1
Igshaan Adams
Detail of *11B Larch weg (ii)*, 2019-20
Nylon rope, cotton, twine and beads and sea shells, stones, glass, wood, plastic, fabric, 341 x 830 cm
Courtesy of the artist and blank projects

# MATERIAL WITNESS

## Blindsight

We see in passing, elide more than we configure. 'Blindsight'—a response to visual stimuli that occurs without any awareness of having seen anything—is an appropriate diagnosis. We are all partially blind. Increasingly aware of the damage inflicted on our visual cortex, we no longer believe the eye to be the sovereign arbiter of meaning and value. Luce Irigaray's view that 'the eye objectifies and masters' more than the other senses is in dispute.[1] Today, smell, taste, touch, and hearing are no longer considered sensorial extensions of looking, but integral to cognition. We no longer maintain that sight, or its perceived dominance, is the cause for 'an impoverishment of bodily relations.' Nor do we assume that when 'the look dominates, the body loses its materiality.'[2] It is not that sight does not have a role to play in our understanding and expression of life. What matters far more is the contiguity of *all* the senses. That intuition and feeling have rapidly assumed a central place in our lives—a consequence of the decline of reason, and the eye as its symbolic trope—means that we now distrust the objectivity of looking.

We do not believe that insight fails us when we cannot explain what we see. On the contrary, it is our non-plussed and immersive relation to things that assumes dominance. 'Emotional capitalism' (placing feeling at the core of exchange) freed us from the matrix of responsibility-reason-sight which has held us to account for the past two centuries. Today, it is not 'an impoverishment of bodily relations' that we experience but their dispersal. We are wired to pleasure and distress. Our bodies are not things in relation to other things, but aggregative, compressed, and intensified bundles of energy. Hence the amplification of material over reason, the acceptance of volatility, ambient noise, suggestion, conjecture, and conspiracy. Whether this is a good thing is not my concern. What interests me is its impact on how we experience the world, and how this changes our understanding of art—what it is, what it does, what it is good for. One cannot ignore the art world's escalating interest in materiality, but to suppose that we are

more interested in what things are made of than what they look like or claim to be simplifies the issue.

The 'ready-made' announced that anything and everything is art. However, the deregulation of what defined art (paint on canvas, stone and marble) did not mean that long-established materials did not matter. Rather, it was the extension of the means, forms, and ways of making that allowed us to understand art's greater scope. If artistic practices assume a defining place as arbiters for (and mirrors of) our current condition, it is because they never lost sight of their psychotropic place in the imagination. No longer a simple mimetic representation—a picture of the world as we see it or wish it to be—art assumes a more complex, sensorial place in the world. It extends our bodily relations, opens our minds, intensifies our instinctive sense of materiality. De-individuation, group-think, and accelerated exchanges are symptomatic of this hyper-connectivity. We no longer mediate worlds or navigate through them. Rather, we find ourselves implicated at every turn, part and parcel of an inexplicable nexus. Our materiality is the materiality of the world. And yet—oddly, curiously—materiality is not only about what is real. It is never as solid as it may seem.

Materiality's antonym—fiction, illusion, fantasy—is an integral part of the reification of things. If, for auditors, 'materiality' is about determining what is hidden from view (disguised, skewed, fraudulent), this should alert us to the fact that substance is not necessarily what it claims to be. Today, we are as enamoured by an artwork's ability to transport us, as we are by its mechanics. The wheezing calculation of William Kentridge's retro dirigibles is a case in point. As is Olafur Eliasson's *WUNDERKAMMER* (2020), which brings extraterrestrial rocks into our living rooms with the aid of an augmented reality app. Enchantment remains irresistible. As Steve Johnson notes in *Wonderland* (2016), 'when human beings create and share experiences designed to delight and amaze, they often end up transforming society in more dramatic ways than people focused on more utilitarian concerns.'[3] Our 'surprise instinct'—regulated by dopamine—is our 'pleasure drug.' We are all wired: *Pay attention. Something interesting is happening here.* We are as occupied with the mystery of things as we are by their appearance and facticity. A Braun food-mixer is as intriguing as *Mona Lisa*'s face—'glad to be of use . . . but a bit obtuse.'[4] Artists have always cooked the books. Lies are built into things. Nothing is what it seems.

