REMAINS TO BE SAID … THE “UM” IN ART AND OTHER DISFLUENCIES

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Abstract

Taking as my starting point an artwork of “fillers” – a 2010 sound piece by Fine Art student Romie Sciscio foregrounding the disfluent speech of various visiting academics to the Department of Fine Art, Rhodes University – I propose that speech disfluencies such as “um”, “kind of” and “I suppose” should not simply be derided as white noise or verbal graffiti. Rather, filled pauses – understood both literally and metaphorically – may be seen to function critically, precisely because they are located neither inside nor outside the “message” of speech. They hover between presence and absence, seemingly content-less and yet dimly portentous: they do and do not matter to meaning. As such, they require (or provoke and demand) a different kind of listening – the acoustic equivalent of reading between the lines.

An artwork of filled pauses is the lens, then, through which I consider the possibilities of “liminal” speech (itself a lens through which I consider a particularly South African fascination with silence and verbalisation). Pivotal to post-apartheid “healing” has been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC): a ‘public rehearsal of memory’ (Nuttall 1998:75) intended to “give voice” to the experiences of those silenced by and within South Africa’s repressive past. Sanctioned by the TRC, verbalisation has been figured as public catharsis. As many have argued, however, there can be no straightforward “telling it like it is”, especially when trauma inhibits speech. Instead, the false fluency that usurps and tidies the work of memory may be perniciously counterproductive, turning tentative stories into totalising narratives.

In response, I investigate a “manner of speaking” between the extremes of muteness and glibness: one which voices the fraught terrain of memory self-reflexively. Such liminal speech has the potential to approximate truth not by ‘excavating silence’ (Brink 1998:33), but by tripping itself up with filled pauses and declaring its own disfluency in the process.

Introduction (um, kind of, I suppose)

I begin with an artwork as lens: a series of sound-portraits produced by Rhodes University Fine Art student Romie Sciscio in 2010. Sciscio made clandestine audio recordings of some visiting academics’ lectures, after which she isolated and spliced together the orators’ overused speech fillers, and erased everything else. So Matthew Partridge’s “portrait” is a curious mantra of “ums”; ditto Michael MacGarry’s “kind of” and Sean O’Toole’s “I suppose”.[1]

Um, kind of, I suppose … as speech disfluencies go, filled pauses or "fillers" are all the more irksome for being so pedestrian – they abound in every language and infiltrate the speech of even the most erudite. Their pervasiveness leads many to regard them as little more than white noise or verbal graffiti, a sloppy speech habit rather than a genuine affliction (like stuttering, for instance). But are filled pauses empty signifiers? And what is to be said when one finds oneself at a loss for words?

In response to these questions, this discussion addresses the difficulty of speaking under various conditions, and finds within it a small space for the humble "um". In doing so, I challenge common-place assumptions that speech disfluencies are meaningless interruptions in spoken discourse. As Deborah Cameron (2001:33, 114) argues, the disfluencies encountered in 'real talk' (as opposed to fictional dialogue) are 'often decried as marks of "inarticulacy" and "sloppiness"' because of a problematic bias in favour of written language 'as a model and ideal for all language'. Cameron (2001:33, 114, emphasis in the original) elaborates:

> false starts, hesitations, repeated words or phrases, and "fillers" like *well, y'know, like, sort of*' seldom appear in written communication, leading to the conjecture that 'they are not necessary for any kind of communication; rather they must be a regrettable consequence of people's inability to use spoken language with the same clarity, economy and precision they are able to achieve in writing.

Against this view, Cameron (2001:114) suggests that 'if something is "there" in people's talk, then it must be there for some purpose'. These purposes are varied and complex: for Cameron (2001:115), fillers are often used in 'managing information (e.g., signalling that a proposition is "given" or "new" information, that it is important, surprising, etc.)', or in 'managing interpersonal relationships (e.g., mitigating threats to face)'. For Herbert Clark and Jean Fox Tree (2002:73), "uh" and "um" serve as announcements, indicating that speakers 'are searching for a word, are deciding what to say next, want to keep the floor, or want to cede the floor'.

Martin Corley and Oliver Stewart (2008:590) propose that fillers are often markers of 'cognitive load', given that they are 'most likely to occur at the beginning of an utterance or phrase, presumably as a consequence of the greater demand placed on planning processes at these junctures … before longer utterances … and when the topic is unfamiliar'. In this regard, fillers – whilst interrupting the fluent delivery of an utterance – may ironically benefit listeners; as suggested by Scott Fraundorf and Duane Watson (2011:162), 'fillers and other disfluencies may benefit comprehension' because 'listeners can use them to predict what they will hear next'.

Taking the potential significance of fillers as a starting point, in my discussion I seek to advance the argument that disfluencies may function critically as productive interruptions in the steady flow of speech. They suggest a manner of speaking that admits to the fault lines in language, rather than aspiring to the false semblance of seamlessly spoken truth. Arguably, this has consequences not just in redressing the written-word bias identified by Cameron (2001:33), but also in unpacking the relationship between articulation and silence *per se*, at a metatheoretical level.

In effect, I thus invoke the trope of filled pauses to reflect on something else: the possibilities afforded by what may best be described as "liminal" speech. In keeping with common understandings of the liminal as denoting an in-between, transitional space,[2] I identify

liminal speech as critically poised at the threshold between presence and absence, between articulation and silence. In betraying the conditions of its own construction, liminal speech is fraught and disfluent – it is speech that trips itself up in the process of making itself heard. With this in mind, I use the term "filled pause" both literally (to denote a particular feature of spoken language) and metaphorically (to suggest other "spaces" which are seemingly "empty" of words but "full" of meaning). In turn, the concept of "filled pauses", theorised metaphorically, shares affinities with the 'active' or 'audible' silence that Mieke Bal (2010:28) identifies in relation to Doris Salcedo's art: '[j]ust as emptiness can be filled, silence can be active', claims Bal.[3]

In mapping out a space for liminal speech (as empty/full; silent/active), I take as a case-study the equally liminal state of extreme trauma, particularly as such trauma was "given voice" during the proceedings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which began in December 1995 and delivered its final report in 1998. The TRC's idealistic faith in catharsis – in the ability of speaking to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation – was central to its formation, as were its concomitant emphases on testimony (in the case of witnesses and victims) and "full disclosure" (in the case of perpetrators seeking amnesty). Against this backdrop, I consider how trauma necessarily inhibits speech, and how speaking of trauma can inhibit the very pursuit of "truth" when smooth talking turns events into commodities.

