

SLOW INTIMACY

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Jamalka Gemmer, Stéphane Edith Contradie (2021). Photo credits: Hayden Phipps.

SLOW INTIMACY

As a response to the systemic harms of 'slow violence' (such as corruption, poverty and the environmental crisis) these exhibitions bring together the art and design of select artists and jewellers as a means of cultivating 'slow hope'.

Reaching across three venues (GUS, IS Art and Oude Leeskamer), the exhibitions express the slow intimacies involved in the making of art but also engage intimacy as subject. 'Slow intimacy' is used as a symbolic framework to signify interactions that are enduring, long-standing and in process, whether between humans themselves or humanity and the material/animal worlds. The exhibitions are a collaboration between the Department of Visual Arts at Stellenbosch University and the curators at the satellite venues.

In the work of each artist, one sees a tentative answer to the question of whether pace too is a political problem.

SLOWNESS

Professor Stella Viljoen

In the 1995 novel by Czech writer Milan Kundera, aptly entitled, *Slowness*, he famously remarked, “there is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting.” At least since industrialisation and the resulting ‘modernity’, there has been a connection in the western collective consciousness between progress and speed. We want everything faster. Even instant gratification takes too long. But, as we now know, this need for speed has translated into cultures of dominance, abuse and exploitation to the extent that the ‘Anthropocene’, the term used to describe the era of human ascendancy, is a shameful moniker. ‘Slowness’ then is a means of thinking against western oppressions and imperialisms. ‘Slowness’ is really a means of rethinking the relationships between cultures themselves and between humans and the earth. The theme is, of course, wide open for interpretation, but here, in the Slow Intimacy Exhibitions, implies the cultivation of gentle and non-invasive relationships that recognize the value of

doing things slowly as a way of undoing past violences.

Disconcerted and enchanted, the viewers of the Slow Intimacy Exhibitions, follow the narrator-artists through: ‘long day’s journey into night’, a seductive encounter that interweaves the sublime, the fetishist and the comedic. The substrate of this libertine narration is a profound contemplation of contemporary life and our determination to forget. Weavers, goldsmiths, photographers, sculptors all attempt to enact and counteract the way personal intimacies are emptied of significance by a perpetual and accelerating ‘show’. They seek to renew a quiet, dignified but poetically playful bond between slowness and memory.

Lutz Koepnick (2014: 65) explains that the task of art is “not simply to slice individual moments out of the continuum of time and embalm them for future generations. It [is] to capture critical contractions of temporality: instants pregnant with historical energies and meaning ... extraordinary folds within

the fabric of the everyday that [have] the power to speak for larger personal or political reconfigurations.” In other words, it has the potential to slow down our perception, unlock the “optical unconscious, bless us with epiphanic insight, and serve as uncanny memory prosthesis” (Koepnick 2014: 67). Yet it can only do so because artists understand how to use their prophetic talents not as Cassandra of doom but as those who would draw us out of a timeframe of urgency toward contemplation, curiosity and intellectual affect.

In the South Africa of the 21st century, the ability to slow down, pause and remember is political work. It involves a somatic recognition of the ways we have suffocated our people and planet. Achille Mbembe (2020), uses the now pervasive metaphor of breath to signify the right to ‘be’ and the threat some experience in merely ‘being’: “Try as we might to rid ourselves of it, in the end everything brings us back to the body” ... we are “caught in the stranglehold of injustice and inequality, much of humanity is threatened by a great chokehold.” Mbembe’s articulation of a world in which it is hard to breathe is an existential call for us to recognise our complicity in cultures of misrecognition and suffocation. The Slow

Intimacy Exhibitions invite the viewer to breathe alongside the artists, to re-imagine intimacy so that it resists complicity with modern exploitation, boredom and greed. The artists and designers attempt to envision slowness not as a mere leftover from the past but as an active antidote to the violent velocity of modern culture. The layering of different durations without violating the logic of the medium becomes a political strategy designed to help the viewer reduce their pace, and play in the arena of delay. The art comes to you in an act of friendship, offering intimacy that is both cognisant of its perverse past and hopeful about a richly timeless present.

Sources Cited

Koepnick, L. 2014. *On Slowness: Towards an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kundera, M. 1996. *Slowness*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Mbembe, A. 2020. The Universal Right to Breathe. *Mail & Guardian*. 24 June.



INTIMACY

Professor Ernst van der Wal

The intimate is everywhere: you bring it everywhere and it circulates everywhere. It registers as intensities of attachment and recognition, inferred and explicit, that pass across people, groups and movements.

Laurent Berlant (2021: 93)

Intimacy seems to lie at the heart of our contemporary moment. Etched sharply against the isolation, retreat and wariness that crept into everyday life over the last two years, it offers hope for connection, care and understanding. At the same time, life after the COVID-pandemic has left many of us with an altered understanding of intimacy, as we had to sustain our affection for people, places, and rituals without the proximity that usually accompanies such attachments. We had to learn how to *feel* close without necessarily *being* close.

