order to explore the “semantization of character” (Bal, 2001a:214) – the way in which the absences become charged with meaning as one remembers, as one’s own body stands where the absent person can be imagined standing, and as she is re-membered, fleshed out, in the members of one’s own body. These gaps, existing as they do between characters who migrate between ontological planes, have affinities with what Ricoeur in his book with the telling title *Oneself as another* (1992:114) calls the chiasm between history and fiction – a chiasm in which he feels narrative identity is located. From this argument, one can posit that narrative identity in Van der Merwe’s works comes into being in the chiasm between history and fiction by means of the focalised activity of the artist on the one hand (by means of planting cues) and re-membered by the participant’s focalising when he or she allots meaning and content to the chiasms.

Furthermore, he (Ricoeur, 1992:163) posits that

Literary narratives and life histories, far from being mutually exclusive, are complementary, despite, or even because of, their contrast. This dialectic reminds us that the narrative is part of life before being exiled from life in writing; it returns to life along the multiple paths of appropriation ...

Ricoeur’s notion of chasms or gaps is therefore relevant to the focalised insertion of one’s own semantisation as a character, and the semantisation of other characters and their doings into the narrative.

In light of this, a connection can be made between Bal’s (1981) exploration of focalisation and her subsequent definition of a fabula. Firstly, the sage poses. The cat sees him, and

imitates his pose. The viewer derives this “cat that sees and imitates” by means of focalising, and by semantising, the gap between what Arjuna does and what the cat does (in light of the issues dealt with in the chapter so far, the cat may be said to identify with Arjuna in an embodied way, but in quite a futile manner since this identification obscures the cat’s vision of the mice).

Focalisation also makes possible the understanding that we are seeing a cat that does un-cat-like things such as assuming the tree pose – and we understand that we are dealing with a non-realist representation of a narrative character. Furthermore, the viewer can focalise what the mice focalise, namely that they can laugh because the cat is not interested in chasing them since he is so busy imitating the sage. This is how the fabula then comes into being: by means of connecting the signifiers (“dots”) and filling in the gaps between the dots. The fabula comes into being in the gaps, and these gaps can be semantised by means of focalisation – by a particular constructive, interpretative slant that guides the sense-making of how the elements in the narrative can be connected. This is applicable to the fabula construction in Van der Merwe’s works – first the space and time, and then the characters were dealt with, after which the gaps in which the unrelated elements find semantic connections are filled in by means of the participant’s focalisation that provides the meaning-making “glue” between the elements to construct the fabulae.

In some sense, there is a causal logic to the works that may be shared among interpreters – elements of “basically similar fabulae” (see chapter 4; section 4.4). Apart from the obvious washing and lipstick application, the suggestion may be felt that in *Biegbak/Confessional* one sees a suspended time, a time of meditation that does not seem to suggest any movement towards another step in a “story”. Of course, the work is still narrative in the sense that it narrates, and it may nonetheless yield various fabulae. Indeed Eco ([1979] 1985:30) notes that “one can recognize one or more *fabulae* even in those avant-garde texts where there is not story at all”. (While *Biegbak/Confessional* is not necessarily an avant-garde text, it does not signify a story in the obvious sense of beginning, middle and end – including all the other prerequisites for story, which include causality and eventfulness).

*It’s cold outside* is slightly different. This is because of the reference to the weather outside, while both my and the absent person’s position is inside, so that there seems to be a greater

possibility for a changed state that is suggested – the protagonist is inside, and since note is taken of conditions outside, the implication is that she will be going out. Once the suitcases are included in this narrative frame, the shift from inside to outside becomes more obvious. Therefore, *It's cold outside* has a clearer physical suggestion of a changed state – now I or she am/is inside, and am/is likely to go outside, although this has to be imagined. *Biegbak/Confessional* seems to rely more on the suspension of time, and the transformation that takes place inside this temporal void or suspension – especially in the character of the participant. The works are both narrative, however, because both speak of process – spatial, temporal and with regard to character construction, even event (Bal, 2006b:258 highlights processual aspects as indicative of a narrative that does not have “an eventful, pre-established, recognizable story”).

Since I, the participant, focalises the works, I can only offer my interpretations. In the works I see the endless repetition of hands washing and applying lipstick, I see the rust deteriorating and I know that it also oxidises, so that while it loses substance, it also grows in substance. I know that the rust reminds of age, of fossilised man-made things, and of nostalgia. I understand that rust always implies time, and that this time is spatially inscribed into space, onto the surfaces of things. I sense that the iterativity of the movements in the screens mesmerise me because their repetitions are so exact that the time they purport to show becomes abstract and dissolves into contemplative time. And most of all, I sense longing that is so acute that the only way to deal with it would be to sublimate it by means of extensive theoretical consideration, as I did above, and coming to terms with the possibility that the characters who are absent, including the artist, and I briefly share some sense of co-existence in which my being present, my body and eyes as well as my affective and cognitive states, focalise and co-narrate for an entire host of consciousnesses.

This experience, irrational as it seems, is situated in an awareness that the works do not tell of a beginning and an end. Like life, the beginning and ending of which we are not aware of ourselves, the works parallel the suspended state that existence is. In this state, we love and lose: we mourn and celebrate. Like monuments, the works celebrate loved ones. Like memorials, they remember – they may even mourn.

### *Fabulae of mourning and memory*

Mourning is related to love and loss, and may entail various processes that work to maintain a relationship with someone who is absent. In Van der Merwe's works, the absent person was deeply loved and has died, and therefore she is both missed and mourned. I do not have to know this, but the works convey the sense of absence by positioning me in a space clearly supposed to be occupied by the person who is doing the dishes, or applying the lipstick.

In *Remember me. Constructing immortality: beliefs on immortality, life and death* edited by Margaret Mitchell (2007:3) the author notes that "communication with the dead is common" – thus attributing feelings and alive qualities not only to the dead, but by implication also to the objects and spaces in which we feel their presence. Such attribution points to a belief in afterlife, or at least to an understanding, usually based in religious beliefs, that the spirit and soul of a person continue to exist after the body has expired (however, when we think of the departed, our longing is for the expired body as much as for the spirit and the soul that inhabited that body during its earthly existence).

The absence of the body of the one who is longed for in Van der Merwe's works can be temporarily assuaged by recalling her soul, and by the process of co-opting the participant to re-member her (physically) when he or she mentally enters the emotional third space. Here, the participant restores the absent one's bodily members by temporarily imagining her there in both body and soul. Consequently, the works express the profound emotional symbolic re-presentation of the absent person, in the body and consciousness of the participant. This aspect is made manifest as an expression of *in memoriam*, where symbolic re-representations are made to remember and commemorate. Not only the objects commemorate; the body of the participant is "borrowed" for purposes of remembering; indeed "[T]he body aids in the mediation between memory and matter, and so implicates its involvement in habit memory" (Trigg, 2006:22).

Van der Merwe's works therefore suggest processes of mourning, and also memory (of the absent person) in a highly aesthetic manner, by giving concrete shape to spaces and objects, so that the participant can channel these sentiments into intellectual grappling and symbolic engagement. As Wylie (2009:279) argues, "it is the very materiality of memory – its

presence, tangibility and there-ness – that remains a touchstone, *even if* the matter in question is tarnished, disordered, forgotten, hidden or irreversibly decaying” [Wylie’s italics]. The artist’s focalising of this tangibility – i.e. the selection of objects and the transformation of time and space by means of rust-covered objects and video – as well as the participant’s focalising – i.e. the subjective transformation of the given facets of the artwork into a meaningful fabula – constitutes the symbolic processes of mourning. All symbolic meanings associated with mourning, according to Colman (2010:288) are “over-determined”, and this translates into multiple and indeterminate, according to the author, who elaborates poetically that such meanings are “subject to the protean energy of the imagination that gives to airy nothings a local habitation and a name”.

