

Wilma Cruise Guy du Toit Elfriede Dreyer

L i t t l e d e a t h s

Catalogue for the travelling exhibition, *Little Deaths*

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R a t i o n a l e

According to Buddhist Sogyal Rinpoche in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, life is nothing but a continuing dance of birth and death, a dance of change.

People have always dreamt up possibilities by imagining and wishing for things. Dreams, utopian visions, perceptions and desires all form part of this web of human constructions that people relentlessly create. Yet, technology and media culture have taken us far beyond the dream into the realm of virtual realities so that the human condition today is strongly characterised by ongoing change and an intermingling of real and virtual worlds.

Commonly occurring aspects of changes in life such as moving house, becoming ill, changing school and the termination of a relationship are all endings of the one or other kind. Human existence on earth, it seems, is characterised by changes, trans-

formations and makeovers, therefore by a continual flow of 'births' and 'deaths'. In all of these changes and little deaths, communication is the ingredient that holds together people, lovers and families.

The term 'little deaths' psychoanalytically connotes continual change of mind and semiotically the notion of 'death-of-the-author' in which the artist remains 'asleep' in the artwork and the spectator 'completes' the work through a process of according meaning. In this exhibition of work, images of prostrate as well as upright bodies of both human beings and animals are found, positions that could be interpreted as being dead (flat, laid down) or being alive (standing up/erect).

These obvious references to the existential extremes of life and death have erotic parallels in the phallic metaphors of upright/taut and flat/limp.



Guy du Toit, *Hares 1* (2007). Bronze.

In the Foreword of George Bataille's *The Tears of Eros* (1961), this ironic stance of life folded in death is articulated as follows: "In the violence of overcoming, in the disorder of my laughter and my sobbing, in the excess of raptures that shatter me, I seize on the similarity between a horror and a voluptuousness that goes beyond me, between an ultimate pain and an unbearable joy!".

Guy du Toit's upright jumping rabbits in bronze seem to celebrate life, evoking the wild caperings of hares as the males fight over the females in the early spring. In myths and legends rabbits have often appeared as fertility symbols, especially in extreme antiquity as symbols of the rising fertility of the earth at the Vernal Equinox. Since the female rabbits often rebuff the males' advances before finally succumbing, the males' mating behaviour often looks like a crazy dance; these fights led early observers to believe that the advent of spring made the hares 'mad'. Rabbits and hares are both lagomorphs; they are prolific breeders. Yet, besides being a symbol of sexual mating, the rabbit is a goddess symbol, a trickster symbol, a symbol of



Guy du Toit, *Hares 2, 3* (2007). Bronze.

the Holy Trinity and a symbol of death, redemption and rebirth.

With regard to his depictions of the rabbits' mating dance of life intertwined with death, Du Toit says:

In my sculpture I've been working with rabbits (hares) bunnies, rodents and cute little lemming like animals from time to time. They have been informed by ideas of reproduction, repetition, the original and the copy. By using Barry Flanagan's (a British sculptor) hare and splitting it, I'm repeating, requisitioning or splicing sculpture over again. ... I grew up tending bunnies on my father's rabbit farm just outside Pietermaritzburg, a city notorious for its sweltering heat waves - during which, the rabbits had to be plunged into water to prevent heat fatigue and death. When slaughtered, they were given a blow to the back of the head, just behind the long floppy pink ears while being hung up side down. A 12 x 1 inch water pipe was used to inflict this blow. Death came as spasm of jerks on a wooden table, similar to the stage performances of Joe Cocker.¹

Du Toit's use of the image of the stairs reminds of French philosopher Jacques Derrida's metaphor of stairs for his notion of *parergon* (the frame of interpretation around a work): an endless process of 'little deaths' simulating erection.

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1. He further states: "Please note: My exploration of *little deaths* concepts only involved sculpture and its processes. No acts of violence or sacrifice were committed against any animals, others or myself in this research."