I conclude via a reference to Maurice Blanchot's (1993:308) notion of 'fragmentary speech', so as to argue that certain forms of liminal speech – both in visual art and literature – seem able to convey the *gravitas* of trauma without succumbing to the limitations and pitfalls of commodified representation. This is partly because they endeavour to carry the unspeakable within them, into and through the ebb and flow of speech.

In making a case for the potential criticality of filled pauses – as a cipher for liminal and disfluent speech – in my discussion I proceed through a number of tentative claims. In turn, all of these claims may be seen to reflect on the excessively precarious, and precariously excessive, nature of language itself.

The endless possibilities of language

The first of my claims is that filled pauses, like "um", "kind of" and "I suppose", attest to the endless possibilities of language. General consensus is that they indicate some form of "time out" while a speaker searches through language for the next word or phrase and mentally tests various options. Taking this as their starting point, a team of researchers from Columbia University (Stanley Schachter, Nicholas Christenfeld, Bernard Ravina and Frances Bilous) extrapolated an intrinsic link between filled pause usage and the relative open-endedness of language: the more options in terms of suitable words and phrases, they hypothesised, the more likely that a speaker would say "uh" (Schachter, Christenfeld, Ravina & Bilous 1991:362). They tested this by counting the "uhs" and "ahs" in a wide cross-section of lectures at Columbia, and determined that lecturers in the Humanities used four times as many filled pauses than those in the Natural Sciences.

The Columbia group ruled out the fluency of individual speakers as a factor – given that all of the lecturers tested used the same amount of filled pauses when speaking on common material in one-to-one interviews.

They thus concluded that the prevalence of filled pauses is topic-specific rather than speaker-specific, and directly proportional to the number of options available to a speaker mid-sentence. Therefore, those in the pure sciences are likely to say "uh" less often than Art Historians because a statement such as $E = mc^2$ involves no options: it is what it is. Humanities subjects, on the other hand, tend towards statements that are far more open-ended and indeterminate, and this makes them fertile terrain for filled pauses as speakers negotiate endless possibilities (Schachter *et al* 1991:362).

The Columbia study's innovation is that it places the impetus to "uh" and "ah" outside of the province of individual speakers: it asserts that filled pause usage is less a reflection of the capabilities of speakers than of the variegated field of the spoken-about. Indirectly, the Columbia group's findings thus prove useful in highlighting the open-endedness of *all* language. Given that every lecture in the sample contained at least some filled pauses – even Biology lecturers registered 1.13 "uhs" per minute (Schachter *et al* 1991: 364) – it seems reasonable to infer that, even at its most factual, scientific and seemingly objective, *all* language is marked by an overflow of possibilities. Thus speakers find themselves at a loss for words, they "um" and "ah", because there are too many words to choose from, rather than too few.

The *im*possibilities of language

Seen this way, filled pauses are ciphers for indeterminacy: they declare that, from this point forth, it is possible to say any number of things. My second claim, which follows on from this, is that filled pauses also attest to the *im*possibilities of language – they mark the points where language seizes up and reveals its inadequacy as a stand-in for experience. On the one hand, filled pauses may be seen to proliferate 'in circumstances where the speaker is faced with multiple semantic or syntactic possibilities' (Corley, MacGregor, & Donaldson 2007:659), as argued by the Columbia group. On the other hand, they also tend to flourish when these possibilities are limited, when the "right word" remains elusive and the filler – as 'audible evidence' that a speaker is engaged in 'speech productive labour' (Clark & Fox Tree 2002:76) – signals the speaker's struggle to find a reasonably adequate fit.

Arguably, excess and inadequacy are two sides of the same coin, if only because the possibility of saying an indefinite number of things also means the *im*possibility of saying anything definite. Where words proliferate unhindered (and linguistic options are in abundance), a speaker can never summon a "final word" to arrest the flood of signification; thus language falters precisely because of its endless possibilities. 'Speaking frightens me', says Jacques Derrida (1978:9), 'because by never saying enough, I also say too much'.

Being always both excessive and deficient (indeed, being deficient because of its excess, and excessive because of its deficiency), language repeatedly underscores the lack of fit between signifier and signified. It serves as a reminder that words are no substitute for things. To overcome this fatal inadequacy, speakers end up generating more words, themselves poor substitutes, and so on indefinitely. Moreover, instead of making the presence of things accessible, words interfere as a mediating layer which ironically pushes them further out of reach. Blanchot (cited by Hanson 1993:xxvii) describes this as 'the eternal torment of our language when its longing turns back to what it always misses'. He asks: 'how can I, in my speech, capture this

prior presence that I must exclude in order to speak, in order to speak it?' (Blanchot cited by Hanson 1993:xxvii).

This 'eternal torment' points to the dilemma that plagues all language, in that language both conjures and overwrites the presences of things by forever displacing them with their (written or spoken) signs. Instead of leading back to the origin, to the 'prior presence' that language endeavours to 'capture', the signs invoked function as "stand-ins" that efface the origins to which they ostensibly point. At best, language can only reconstitute the "origin" as a spectral after-effect – itself a sign, and subject to all the vicissitudes and uncertainties of signs. As such, it becomes impossible to conceive of an independent world outside of language, a world of origins and prior presences to which language simply refers.[4]

Given this 'eternal torment', where language usurps, absents and displaces presence in every attempt to capture it, silence leaks into language – not as a negation of speech, its binary "other", but as its shadowy double. According to Derrida (1978:54), 'silence plays the irreducible role of that which bears and haunts language, outside and against which alone language can emerge'. In effect, then, language is melancholically marked by the very loss of the things that it names. Silence pervades the speech that kicks against it and every spoken word rings hollow because it is haunted by an absence that it cannot fully overcome.

By extension, the silences, absences, delays and hesitations that mark spoken discourse may be seen to evince a lack of equivalence between language and complex experience. They attest to the 'semantic voids' that Menachem Dagut (1981:63) identifies – these being instances where (finite) language is unequal to the task of representing (infinite) experience. For Dagut (1981:63), experience is 'virtually infinite in its multifarious variety and detail'; whereas language is subject to 'drastic selection', without which it 'would of necessity expand beyond the storage and recall capacity of the ordinary human mind'. He continues: 'if the vocabulary of a language is figuratively thought of as a kind of shared "map"… then it is only to be expected that every lexical "map" will be full of blank spaces' (Dagut 1981:63).