In addition, “[M]emories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are awoken by some trifle and in some strange way blind us to life” (Sebald, 2002:255 in Trigg, 2006:23). Far from calling Van der Merwe’s representations trifling, the mundane activity shown in the looping video certainly represents among life’s less significant, or at least less ostensibly meaningful or eventful activities. But these are also the activities by means of which the absent person is remembered: her embodied ritual becomes a conduit for continued remembering (see also Madrell, 2013:517). In *Biegbak/Confessional* her incessant, repetitive labour becomes the memory of her. One is not likely to remember any specific event of a grandmother washing the dishes unless, perhaps, something significant happened during once when she was washing dishes. In any event, in such a case the remembering would not really be about the dish-washing, but much rather about some kind of event. Since the works show incessantly repeated images, the works do not seem to “be about” the ostensible act of washing. What the works rather seem to suggest is that the memory of a person is caught here not in one specific event, but rather in the everydayness of things that take place so often that they lose meaning through habituation.

Instead of the more frequent association with mechanical action as repressive of memory (see Trigg, 2006:23), this work reverses such associations. The remembering instead becomes more acute and iterative, giving a heightened sense of memory. Benjamin (1977:257 in Trigg, 2006:23) claims that: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is *never seen again*” (my italics).

Thus, Trigg (2006:23) contends, “mechanical action opposes and represses the image of the past in its totality”. However, what Van der Merwe’s work does is precisely the opposite: it shows never-ending repetition of banal actions and in this very repetition the heightened experience of the past, the acute memory of the person and the narrative associated with her is forged – and that is part of how extended fabula comes into being.

Often, people would lay flowers of remembrance at the place where a person was last alive (for example, if someone was killed in an accident, a wreath or cross with flowers may be positioned at that place) (see Howarth, 2007:30). *Biegbak/Confessional* seems to suggest a symbolic wreath of remembering in the place where the absent person is most typically remembered having been; another kind of place-marking is true of *It’s cold outside*, which indeed commemorates the last place inside the home where the person was, as part of a family and a household. Again, this information has been gleaned from the artist’s anecdotes, and therefore frames the current construction of the fabulae. Bal (2006a:254) posits that many artworks produce this tension between “interpretation, meaning, the maker, the viewer, and the effects of time”. Certain subjectivities – especially the artist’s and the interpreter’s are at play during the construction of meaning, which is always undertaken from the vantage point of the present (Bal, 2006b:255). The artwork is bound up with all these subjectivities, and yet manages to speak through its own pictorial intelligence.

This pictorial intelligence is transmitted by means of “free indirect focalisation” on the part of the interpreter. Bal (2006b:256-7) explains this process thus: there may indeed be a conflation of narrator and character in the reading of certain visual artworks – and the reader’s role in such cases may be one of co-narrator that also shifts to being a character on the inside of the artwork<sup>30</sup>. Additionally, Bal (2006b:257) notes, the critic’s or interpreter’s response to an artwork *also* constitutes a narrative. Therefore, by means of free indirect focalisation in which a conflation of character, narrator, and even artist and interpreter is achieved, the fabula is constructed through the use of all the subjective information available. My argument is that Van der Merwe’s anecdotes pertaining to his versions of the

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<sup>30</sup> It is notable that Bal (2006b) makes these inferences about paintings, but not about installation artworks, where such a conflation of subjectivities, I argue, is much more prominent.

fabulae are available to the interpreter, and that these make the narrative reading that an interpreter would reach, richer and more poignant.

Therefore, the works are focalised to become monuments to the unknown and to those who are known to the interpreter (also through the artist's paratexts), and the works are also memorials. They represent absence – but in doing so, the nameless dread of absence is given an identity. It is symbolised and made concrete: “the most fundamental requirement of mourning is the capacity to symbolise absence” (Colman, 2010:291). Also, “[P]erhaps the central task of mourning is to make sense of the conflict between the absence of the lost object and the continuing presence of an emotional relationship to that which is lost” (Colman, 2010:278).

Colman (2010:292) contends that symbols are richer and more complex than “the diversion of instinctual wishes onto substitute objects”. Therefore, a symbol is an interactive web of meanings that has a relational meaning basis. It is “a living thing that changes and grows as new meanings are generated out of a creative process of relationship” (Colman, 2010:294). This relational aspect allows the symbol to “take one a living reality in the imaginal world and thus to redeem the dead and restore faith in creative living”. Thus “symbolizing loss is not merely a re-creation but a creative act of bringing a new imaginal reality into being”. Therefore, “a symbolic representation of a lost loved one is never merely a symbol of the person themselves, but of the entire relationship with that person, transformed and kept alive in symbolic form. And, as a living thing, it is never complete, always in motion and sustained by the ultimate enigma of absence and death. Symbolic activity is a work that is never done; it is an on-going act of faith in loving remembrance, and active transcendence of the opposition between life and death, love and hate, hope and despair” (Colman, 2010:293).

The restoration of lost objects (and lost people) is pre-eminently a “symbolic process”, and this restoration cannot take place “if absence remains in the unthinkable state of being ‘gone’ where the absence of the object is co-existent with the absence of a mind in which it can be known” (ibid.). I understand this to mean that Van der Merwe's works present an opportunity to restore, through mourning and specifically by means of symbolically understanding absence, the person who is lost (probably dead) in the bodily experience, but

especially in the mind of the participant who enters the artwork. The artist therefore invites the participant through a series of symbolic processes to share his mourning, while at the same time remembering and mourning ourselves. The works could have been captioned *In loving memory*<sup>31</sup>.

## 6.7 Synthesis and chapter conclusion

### 6.7.1 Summary and conclusions: character narrated and focalised

Ryan (2013:28) suggests that to read a picture narratively is to ask who the characters are that are shown in the picture; what their interpersonal relations may be; what they have done before, what they are doing now, what their reasons for acting are, what will be brought about by their actions, and how the characters will react to the event. Obviously, she brings to bear the basic elements of narrative here – character, time, event or action (and space, which can be assumed, since a picture is made up of space). This chapter set out to explore character and fabula construction in Van der Merwe’s works, keeping in mind that spatial and temporal issues inform this process.

Therefore, as Smyth and Croft (2006:22) argue, spatial meanings and character implications are “always in part an effect of a *temporal* shift (one which the observing subject is always obliged to negotiate) from past to present” (my italics - LC). In effect, these implications have been argued to make sense in terms of focalisation; so that the fabula comes into being once space is “concretized into place”, when the “thickening of time” has been accounted for, as “the semantization of character” was explored – all brought about by the focalising activities of the artist and very pertinently by the participant’s character (the participant is of course also the interpreter) and synthesised into different possible outcomes of the fabulae. It was proposed that as space and time are transformed and transformative in the works, character is similarly a transformative issue; the main transformative work takes place in the character of the participant who interprets (more about this shortly). The construction of postmodern characters was interrogated following

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<sup>31</sup> Also see Wylie (2009) for a more elaborate discussion of loving remembrance – here in the form of memorial park benches in a landscape.

Fokkema's (1991) typology of such characters. In summary, five salient points pertaining to character have been identified from Fokkema (1991) and found to be relevant to all character aspects in Van der Merwe's works. These were: (1) the human-like aspect of character; (2) ontological overlaps between real and fictional worlds; (3) closed versus open characters – postmodern characters tend to be open; (4) characters have multiple selves; and finally, (5) characters are selves in search of others.

These five points illuminated the characters identified in Van der Merwe's works. In terms of the characters in these works, it was proposed that instead of reading character as comprising single entities, character categories (that may be hosted in single entities) can rather be identified. These included the artist in his various guises: from implied artist, historical artist as well as co-narrator and (absent) character. Paratextual elements were explored as supplemental authorial inputs; here titles, exhibition statements, preface-like statements, anecdotal evidence and biographic issues were dealt with. All five of Fokkema's points pertaining to character are present in this artist-character category: he is human-like; his character aspects migrate across ontological borders of real and fictional, especially since the boundaries between implied artist and historical artist are perforated by his intrusion into the fictional world of the artwork through anecdote and preface-like statements. Furthermore, he is an open character whose input is available for use but since he is a real person, too, he cannot be a closed entity. Following this scrutiny of the artist's character, one can posit that he does indeed have multiple selves and, finally, that his works suggest a self in search of others. This last point was addressed with reference to his work as expressions of mourning and symbolic representation of the object of mourning – which was explored under the section on fabula. In any event, the artistic presence was de-centred; like paratexts that appear on margins, the artist did not put himself in the centre of the action inside the works.