Guy du Toit, *Hares and stairs* (2007).

Bronze.



Wilma Cruise, *Mother goose 1* (2006). Etching 2/10.

For Derrida (1976:163) interpretation (and the search for truth) is a nostalgic quest which leads to continuous temporal frameworks or *parerga* that are continuously drawn and deconstructed. As a result, in poststructuralist terms, every work is 'eternally written here and now' with each re-reading, because the origin of meaning lies exclusively in language itself and its impressions on the reader. According to John Lye (2000 [sp]), "We get caught in a fruitless circle".

Death depicted in Wilma Cruise's prints goes hand-in-hand with bodily transfer and sexuality². Notions of little deaths abound in these works that articulate the idea that beings – whether human or non-human – communicate through the body. Cruise says that, like the French literary theorist Hélène Cixous, she

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2. The little death (The little death [sa]), a translation from the French *la petite mort*), a popular reference for sexual orgasm, has generally been interpreted to describe the postorgasmic fainting spells some lovers suffer from. Also it can refer to spiritual release that come with orgasm, or a short period of transcendence, an expenditure or spending of life force.



Wilma Cruise and Guy du Toit, *Springhaa(r)s*
(2007). Collaborative work, bronze.

rejects "... a logocentric Cartesian discourse that posits the mind as the source of writing".³

Cixous speaks of an oppositional language, *écriture féminine*, in which the body functions as text in the area of the subliminal and the subconscious, resisting order and structure. Cruise offers the proposition that (logocentric) language fails to capture those realities that function beneath the surface of conscious apprehension.⁴

The figures, in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional form, explore the idea of subliminal communication – what Cruise calls the "in-between space".

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3. Julia Dobson, Hélène Cixous (1937 -) in Simons, J (ed). 2004. *Contemporary Critical Theorists*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. P.130.

4. Cruise, W. 2005. Partial Figures and Psychic Unease: An Artist's Perspective (*Fragmented Figure* Conference, Cardiff, Wales, June – July. Published in *Interpreting Ceramics*, Issue 8).

Psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan maintains that communication is actually desire, that is, desire of the Other, which is a fundamental part of the understanding of identity. For Lacan the need for communication is inseparable from, and importantly subordinated to, the individual's demand for the recognition and love of other beings (Ross 2002).

For Cruise this need for communication is not so much a mental process as communication through the body itself, an almost subliminal process read via the tension that emanates from bodies and between bodies. The moment of *Gestalt* is important; that flash experience of instant and unspoken recognition. Rephrased differently,

Cruise's bodies operate in the domain of the unconscious, which, according to Lacan, is the ground of all Being and like a continually circulating chain (or multiple chains) of signifiers, with no anchor – or, to use Derrida's terms, no centre. Theorists have given many other names to centre; in Lacanian theory it is the Other, but it's also called the phallus.



Wilma Cruise, *Mother goose 2*
(2006). Etching 2/10.



Wilma Cruise, *Sarcophogi 1* (2007). Ceramic and limestone.

Mostly, Cruise's bodies don't touch; they are islands, contours of Being that become silhouettes, almost. They are minimal and mute, and their communication occurs with minimal means. The monumental large sculptures are 3-D, yet they seem one-dimensional. The artist's phallic males are large but limp, and her females elderly; maybe both types speaking about failed communication.

The Lacanian need for communication is represented in unspoken form in Cruise's gendered bodies and articulated through a circuit of symbolic communication where the word fails. It becomes a prolongation of communication where the failed, repressed word articulates itself in a coded, ciphered form and the boundaries of the figures are forever transgressed in the search and the desire for the Other.

For twentieth-century Conceptualist Marcel Duchamp, such 'unspoken' communication entails consumption of the Other through the desire for the Other, therefore consumption as

'use' that becomes synonymous with sexual metaphors of expenditure that goes beyond use-value⁵. Bataille's notion of erotic desire converges with that of Duchamp in terms of a time-based interaction with the erotic object as Other, that is, the establishment of "continuity with alterity: communication" (Botting and Wilson 1997:11).