According to Dagut (1981:63), these 'blank spaces' in the 'lexical "map"' – or 'holes' in the 'semantic blanket' (Bolinger cited by Dagut 1981:63) – are unavoidable, given the necessarily limited nature of language. They signal language's inadequacy as a comprehensive marker of experience. At the same time, it may be argued, following Blanchot (1981:129), that 'the inadequacy of language … runs the risk of never being sufficiently inadequate', otherwise 'we would all have been satisfied with silence long ago'. The predicament, it would seem, is that neither speech nor silence fully satisfies, and speakers can no more say what they mean (with the "right" words) than quell the incessant babbling of signifiers (with a "final" word).

Given the above, the "ums" and "ahs" that pepper spoken discourse may be seen as bearing witness to the Janus-faced inadequacy of both speech and silence: they crystallise what Blanchot (1981:129) terms 'the prolixity of an indefinitely and indifferently signifying absence'. Um, kind of, I suppose … are these not the ghosts of silence in failed speech or the ghosts of speech in failed silence? They hover at the cusp between absence and presence; not-quite silence, not-quite speech; suspended in language like cold spots in a haunted room or ectoplasm in the air.

Speaking the unspeakable (trauma and truth)

If filled pauses attest to the reciprocal haunting of speech by silence and silence by speech, then they may also be apprehended as markers of the unspeakable *per se* – of that which cannot be put into words. This, then, is my third claim: that filled pauses may be seen to 'hold' the unspeakable within the flow of speech, particularly as this relates to 'the inherent unspeakability of trauma' (Gibbons 2007:59).

In its extremity, trauma is 'classically defined as [being] beyond the scope of language and representation' (Bennett 2005:3), and resistant to the usual processes of memory formation.[5] '[I]n the normal course of events', suggests Jill Bennett (2005:23), 'experiences are processed through cognitive schemes that enable familiar experiences to be identified, interpreted and assimilated to narrative'. Memory is thus formed 'as experience transforms itself into representation' (Bennet 2005:23). Extreme trauma, however, resists such processing: '[i]ts unfamiliar or extraordinary nature renders it unintelligible, causing cognitive systems to balk; its sensory or affective character renders it inimical to thought – and ultimately to memory itself' (Bennet 2005:23).

Seen from this perspective, silence seems inevitable in the face of incomprehensible (literally, unspeakable) trauma. However, where language is regarded as 'the medium of reconciliation and mediation, of peaceful coexistence' (Žižek 2008:51),[6] silence is often posited as itself traumatic and trauma-inducing – a nefarious vehicle of oppression that robs individuals of self-expression and agency. Many commentators on post-apartheid reconciliation and nation-building seem to adopt this view and implicitly or explicitly equate silence with oppression. By extension, democracy is seen to entail a liberation of, through and into speech: a therapeutic/cathartic transition 'from repression to expression', to use Njabulo Ndebele's (1998:20) term.

The conception of healing-through-speaking was central to the formation of South Africa's TRC. Mandated by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (1995) to expose and adjudicate the gross violation of human rights during apartheid, the TRC sought to foster healing by positioning itself as a 'nation-building confessional' designed to 'give voice to those previously silenced' (Posel 2004:7, 11). It 'constructed a collectivist view of the nation as a sick body' (Wilson cited by Field 2006:33), and posited 'the catharsis of victim testimonies' as a means to healing, in which 'the public were to vicariously share' (Field 2006:32). This medical metaphor was reiterated and popularised by the Head of the TRC, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (cited by Field 2006:32), who identified South Africans as a 'traumatized and wounded people' and articulated his fervent hope that those 'injured in either body or spirit' would 'receive healing through the work of this commission'.

The TRC thus began with idealistic aspirations, fuelled by public statements that totalised links between 'truth, healing and reconciliation' (Field 2006:33). It seemed confident in the assumption that catharsis, testimony and "full disclosure" (as stipulated in the National Unity and Reconciliation Act) could expose the truth and expunge the trauma of South Africa's 'dark past' (Tutu cited by Field 2006:32, 33). The question to be asked, however, is whether the TRC's unbridled faith in truthful disclosure as national remedy could ever be sustained, given the overwhelming trauma that marked (and marred) the collective and individual memories of its various participants.[7]

The process itself proffered no easy answers, and – whilst it is important to acknowledge that the TRC

workings gave solace to many traumatised victims – the TRC's faith in catharsis has also been extensively questioned and critiqued. Oral historian Sean Field (2006:34) argues that 'the TRC's leadership tended to collapse distinctions between nation-building and the traumatic memories of individuals and promised "curative" and "spiritual" forms of "healing" which took on a myth-making dimension'. As he says, '[i]n effect, the TRC attempted to suture the nation's "wounds" with public myths and this evoked unrealistic popular expectations' (Field 2006:34).

The TRC's investment in national catharsis seems particularly evident in its Final Report (presented to the State President in October 1998). Although Tutu's Foreword suggests a tempering of some of his initial idealism,[8] the TRC's 'deeply moral' (Posel 2002:149) mandate continues to provide a narrative frame for the content of the report. As suggested by Deborah Posel (2002:148), '[t]he report contains a version of the past that has been actively crafted according to particular strategies of inclusion and exclusion … [it] reads less as a history, more as a moral narrative about the fact of wrongdoing across the political spectrum'. In effect, the TRC report "reframes" the material of the commission's proceedings so as to tally the TRC's central aim 'of uncovering the dark truths of apartheid' (Schalkwyk 2004:4) with its major objective of 'healing and transforming' society.[9]

To this end, suggests Field (2006:33), 'victim testimonies were assigned a marginalised conceptual status in the Final Report'. They also appear to have been solicited with particular objectives in mind, at least in the latter stages of the TRC's hearings. Field (2006:33) cites the TRC's chief database processor as follows: '[w]e let people tell their story [at the outset of the Commission]. By 1997 it was a short questionnaire to direct the interview instead of letting people talk for themselves … The questionnaire distorted the whole story'. For Richard Wilson (cited by Field 1006:33), this approach 'stripped out' the subjectivities of victims in the interests of a questionable positivism.