Rather, the central position in the works was found to be occupied by the cast of absent characters in Van der Merwe's works; these have been argued to occupy "centre stage". Like absent characters in stage dramas, they determined much of the content of the work, and their absence filled the experience of the audience, or of the participant (following Mahfouz, 2012). Furthermore, given the paratextual element of artistic anecdote, these absent characters could be understood as Van der Merwe's grandmother and mother in

*Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside*, respectively. However, these absences were indicative of absent characters “filled in” by the participant’s own projections of absent persons, so that a participant could bring his or her own grandmother or other beloved absent female person to the work. Of great significance here is that the merging of selves was suggested by the man’s hands in the looping video inside the sink in *Biegbak/Confessional* where one would expect a woman’s hands – this feature gave further credence to multiple character aspects, to selves that embody others – and selves in search of others; here by making symbolic re-presentations and re-memberings of absent others. The absent character who prays not only for real people, but for fictional characters (relayed by means of an artist’s anecdote) corroborates this conflation and layeredness of character, and adds an interesting dimension of fictionality to the work.

Again, in the light of Fokkema’s typology, it is worth noting that the cast of absent characters are human-like because they infer real people; therefore they also cross ontological boundaries between the real world and the fictional world of the artwork where they are recalled. Since these characters infer actual people, they are open rather than closed entities. Furthermore, the absence is constituted of many absent people so that one can speak of multiple selves; the absent characters are also fragmented (they are represented by fragments of bodies – hands and part of a face). In the last instance, they are selves in search of others, not least because they need an other (the artist and the participant) in order to “exist”.

The last character category comprises the participant in the installation artwork. This group overlaps with the absent characters, notably because the absent characters are called to live by means of mental, affective and embodied focalisation processes that are lodged in the participant. The participant is a character because he or she is also a participant in the storyworld of the artwork (following Jannidis, 2013:1 and Margolin, 2007:66 set out in chapter 4). He or she identifies with the absent character and also with the artist; he or she experiences a radical sense of empathy and, finally, he or she experiences what was termed embodied narration and focalisation. These refer to the actual experience of mirroring the other to the extent that one re-members or fleshes out the other. Philosophically, this sense of temporarily becoming the other was linked to Ricoeur’s (1992) arguments pertaining to the self that becomes the other in a sort of transfiguration in the narrative. Cloete’s (2013)

sentiments echo this notion; he believes that love allows for the transcendence of self into another; again, a type of transfiguration or transpersonification.

Fokkema's (1991) character typology was found to be equally applicable to the character category of the participant: he or she is human-like; by entering into the installation artwork he or she physically transcends the ontological boundaries between the real and the fictional worlds. Of course, this ontology is echoed in mental, affected and embodied processes of focalisation and co-narration that oscillate between the real world and the storyworld of the artwork. In the third instance, following Fokkema, the participant is much rather an open entity than a closed one; he or she has multiple selves (self, self as other, i.e. self re-membering the other, self as character, self as co-narrator, to name a few). Finally, he or she was shown to be a self in search of an other. This last point, namely a self in search of an other, was found in all three character categories to be a determining factor in the construction of the more abstracted fabulae. Fabula construction is now briefly considered.

### **6.7.2 Summary and conclusions: fabulae constructed**

Fabula construction is an active process that needs the participation of the interpreter; by and large, there are, however, different levels of fabula construction. Firstly, the unsatisfactory and unabstracted fabulae yielded fairly nonsensical versions such as "person washes dishes" or "woman applying lipstick". The fabulae produced by means of emphasising artistic paratexts were more interesting, but similarly lacking in greater dimensional depth: seeing a work that relates a grandmother's prayers while washing dishes is touching, but this fabula does not account for the excess of meanings that artworks like these hold. Similarly, not even the poignancy of a last moment of comfort at home in preparation for death (as noted, the story of *It's cold outside*) can account for the meaning-potential of the work. Therefore, the participant's focalisation activities that helped to make sense of how space is transformed into place, and how the thickening of time (Bal's 2001a:214 phrases) has meaning, is also necessary in order to trace how character is semantised (ibid.) and how all these work to construct more meaningful, abstracted, extended fabulae.

Ricoeur (1992:162) has noted that: “By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself its co-author as to its meaning.” This is closely related to the process of fabula construction by means of focalised efforts on the side of the participant. The notion of the extended fabula was gleaned from Eco ([1979] 1985) and Du Plooy (1986); the extended fabula can account for probabilities, changes of states and a constructive approach towards the fabula – and constitutes a greater measure of abstraction than the more unsatisfactory connection of minimal schema or the artist’s anecdotes on their own would yield. The extended fabulae pertaining to Van der Merwe’s works took their *raison d’être* from the participant’s mental, affective and embodied focalising activities. These focalising activities, reception-like, come into being when the participant fleshes out the narrativised cues in the artworks and makes focalised meaning of the aporia that can be discerned in terms of space, time and character. This is how space becomes concrete place, time thickens, and characters are semanticised in order to produce a fabula.

I explored the possibility that the extended fabulae that one can construct thus for Van der Merwe’s works entail a symbolic process of one-ness with an other for whom one longs. It is therefore akin to a symbolic type of mourning. This symbolised mourning entails that the participant-I, who is myself, also re-members various absentees and commemorates them. These absentees include, for example, my grandmother and the artist’s, as well as a generalised sense of loved ones who are unknown but for their small gestures of care, among others. Absent, or likely deceased characters who played roles in the lives of the artist and the participant become re-membered, transfigured, transformed by the participant by of his or her focalising process that facilitates this transformation.

In other words, by mourning the various absent personas in the symbolic time-space of the artwork – indeed, the personas who are also embodied in my standing there – I as the participant can also emerge in a changed state, having honoured and mourned them (my own grandmother, for example) and having co-mourned with the artist, and thus having come to terms with symbolising their absence. The symbolic time-space of the artwork together with my recall of the absent ones whom I represent and whom I remember, constitute the formation of a symbolic object of mourning. Symbol formation is “a creative activity that is centrally linked to the mourning process. The creation of symbols is seen as

providing a means by which the lost and destroyed object may be repaired and restored in symbolic form” (Colman, 2010:279).

Symbols are often embedded in histories (i.e. in narratives) in a different ontological, often unconscious form. Here the repeated movements of washing or applying lipstick become symbolic because these simple, everyday activities concretise, ironically, on a screen which is really all but concrete, the person who is absent by evoking not just her activities, but also her memory and body in the image that is shown. The image concentrates the person’s character and becomes the focus of symbolic transformation. The multiplicity of the self, achieved through identification by the participant, is foregrounded here when the unconscious possibility of embodying, imaginatively, another character in another temporal and spatial ontology becomes pertinent. This identification with another, indeed, empathy, is essential for engaging with the works at hand in a profound manner. It means that one has to feel with another human being. Interestingly, Wylie (2009:279) notes that “the depth and richness of memory-places and memory-objects demands in turn the attentive empathy of the researcher [here the participant of the artwork]” because of their archaeological resonances that hinge on the notions of salvage, rescue and so on. Thus, the identification process, that is achieved by means of symbolising it, proceeds with empathy – and this is how the extended *fabulae* is imbued with life.

It is through the participant’s bodily as well as mental *presence* that the *fabula* is co-constructed. This happens through cognitive processes and physical, sensuous experience of the space and its implications that enable the co-constitution of the absent person. This process requires a significant measure of identifying, emphatically, with the absent person.

Also, this identification and empathy pertain not only to the absent character, but to whoever longs for the presence of that character. This cast of characters includes the absent mother or grandmother, but also the artist’s persona who longs for them, as well as my own absent grandmother or other loved ones, as well as myself (who longs for her or them). A radical type of empathy occurs here, one that transcends the differences between myself and the longed-for other character, and one which makes it possible for me to also feel a kinship with the artistic person (implied or actual historical artist, depending on how closely

the autobiographical content is understood to approximate a real historical person who doubles as an artist of an oeuvre).

All these layers of personas or characters are quite involved – the various aspects of the artist (historical, implied and the maker of an oeuvre who exists in cultural consciousness), myself (who looks and participates here, but who has an existence quite independent of the artworks), and the various personas and aspects of personas who absently people the works. They all ‘live’ inside my body for the duration of my viewing, and yet I “become” them but remain myself.

