



neither art nor art
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Videography: Daandrey Steyn

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alex trapani



fig. 1

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I can't stop myself from thinking. At this very moment – it's frightful – if I exist it is because I am horrified at existing. I am the one who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire.

Jean-Paul Sartre (Nausea 1936:99)



fig. 2

artist's statement

2016

Thinking about behaviour influences behaviour. One's existence is confirmed as one reflects on personal re/actions, regardless of life's absurdities, modifying one's behaviour to achieve desired outcomes.

Bruce Nauman's work both affirms and ridicules these ideas. He contended that being an artist and being in the studio, concludes that everything done there must be art (Plagens, 2014:72). Since I believe that art is a way of being my praxis interrogates and reflects on Nauman's critical engagement with mundane human behaviour and with the art establishment, or what George Dickie (1974:31) refers to as the "artwold". Therefore, my work presented here embodies this critical investigation of human nature by means of a subversive temperament.

Nauman's *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, (1966-67) confronts Marcel Duchamp's works, specifically as it pertains to the paradoxical spirit of art. As Nauman comments on Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), so I comment on Nauman's fountains. More specifically, I interrogate the artist's worth as mediated by critical recognition or by making a significant contribution to life.

This exhibition concerns the fountain as representative of the cyclical mentality of a productive, equitable and sustainable system. When I, as a conscious being, behave as a fountain I comment on what it means to be an artist as an art object. It is as if involuntary behaviour, like that of a cascading fountain, subverts a rational existence and purpose in art.

The plinth metaphorically affirms the aspirations associated with critical achievement. Furthermore, a plinth serves as a structural representation of the prodigious character of art. My engagement mirrors my personal aspirations. These aspirations may appear involuntary or unanticipated, but since I need to make sense of a chosen resolve, the pursuit continues regardless. As Sisyphus finds his purpose in incessant duty when forced for eternity to roll a rock up a hill (Camus, 1955:7), so the artist responds perpetually to an over-rationalised world through his tacit understanding.

In order to be a true artist I strive to be an absurd fountain.

ascending and descending

stills from video performance
2016

In a video performance, *ascending and descending* (fig. 3, 4 and 5) the artist climbs up and down each side of a plinth repeatedly. This Sisyphean act is a comment on the artist's 'worthiness' or 'lowliness' within the art establishment (and the world). The behaviour is indicative of the lengths to which the artist will go in order to gain significance in the artworld. However, every ascent is followed by a descent. An interrogation of the artist's significance is at play which asks the question whether the artist's aspirations and dedication, or the levels of exposed fallibility and desperate repetitions are responsible for achievements or notoriety.



fig. 3, 4 & 5



fig. 6, 7 & 8

cutting corners

stills from video performance
2016

Incessant duty to the art establishment becomes a form of submission to an authority. *cutting corners* (fig. 6, 7 and 8) is a video performance that reveals aspects of incessant duty as the artist performs the difficult and somewhat destructive task of removing the four top corners of a plinth, the symbol of the art establishment. The activity of cutting corners to succeed in the artworld is contrasted with the sustained destructive efforts of the artist in achieving this goal, as if destroying the structures of authority that recognises the artist's role, in order to further the recognition of the artist within the institution of art. A paradox exists between the path to success, hard work and taking short cuts to get there. The determined behaviour of the artist, performed upon the chosen symbol, accentuates the duty of the artist to his craft and faithfulness to the establishment, regardless of the obvious discomfort.



wet behind the ears and wet feet

stills from video performance
2016

The artist performs rudimentary idiomatic actions. The contrast between getting one's feet wet – actively gaining some experience in art – and being wet behind the ears – being immature and inexperienced in art – is evident simultaneously, as in *wet behind the ears and wet feet* (fig. 9). The contrast of experience and inexperience accentuates the anxieties about the artist's position in the practices of art. The artist is concurrently qualified and unqualified in every new project embarked on. This can be bewildering for the artist and is conceptually continued through the discomfort of having pissed oneself in fear of failure, or having wet feet in gaining experience in art.

fig. 9

fig. 10

water falls and water ascends

stills from video performance
2016

The artist is contrasted with a moving ladder. The close up shot of the artist's mouth and beard, where water falls down beyond the picture frame, is indicative of the artist as an object that allows movement. The continuous flow of water represents the unceasing dedication to art, yet it has a sense of the unconscious action, such as the incessant drooling of someone in psychosis. The ladder, an instrument of ascent and descent, is denied part of its function as the water continues to climb. It represents the artist's desire to never have to come down.