Moreover, the TRC's processes for obtaining and handling testimony failed to recognise that, in Field's (2006:33) words, '[t]alking about feelings or traumatic memories is not always the best strategy'. According to Field, 'listeners need to respect the speaker's right to silence and understand the reason for and "content" of these silences'. In the case of the TRC testimonies, a primary reason for speakers' silences may have been the very incomprehensibility of trauma alluded to above.[10] As Field (2006:38) suggests, 'when interviewees have experienced severe pain, they reach the limits of their vocabulary to describe these memories. At these moments silences often occur'. In other words, victims of trauma often find themselves coming up against 'semantic voids' or blank spaces in the lexical "map" (Dagut 1981:63); they are unable to summon words appropriate to their experiences.

Arguably, these gaps in articulation are meaningful precisely *because* of their portentous emptiness. Listeners should be sensitive to their 'content', as Field (2006:33) suggests, because giving voice to trauma is necessarily difficult, fraught and disfluent. At times this disfluency manifests itself in silence, but it may also include elements of repetition – for instance, interviewees may repeat 'identical stories' in response to 'different questions' as they replay these scenarios over and over again (Field 2006:38) – as well as elements of fantasy or 'forms of magical realism' as interviewees attempt to convey 'the painfully indescribable' (Field 2006:38).

Such gaps and slippages complicate the myth of catharsis as a transparent, positivistic telling of "truth". They suggest that there are elements of traumatic experience that simply cannot be spoken about, or that can

only be intimated obliquely – much like the 'collateral messages' that, according to Clark and Fox Tree (2002: 78), are carried by filled pauses. In the case of TRC testimony, these fillers and disfluencies – understood here metaphorically rather than literally – are difficult to identify in the written transcripts of the hearings (most of which are available at the TRC website (Truth and Reconciliation Commission. [s.a]). This is partly because of the conventions that privilege written language over spoken discourse: as Cameron (2001:33) argues, all but the most 'full and faithful' instances of transcription tend to 'mentally edit' disfluencies. Moreover, the use of 'standard writing conventions like commas and full stops' (Cameron 2001:35) does not necessarily correspond to the intonation of talk; thus transcription often fails to register the pauses and hesitations that mark disfluent speech.

Nevertheless, a comparison between the TRC transcripts and the TRC Final Report is revealing. Without the narrativising "frame" of the report to tidy, process and manage the "raw data" of testimony, the transcripts are often unwieldy and confusing. Ironically, whilst the transcription process may have "edited out" a fair number of the speakers' hesitations and disfluencies, the transcripts themselves are marred by numerous absences and uncertainties (often due to problems with the recording equipment), prompting Hanneke Stuit (2010:99n11) to lament that, '[u]nfortunately the flaws and omissions in the actual transcripts make them difficult to follow and raise questions of reliability'.

The omissions that Stuit refers to are generally marked with the words 'inaudible' or 'indistinct', as in the following example from the hearing of William Henry Little (case no: CT/00802) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [s.a]):

> MR LITTLE
> The [indistinct] after being discharged from the Public Service in 1993, [indistinct] voluntary people known as the [indistinct] Christians [indistinct] Committee which was born out of the [indistinct] churches in Lansdowne. The aim of this committee was to address the serious [indistinct] vacancy problem and the committee is now known as the [indistinct] Shelter.

In the transcript from this particular hearing (held in Cape Town, 22 April 1996) there are no less than 23 gaps designated with 'indistinct', as well as a section of missing text where the tape ostensibly ended. This section reads: 'I was diagnosed as suffering from anxiety, and when it became too **much end of Tape 1, side B** … of June 1982, I was again put off from the 26[t]h of June … '. Given these, and numerous other lapses in the transcripts, it is not surprising that one finds the following disclaimer under the heading "Amnesty Hearings" on the TRC website (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [s.a]):

> NB: Witnesses at TRC hearings were able to give testimony in their home language. Translators and transcribers worked in most of South Africa's 11 official languages plus Polish. As a result, spelling errors (particularly of names) occur. There may also be incorrect transcription or translation in places. There are also many instances where a response was inaudible and   gaps appear in the transcription.

So even here – under the bold and confident heading of "truth" – silence and uncertainty creep in. In what can only have been a peculiar Freudian slip-of-the-finger, the typist of the above paragraph must have hit the space bar twice before the word "gaps", thus creating a literal gap in the phrase 'and   gaps appear'.[11]