Such erotic communication is not about conserving energy but discharging it as a result of desire, "consuming it in the act of using it" (Botting and Wilson 1997:13). Time-based communication confirms mortality as interwoven with sexuality: desire and erotic discharge confirm death.

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5. Throughout his artistic career Duchamp imbued his found objects with sexual metaphor. His images and objects such as the chocolate grinder are deliberate choices to articulate sexual mechanism.



Elfriede Dreyer, *delta 26* (2005). Video still.

The title of *Little deaths* furthermore represent the poststructuralist notion of 'death-of-the-author'. In 1967 French literary critic Roland Barthes postulated that, in the interpretation and understanding of any text, the *author is dead*⁶. In ambiguous way, the author-artist is 'in' the text only insofar as we try to read him/her 'out' of it.

This is not to say that knowledge of an artist's life cannot illuminate a text, but at the very same time that illumination forecloses the text, cuts off possible meanings that lie inherent in (or, implicit in) the structure of language, images, ideas in the text. Such an ambiguous, deconstructionist condition of 'little deaths', life-in-death so to speak, indicates a dystopian condition.

In Elfriede Dreyer's video production, *delta* (2005), a central prostrate figure -- either in deep sleep or dead -- forms the main character in the production. The sleeping/dead/comatose figure recalls Barthes' death-of-the-author as well as Derrida's metaphor of the author-artist as a corpse in upright position in a coffin. Using the metaphor of a coffin, Derrida (1987:195) argues that this 'paradigmatic coffin' of unchallengeable information is constantly vulnerable to being "multiplied, described,

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6. In *Death of the Author* (1967), Barthes argues against the incorporation of the intentions and biographical context of an author in an interpretation of text. The author is merely a 'scriptor' that exists to produce but not to explain the work.

serialized, analyzed, detailed, displaced, turned about in all its states (or almost) and from all its angles (or almost)". There are certain imperturbable aspects, which makes the artwork/text stand up to all manipulations of interpretation, "All assaults, ... all perspectives and all anamorphose" (Derrida 1987:195, extending his figurative image into a wooden coffin in upright position).

The sleeping figure might suggest a paralysed figure, referring to a condition of temporary paralysis of the body shortly after waking or, less often, shortly before falling asleep, known as hypnagogic paralysis (Sleep paralysis [sa])⁷. More often than not, sleep paralysis is believed by the person affected by it to be no more than a dream. This is the reason why there are many dream recountings which describe the person lying frozen and unable to move⁸.

The paralytic state of the figure might moreover suggest the short period of transcendence, an expenditure or spending of life force, that could accompany orgasm.

The title of the video production, *delta*, furthermore refers to the delta⁹ phase of sleep that is the deepest form of sleep, a condition interpreted conceptually as the phase where there is deepest access to hidden and primeval faces of the mind.

The head of the male figure is presented as evolving into a double image that represents the id and the superego.

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7. *The Nightmare*, by Henry Fuseli (1781) is thought to be one of the classic depictions of sleep paralysis perceived as a demonic visitation.

8. The hallucinatory element to sleep paralysis makes it even more likely that someone will interpret the experience as simply a dream, as one might see completely fanciful objects in a room alongside the normal vision one can see. Physiologically, it is closely related to the normal paralysis that occurs during REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, also known as REM atonia (Sleep paralysis [sa]).

9. Delta sleep precedes REM and entails the slowest and highest amplitude brain waves. Physiologically, it is closely related to the normal paralysis that occurs during REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, also known as REM atonia (Sleep paralysis [sa]).



Elfriede Dreyer, *delta 14* (2005). Manipulated video still.

The two heads are replicated in the images of the two red buck engaged in head bashing, expressing the constant conflict between the id and superego, related to basic sexual and aggressive drives.