self-wetting portrait

mixed media fountain sculpture
2016

In *self-wetting portrait* (fig. 11 and 12), a small sculpted fountain embedded in the plinth, the bottom half of the artist's body is reduced to approximately one tenth of its size (as if shrunk) and fitted with a fountain that overflows at the pants line. Impressions of pissing oneself out of nervous anxiety or fear of ridicule are apparent in the awkward partial self-portrait. Attention to anatomical correctness and surface detail is indicative of my commitment to my craft and the down-scaling of forms and the body language shows insecurity and insignificance, the artist's 'smallness' within the art establishment. The continuous flow of water accentuates the perpetual nature of the artist's discomfort and uncertainty with being an artist, a type of perpetual pants-wetting. The worthiness of the artist is interrogated here and self-reflection reveals anxieties and self-doubt within the assumed expectations of the art establishment, as if it were keeping a watchful eye on the artist's compliance.



fig. 11 & 12



fig. 13 & 14

neither up nor down

mixed media sculpture
2016

In *neither up nor down* (fig. 13 and 14) the plinth symbolises the achievements or elevation of the artist, as seen in *ascending and descending* (fig. 3, 4 and 5). Here the plinth is precariously raised off the ground and emerges from the gallery wall as if it were one with the structure. The upside-down ladder is illuminated from inside the plinth and is no longer a mere functional object of ascent and descent – particularly due to its inversion atop the plinth – becoming an object of admiration. It is confounding in the sense that the ladder has been elevated by the plinth yet it is denied its own ability to elevate.

sweat fountain (driver's tan)

mixed media sculpture
2016

Bearing reference to the odd yet common practice of an arm hanging outside the car window whilst driving, in *sweat fountain (driver's tan)* (fig. 15 and 16) the artist positions himself in art as if it were taking him on a journey. As the artist's arm hangs outside of the plinth, while appearing to be involved in nothing significant the viewer may imagine that the rest of his body is actively engaged in specific augmentation – as if he were driving a car. The voluntary actions are accompanied by the involuntary ones, but it is as if the voluntary becomes involuntary. The artist's arm, although flaccid, still sweats, not just from exertion, but also from the 'spotlight' or 'sunlight' upon the hand. Here the bucket also cross references Duchamp's *fountain* (1917). Both the bucket and *fountain* (1917) become proverbial receptacles of bodily secretions. The result of working hard at nothing important is nonetheless contained significantly.

fig. 15 & 16



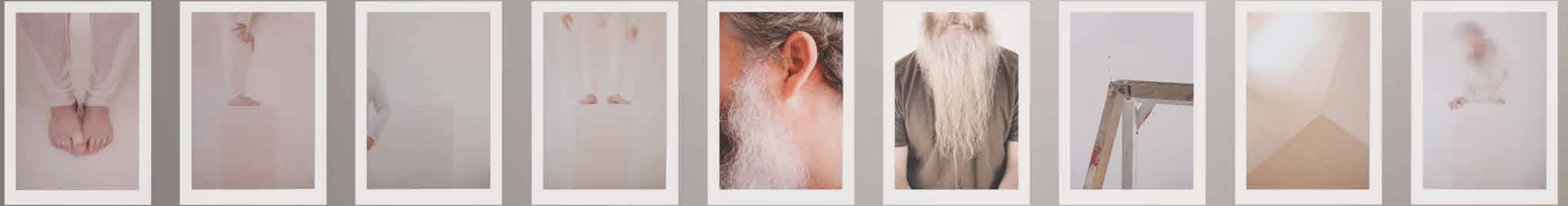


fig. 17 & 18

wet behind the ears II

mixed media fountain sculpture
2016

The enlarged ear of the artist appears as if swollen due to its prolonged exposure to water. The perpetual flow of water behind the ear suggests the continuous inexperience of the artist when facing the challenges of making art. The cycle of water flows away only to return, emulating the artist's compulsion to make art.



9 desaturated photographs

photographic print installation
2016

In *9 desaturated photographs* (fig. 19), I exhibited a series of images, some of which are familiar to what has already been seen on *neither art nor art*. Each photograph captures a performance moment. Self-reflection is unavoidable and escaping it is impossible. In choosing images ‘at random’ I reflect on them and remember the behaviour, or how I felt during the activity. My recollections of activity imply the cyclical nature of contemplative thought and how thinking about behaviour alters behaviour, which leads to contemplation.

fig. 19



fig. 20

(over)look (under)stand

photographic print
2016

In *(over)look (under)stand* (fig. 20), failure as a conceptual element is evident from an early encounter with it. The deliberation of the inverted photograph hopes to trick the viewer into believing that the artist is performing this activity upside-down, but very quickly fails to convince. The artist's entire body grasps the plinth as if his survival depends on it. Being immersed in the investigation of art the artist is focused on the task at hand, but clearly detached from the world around him as his head is immersed in the plinth. A sense of avoidance is present, but more so a sense of solipsism is implied giving the impression that understanding the commitment to the selected task is truly significant to the artist, yet what the actual task is remains undefined (within the parameters of art) rendering the efforts to hold on to the plinth self-indulgent and pointless. The work therefore can be interpreted as a critique of the character of the artist and art as institution, not unlike Duchamp's critique of the artworld via *Fountain* (1917) (Godfrey 1998:31). Much like Duchamp's artwork evidence of the hand of the artist (in making) is absent, yet in *(over)look (under)stand* (fig. 20) the body of the artist is enacted as object in merger with (engulfed by) another object, the plinth, which is the symbol of the artworld.