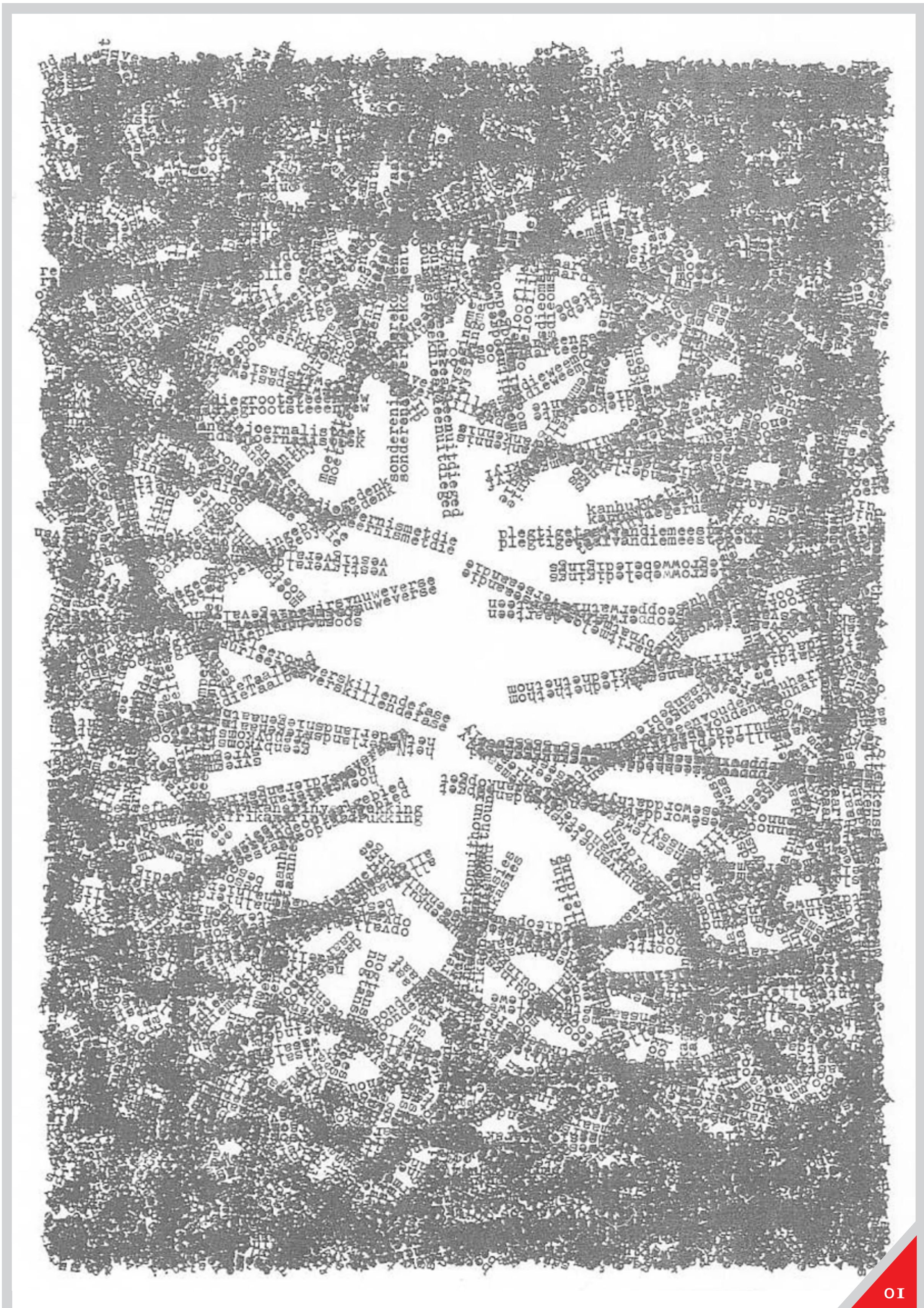

Figure 1: Willem Boshoff, *Duistere Bedoelings*, p. 22 from *KykAfrikaans*, 1976-1980, 90 pages of original poems typed on a Hermes 2000 manual typewriter, 30 x 21 cm each. Collection: Sackner Archives of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Miami, Florida, USA. Image courtesy of the artist.

And gaps appear …

My fourth and final claim comes indirectly from Sarah Nuttall (1998:85), in the form of her suggestion that, 'to heal, and to remember, is also to find the freedom to ask more questions, to let the unspeakable, both then and now, filter in, to disturb, to open out consciousness'. If filled pauses are the present/absent "haunted" spaces that allow the unspeakable to filter in, can they not also work as productive disturbances of the kind identified by Nuttall?

Taking autobiography since 1994 as her focus, Nuttall (1998:83, 84) cautions against a tendency to frame memory and experience in terms of 'a narrative "wholeness"', characterised by a 'premature smoothing over of real contradictions' and a 'problematically holistic and harmonistic' 'kind of closure'. Ironically, such suffocating cohesiveness, though parading in the guise of healing, may amount to another (more pernicious) form of silencing – one which blanks out the disjunctions, conflicts, absences and uncertainties that mark the itinerant and on-going 'narrative of self' (Nuttall 1998:85).

Although writing in relation to the Holocaust rather than apartheid, Ernst van Alphen (1997:95) articulates similar reservations about 'narrative retellings' that gravitate towards closure, where 'everything comes to an end, an end that somehow satisfies'. For van Alphen (1997:37), a responsibility 'poignantly imposed on us' involves 'working through … the traumatic intrusion of an unimaginable reality' and 'foregrounding … the cracks and tears that are concealed by the coherence of the stories being told'. He continues: '[i]t is in relation to those responsibilities that the imaginative discourses of art and literature can step in' (van Alphen 1997:37).

For van Alphen (1997:36, 37), unspeakable trauma (connected to events like the Holocaust) 'cannot be represented or made familiar, in the form of a complete narrative'; rather, it can only be known negatively – through a language 'which leaves the unsayable unsaid'. This language, whether in the realm of visual art or literature, may be something akin to the 'fragmentary speech' that Blanchot (1993:308) describes in *The infinite conversation*: a 'new kind of arrangement not entailing harmony, concordance or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction and divergence … an arrangement that does not compose but juxtaposes'.

Van Alphen (1997:35) refers to the 'antinarrative' work of the postmodern Dutch artist and writer Armando[12] as exemplary of this 'new mode' of articulation. Armando represents history 'without narrative plot' and without the narrative devices of 'coherence, a sense of development and continuity' (van Alphen 1997:35). In other words, he represents trauma *traumatically* – as something incoherent and inimical to memory, something that can only be "spoken" disfluently. In particular, van Alphen (1997:137) describes Armando's practice of isolating single words as an enactment (rather than a representation) of trauma: '[p]recisely because these words lack the context of a sentence or a narrative, because they are surrounded by silence, they enigmatically refer to a situation of violence'.

Arguably, a similar enactment of violence may be identified in many of the text-based works of South African artist Willem Boshoff. Boshoff's concrete poetry in the artists' book *KykAfrikaans* (1976-1980) (Figures 1, 2 & 3), frustrates possibilities of narrative reading, through his use of typewritten words as forms (or text as texture). Unconventional spacing, breaks in words, overlaps and layering serve to unhinge the link between signifier and signified. Similarly, in *The Writing That* Fell Off The Wall (1997) (Figures 4 & 5), Boshoff seems literally to dislocate words from the coherence of linear

SIMFONIEKONSERT

(klank) / (bakker)