By venerating and experiencing the objects, temporal suggestions and the spaces of the artworks, by sensing these qualities as symbolic representations of the absences of loved ones, the absence is made present. Even the traces, the decaying fragments that tell of what has been become reconstituted into a meaningful, restorative fabula. In the context of this fabula, I have been transformed: heavy with memory and with the pleasant burden of remembering, the threshold between myself and my memories on the one hand, and my co-constituting of the memories invoked by absences related to the artist in the works becomes a new inhabitable zone. Wylie (2009:279) suggests that a threshold can assume the status of “an enlarged, uncannier zone of indiscernibility and dislocation, disrupting all distinctions” between the absence of presence and the presence of absence. This oneiric yet embodied state is a state of heightened awareness of our humanity, and is also emblematic of significant aesthetic satisfaction.

In the unconscious mind, where these meaning-possibilities stew and where they emerge from, “everything is interchangeable with everything else, past and future are one and there is not distinction between intention and action” (Colman, 2010:289). This is what Van der Merwe’s works achieve: rendering tangible time and space, character and stories, as these exist in the unconscious mind.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION

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#### 7.1 Introduction

This study presents a narratological investigation into selected installation artworks by Jan van der Merwe, with emphasis on narration and focalisation as these give rise to the construction of fabulae. The central question that guided this study pertained to the manner in which the narratological concepts of narration, focalisation and the fabula facilitated peculiar interpretative possibilities in the selected artworks as installation artworks – specifically *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003) and *It's cold outside* (2004).

Due to the intermedial and interdisciplinary nature of the study, the methodological and theoretical concerns (mostly narratologically based) paralleled the art historical inquiry (pertaining to the artist and his oeuvre, and especially to installation art as an art form). The study therefore focused on addressing two areas of research that seem underexplored: firstly, it was felt that scholarship on Van der Merwe's oeuvre, approach and artistic achievements needed to be expanded; and secondly, the study set out to present a narratologically based reading of installation art – with emphasis on narration and focalisation – in a manner that has not yet been pursued. These two issues are the lacunae in current scholarship that the current study endeavoured to address. Other lacunae include the exploration of installation art in terms of the elements of narrative (space, time, character and also event), specifically in terms of how these elements are foregrounded in installation art. Character posed the most multifaceted challenge in this regard, and it was argued that the viewer of the artwork becomes a participant who, upon participating in the artwork, assumes the nature of a character. This character co-narrates and focalises, and furthermore exhibits ontologically diverse potentialities in terms of the suggestion of absent characters suggested by the artworks.

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This chapter is structured into two sections. In the first instance, a summary of the main points that guided each preceding chapter is presented in order to consolidate the different sections contained in the thesis; the manner in which the research questions of the study as set out in chapter 1 are addressed in these chapters is highlighted. In this first section of the current chapter, then, insights gleaned from the different sections of the study are presented. These insights pertain to methodological as well as artwork-specific findings. Secondly, in the last and brief section of the chapter, suggestions are offered for future research that can extend the insights arrived at and the contribution to knowledge by the current study<sup>1</sup>.

The central question that this study aimed to address was: How can the narratological concepts of narration, focalisation and also the fabula provide access to peculiar interpretative possibilities in the installation art of Jan van der Merwe? From this question, a number of research questions were formulated; these were guided to a large degree by Bal's (2001a:214) approach towards a visual narratology. According to her, the way in which the fabula is presented in order to come across as a *story* concerns the "semantization of characters, the concretization and subjectification of space into place, the thickening of a sense of time by a variety of devices, and, most important of all, *focalization*".

## 7.2 Summary of sections and insights

### 7.2.1 Chapters 2 and 3 – the artist, his approach to installation art and installation art narratologically expounded

These chapters were guided by the first research question of this thesis: *How can installation art as an artistic approach be conceptualised specifically with reference to the elements of narrative as proposed by Bal (2001a:214) in the context of the visual arts: the thickening of time, the concretization and subjectification of space into place, and the semantisation of character?*

The body of the thesis commenced with an introduction to the artist and his oeuvre in chapter 2 with emphasis on his rust-based installation artworks. The artist's career path,

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<sup>1</sup> See Trafford, Leshem and Bitzer (2014) regarding the significance of pointing out the contribution in the conclusion to a study.

some important achievements in his oeuvre as well as a perusal of publications on his work suggest that Van der Merwe has attained a number of significant milestones, such as major awards and large national exhibitions as well as a fair amount of international exposure. However, the limited number of critical studies devoted to his work seems to reflect a disjunction between his output and artistic acclaim on the one hand, which are significant, and the relative lack of scholarly engagement with his work on the other. This is, as noted, one of the lacunae that the current study seeks to address by means of, in this instance, situating his oeuvre in the broader context of installation art and its application of the elements of narrative, as well as a narratological consideration of Van der Merwe's work.

Van der Merwe is perhaps best known for these large-scale installation artworks using rust-covered interior settings and objects, often including screens (monitors or projections) in which moving images can be seen. With some exceptions, such as *Baggage arrival* (2001; fig. 2.21, 2.22) which makes use of live closed-circuit television, these screens show pre-recorded video material, often of human hands performing mundane tasks such as washing, or folding paper airplanes (*Killing time*; 2007; fig. 2.32), or more sinisterly, a handgun being fired (*Guests/Gaste*, 2003; fig. 2.19).

Certain recurrent themes and concerns were traced in the artist's oeuvre. One such thematic concern is the manner in which he transforms things and places – on the physical level by covering them in rusted metal or creating objects from discarded cans and making them rust; and on a more conceptual level by transforming ordinary things into extraordinarily charged narratives that purport to manifest his notion of “monuments to the unknown” (Walkabout, 2013). Ordinary, commonplace objects and spaces are transformed into relic-like things and seemingly sacred places that hinge on the liminal. For example, cinema chairs in the massive work *The End* (2006; fig. 2.25-2.28) appear spooky like gravestones, and keepsakes of absent people on these chairs are stand-ins that metonymically suggest people. Other spaces and objects in related artworks similarly achieve a sense of charged places and objects. Tensions between presence and absence permeate Van der Merwe's oeuvre; the works often seem to evoke either specific people or certain types of people who are not there but whose absences are felt in the works – such as a man preparing for church in *Sunday suit* (2003; fig. 2.20) or a woman applying lipstick in *It's cold outside* (2004; fig. 2.6 – 2.8).

These last two works also highlight the artist's concern for gender issues that are sparked by a combination of domestic settings, suggestions of "women's work" such as washing and ironing, all the while using "masculine" material such as metal that, armour-like, covers objects. Furthermore, it was noted that the sheer immensity of Van der Merwe's labour efforts can hardly be missed; not only does he often portray labour (washing dishes, for example), he also works compulsively on his artworks, imbuing them with evidence of sheer hard work – also by using rusted cans, which is a material that is difficult to shape. Labour itself is in this way also thematised in his work: the artist himself propounds that labour is ennobling and is a means of achieving the alchemical transformation of matter into art (Van der Merwe, s.a.:20).

Traces of time, a sense of transience and the evocation of preservation are inscribed in the rust-covered surfaces of Van der Merwe's works. One can, thus, think of "time folded in over itself" into an "archaeologised future past" (Kruger & Van der Merwe, 2010:159). This concern with time is a theme that Van der Merwe shares with South African as well as international artists. Works like Anne Hamilton's *Dominion* (1990; fig. 3.23) also thematise time. Likewise, Christian Boltanski's Holocaust- and other war-related works (such as *No man's land*, 2010; fig. 3.22 and *Monument Odessa*, 1990; fig. 2.50), Van der Merwe's installations often hark back to the past. Van der Merwe's works show similarities with Doris Salcedo's installations such as *Atrabiliarios* (1992-3; fig. 2.52) that narrate absence – a theme often encountered in works by artists who use clothing, shoes or furniture as material (Salcedo often uses shoes as well as furniture; Boltanski also uses clothes and Van der Merwe uses "clothes" that he sculpts out of metal). Van der Merwe shares with most artists whom he regards as inspiration – Christo Coetzee, Antoni Tàpies, and more – either a concern for unusual materials and methods, or for conceptual approaches to narrative – here one can include Robert Hodgins, Willem Boshoff and the Belgian artist Jan Fabre.