During delta sleep, the realm of the imaginary is entered when the alienated self encounters primordial images -- in delta represented by the African bush and animals¹⁰.

It is suggested that during delta sleep in the subconscious represented by water, there are memories of 'nature' and nostalgia for reconciliation with primal beginnings that are 'surveyed' during sleep¹².

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10. *Delta* refers to the opulent African landscape as encountered in Paradise Country in Mpumalanga in South Africa where the raw footage for the video production was taken. Along the eastern slopes of the escarpment the Panorama is found that abounds with breathtaking views, including God's Window and the Blyde River Canyon, the world's third largest and biggest green canyon and a densely bushed area that encompasses markedly different landforms, climate and people and is characterised by bush, valleys, rivers, waterfalls, forests, animal life and beautiful sunsets. From God's Window the land falls away to the area known as the Low Veld. This is authentic African Bush area with several national parks where wild animals such as the Big Five -- lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and rhino -- roam freely.

12. Psychoanalytic theorists such as Freud, Lacan and Kristeva emphasised the inseparability of self (baby) and other (mother) and suggested that nature (mother) should be 'left behind' for the ego to enter culture and the development of identity to take place.

The lush and opulent spectacularity of the South African landscape allow for a psychogeography and imagined narratives to be projected onto the scenery. The physical space of the landscape turns into a mental, subjective map of events, emotions and experiences. This subjective psychospace becomes a theatre of the subconscious, complete with the African Low Veld as stage and images and animations as props and characters; the landscape and animal imagery become embodied with recurrent memories of emotional correspondences and sensations of disaster.

The animals in conflict represent and intermingle recollections of South African political and social turmoil with personal trauma, challenges and confrontations. Besides the buck imagery, the quivering road of memory also evokes images of giraffes and cheetahs that respectively represent existential Being in the world, fear and aggression. The depiction of the giraffe recalls Dali's burning giraffe¹³ that allegedly refers to the Spanish Civil War.



Elfriede Dreyer, *delta 32* (2005). Manipulated video still.

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13. *Burning giraffe (Jirafa ardiendo)* (1936-37). Oil on panel, 35 x 27 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel. Dali painted this work during his exile in the United States. Although he declared himself a-political, the work demonstrates his personal struggle with the battle in his home country.

As such, the landscape and animal imagery turn into Benjaminian “thought images”, that “fling to the surface traces from the unconscious, where we dream alone and when we participate in the dream of the collective” (Gross in Patt 2001:68, with reference to Freud and psychoanalysis). These thought images release and express innate experiences of anxiety, fear, threat, conflict and abject¹⁴.

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14. As conceived by psychoanalysts, the subconscious directs most of human behaviour, which entails that most things are controlled by forces of which we are completely unaware. In 1899 Freud postulated that the visual images we bring to mind when recollecting early childhood experience are not pictures of reality, but are emotional and subjective distortions or ‘screens’ (Schur 1972:117). According to Max Schur (1972:117), “We know that normally most memories pertaining to events preceding the fifth year are covered by what Freud called ‘infantile amnesia.’ Usually certain isolated memory traces stand out, like tiny islands. It is not easy to determine whether such memories are really recollections of actual events or are ‘memories’ of the family legend, kept alive and often embellished and distorted by parents or other older family members, and told to a child at a later age. Such spontaneous early memories are usually ‘screen memories,’ i.e. condensations of a series of memories which have been stored like a series of superimposed photographs.”



Wilma Cruise, *A little death* (2006). Etching 2/10.

Cruise’s informal writing on the wall becomes an informal diary of thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding both life and death, similar to her writing in several other works such as an earlier exhibition, *John’s Wife*. She comments on the verfact of being that is articulated in time, implying loss through imminent death and the unavoidable process of ageing. Her narrative of time is about reconfigured time and place in which linearity operates – the linear logical process of cause and effect

in being and time.