Visual media plays an important role in sustaining the care and affection that we, by necessity or choice, often experience from some distance. We intimate – we state, disclose, share and show – by means of image

and text, both of which form part of the larger circulation and consumption of affective media. Intimacy is not only the result of some productive coupling or serendipitous moment (the spark! the joy! the excitement!), but it is also a form of expression that has its own aesthetic qualities and performative expectations. Intimacy is crafted, be it for oneself or for the sake of someone or something else.

As much as we'd like it to be spontaneous and direct, intimacy is often encountered in a scripted, rehearsed and represented format (hence, the need for 'intimacy coordinators' who ensure the well-being of actors who participate in intimate scenes on film and television sets). It is geared towards the private and the public, and we draw on a wide range of media to explore and

communicate our secret *and* shared affections.

For literary scholar and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, we need not be alarmed by the ever-increasing representation of intimacy, as our relational enjoyment of and attachment to people and places are always mediated in some way. We learn how to take care of something or how to forge a connection with someone. However, the stories we have long been told about affection, desire and care are in desperate need of critical intervention, Berlant argues, as we need to imagine and rescript intimacy beyond the narrow constraints of (inter alia) hetero-patriarchal culture. As Berlant (1998: 286) maintains, to "rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living". Intimacy, Berlant argues, has the radical potential *to do and serve more*.

The Slow Intimacy Exhibitions ask the question of what intimacy has done (to whom and for whom) and what it can do (or change or celebrate). Even though it is often associated with the sacred and the sheltered (the refuge, the sanctuary, the home), intimacy can also be transgressive, challenging and dangerous, depending on the

direction of its flow and the object of its desire. In both its enactment and citation, intimacy is always in need of context, it requires communication and consent, and it ends as soon as animosity, alienation, and ignorance rear their heads. With these ideas (and challenges) in mind, the artwork featured in the Slow Intimacy I, II and III Exhibitions call for a slow, mindful engagement with the topic of intimacy.

Sources Cited

Berlant, L. 1998. 'Intimacy: A Special Issue', in *Critical Enquiry*, 24 (Winter):281-288.

Berlant, L. 2021. 'On Intimacy as World Building'. Interview by Hans Demeyer, in *Extra Extra*, 16:90-101.

THE CURATORS

Professors Van der Wal and Viljoen, from the Department of Visual Arts, are the head curators of the Slow Intimacy Exhibition Project. Slow Intimacy I is also curated by this team, alongside Carine Terreblanche and Joani Groenewald, both from the Department of Visual Arts, who are responsible for the curation of the jewellery design.

Ilse Schermer, from IS Art Gallery, is the curator of Slow Intimacy II and Maryke van Velden, of the Oude Leeskamer, is the curator of Slow Intimacy III.

SLOW INTIMACY I

In Slow Intimacy I (GUS), the artists and jewellers are bound together by strategies of nesting, resting, collage and collecting, especially in relation to 'home' as a place of bodily intimacies.

Here the art of Sitaara Stodel, Stephané Edith Conradie, Nomusa Musa Mtshali and Anne Lacheiner-Kuhn is in conversation with the art jewellery of Carine Terreblanche, Joani Groenewald, Mariambibi Khan and students of the Jewellery Design Division at the Visual Arts Department of Stellenbosch University.



STEPHANÉ EDITH CONRADIE

Conradie (b. 1990) is an artist living and working in Cape Town, South Africa. Her research and practice stem from a fascination with how people arrange sentimental objects in their homes, particularly in her family member's homes in Namibia and South Africa. Her ornate sculptures and prints examine the histories of colonialism and creolisation embedded in domestic material culture.

NOMUSA MUSA MTSHALI

Mtshali's (b. 1986) practice aims to challenge the policing and censure of sexuality and expressions of gender in contemporary South Africa. Their photographic series, *Titanium Inner-Verse* (2020), employs the black queer body in a performance that seeks to gently confront the binary of masculinity and femininity.

SITAARA STODEL

Stodel (b. 1991) is a Cape Town-based artist working across mediums of photography, collage, video and printmaking. Her collage pieces are created using other people's family photographs that she collects at antique stores and markets. Through her work, Stodel curates her own memories of childhood and beyond.

ANNE LACHEINER-KUHN

Lacheiner-Kuhn's (b. 1983) creative narrative explores themes of memory, sexuality and identity, which is highlighted through aspects of appropriation, remixing, recycling and sampling. Under the banner, 'Re-queering a Nation', she investigates not only a personal grapple with outsider, as well as intruder syndrome, but also aims to visualise the connection to a collective colonial memory and its impacts on minorities.

JEWELLERY DESIGN

The division is focused on teaching jewellery design as a critical discipline that allows students to reflect on their surroundings and translate their ideas into three dimensional wearable artworks that communicate and stimulate thought.