Installation art as a peculiar and relatively recent approach to art-making and reception was interrogated next. This type of art was found to be transgressive (or at least critically positioned) in terms of material, gallery/museum practices and often also thematic concerns; the latter may include historical, gender and sociological issues that engage with the messiness of "real life". Works may either be dematerialised (such as Eliasson's *Weather project*, 2003; fig. 2.41 – 2.44) or it may contain an abundance of material aspects (for

example, Bourgeois' *Passage dangereux*, 1997; fig. 5.14). The artist him- or herself may be present – as in Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972; fig. 2.45 – 2.46) where the artist was present but hidden, or as in Hamilton's *Dominion* where she is present and visible – this last point suggesting that a significant overlap exists between installation art and the conceptual category of performance art. This point also demonstrates the close affinity that installation art has with the theatrical and discursive aspects of art-making and consumption – and furthermore, the theatrical dimensions of installation art highlight the centrality of time and space (and, indeed, character and event) in most installation artworks.

Drawing on predecessors such as Dada (especially the Dada fair of 1924; fig. 2.53) and the Surrealist exhibitions of 1938 and 1942 (see fig. 2.54 and 2.55), installation artworks often activate entire environments; the works cease after being dismantled; works often critique the ideology of the gallery and, perhaps most saliently, installation artworks typically position the viewer of the artwork in a radically *inside* position, so that his or her position vis-à-vis the work is that of participant whose presence is necessary for the work to function.

These, then, were some issues addressed in chapter 2: the artist and his work; and the genre of installation art in terms of historical predecessors, characteristics and possible definitions. In chapter 3, installation art was further interrogated, this time from a narratological point of view. In particular, Bal's (2001a:214) phrasing of "the concretization of space into place", the "thickening" of time and the "semantization of character" (as well as event, which does not occur in Bal's phrase but which is a fourth element of narrative – see Bal, 1985) directed the chapter structure. For each narrative element, an overview of that element's appearance in the visual arts more generally paved the way for a more specific consideration of the element with reference to installation art; these sections were furnished with numerous examples to sustain the various arguments that were presented.

Time was discussed first: it was noted that a recording of an event could suggest time; or an artist may represent a particular moment (also referring to Lessing's [1766/1962] "pregnant moment") from a narrative pre-text in a way that could similarly have temporal implications; the theme of a work could be concerned with time; one needs time to take in or move around in an artwork, and finally, a medium or material could suggest time by

means of implied or real movement, decay, and the suggestion of temporal involvement such as labour. All these devices serve to “thicken” time.

Sequential art forms such as graphic novels – which in their turn borrow sequential strategies from historical instances such as multi-episodic medieval paintings – use different semiotic channels, including language, visual imagery and other genre-specific conventions such as frames to denote the flow of time. One temporal dimension that is always “there” is the viewing present (Bal, 2006a:37); the contention of the current study is that this aspect is foregrounded in installation art, because the participant’s embodied experience inside the artwork, where he or she focalises and co-narrates (as argued in chapters 4-7), takes place in the present but may also recall the past. In short, with regards to time in art, and in installation art, it was argued that this element is self-consciously foregrounded and thematised in much installation art. Labour as an index of time was briefly perused in this section, and the importance of video to suggest time was explored with reference to artworks such as Nauman’s *Corridor* series (1970; fig. 3.25; also 3.28, 3.29) and others; it was indicated that video almost inherently suggests heterochronous temporal strata (Bal, 2011:225)

Space as an element of narrative was discussed next with reference to the visual arts in a broader sense, and then especially in terms of installation art. Given that visual artworks are perceived by some scholars as primarily spatial in nature (compare, for example, Kuijers, 1986; Ryan, 2004), space is more thoroughly theorised than time is in the visual arts. It was nonetheless indicated that one can barely speak of space without incorporating time into one’s thoughts, and vice versa.

Levebvre’s (1991) contention that space is socially negotiated and subjectively understood – so that space is not simply *there*, but rather *produced* – informed the understanding of space in installation art. The discussion then turned towards visual art practices of creating spatial differentiation between the artwork and the viewer. It was found that these practices culminated in Renaissance (linear) perspective that presumed a prescribed, ideal viewing position – outside the artwork. Concomitantly with this spatial practice was the distancing achieved between the work and the viewer by means of the plinth and the frame

– both of which served not only to isolate and delineate the spaces of the work and viewer, but also to “freeze” time (again, pointing to the inseparability of time and space).

In the context of installation artworks, the real time of viewing and participating is echoed by the experience of real space by an embodied participant (the participant is not the disembodied eye presumed by more conventional artworks that use linear perspective and a frame, for example). For this reason, the politics of space often relates to how space and place are understood in installation artworks, especially those works that take the artwork out of the presumed “neutral” (but, indeed, charged) space of the gallery and out into the “real” space of the city or of a particular spot in a landscape. This is one way of concretizing space, in Bal’s (2001a) parlance – by means of actual places that are historically charged and psychologically meaningful.

Those installation artworks that are shown inside a gallery (these works may enter into a dialogue with the charged space of the gallery and its conventional authority) also tend to engage the element of space in self-conscious ways. Nauman’s *Corridors* are once again examples of works that present space as something that is felt in the bodily experience of the participant.

One’s ability to navigate inside an installation artwork highlights a particularly important issue, namely the de-centring of the participant’s experience (i.e., out of the central and prescribed position implied by Renaissance or linear perspective). In this way, space is once again transformed into a subjective experience of place. In a similar vein as the argument presented above regarding the self-conscious foregrounding of time in installation art, it was posited that space receives the same treatment in installation art: the self-conscious foregrounding of space means that this element is increasingly localised, felt, real and embodied – in short, space is concretised into place.

The next element of narrative that was dealt with in chapter 3 with reference to art, and installation art in particular, was character. Not a term that is often used in the visual arts (where one would, for example, rather speak of the subject, or the sitter, or the figure in a painting), character was explored in this section with reference to a number of paintings. These paintings –including Magritte’s *Not to be reproduced* (1937; fig. 3.46), Van Eyck’s

*Arnolfini portrait* (1434; fig. 3.48) and Velázquez's *Las meninas* (1656; fig. 3.47) all draw attention to complications that are possible in terms of a broader understanding of character relations: artist, viewer and character inside the work. It was noted that art history, more so than the literary arts, has tended at times to grant the artist a dominant role in terms of how artworks are interpreted. In addition to the perceived necessity in this study to take note of the artist's role – given the autobiographical nature of the works as well as the keen sense of traces left by the hand of the artist – it also seemed logical to include agents inside the artwork as characters. These agents are either suggested or present. However, in terms of installation art, these inside agents could (and most likely would) include the participant – who is argued to become a character upon entering the installation artwork's storyworld, much like a painted figure would be a character inside the storyworld of the painting. Three character types or positions could therefore be identified: artist, inside character and viewer-participant. These, as the study argued, sometimes enter into complex, even conflated roles.

Character, therefore, proved to be a complex yet exciting element to explore with reference to the visual arts and more specifically installation art, not least because artworks engage with, or present character in vastly different ways. For example, some painted characters "take note" of the viewer and "converse" with him or her – here one can think of the bashful glance offered by Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538; fig. 3.52) as opposed to the brash stare of Manet's *Olympia* (1863; fig. 3.53) – these works are then likely to elicit different responses and viewer engagement. More acutely, works such as Maes's painting *The eavesdropper (with scolding woman)* (1655; fig. 3.51) imply coercion with an inside character; here the painted woman gestures to the viewer to quietly eavesdrop with her – and in the process to become a character as an agent in the storyworld of the painting. Rembrandt's *Bathsheba at her bath* (1654; fig. 3.56) also requires viewer complicity, according to Bal's (2006a) reading of the work; here the viewer "views with" the king (David) whose glance is implied by the work.

In installation artworks, the nature of the character inside the artwork varies. As noted, this may entail the viewer who becomes a participant and also a character, and whose actions inside the work determine the flow of events to a large degree. However, there may be characters stationed inside the work "planted" by the artist, as is the case with Beecroft's

*Show* (1998; fig. 3.57). The artist him- or herself may be present as a character, as was the case with Hamilton's *Dominion* (1990; fig. 3.24) and Acconci's *Seedbed*. These works introduce a further complexity: absence and presence – because in Hamilton's work, the artist is clearly visible as the central character, but in Acconci's work, the artist is present but invisible, hidden under the ramp of the temporary gallery floor. Invisible and absent, also, are the protagonists of Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios*; only shoes are left of ones who were once inside the shoes. Such absences can be traced to works like Van Gogh's *Shoes* (1886; fig. 3.54) and other works where garments or shoes suggest that someone may have been there, but is no more present.