In both Cruise's and Dreyer's work their images refer to their own perceptive 'memories' as complex, multilayered, autobiographical and even historical recollections. On such a prelinguistic level, very much based in visual perception, or what Lacan calls 'specular imaging', the symbolic and the imaginary overlap and the bodily drives and emotions are discharged into signification. Inscribing itself on the ripples of the turbulent sheets of water or volumes of bronze, the silent echo of a primordial scream reveals the psychogeography of a mental universe in which emotions speak and vibrate through the imaginary sunset and landscape. Memory and recollection are about death in linear time.

In Cruise's *Progressions*, all of them monotypes, notions of mute communication through the body are taken further in images of alienation that exude fear and anxiety, but also fantasy and memory. *Progression 2, The red dog*, for instance, depicts her granny's Harrismith with its Platberg in the background,

a place that represents some of Wilma's happiest childhood memories. These *Progressions* effectively articulate that if there is no communication or it is cut off, the body is trapped within the confines of its own boundaries, its own skin.

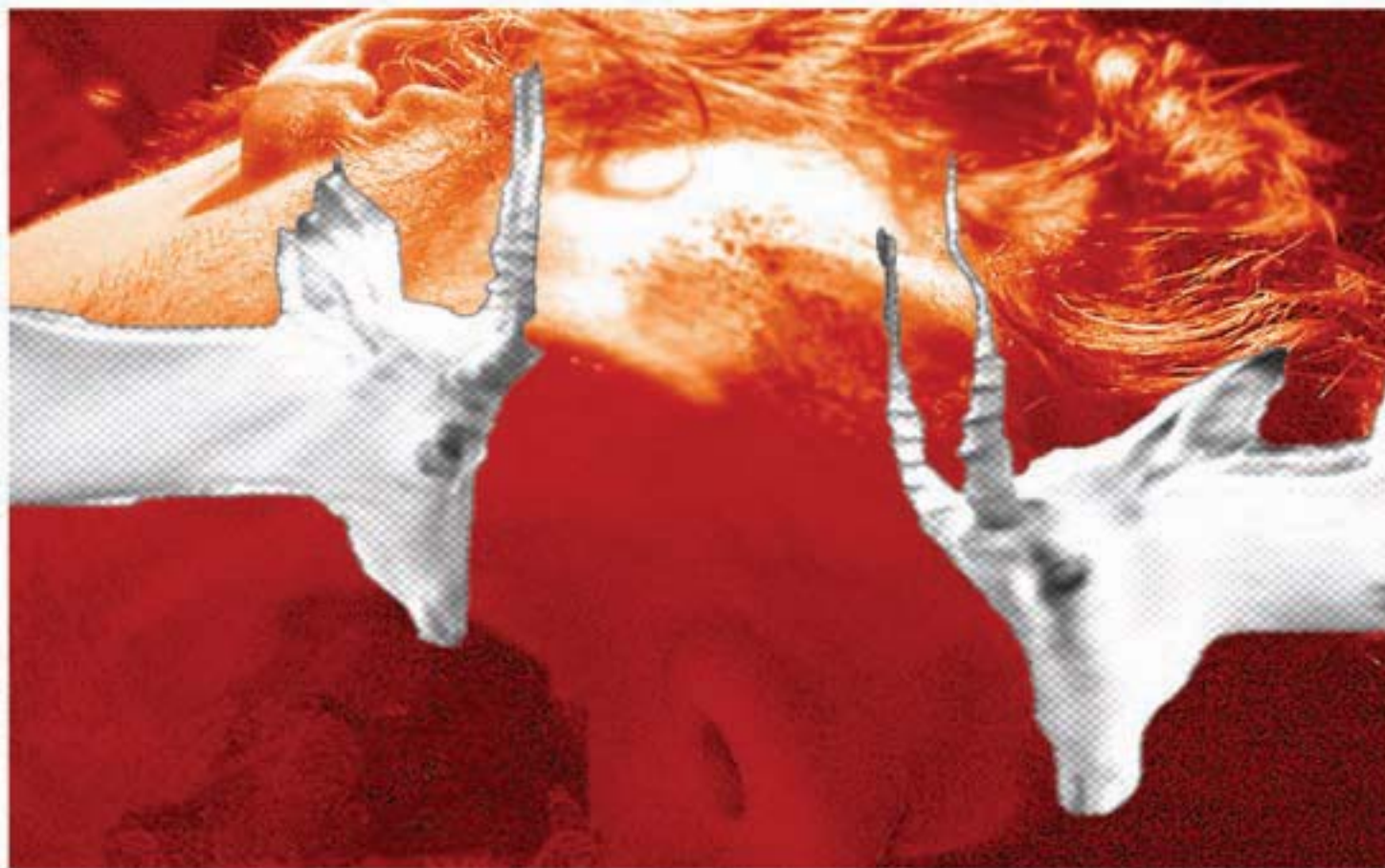
From an atheist point of view, the work celebrates the here and now of the body inside its own skin – the very being, beyond any teleological goal. It is the domain where, as Wilma writes: "... the demons of dream are let loose to fly swing and fuck ...".