eggo / volwasse
weerklank / versmoor   hoor / jubel   stemvurk / rooi
klingel / gans   simbaal /raat
frekwensie/ smet   verdof / reis   oktaaf / karwats
klank (golwe) / volprese   sagter - harder / tou
musiek / klagte   klankgrens / karton   napraat / nuut   juig / waar
resoneer / regtelik   note / bedryf
(loos)   klankdig / nydig   neul / grusaam
spraak (saam) / nuuskierig   sjt ! / drink
byklank / lam   gorrel / as
geraas / vulkaan   maat / kloof   trom / vrug
foggel / lig   sopraan / gewas   hoes / seën
toehoorder / ekstra   alt / plantasie   trompet / noord   luier / fyn
tempo / ys   konsertsaal / omarm   ontplof / gaar   alarm / ster
polsslag / tol   teater / regs
ritme / pen   meterband / terrein   versterker / intiem   lag / suip
roffel / knies   weerklink / waai
klinkers / raseg   talent / hout   babbel / sout
roffel / geld   solo / net   sirene / moord   fonies / horing   skinder / trop
slag / wol   duet / koei   lawaai / honde   knal / kommer
harmonie / wip   loei / biljet   rumoer / perk
(snater) / (bieg)   gedruis / pruim
melodie / toga   ontplof / oog   raas / vergeef   drup / streep
koer / skeer
musiek / slet sy stem breek / joos   gil / tower
fluit / wors   plons / goël
hard - sag / oond   vlamvat / sestig sis / menig
koor / woel refrein / frats   klots / stut
welluidend / maai   fluister / dosis   skreeu / nommer
vibreer / klier   klappertand / swak   G-sleutel / kaap   kners / hol
lisp / gas
crescendo / spog   akkoord / wolf   lawaai / tor
lui / streng
toonwaarde / klim   roep / krom   uitbasuin / wyk   rinkel / trem
brom / stert
blêr / historikus   mishoring / anys   klok / spog
grom / koevert
mikrofoon / room   helder / spring   druis / vel
babbel / biesie   huil / jeuk   onmiddelik / sweef   trilling / oop
klap (per) / bier
knetter / oes   wielklopper / wraak
sangerig / nerf   afluister / hoek   geskal / veer
stilte / speld
komponis / oorbluf   kraak / eland
luistervink / derm   klets / son
wysie / loods   fitsel / glas   klawers / lomp
snuif / lees   kekkel /woon
duidelik / koekeloer   doof / uitkoggel
voetstappe / jok   geluid / verskaf
toonset / dos   sing / hisop   kerm / wurg
speeldoos / duiwel   jou-wragtig-jou-wragtig / raam doof / os   rapsodie / woeker

32

02

Figure 2: Willem Boshoff, *Simfoniekonsert*, p. 32 from *KykAfrikaans*, 1976-1980, 90 pages of original poems typed on a Hermes 2000 manual typewriter, 30 x 21 cm each. Collection: Sackner Archives of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Miami, Florida, USA. Image courtesy of the artist.

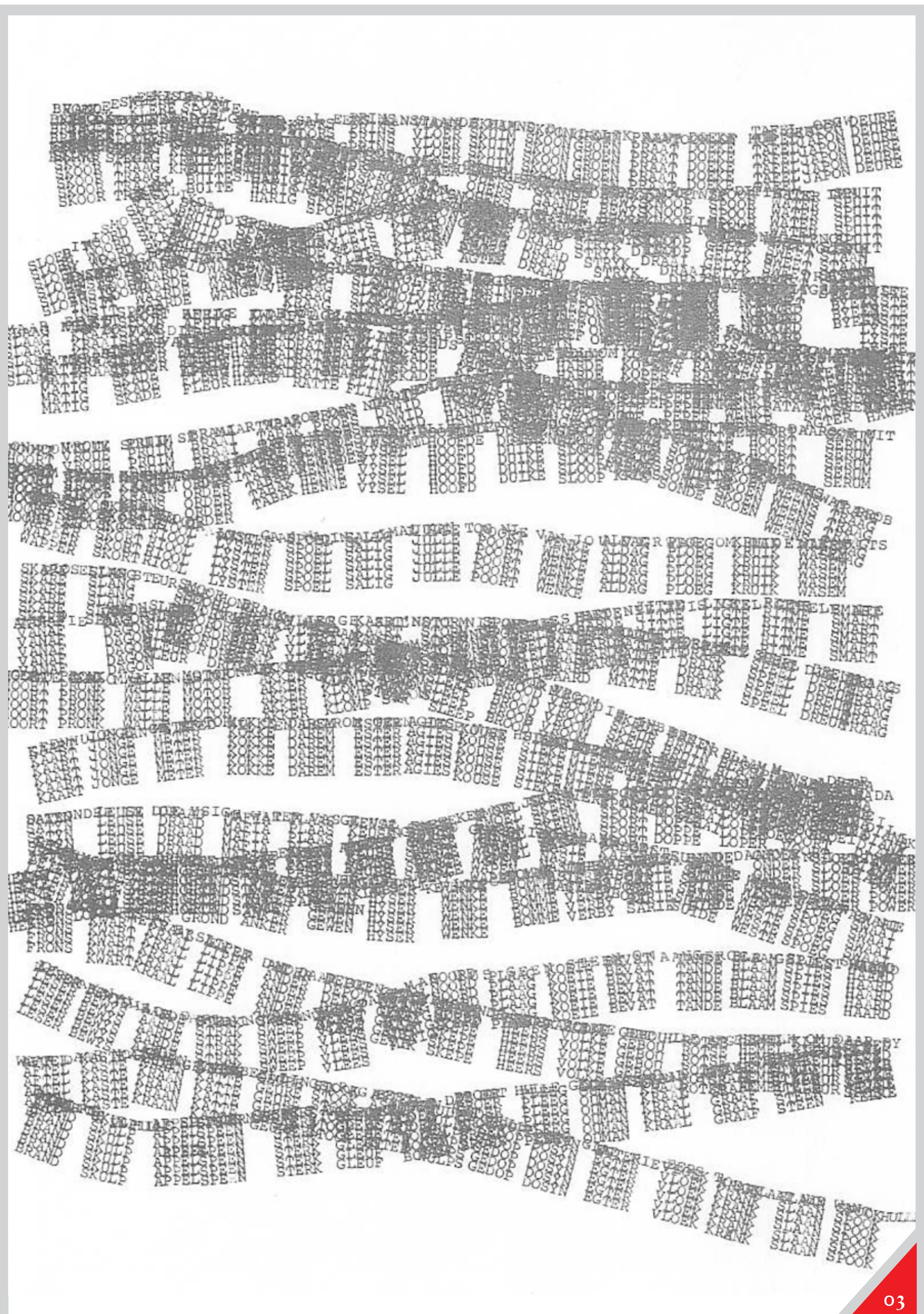

Figure 3: Willem Boshoff, *Vlaggies*, p. 72 from *KykAfrikaans*, 1976-1980, 90 pages of original poems typed on a Hermes 2000 manual typewriter, 30 x 21 cm each. Collection: Sackner Archives of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Miami, Florida, USA Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4: **Willem Boshoff, *The Writing That Fell Off The Wall* (detail), 1997, type on paper, wood, masonite, paint, 800 x 2400 cm (variable). Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist.**

narrative. Produced for the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale (held at the height of the TRC hearings), the work comprises fourteen free-standing "walls" with "labels" of single words lying strewn at their feet. Representing 'various bankrupt ideologies in seven different languages' (Boshoff 2007:80), these isolated words – amongst them, "truth" – posit language itself as a broken promise.