For her exhibition *Material Ecology* (2020) at MoMA, Neri Oxman spliced organic design and digital fabrication technologies, integrating art, nature, and science to understand the ecology of matter—its *animus*. If Oxman's adventure is more profound than Eliasson's love affair with augmented reality, Dieter Rams' food-mixer, William Kentridge's dirigible, or Mona Lisa's face, it is because we cannot survive without understanding the



fusion of the human and inhuman, the organic and inorganic. 'The intersection of biology, engineering, materials and computer science' is now.[5] Oxman's declaration is indisputable. Curiosity is vital. Acquisition—the acquisitive eye—is a culture of the recent past; its continuation nothing more than perverse. What is needed is radical accountability.

## Matereality

On the ashen parquet floor of a white-walled room we see a broad, frayed shred of carpet. The found object is the centrepiece of an exhibition by Igshaan Adams at blank projects.[6] The director of the dealership, Jonathan Garnham, directs my eye to areas that are worn, and others where the surface remains relatively intact. Here there was once a sofa, there a fridge. Here people sat, there they strode. The quality of the impress varies. Then there is architecture and design's greatest influencers, light and shade, with their shifting pressures and consolations.

Materiality is informed by a variety of impactful exchanges—animate, inanimate, elemental. Nothing withers and fades at the same time or in the same way. Distress is a composition made of varyingly subtle and harsh presses and tones. Adams's ragged carpet is a trope for living. Unprotected, used and reused, it is both functional and elegiac. It is not, however, akin to a Braun food-mixer (an elegant, intact, quietly-whirring thing which Dieter Rams troublingly associates with the archetypal English butler—as though a human was merely a type, a thing, used until discarded). It is not a fetish object. In the artist's hands, it reflects on the small comforts that Cape Town's disenfranchised—the Malay community in particular—have drawn and redrawn from life. On that tawdry shred of carpet we find the small sum of our footwork—the stories of bodies recumbent, apace. For Adams, the carpet is the measure of lives foreshortened. Initially placed in a living-cum-kitchen area, flush against the entrance to the home (a mere six-by-four metres), it speaks of lives trapped in cramped increments.

One could belabour the political and societal implications which Adams's carpet exposes; reflect on its discord within a white cube. One must. But this is not my theme, not quite. What concerns me is the body as a circulatory material witness, and Adams's carpet as the tracing of that circulation—lives lived in and amongst things (and not in Rams's sense, lives as things). I am interested in how we look at and live in relation to objects, and how they look back at and live with us. Amid this exchange is *desuetude*—the allowance for a lapse in time, the acceptance of obsolescence. In this regard, I am unconcerned with the rarefaction of objects—with 'the intricacies of model numbers, provenance and pedigree.' Such

rarefaction sustains 'a drooling pornography that fetishises sunglasses and fountain pens, shoes and bicycles, and almost everything that can be traded, collected, categorised, organised and ultimately possessed and owned.'[7] On the contrary, I am interested in that which exists at the limit of acquisitive absorption.

Igshaan Adams's tawdry carpet is a singular case in point, but when materials are massed—seen in chorus, in rooms chockfull of reimagined junk—their impact is much greater. For me, this was profoundly felt on seeing *Matereality* (2020), a group show curated by Andrea Lewis at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town. Here, at the gill between two interlinked rooms, a single key wall text—white against turquoise—was prominently displayed:

> Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they are in all previous ages, but by objects. . . . We live by object time: by this I mean that we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession.[8]

The words are from Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society* (1988). Other than the show's title—*Matereality* (a neologism fusing the material and the real)—it is the only indicator as to what the exhibition is about. No accompanying brochure was at hand. No matter, because the depth-charge of Baudrillard's words were enough to compel thought about why things today matter more than people, why it's easier to deal with people when we turn them into things, and why our bodies are the prosthetic extension of them.