Such loss of real time is entrenched in what Du Toit refers as:

Little deaths: *la petite mort* ... Refers to the momentary loss of selfhood (consciousness) and heart beat during an orgasm, this orgasm preempts its and the ultimate obliteration - death - Unabashedly kinky as it sits between that which it signifies and its more literal meanings. ...

Now, having being invited to participate in this exhibition under the umbrella title *Little deaths* and subsequently seeing the rabbits in a different light, another reading, they somehow become even more appropriate/d and relevant - like lemmings following each other - up, up and over the cliff and into the lake and ultimately death (This is a Disney fake).

Damn close to pornography and here is where I lose it.



Elfriede Dreyer, *delta scream* (2006). Video still.

Using the notion of *la petite mort* as metaphor, French theorist Jean Baudrillard's¹⁵ postulations on the death of the real are relevant. According to Baudrillard, the end of utopia is the end of the real (that is, the human real as we know it), a kind of vanishing act, and we are left with the dystopia of the nothing the 'no space' in which the distinctions between the real and the non-real have collapsed and vanished.

In South African born artist, Marlene Dumas's depictions of the sexual body in relation to violence and death, references to

15. In *The Perfect Crime* (1996), Baudrillard (1996:11) argues that "virtual reality is the product ... of a surgical operation on the real world". For Baudrillard, the most dreaded scenario would be to start believing in the real for want of anything else, since the real is merely the natural child of disillusionment and has been given to us as simulacrum. Therefore everything is illusion and neither the sensory real nor the non-real can be believed. "Faith in reality is", he proceeds, "of all the imaginary forms, the basest and most trivial" (Baudrillard 1996:11). According to Baudrillard, the world is only appearance and will always remain the ultimate mystery, the enigma. In fact, the world has disappeared and is radical illusion (Baudrillard 1996:16): the real actually consists in the discourse on the real. For Baudrillard such an 'end-of-utopia' viewpoint that concerns a questioning on the notion of reality itself is not to be realised in the sense of the *transformation of* dream into reality, but about an *intermingling of* the experienced human real, other forms of real such as fantasy and dream and artificial reals such as those created in virtual reality.

artists such as Theodore Gericault, Hans Holbein, Egon Schiele, Leon Golub and Romaine Brooks are found. These ghostly figures in oil and water colour become almost 'unreal', floating between reality and some other state.

Similarly, Dreyer's fictitious worlds intermingles the real and the virtual. The filmed real become the material for imaginative projection so that the *visual real* becomes amended by symbolic meaning. The boundaries between the sensory real and the imagined real become blurred and the real attains its full meaning in the sense of its being nothing but illusion. In *delta*, experiences and conceptual references such as ideological Da Vinci-like landscapes are piled as a multi-layering of fragments, becoming an illusionistic collage of events.