The exploration of character in installation art, in summary, yielded the insight that character-like qualities can be ascribed to the viewer-participant, to people placed in the artwork by the artist, or to the artist him- or herself (a complication on Foucault's take on the author in his essay *What is an author?* [1969] in which he explored the layered personae of the artist). Furthermore, the notion of event (a final element of narrative) was related to a change of state or a transformation. Type I and type II events were mentioned, and the significance of inner transformation as a function of a type II event was noted. An event in the visual artwork could be found in various possible manifestations, for example, in Lessing's "pregnant moment", or in the pre-text referred to by the work, or in the narrativised aspects of the work, or in the interaction between the viewer and the work, or in the actions performed by the viewer-participant inside the installation artwork. In all these instances, event is either an integral component of the fabula, or the change of state accomplished by some transformation may itself be the fabula.

#### **7.2.4 Chapter 4: Narratological-theoretical complications in the context of installation art**

In chapter 4, where the theoretical points of departure were presented, the narratological concepts of narration, the fabula and focalisation were explored as central to the current study. This was done in order to answer the second research question, namely: *Why are the narratological constructs narration, the fabula and focalisation problematised by installation artworks, and how can these narratological constructs be configured with a view to apply them towards an interpretation of Van der Merwe's installation artworks?*

It was noted that installation art problematises these concepts in various ways. Consequently, conceptualisations of these terms that favour a synthesising, constructive approach were noted as most being useful for purposes of a narratological reading of installation art. Bordwell's (1985) filmic approach to narration was highlighted as being particularly useful for application to installation art, because this approach de-antropomorphises the narrating function (in installation art, this function may be partially lodged in a human agency, but does not have to be). Narration is therefore to a large degree the result of semiotic activity in the mind of the viewer-participant, and as the case is with digital gaming environments, narratorial choices can be made by the participant. However, the embodied experience of the viewer-participant in installation art is a significant difference between this art form and digital immersion in virtual worlds, which is disembodied.

Formulating a workable theoretical position on the fabula for purposes of reading installation art, it was argued that it would be untenable to regard the fabula here as something that is fairly fixed, that predates the work and has to be "discovered" by the viewer-participant. Instead, the fabula has to be constructed by means of various levels of abstraction, following Eco's ([1979] 1985) and Du Plooy's (1986) formulation of the extended fabula.

Such an understanding of the fabula proved more meaningful, even in the context of artworks such as paintings, than "connecting minimal schema" that appear in the work would be (following Bal's [2006a:227-9] demonstration of this issue in Rembrandt's *Bathsheba at her bath*). Focalised fabula construction therefore proved to yield fabulae that proceed as a process of making narrative sense by tracing semiotic inferences and chains.

The subsequent section of chapter 4 addressed focalisation. Defining the concept, and tracing its original use by Genette ([172] 1980) back to James' ([1881] 2003:7) notion of windows of perspective, it was noted that focalisation concerns more than seeing; and that the cognitive (affective and mental) as well as the embodied, even gendered activities of the focaliser are of central importance. Part of the work of focalisation is attributed, of course, to the artist whose task is to a large degree that of selection. However, since the viewer-participant in installation art also assumes the role of a character *inside* the artwork, he or

she can also focalise as a focalising character. Therefore, when applying the notion of focalisation to installation art, it was argued that instead of emphasising the “orientational restrictions” – those filtering and selecting properties of focalising proposed by Huck (2009:207) and Jahn (1996:241; 2005:173), the cognitive, synthesising, embodied and imaginative properties should be foregrounded (see Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011; Hühn, 2009:4). In this manner, the fabula that comes into being as a result of a synthesising, constructive approach towards focalisation, would similarly be a constructed version that is profoundly related to the subjective processes of the focalising agent.

### **7.2.5 Chapters 5 and 6: interpreting the artworks**

The penultimate chapters presented interpretations of the works: space, time, character and event, as well as fabulae in order to answer the final research question: *How do the narration and focalisation of time and space, as well as character construction (and, more briefly, event) proceed in Van der Merwe's installation art in order to produce possible fabulae?*

The interpretations of the works were informed by Margolin's (2009) six points of focalisation as augmented for current purposes: (1) the focalised story-world in terms of space and time; (2) the focalising agent(s); (3) evaluative and interpretative processing; this included subjective aspects of narration; (4) inner representation and foregrounding towards fabula construction ; (5) textualised constituents which were aligned with paratextual elements; and finally (6) the self-reflexive dimension – here, especially of focalisation.

#### *Time and space*

Chapter 5 presented an interpretation of the narration and focalisation of space and time in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside*. Space was addressed first. The physical layout of the artworks was explained, together with a consideration of how the physical setting as well as the objects in the works achieves a nostalgic, intimate and domestic atmosphere. Together with the objects, the different instances of looping video imagery were described. These included the hands washing a cooking vessel in the screen inside the sink in *Biegbak/Confessional*, and the rain that drizzled down the projected image of the window in

the same work. In *It's cold outside*, the hand and part of a woman's face that show lipstick being applied inside the lid of the vanity case, where the "mirror" would be, was noted.

In their aesthetic, transformed state, the objects inside the works as well as the looping imagery on the screens signifies as narrativised traces that infer the passing of time, and a sense of longing for a person whose presence is suggested, but is felt as an absence (this idea connotes the intimate connection of space and time). Thus the "real" (real space, real modified things, real history that is referenced, and a real person who enters into the artwork) interacts with the fictional (the storyworld of the artwork that re-creates a space of memory in which the viewer-participant becomes a character who focalises and co-narrates). Space is concretised into place: the focalised selection processes of the artist who created the works are furthered by the synthesising focalisation of the participant who ascribes meanings to the transformed spaces and objects.

In this way, the space of *Biegbak/Confessional* is transformed into an intimate, shrine-like, personal place. *It's cold outside* is understood as a domestic space that belongs, as *Biegbak/Confessional* does, to a female occupant who is not there. In these spaces, the incompleteness of the inferred absence, the on-going oxidising and fragmentation of the rust process, the mutability of gallery space that becomes places of memory and mental spaces of reflection, all speak of processual, continuous transformation. It is as if a dialogue exists between the different spatial layers inferred by the work. These transformations and layerings facilitate the subjective concretisation of space into place, as well as the semantisation of character, specifically of the viewer into participant-character. In addition to the artist's role in creating the space and the material aspects, the cognitive and affective processes that constitute the participant's focalisation continue the transformations that are suggested in the works. These processes enable a type of narration that is predicated on the participant's understanding conceptual links that exist between the arrangement of objects, as well as between references in the works to experiences of space, time and character (and event), in accordance with Bordwell's (1985) theory of film narration. The mind who focalises and who fills in the gaps between the signifiers and signifieds (see Bal, 2006a:230) determines the shape and thus the meaning potential of the objects and spaces.

The next section of chapter 5 entailed an interpretation of time in the works selected. Various temporal strata could be identified in the interaction between the rusted metal and the looping video imagery. For example, time is halted, frozen or suspended by the rusted material as well as by the repetitive looping images that seem to stall time. In another sense, time is drawn out by viewing frozen aspects of time at length. The viewing time as a dimension of the present is another temporal layer. In a further sense, time was also felt to be contracted since a narrative that may evoke an entire life or large part thereof is focalised into ephemeral, repeated bits of seemingly insignificant actions.

Like space, time is poignantly transformed, layered and multivalent in the works. The thickening of time achieved in the works was discussed in terms of three zones, where the now-time of viewing was the first zone, and the second zone referred to the various temporalities planted by the artist – rust that ages, a sense of looking at events that took place a few decades ago, and the repetitive movements of the looping imagery. The time-suggestions in this zone are intricately layered, to give rise to a third zone of narrative time that is abstracted and suspended beyond any sense of linearity. Instead, a sense of thresholds that fold back into themselves, carrying with them the suggestion of concomitant ontological character shifts, was identified. Genette's ([1972] 1980) notions of sequence, frequency and duration were applied to the interpretation of time in the works, and special attention was paid to the notion of repetition.