There is something spooky about the cult of objects. That they occupy a sacred place in affluent societies is the measure of our death in life. In his book *The Language of Things* (2009), Sudjic recounts this horror in a prose as blithe as it is withering. At Iziko, however, the tone is more concerned, more concerning. Despite the hype, this is the 'Third World' after all. Affluence belongs to the very few, but things do not. Consumption is a by-product of waste, not the other way around. We may all have access to things, but artists transmogrify them, alter their meaning, twist their fate. If Lewis's curatorial venture is an astonishing achievement, it is because of the immense variety of things pulped, rebooted, and made anew.

In the midst of the horror we have become—our obscene merger of people and things, and the creeping sense of futility in the face of a catastrophe of our own making—there remains our unerring ability to make beauty out of waste. Materiality is not a fait accompli. A work by Carolyn Parton provides an inspiring and unassuming answer. Titled *Silent Song* (2018), it was made with 'spent paint' collected from artists,



**3**
Carolyn Parton
*Silent song*, 2018
6.4kg of reconstituted and reclaimed paint strata, 42 x 68 x 7 cm
Photo: Vanessa Cowling
Courtesy of the artist

house painters, and paint manufacturers. The artist poured, scraped, and compressed the remaindered paint into slabs. Once dry, they were rubbed by hand with archival artist paints, as though anointed. These were then cut, torn, and stacked as strata. Barring the three-sided wooden frame which contains the tessellated slabs, it is 'spent paint' that defines the work. At its single gaping flank the sheets venture onward, unbound, a compress of jutting tongues. For Parton, this hardened liquid is a 'resuscitated . . . landscape.'[9] Recovery and reconsecration are key. Parton diverts waste matter destined for the landfill, preserving it and turning it into a song of 'land and liquid,' the source of all our living. What makes an artist draw sustenance from waste? Why are these resuscitations poignant? Is it because they tell us that nothing need be lost? That beauty is infinite? That everything returns?

Buoyed by Parton's *Silent Song*, I wander through Chris Soal's scorched field of toothpicks and Usha Seejarim's abstracted wall of clothes pegs, past Turiya Magadlela's floral mandala (made of stretched pantyhose) and Frances Goodman's horned bull-like relief (made from fake yellow and purple fingernails). There is Nicholas Hlobo's clunky rubber turbine, a photograph of Maurice Mbiyaki taking a stroll through a township in his Sunday best (a knicker-bockered suit made of computer keys), and Alexandra Karakashian's tall tumbling canvas. Soaked in used engine oil, it echoes the grandeur, and ills, of maritime imperial history, and the fact

**4**
Kresiah Mukwazhi
*Ngirozi yemusha*, 2021
Bra straps, lace, corset and beads on timber frame, 140 x 90 cm
Courtesy of the artist and blank projects

that sailcloth inspired the painter's canvas. Cyrus Kabiru's nonsensical bicycle delights me, as does Buhlebezwe Siwani's absurdly tall tripod, with its rusted basin atop, green roots bursting from its riddled base. Not so Francois Knoetze's menacing ogre, made of shot circuit boards and tangles of flexed wire—a Nam June Paik on a bad hair day. Bert Pauw's chequered baby quilt (made of plastic shopping bags) warms the cockles. Lisa Grobler's nuclear green tumour summons dread. Kresiah Mukwazhi's strung bra straps (shorn from their cups) ominously inspire, while Ibrahim Mahama's dance of drab sackcloth and flouncing shirts drag me into a funk. Aaron Samuel Mulenga's devotional shrine reminds me that God is not dead, while Akudzwe Elsie Chiwa and Pierre Vermeulen's bouquets (made from human and fake hair) restore the quirky and weird. Moffat Takadiwa's colostomy bag of bright plastic bottle-tops reminds me of all the good things I could do with a nail, thread, and some junk, while Serge Attukwei Clottey's tapestry of flattened yellow oil cans, a grim commentary on pollution, remains a thing of beauty. But it is perhaps Aaron Samuel Mulenga's devotional shrine—*Flight Is A Beautiful Thing When Performed in Tandem* (2019)—which best captures the sacramental sentiment at the heart of Lewis's curatorial project.

Here it is not only the things sourced but their reincarnation that proves a strange attractor—the way artists galvanise things that have been ignored. Waste is not an end in and of itself. Consumption is not the reason for living. Things take flight, converge, allow for other iterations. The cycle is as excessive as it is magical. An embrace made of stitched burlap is a source of grace.