Disparate zones of time and space are woven into the videoed subject in order to transmute the real into virtual narrative, a process that echo Walter Benjamin's spatio-temporal strategy of "engaging with the world as history" (Law 2002:21) and his allegories of processes that extract meaning from the "petri



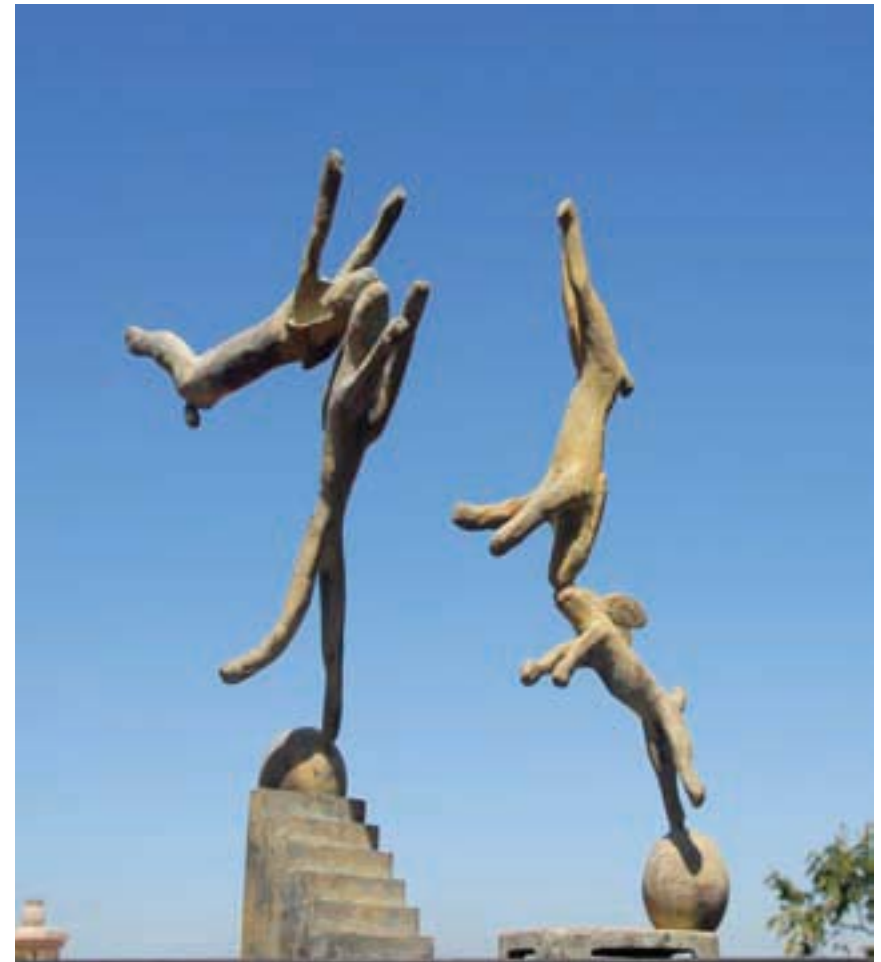
Dreyer, *delta 46* (2007). Manipulated video still.

fied” and the “insignificant” as a melancholic way of reading the world. In this sense experience can be viewed a “dead occurrence” of the past (Susan Sontag quoted in Law 2002:21).

In his essay of 1939, reproduced in *Illuminations*, Benjamin (1973:155) expresses the view that “Beauty in its relationship to nature can be defined as ... the object of experience in the state of resemblance”. It is an act that entails recognition of the mortality of human beings and the seeming timelessness and eternity of nature¹⁶. This notion of discontinuity within continuity has parallels in other existential dichotomies such as life/death, sadness/joy, pleasure/suffering and awake/asleep.

Still, the author-artist *creates* the text, gives birth to the artwork and remains comatose in it forever after. It is left to the spectators to continue to create ‘little’ interpretations around the work that die ‘little deaths’ when other interpretations take over.