For Blanchot (1992:49), to speak in a broken and disfluent manner – in 'pieces that do not compose themselves, are not part of any whole' – is not to capitulate to chaos and meaninglessness. Rather, '[j]uxtaposition and interruption here assume an extraordinary force of justice' (Blanchot 1993:308). This is because fragmentary speech recognises and upholds *difference* rather than collapsing everything into a (false) unity that one can assimilate, master and possess. In Blanchot's (1993:308) words, it 'leaves each of the terms that come into relation outside one another, respecting and preserving this exteriority and this distance as the principle – always already undercut – of all signification'.

To this extent, fragmentary speech highlights the spaces between terms, between thoughts and their articulation, between speakers and listeners (as something that both enables and imperils signification). By extension, it posits a scenario where the other is addressed and invoked by my speech, yet recognised as being both different and distant – 'always outside and beyond me, exceeding me', 'not reduced to what I say of him'

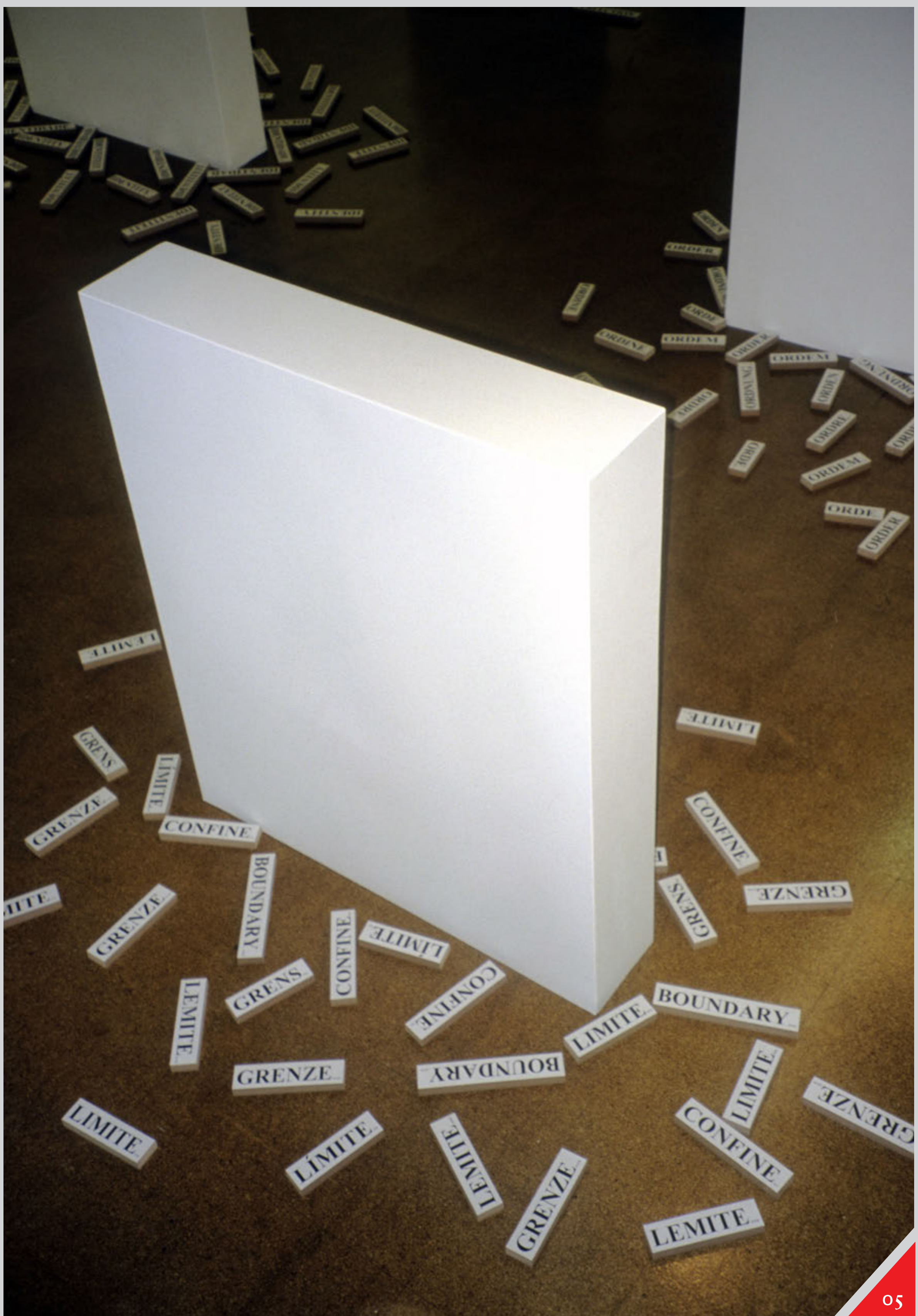

Figure 5: Willem Boshoff, ***The Writing That Fell Off The Wall*** **(detail), 1997, type on paper, wood, masonite, paint, 800 x 2400 cm (variable). Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist.**

(Blanchot 1993:55). The other is 'the one I can neither reach [through language] nor place at my disposal' (Blanchot 1993:56, 308), but who is nonetheless summoned by 'an affirmation irreducible to unity'. Following Blanchot, then, it may be argued that fragmentary/disfluent speech has the potential to 'open out consciousness' (Nuttall 1998:85) because it *performs* the operations of language-as-construction. In doing so, it acknowledges the insurmountable gaps between signifier and signified, signs and presences, self and other; and it apprehends them not as one-dimensional instances of lack, but as spaces of 'evanescent possibility' (Blanchot 1993:308).

At the same time, the performative nature of disfluent speech is arguably more equal to the task of voicing trauma than the illusory coherence of narrative is – primarily because, as Bal (2010:213) puts it, '[t]he involuntary re-enactments of traumatic experience that make trauma so hard to live with take the form of drama, not narrative'. To dramatise trauma is to speak in an 'a-narrative mode' (Bal 2010:213), dislocated from the (chrono)-logic of temporal unfolding, and perpetually re-enacting what cannot be put to rest.

Comparable to Bal's differentiation between narrative and drama is Veena Das's (2007:216, emphasis in the original) allusion to 'the contrast between saying and showing' where 'to "show"' is not to offer 'a standardized narrative of loss and suffering' but to engage in 'a project that can be understood only … through the image of reinhabiting the space of devastation *again*' (and again, and again). The critical edge of the performative, in this case, is its ability 'to enact [in the present] rather than report [what is past]' (Michaels 2004:142).