CARINE TERREBLANCHE

Terreblanche (b. 1968) heads the Jewellery Design Division at the Visual Arts Department. For *Slow Intimacy*, she used pieces of the jewellery and ceramics inherited from her mother and grandmother to recontextualise these problematic symbols of colonial status in a troubled present where the love and longing for heirlooms of the past is also a confrontation with the ghosts of historical injustice, displacement and structural violence.

JOANI GROENEWALD

Groenewald (b. 1986) is a lecturer in the Visual Arts Department, as well as a jewellery designer, goldsmith and artist. She is currently enrolled for a PhD in Jewellery and Object Design at PXL-MAD Hasselt and Stellenbosch University. She relies on the nature of the materials that she works with, such as mined minerals, stones, soil, glass and plastic, to question issues regarding landscape and culture.

AFRO-FEMINIST FILMS

These interviews engage artists on the slow intimacies involved in art-making. Stella Viljoen chats to Sitaara Stodel about her strong women in domestic spaces. Shakeelah Ismail interviews Kenyan Chemu Ng'ok about the slowness of oil painting in pursuit of justice. Beata America talks to Zimbabwean multidisciplinary storyteller Thandi Gula-Ndebele about self-representation and slow violence. Charisse Louw and Ghanaian filmmaker Nuotama Frances Bodomo talk about the complications of feminism in the African context. Ernst van der Wal and Nomusa Musa Mtshali discuss engagements with queerness. Filmed and edited by Adriaan de la Rey.

SLOW INTIMACY II

In *Slow Intimacy II* (IS Art) artists like Elizabeth Gunter and Cow Mash deal with the challenges associated with cultivating slow intimacy and the underbelly of this apparently hopeful concept, whether held between human or animal subjects. The dichotomy of the lightness of form and the inherent weight of the bronze material of Morland's sculptures are in playful conversation with the works of Leanie van der Vyver.



Bat I, Elizabeth Gunter (2021).

ELIZABETH GUNTER

In Gunter's (b. 1957) art practice, which mainly comprises drawing and sculpture, she deals with the human/animal relationship, employing the liminal overlap between opposites to demonstrate, even enact, mutuality and difference between non-human and human animals. As such, the fetuses of endangered species suggest that birth and death exist as contiguity.

COW MASH

Mash (b. 1994) is a South African artist whose practice and research centres on cow metaphors, gender studies, and generational transformation.

JACKY LLOYD

Lloyd (b. 1963) works principally in marble and sandstone. Her highly metaphorical work explores the intimacies of self within broader psycho-social and socio-political narratives. In this collection, 'sleep time' becomes the universal foundation for the contextualisation of self, while her theme of 'youth' expresses the formative, fluid and vulnerable state of early adulthood.

ARNO MORLAND

Morland (b. 1971) works and lives in Cape Town. His bronze sculptures seek to investigate the variable nature of human connection, with a special emphasis on the state of interaction and intimacy post pandemic.

LEANIE VAN DER VYVER

Van der Vyver (b. 1980) is based in Cape Town and uses product design as an art medium. In *Slow Intimacy II*, her work speaks to moments of violent intimacy she experienced whilst wearing specific garments. Through a rendering of these, hidden behind QR codes, Van der Vyver invites the viewer to engage with her work, but from an intentional distance.

SLOW INTIMACY III

In *Slow Intimacy III* (Oude Leeskamer) the emphasis falls on an intermedial voyeurism that maps our relationship with the intersubjective world around us. Here the drawings and prints of Katherine Bull, the collaborative story-telling of Asemahle Ntlonti and the artful weaving of Sivan Zeffertt reach between the past and future.



Huba I, Asemahle Ntlonti (2021).

KATHERINE BULL

Bull (b. 1974) is a Cape Town based visual artist who has practiced as a lecturer in tertiary education for almost two decades. She engages in a range of mediums to draw attention to sensory perception mediated through digital technologies and the act of representation itself. Combining digital drawing, painting, printmaking, performance and installation, she explores how we – both artist and viewer – see, understand and engage with the current digital environment. She brings analogue and digital modes of image making into conversation through digital life drawing and painting from live online broadcasts, webcams, Skype and Google Image searches.

ASEMAHLE NTLONTI

Ntlonti (b. 1993) works and lives in Cape Town. Ntlonti's collective approach to making reflects the isiXhosa culture of beading, where artistry is shared across generations. Much like beaders, Ntlonti embraces knowledge sharing and a collective approach to making, rather than the isolated romanticism of being a singular artist-in-studio. For Ntlonti, beading is a way to trace and connect with her isiXhosa lineage.

SIVAN ZEFFERTT

Zeffertt (b. 1992) studied architecture at the University of Cape Town before finding herself as a textile artist, weaver and self-taught photographer. Her work focuses on themes of memory, land, space and texture.

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INSIDE COVER ARTWORK

Stephané Edith Conradie, *Geestelike
Onderhouding* (2022). Photo credits: Hayden
Phipps.

CATALOGUE DESIGN

Clara Babette