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Guy du Toit, *Hares* (2007). Bronze.

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Elfriede Dreyer, *delta 5.58.13* (2007). Manipulated video still.



Wilma Cruise, *Sarcophogi 1* (2007).

Ceramic and limestone.

WILMA CRUISE

... uses the body as the vehicle for the exploration of meaning. The body provides the metaphorical link between unconscious realities and the conscious known world. Her sculptures are rendered in expressive life-size figures in bronze and ceramic which in recent years have included animals such as horses and sheep. In collaboration with David Krut Arts Resource she has produced a body of work on paper that incorporates the figure, animals and text.

Recent works include *The Dolly Suite*. This suite of works includes installations and a series of mono-prints made in collaboration with David Krut Arts Resource and the commission *Sheep May Safely Graze: the Return of the Bultfontein Sheep* for the Oliewenhuis Museum in Bloemfontein. Another public work *The Right to Life* was installed at the Constitutional Court in 2004.

Cruise has had eleven one-person shows and curated several others. She has won awards including Architect's Project Award in 2000 for the Women's Monument at the Union Buildings, the Quarterly Vita Award in 1993 for *Nicholas - October 1990* and the Lorenzo il Magnifico Award at the Biennale Internazionale Dell'arte Contemporanea, Florence.

Her work is represented in The South African National Gallery, the Corobrik Collection, the Pretoria Art Museum, The Durban Art Museum, the University of South Africa, MTN, the Billiton Collection, Standard Bank and the Constitutional Court.

GUY DU TOIT

Born 1958, Rustenburg, North West Province, South Africa. Graduated with a BA(FA) from the University of Pretoria in 1982. Du Toit has exhibited widely both locally and abroad (China, Germany, USA, Ireland and France, inter alia) and is well represented in local- private and public and corporate collections. He has been the recipient of various awards, including a FNB Vita nomination in 1989 and an overall winner in 1993. The Sol Plaatjies Sculpture Award in 1989, two Volkskas Atelier Merit Awards (now Absa Atelier) in 1990 and 1989, was a finalist in the Brett Kebble Art Awards of 2003 and 2004 and in 2006 he was nominated best overall contribution at the InniBos arts festival, Nelspruit.

Du Toit has taught/lectured at Pelmama Academy in Soweto, both Johannesburg and Pretoria Technikons, (now UJ and TUT respectively) and the then Johannesburg School of Art, Ballet, Drama and Music. He currently teaches part-time at the University of Pretoria and lives and works in Zwavelpoort, Kungwini, east of Pretoria.

Du Toit uses everyday utilitarian object and animals which he casts in bronze. He chooses to cast his own sculptures, thus involving himself in both the creative and the production processes, reconciling to some extent the art and craft divide.

ELFRIEDE DREYER

The topics of posthumanity, technoculture, Romanticism and utopia/dystopia are ongoing interests in Elfriede Dreyer's practical and theoretical research. Besides the curating of several exhibitions she exhibited her own mixed media paintings and video productions widely, both locally and internationally.

As an interdisciplinary arts specialist, she teaches and publishes in the fields of Fine Arts, Art History and Visual Communication and inter alia holds a DLitt et Phil in Art History, a MA(FA) in Painting from UNISA and an international diploma in Interactive Multimedia. She was the recipient of several merit bursaries and research grants from UNISA, the HSRC, the University of Pretoria and the CSD.

Elfriede is well known as an adjudicator for art competitions, external examiner for various universities and a public speaker, and she presented papers at several national and international conferences and chaired a few sessions.

She has been lecturing at the University of Pretoria since March 2003. Before that she taught at UNISA from 1990 to 2003, where she was Head of Department of the Department of Art History and Visual Arts of Unisa from 1999 to 2003. During this period, she developed a new degree, the BA (with specialisation in Multimedia Studies). She has set up international liaison in the field of Multimedia with international organisations and especially the DCDM Business School (UK affiliated) in Mauritius, where she also did several workshops.