Similarly, for Shoshana Felman (1992:3), testimony 'loses its function as testimony' when it is 'simply relayed, repeated or reported'. Narrativised in this way, testimony can only situate the horror of trauma in a sealed-off past, where its power to affect the reader/listener is diminished. The problem with confessions, says Felman (cited by Michaels 2004:144, emphasis in the original), 'is that they are all too *readable*: partaking of the continuity of conscious meaning and the illusion of the restoration of coherence'.

In contrast to such readable coherence, Felman (1992:39) invokes the (disjointed and fragmentary) poetry of Paul Celan and argues that the 'breakdown' or 'breakage of words' evident here is precisely what renders it performative: it is by disrupting 'conscious meaning' that these 'sounds testify' (Felman 1992:37). Celan's poetry solicits the reader not with meaning, but with the very illegibility of trauma. At the point of its breakdown, then, the text becomes testimony and reading becomes a form of witnessing (in the sense of experiencing rather than understanding).

It is also, perhaps, in the face of such 'unsettling accounts' (to borrow the title of Leigh Payne's (2008) text) that one may glimpse the ghost of truth – not as definitive presence, but as the very spectre that rattles the cages of certainty. It is an irreconcilable truth perhaps – following James Williams's (2005:92, 93) suggestion that truth is not an entity but 'an event in the strong sense of something that happens in an unpredictable and troubling manner. It cannot be known or grasped, only felt and expressed'.

Conclusion: traversing speech

In Derrida's (2001:200) *Adieu* to philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, he suggests that those who come forward to address the dead, with 'tears in their voices', do so 'not

out of respect for convention' but 'to traverse speech at the very point where words fail us'. What does it mean to 'traverse' speech? With this single word, Derrida articulates, more succinctly than I can, that speech is not something to be marshalled like a dutiful servant but something to be *traversed*, like an obstacle course or uneven terrain. He reminds us that words are there to be stumbled over; that behind the veneer of coherence, every story is perforated with disfluencies; that always (inevitably) gaps appear.

However, Derrida also hints at the importance of speaking in and through and despite the failure of language – of giving voice to trauma, especially when speech is difficult. Expressing the "truth" of trauma, under these conditions, entails an articulation of articulation's failure: it involves not only the act of giving voice but the responsibility ('poignantly imposed on us', according to van Alphen (1997:37)) of *giving pause*, and allowing the unspeakable to filter in. For, in Blanchot's words (1982:187), '[w]hat cannot be said must nevertheless be heard'.

Notes

1 Matthew Partridge is a Masters student from the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town; Michael MacGarry is the winner of the 2010 Standard Bank Young Artist Award for visual art; Sean O'Toole is a Cape Town-based journalist and writer, and former editor of the journal *Art South Africa*.

2 See anthropologist Victor Turner's (1967:93) definition of the liminal period as denoting an 'interstructural situation' 'betwixt and between' two relatively fixed or stable states. See also Jon McKenzie's (2004:26-31) discussion of the liminal in relation to performance studies and performance art.

3 See Mieke Bal's (2010) illuminating text on Doris Salcedo for a nuanced and thorough discussion of Salcedo's use of muteness, silence and absence as representational responses to trauma.

4 Hence Derrida's (1976:158) often-cited assertion that 'there is no outside-text'. As suggested by Niall Lucy (2004:143), '[a] text is not, for Derrida, the imitation of a presence; instead presence is an effect of textuality'.

5 This is partly because trauma itself is liminal. According to Jill Bennet (2005:12), '[t]rauma … is never unproblematically "subjective"; neither "inside" nor "outside," it is always lived and negotiated at an intersection'.

6 For Slavoj Žižek (2008:51, 52) such a conception of language is both simplistic and problematic. Instead, he suggests that the foundation of language is not reconciliation but violence: '[w]hat if … humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they *speak*? As Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was already well aware, there is something violent in the very symbolisation of a thing, which equals its mortification'.

7 The TRC has, as David Schalkwyk (2004:4) points out, been subject to legal challenges, criticisms, and accusations of bias almost from its inception. To entertain such criticisms (my own included) is not to detract from its significant accomplishments: '[d]istinguished from other truth commissions by the fact that its hearings were conducted in public, it took over 21,000 statements across the length and breadth of South Africa, recorded almost 40,000 gross violations of human rights during its mandated period (from 1960 to 1994), held over sixty hearings across the country in major urban centres and small, rural towns alike, and processed over

7,000 amnesty applications, of which it granted almost 3,000'.

8 According to Deborah Posel (2004:20), Tutu's Foreword outlines the TRC's accomplishments as 'markedly more modest and circumspect than the grand, ambitious aspirations of the commission's legal mandate'. Tutu writes that the TRC report 'provides a perspective on the truth' rather than offering 'the whole story' (TRC Report 1998a:2), and makes some concessions to plurality by proposing (with limited persuasiveness, according to Posel (2004:20)) a 'typology of four different types of truth'. These are: 'Factual or forensic truth'; 'Personal and narrative truth'; 'Social truth' and 'Healing and restorative truth' (TRC Report 1988a:111-114).

9 Media coverage of the TRC hearings provided yet another narrative framework. As suggested by Posel and Graeme Simpson (2002:8), '[i]n the media arena, the truth delivered by the TRC was truncated and carved up into consumable information'. They elaborate: '[t]he sheer power of the public testimonies of victims and perpetrators, coupled as they were with the drama of catharsis and the rhetoric of forgiveness, created neat, emotionally charged "sound bites" of truth'.

10 During the TRC hearings, lapses in memory and/or the articulation of memory sometimes marked the testimonies of victims and witnesses as "legitimate" sufferers of trauma. However, there were also cases where perpetrator's testimonies evinced such gaps. See, for instance, Leigh Payne's (2008: 229-239) discussion of the amnesty hearing of apartheid policeman, Jeffrey Benzien, *apropos* his ostensible amnesia as well as his claim that he was himself a victim of trauma. In this contentious case, Benzien was granted amnesty despite his (intentional or involuntary) avoidance of "full disclosure". As Payne (2008:242) points out, audiences of victims and survivors generally treat claims of trauma-induced memory-loss on the part of perpetrators with suspicion.

11 A similar disclaimer appears under the heading 'Human Rights Violations', but with the text 'and a gap therefore appears' instead of 'and gaps appear'.

12 Alias for artist Herman Dirk van Dodeweerd.

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