## http: 404 not found

Lewis is not alone in her consecration of waste and excess. Material culture is the sine qua non of modern life. In the 'Mill House,' a rebooted lumber factory in Stellenbosch, Khanyisile Mbongwa and Bernard Akoi-Jackson staged a monumental exhibition which reprised our obsession with waste and excess. Titled the *Curators' Exhibition*, it formed part of the Stellenbosch Triennale (2020). It was not only preoccupied with materiality, but its ability to illuminate our past, present, and future. 'We are here today, thinking through yesterday to imagine and manifest tomorrow,' wrote Mbongwa.[11] Her vision is future-proofed, but it is also a heartfelt reckoning with Africa's strangled fate. The balance lies in the weighing of time—what matters, why we exist, how we can become better beings. If materiality is central, it is because we need to own up to waste and reconfigure the cycle of affluence and poverty to produce 'counter

**5**
Zyma Amien
Installation view of *http: 404 page not found* (2020) at the Stellenbosch Triennale 2020
Found objects,
700 x 800 x 500 cm
Photo: Kelvin Haizel
Courtesy of the artist

futures.' None of which is possible, notes Mbongwa, without recognising the 'divinity of the everyday.'[12]

I visited the Triennale on a sunny Sunday morning with Ariane Nevin and Sven Christian. We passed university students drinking tankards of craft beer and a dressmaker's atelier before venturing into a towering cavernous room—a hippodrome, a hangar. We were gobsmacked by its enormity, the scale and space afforded to each work. At its vaulted centre hung Zyma Amien's towers of pink and white satin, titled *http: 404 not found* (2020)—the 'error code' and 'standard response in computer network communication to indicate that the request content could not be found.' For Amien, this omission (akin to the auditor's discovery of undeclared evidence) forecasts an ominous outcome, namely 'The impact the 4th industrial revolution will have on the manufacturing sector as artificial intelligence can easily be programmed to do the work of humans.'[13] The invasiveness of technology returns. Again, we are presented with neglect. In that moment, however, it was not the menace of A.I. which was uppermost in our minds, nor were we the only ones unaware of A.I.'s creeping menace.

Schoolgirls, soon to graduate, were posing before Amien's great swathes of satin. They were tricked out to look like ladies, dressed in shimmering gowns, their hair sculpted in defiance of gravity. The photographer informed me that the shoot was meant to happen in nature, but then, lo and behold, they discovered a better 'venue'—a room filled to the rafters with diaphanous drapery. We watched as they posed beguilingly before Amien's avalanche of pink and white satin which, on closer inspection, proved to be collared shirts which had quit all functional purpose. The schoolgirls thrust their heads skyward, arched their backs, cinched their waists, and held their pose.

Gazing skyward towards an imaginary yonder, they would have seen another work of art, a vast, brightly patched train of cloth travelling in billowing waves along the ceiling towards the sunlit yard. The work was created by Hellen Nabukenya from the off-cuts of tailors' shops in Uganda. They were understandably preoccupied, in a wonderland of their own making. Along a wall, Reshma Chhiba had arranged a battery of jutting red tongues, sculpted and fronded with nylon cord. Titled *The Talking Yoni* (2013–ongoing), it spoke as much to the vision of empowered young womanhood as it did of the goddess Kali ('The unbridled, provocative and ferocious goddess of Time').[14] As insouciant as it was knowing, Chhiba's wagging tongues summed up the blockbuster event, in which the preening youth were by no means an anomaly. In fact, they were a further expression of our 'unbridled,' 'ferocious,' crisis-ridden world. The fourth industrial revolution may beckon, but it could not dispel the delight of a focused group of glamorous schoolgirls.

## Junkspace

Since the first ready-mades and found objects, we have grown accustomed to the undying power of things. If ours is an 'object time,' however, it is because today's landfills are everywhere. They are not a vast plot of land yonder. They are us, a part of our bodies—our crowded, impacted lives. We cannot walk along a street without seeing a weathered shred of paper—once pressing news or a glossy sell, now nestling in an unkempt drought-stricken bush. Ours, says Rem Koolhaas, is 'junkspace'—a world 'overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the world in a stranglehold of seduction.'[15] Consumption and waste are inextricable.