Deleuze's ([1968] 1994) argument was noted in this regard, namely that the present can be seen as a contraction of different dimensions in which other presents succeed and encroach upon each other. All these successive presents can be seen to play out "the same life' at different levels" (Deleuze, [1968] 1994:83). And so, the same story can be played out at different levels, with different resonances, in a way that transcends spatial locations and temporal successions and enable the character conceptualisation as set out in chapter 6. In summary of this perusal of time and space, it can be noted that concrete times and spaces (as one finds in the artworks) are used for memorialising and to create a sense of nostalgia in order to intensify the experience of the one who apprehends (Spiro, 2011:725).

## *Characters*

The notion of memorialising and its relation to character shifts was further explored in chapter 6, which dealt with character and fabula construction. It was noted that in accordance with the manner in which character construction in installation art was anticipated in chapter 3 (where installation art was addressed in light of the elements of narrative), three sets of character categories could be identified in the selected works. Before discussing each character set, Fokkema's (1991) typology of postmodern characters was perused and five characteristics were extracted. These included (1) the human-like aspect of character; (2) the ontological status of real versus fictional characters; (3) character as closed or open (the latter being more prevalent in postmodern narratives); (4) characters being fragmented and/or having multiple selves; and (5) characters that are selves in search of others. Each of these qualities resonated with the three character categories or sets that have been identified.

Hence (1) the artist, (2) the absent characters who are inferred by the works, and (3) the viewer-participant constituted three categories of characters. These categories comprise different layers or dimensions of characters that may exist in ontologically different spheres. Consequently, the artist's character category included the historical person, the implied author, and the cultural construction "Jan van der Merwe". These distinctions allude to Bal's (2006a), Booth's (1961) and Foucault's (1969) ideas about the construction of the artist. Van der Merwe's character was also ascribed the role of co-narrator, in great measure by means of authorial paratextual elements.

Paratexts as supplements to the artwork were explored in view of Genette's ([1987] 1997) ideas. For this interpretation, Van der Merwe's artwork titles, exhibition titles, preface-like statements, exhibition statements, biographical information and anecdotal information (the latter supplied in interviews, walkabouts and public lectures) were taken into consideration. These paratexts tended to convey a mood (in the Genettian sense of focalised perception) of simplicity and sincerity while conveying personal as well as more generalised information. Compare, for example, the paratexts of personal anecdotes: of a grandmother who prays for both family and fictional *Springbok* radio characters (*Biegbak/Confessional*), and a mother who prepares to leave the house, for a last time, before meeting her death (*It's cold*

*outside*) – these pertain to the artist’s historical, biographical and narrator status. On the other hand, preface-like statements pasted up next to the works and their titles were less autobiographical; these statements included phrases such as “[*Biegbak/Confessional*] aims to allow a moment for reconsideration and reflection. The enclosed room becomes, for a moment an enclosed personal and poetic space”. And, in the case of *It’s cold outside*: “The rusted metal surface acts as a metaphor for transience, vulnerability and the fight against time, and imbues the objects with an archaeological quality”. These statements were preceded with didascalia-like references to the placement of objects inside the works.

Paratexts may raise issues of intentionality. In Van der Merwe’s case, it would seem that the artist tends to restrict himself to thematic and material concerns in the works in the rather public, official paratexts like the written statements that appear next to artworks. On the other hand, he tends to share his more personal take and his stories about family members in whose memory the works were made in interviews and lectures, and to an extent during walkabouts. Therefore, the reach of the more personal paratextual information (which can be read as subjective versions of his intentions) may vary and consequently this variation is likely to have an impact on the way in which the fabula is understood – as discussed below.

Nonetheless, it could be said that in the world of digitised information, even personal anecdotal information is likely to reach a student who is seriously looking for information on an artist. Such information is part of a larger issue of artistic intentionality that is more fully addressed by Bal (2006b:236-263) who calls intention “a concept we hate to love”. Instead of asking whose intention is at work here [with reference to Caravaggio’s painting but to artistic intention in general], we must ask now whose pictorial intelligence we are responding to” (2006b:254).

The critic and the author are Siamese twins, Bal (2006b:252) contends; and the reception-like filling in of gaps in a work is itself a response by the critic that constitutes a narrative (2006b:257). However, the gaps are *inside* the work (ibid.). To summarise Bal’s argument in this regard, she sets out a situation where the work itself reaches out to the viewer, makes him or her part of it; so that interior and exterior knowledge can become one. The viewer brings with him or her a temporal reality (the time of viewing and afterwards thinking about the work) into the work, and becomes engaged as a second-person narrator. Bal stops short

of actually saying that the viewer becomes an actual full character inside the work, but speaks of the narrator (it seems a role she ascribes to both the viewer and the artist) having to “become a character *within* the ... image” (2006b:257) and practise “free indirect focalisation” (Bal’s term for focalisation that entails a conflation of narrator and character, or of subject and object of figuration). Bal (2006b:258-9) proposes a “second-person” narrative in order to create a way of making sense of “subjectivity, agency, even intention”, although within an “urgent historical framing” of the work. What Bal seems to propose here is an allowance for a “special form of subjectivity” (2006b:256) in which the viewer’s and the artist’s subjectivities are accounted for in a manner that avoids “subordinat[ing] the image to the discourse about it” (2006b:252). More than attempting to reconstruct an artist’s intentions, one reconstructs, and fills in, reception-like, all the while working with what is available, and understanding that the artwork may draw one to the inside of the artwork.

Bal’s suggestion in this argument that the narrator and character, or the subject and object may indeed be conflated hinges on the next part of chapter 6 that is summarised below, namely that dimensions of all the character categories (the artist, the absent and inferred characters as well as the viewer-participant) are conflated in some ways in Van der Merwe’s installation artworks. Not only is each character group a host of character dimensions, but all the subjectivities evoked by the works suggest a conflation of narrating, focalising and self-other relations.

For example, it was argued that the memorialisation of the absent characters in *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside* proposes characters on ontologically different planes. Thus, they were real people, historically situated. They are also imagined. These two positionings of the absent characters suggest that they inhabit ontologically different spheres at the same time: simultaneously “told” by the artist, apprehended by the participant, and also imagined by the latter. Ghost-like, symbolised in voids, and temporarily embodied by the participant: the absent characters comprise a cast that includes the actual grandmother, the participant’s imagining of this person, his or her own remembered grandmother, and a generalised sense of an unknown and loved woman whose presence is suggested but whose absence is felt. These characters relate to *Biegbak/Confessional*; for *It’s cold outside*, a similar cast of characters can be imagined and re-membered.

Like absent characters in stage plays (relating to ideas set out by Mahfouz, 2012), Van der Merwe's artworks' absent characters occupy centre stage and dominate the narratives. The artist and the participant's characters are de-centred, conceptually. And yet, the participant also re-members, fleshes out, becomes transfigured into the absent other. This sense of becoming an other was explored with reference to empathy and identification with the absent other, who is most likely also one that the self yearns for. Cloete (2013) and Ricoeur (1992) have both interrogated this notion and both conclude that such a transfiguration, or a becoming-the-other, can indeed be felt.

Embodied focalisation, as well as focalising that works to "fill in" or "flesh out", and focalising with an other (following Nixon's [2010] notion of "we all focalise together") is therefore a salient dimension of how character construction and focalisation can be interpreted in Van der Merwe's works. The participant focalises with the artist, with the various absent others, and stands "in" the absent characters' place, so that the ontological and identifying boundaries between the various character dimensions become profoundly destabilised.

These boundaries are also transgressed since in Van der Merwe's works one can speak of a transportation of one consciousness into another, of the participant's body into another, in a metaphorical and symbolic way. Placing ourselves in another's shoes, as it were, or seeing through their eyes (both actions have extremely, excitingly intimate connections with actions of focalisation as understood in this study) entails a greater sense of transmutation that Cloete relates to sublimation, especially since the latter celebrates the transformation into "something higher, purer" (Cloete, 2013:36 quoting *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*).

This resulting transmutation is a way of attaining transcendence: the confines of one's body are transcended by the mind's ability to self-reflect. Self-transcendence, in particular, is concerned with a greater awareness that rises above the self. Herewith the body can transfer itself into another tangible or intangible, living or imagined entity. Cloete (2013:40) aligns himself with Fromm's understanding that self-transcendence means to achieve "interpersonal union" or "fusion with another person". Indeed, this self-transcendence is

described as one of the deepest needs of man, and enables all love as well as creativity because it activates the self and awakes it from the passive role of being created (ibid.).