(sub)merge

photographic print
2016

In *(sub)merge* (fig. 21), the artist is present in the work consumed by elements that epitomise his art practice, such as the contemplation of the symbol of the plinth. The absorption becomes a meditation expelling the outside world (or the artworld), yet, paradoxically, the artist appears to be hiding, like a child who believes it cannot be seen by merely placing the hands over the eyes. Also, a sense of disgrace is evident as if the artist were trying to disappear into his own conceptions of art out of sheer discomfort – submerging his head in water to escape the world. In the case of *(sub)merge* (fig. 21) doing things with his eyes closed is at once hubristic and shameful for the artist. The artist is focused but disabled by his own focus, engrossed in his practice while trapped by its limitations.



fig. 21

plinth

photographic print
2016

The plinth stands alone, white in a white space, in the artwork titled, *plinth* (fig. 22). There are almost no shadows presented and the photograph implies that there is a light coming from the plinth itself, as if it were glowing in its own presence. The plinth becomes a beacon for the body of work as it attempts to monumentalise the symbol of the art establishment and its prodigious nature, yet in its solidarity it becomes cold and lifeless without the interactions of the artist.

fig. 22



list of illustrations

front cover
fig. 1.
fig. 2
fig. 3, 4 & 5.
fig. 6, 7 & 8.
fig. 9.
fig. 10.
fig. 11 & 12
fig. 13 & 14.
fig. 15 & 16.
fig. 17 & 18.
fig. 19
fig. 20.
fig. 21.
fig. 22.
fig. 23.
back cover

(sub)merge (2016). Photographic Print, 100 x 80 cm.
sweat fountain (driver's tan) (2016). Mixed media sculpture, 130 x 50 x 40 cm.
alex trapani (2016). UNISA Art Gallery, Pretoria. (photographed by Mark Fegen).
ascending and descending (video stills) (2016). Video performance, with sound, 11 minutes, 3 seconds.
cutting corners (video stills) (2016). Video performance, with sound, 13 minutes, 23 seconds.
wet behind the ears and wet feet (video stills) (2016). Video performance, without sound, 30 minutes, 48 seconds.
water falls and water ascends (video stills) (2016). Video performance, without sound, 27 minutes 5 seconds.
self-wetting portrait (2016). Mixed media fountain sculpture, 140 x 33 x 33 cm.
neither up nor down (2016). Mixed media sculpture, 190 x 40 x 33 cm.
sweat fountain (driver's tan) (2016). Mixed media sculpture, 130 x 50 x 40 cm.
wet behind the ears II (2016). Mixed media fountain sculpture, 110 x 33 x 33 cm.
9 desaturated photographs (2016). Installation of photographic prints, 30 x 22 cm each, installation dimensions variable.
(over)look (under)stand (2016). Photographic print, 100 x 80 cm.
(sub)merge (2016). Photographic print, 100 x 80 cm.
plinth (2016). Photographic print, 58 x 45 cm.
self-wetting portrait (2016). Mixed media fountain sculpture, 140 x 33 x 33 cm.
gallery view of *neither art nor art* (2016). UNISA Art Gallery, Pretoria. (photograph by Mark Fegen).



fig. 23

selected exhibitions

2016	Solo Exhibiting Artist: neither art nor art (MVA Exhibition) UNISA art Gallery (Pretoria)
2013	Exhibiting Artist: The Seven Deadly Virtues KKNK (Oudtshoorn)
2011	Head Curator/Exhibiting Artist: Exquisite Corpse, The Happening Old Parks Sports Grounds (Johannesburg)
2008	Exhibiting Artist: AfroVibes Galerie Chiellerie (Amsterdam)
2008	Exhibiting Artist: Heptad ArtSpace Gallery (Johannesburg)
2007	Exhibiting Artist: Rendezvous Gordart Initiative (Johannesburg)
2005	Solo Exhibiting Artist: PREtension. Celebration of Hypocrisy The Premises Gallery (Johannesburg)
2005	Solo Exhibiting Artist: Co/Con. Prefix to Perfection Gordart Gallery (Johannesburg)
2003	Exhibiting Artist: The Ampersand Foundation Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Gallery (Johannesburg)
2000	Collaborative Artist: After New York Civic Gallery (Johannesburg) [Fellows of the Ampersand Foundation]
1996	Solo Exhibiting Artist: Back to Back: A Two Part Focus Generator Art Space (Johannesburg)
1995	Exhibiting Artist: Body Politics JHB Biennale Gertrude Posel Gallery (Wits University, Johannesburg)

bibliography

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If the world were clear, art would not exist.

(Albert Camus 1955:63)