Echoing the strategies of artists who make waste their medium and coda for being—Amien and Nabukenya amongst others—Koolhaas notes that today, more than at any other moment in history, we 'stick, fold, dump, glue, shoot, double, fuse.'[16] The splice is both necessary and random. Life and its relation to art is 'a transient coupling, a temporary embrace with a high probability of separation.'[17] Ours is an 'object time,' not only because we are bound to our excesses, but because the stranglehold of objects is the surest mirror of our cultural DNA—our addictions and abuses.

Sudjic is correct in stating that 'Never have more of us had more possessions than we do now, even as we make less and less use of them.'[18] If such curatorial ventures are memorable, it is because they place us inside this dilemma. It is the rub of affluence and penury, and the role of artists in exposing this aggravated interface, that matters. Despite Mulanga's goodwill ('flight as beautiful when performed in tandem'), we cannot transcend the world we struggle to survive. The material is us. We are its body and its witness. Affluence and poverty are one, along with the neurosis that accompanies the former and the desperation that accompanies the latter. The poet Zenzile Khoisan summarises this circulation as 'the purgatory of unprocessed pain.'[19] Loops and exchanges occur. Waste disappears, only to reappear elsewhere. It cannot be removed. It is a criminal omission in an auditor's account, a questionable thing that lingers.

## This song is for . . .

In the neighbouring flank of Iziko (where *Matereality* was staged), a very different story was being told, a devastating story. To connect the two is obscene, yet they are irrepressibly connected by a toxic culture built on waste. This story formed part of Gabrielle Goliath's *This song is for . . .* (2019), curated by Ingrid Masondo. In that darkened room, it was not things



**6**
Gabrielle Goliath
Installation view of
*This song is for . . .* (2019)
at Standard Bank Gallery,
Johannesburg
22-channel 4K video, sound,
lighting, floor cushions,
and vinyl text
Courtesy of the artist and
Goodman Gallery

one saw, per se, but voices—things heard, words inscribed. Pictures (and their association with the mind's eye) were, for the most part, struck away. One entered through thick black sound-proofed curtains into a catastrophe that, despite its choreography, proved uncontainable. This was not a place that cared for approval. It was a place where history hurt, where starkly personal stories confronted one without reprieve. There, in that darkened room, another reckoning was afoot. There, the object was human—preyed upon, exploited, abused. What Goliath chose to examine was the human spirit and the mistreatment of the body that houses it—refused its inalienable right to dignity because we no longer care for, or can no longer protect, the sanctity of life.

Goliath's theme, in the crudest sense, is rape—its psychic and physical ramifications. It is the plight of human bodies, mistreated as mere extensions of a world of objects—bodies as matter, as unthinkingly consumable and as easily discardable—that is her driving concern. Goliath asks that we re-evaluate this attitude, questioning why and how we arrived at such an appalling disregard for the life and pain of others. At what point did we relinquish compassion and mutual understanding? What is the consequence of this tragic forfeiture? It is not rape that is her focus. This brutal act is but the most grotesque and obscene outcome of a pernicious economy of hurt. We hate ourselves and others because we can find no reprieve from our historical and acculturated inhumanity.

It is in this regard that the juxtaposition of the two exhibitions struck an unnerving chord. On quitting an exhibition devoted to understanding our incommensurable relationship with waste, I had not expected to find myself confronted with its most dark of hearts. Yet the stories which Goliath recounts are emphatically not about victimisation alone. Rather, the stories told, the songs sung, ask that we weigh the measure of a wrong to the subsequence of that wrongdoing (which is immeasurable). A damage survived is never wholly resolved. There is a victim and there is a perpetrator, true, but there is also a broader web of culpability. In South Africa, a country with the worst rape statistics on Earth, abuse has many faces. In stating this, I do not seek to diminish the singularity of suffering but to draw attention to its devastatingly abnormal normalcy.