While focalising and constructing the various character dimensions, the participant engages with what Derrida ([1993] 1994:63) referred to as “performative interpretation”, namely that it is “an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets”. The insights derived in the interpretation of the fabulae, and their construction as contingent upon the transformative power of focalisation, will now be summarised.

“The concrete properties of the world around us, including space and time, only have meaning by virtue of our having the capacity to absent them”, Spiro (2011:725) contends. This absencing function in Van der Merwe’s works that draws these absences into the centre stage is the point from where the fabulae can be constructed by the participant who responds to the works. However, this level of fabula construction is a more abstracted one. Before arriving at this abstract level, the possible fabulae suggested by the works were explored. It was found, concurring with Bal (2006a:227), that connecting minimal schema yields unsatisfactory fabulae that did not seem to reflect the layered and nuanced meaning-possibilities of the works. Furthermore, the artist’s anecdotal information about his works and the people who inspired them (these anecdotes were mentioned above concerning his grandmother and mother) provided some sort of narrative that one could refer to in conjunction with the works, but again fail to provide an interpretation of the works that does justice to their rich suggestion.

### *Fabulae*

Eco’s ([1979] 1985) concept of the extended fabula as a more abstracted level as well as Du Plooy’s (1986) explication of this concept as “uitgebreide storie” provided a useful avenue in this regard. This extended fabula concerns the various transformations highlighted above in terms of space, time and especially of character. Much of the self-transference into the character of the other that was dealt with above therefore constitutes this version of the fabula, which was proposed to unfold as identity formation, negotiation and transformation. These processes were argued to take place in the so-called third emotional space, which allows for such transformations and renegotiations to emerge.

Taking arguments by Madrell (2013), Colman (2010) and Wylie (2009), *inter alia*, as points of departure, the fabulae of Van der Merwe's works were proposed to narrate processes of mourning, and also memory (of the absent person) in an aestheticised manner. This was achieved by giving concrete shape to spaces and objects, so that the participant can channel these sentiments into intellectual grappling and symbolic engagement. Therefore, the works can be described as monuments and memorials to various unknowns. They represent absence – but give the absence an identity by means of the empathic identification of the absent person by the participant. In this manner, absence is symbolised and made concrete, and an emotional relationship with the absent other is maintained across the threshold of death. This is a kind of mourning that relegates the Freudian compulsion to relinquish a relationship with the absent other, which would constitute healthy mourning. Rather, this study concurs with Colman's (2010:278) view that: "[P]erhaps the central task of mourning is to make sense of the conflict between the absence of the lost object and the continuing presence of an emotional relationship to that which is lost". This "making sense" is achieved by means of symbolising the absence, because "the most fundamental requirement of mourning is the capacity to symbolise absence" (Colman, 2010:291).

In conclusion, Van der Merwe's works clearly have narrative content, and this narrative content was interpreted in the current study as contingent upon the negotiation and transmutation of identities of character categories: the absent others', the artist's, and perhaps most crucially, the participant's. Hence Bennett and Royle's (1995:41) contention that "stories are everywhere" and that we tell stories, but stories also tell us, rings true. Ricoeur's (1992:147) view resonates with the idea that we are constructed by stories and vice versa: "[T]he narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told." Meuter (2013:31) concurs; noting that while personal identity "is formed and stabilized only through the telling of stories", it is also true that narrative identities are constantly reconfigured through the telling of stories (*ibid.*).

### 7.3 Concluding insights

The research questions were addressed in the various chapters and the manners in which the dimensions of installation art problematised narratological concepts were highlighted. One could argue that installation art not only problematises narratological concepts such as narration and focalisation – both of which are under-theorised with reference to installation art – but that installation art in its problematising actually enriches the scope of these narratological concepts. For example, the role of the viewer who becomes a participant and then a character who focalises and co-narrates is an insight that is perhaps applicable to most instances of installation art. This is because the person who engages with the work experiences it at different levels: by becoming physically immersed in the artwork, there is a sense of embodied focalisation. Furthermore, this person is tasked with completing the work – viewer participation means to “complete the piece” (Reiss, 2001:xiii; see also Davies, 1997:14). This notion may well expand the narratological understanding of focalisation, narration and fabula construction in, for example, especially open-ended literary texts, computer games, in narratological readings of “conventional” visual artworks.

The implications of this viewer-participation in Van der Merwe’s works – as the case may be with other installations – are that the participant who becomes a character (i.e. a participant in a storyworld – that of the artwork) – co-focalises, and co-narrates, and thus meaning and fabulae become deeply subjective. The works allow the participant to meditate on the profound mystery of the self and its relation to others – in Van der Merwe’s works, often a beloved other (this is not always the case – especially the larger works such as *Eclipse* and *The End* speak of a general sense of humanity). In the works *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It’s cold outside*, the participant may experience the works as non-portraits of beloved absent persons. The likenesses of these are lodged in her not being there; in all the ancillary things around. In this manner, the work suggests that a living relationship between the self and the work, and between the self and all the other personas who are evoked can be constituted symbolically. In these works, also, the participant is invited to share in the mourning process. This means that I, the participant, can bring my mourning to the artist’s narration of his mourning. In this way, I work *with* and *inside* the artwork to keep the memory of the departed alive by restoring them symbolically. My living

physical body and mind are vital because my focalisation – the heart of this transformative process – is embodied yet also takes place in the mind.

This brief reflection on some of the implications of the viewer who becomes a participant and character points to exciting new avenues for further research – these are briefly highlighted below.

#### **7.4 Suggestions for further research**

In view of the current proliferation of digital storytelling research, the performative nature of the participant's role in the narration of installation art can be explored more pertinently as corollary to the player of digital gaming environments as well as other digital interfaces. As Montfort (2007:173) indicates, the player's ability to not only be inside the world but to influence it has ontological implications. A similar situation emerges in the context of installation art where the actions of the viewer-participant may have a bearing on the storyworld of the artwork. Compare, for example, the different effects produced by antics and meditations of people who attended Eliasson's *Weather project* – their actions determined "how" the artwork unfolded at particular times.

In a similar vein, the ontological complexities that emerge in the participant's role in the context of installation art can be further explored with reference to other narratological concepts such as, for example, experientiality. This term is closely related to the notion of immersion that is often used in conjunction with installation art. Especially Fludernik (1996; 2003) and also Caracciolo (2014) and others have investigated the evocation of experiential – cognitive, embodied and emotional – parameters in the sphere of postclassical narratology, but this has not yet been interrogated in terms of installation art.

Related to the notion of immersion and experientiality, further studies need to be directed towards engaging with narrative empathy in the context of installation artworks. Empathy seems to be at the heart of the idea that the self can be suspended and renegotiated in terms of its co-feeling with the other, and much can still be learnt from this exciting confluence of narratology and neuro-scientific research. Theory of Mind (e.g. Zunshine, 2010), its relation to narrative empathy (e.g. Keen, 2010) and embodied narratology (Gallese & Wojciehowski, 2011) as well as the ontological implication of narrative immersion of the possible storyworld self (Angeles Martínez, 2014) all pertain to this sphere of

interrogation, and have not been probed in the context of installation art where these issues are arguably very, very salient.

In terms of Van der Merwe's oeuvre, there exists a need to explore large-scale works like *The End* and *Baggage arrival* by means of an approach such as the one followed in this study that foregrounds the narratological concepts time, space, character and event into fabulae, also with emphasis on the processual nature of narration and focalisation.

Furthermore, Van der Merwe's installations can be interrogated in terms of the relationship between memory and narration. Whereas the intimate works such as *Biegbak/Confessional* and *It's cold outside* may, for example, suggest personal memories, larger works such as *The End*, *Baggage arrival* and *Eclipse* may speak of a greater sense of collective memories as these have been explicated by Halbwachs ([1941] 1992) as well as Ricoeur (2006).

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Further forays into multifaceted possibilities of interpretation are indicated; narratological approaches in the context of installation art suggest an enduring marriage of narrative theory and the appreciation of art. With this study I hope to have contributed to the generous offering of this pursuit, in particular as far as the exquisite installation artworks of Jan van der Merwe are concerned.

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