What does one make of this abomination? How do artists respond? Given art's limits, it cannot wholly answer for a crime. Still, art must find a way to carry such burdens. In August 2019 we were confronted with the brutal rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana. It occurred in a post office in Cape Town. That it galvanised outrage is unsurprising, but its location and perpetration by a government official only amplified a monstrousness that had long reached its breaking point. There seemed no answer to the crime, no way we could right a wrong as fathomless, as damning. Two months later, Gabrielle Goliath presented her song of suffering at Iziko. The events form a blood-knot. They remind us that art—as ritual, as prayer—remains integral in trying to understand what defies all reckoning. It is through ritual and prayer that Goliath is able to find some response, some answer, to that which is unanswerable. One might seek to right a wrong (and justly so), but one cannot presume that answers solve problems. Instead, one finds oneself turning to prayer. Faith returns in the face of the unthinkable.

Those who were the inspiration and source of song were not only women, yet the predominance of femicide is incontrovertible. Goliath's choreography of the story of suffering (one cannot dispel that we are in the midst of a staging) was designed to infiltrate our bolted hearts and minds; to be cathartic. Yet as Greek tragedy reminds us, catharsis comes after suffering. It can never, finally, expunge it. As relief it is always brief, and, in the final instance, unsatisfactory. There is no fitting response to horror, no atonement nor reason for the damage done. I wept. But why? Was it the plaintive reverberation of song that left me bereft or the personal accounts of victims taped to the walls, the unutterable silence within them? What can one do in this wracked space? One listens, inhabits, breathes, endures, then walks away—which one must, when one can, because this is not a room one easily removes oneself from. That experience stays. It becomes another sediment of hurt, joined to other hurts, that we must carry.

Again and again I enter a low-lit purple room, cordoned off with thick black curtains. It is song that accompanies me—reverbed, elegiac—along with testimonials as stark as they are tender. In each transcribed account I cannot feel, cannot believe, that rape is something one can truly survive. Unless one is a victim of sexual abuse, one can moralise, protest, be outraged, but one can never know that particular destruction. Perhaps it is this incommensurable point between communion and disjunction—this place of hurt—that Goliath asks us to embrace. One can and must read the personal accounts by the victims, listen to the songs sung in their honour—Corey Spengler-Gathercole, Pat Hutchison, Gabriel Xavier, Nondumiso Msimanga . . . There is no end to the list of names, known and unknown.

If rape and abuse are horrifically normative, it is because of our alarming capacity for depravity. If today 'we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession,' it is because of our tragic incapacity to distinguish value, let alone arrive at a state of grace. We live in an amoral, uncaring time. Lived in shattering seconds, it is this time—for all my talk of fatality—that we must reconfigure with the last shreds of decency we still possess. Following in the footsteps of Goliath, we must enshrine love, goodness, and compassion. Because despite grotesque

**7**
Carin Bester
Stills from *She Had a Name 365*, 2021
One year durational performance, with a video uploaded to social media every 190 minutes
Courtesy of the artist

evidence to the contrary, there remains the sacred care and attention we can give to people and to things, as well as the many miraculous ways in which we can transfigure our terrible mistakes. Long past the eleventh hour, this possibility persists. Now, then now, then now, we need to re-direct ourselves back to our wasted and wasting humanity. Failing to do so would be catastrophic. We are, after all, the last material witness to a crime of our own making.

If Gabriella Goliath's dramatisation of desecration is performative—a merger of dirge-like sound, image, and text in an immersive low-lit studio environment—then Carin Bester's 365 day project *She had a name* (2021), repeated every 190 minutes in a digitised landscape, is a reminder of the gut-wrenching persistence of the abuse and slaughter of women. Its first iteration in 2020 was a live-streamed video performance, in which Bester typed 'She had a name' 2695 times—'the number of womxn killed in the previous year.' Continued 'awareness' is key for Bester; a month-long commemoration farcical. 'We need 365 days of activism,' indefinitely, hence the digital interface repeated every 190 minutes.[20] As a performance artist, she is the definition plus ultra of the material witness. Her staggered incantation is a tolling. Reducing flesh to thing, being to non-being, eviscerating the existence of the soul, is how hatred destroys all it touches. The extent of South Africa's self-hate is metastatic and sick, the destruction it fosters fathomless. Tragedy is a failed descriptor for a failed psychodynamic. Still, Goliath and Bester must drive forward the ever-tender need for dignity, love, and grace—for 'immediacy and honesty.'[21]