LIMINALITY, ABSENCE AND SILENCE IN THE INSTALLATION ART OF JAN VAN DER MERWE

Runette Kruger and Jan van der Merwe

Abstract

In this article, I interpret specific examples of the installation art of South African artist Jan van der Merwe in terms of notions regarding liminality, focusing on the concepts of absence and silence, or the "nothingness" inherent in space and time, and in language. I argue that in the works chosen for analysis, Van der Merwe foregrounds liminal space and time as productive of nothingness. This conception of liminality (relating to its inherent nothingness) is explored in terms of Martin Heidegger's (1962; 2006) thoughts on the spatial aspect of time.

Liminality

The term "liminal" relates to the Latin phrase for "threshold". The notion of liminality as developed in anthropological writings on ritual signifies the temporary cessation of "ordinary" social life experienced during rituals, such as initiation rites.[1] For the duration of the ritual, liminal space and time are created in order for "ordinary" activities, frameworks and worldviews to be dismantled whilst the initiate is experiencing a transformation in her or his social status. Early twentieth-century anthropologist Arnold van Gennep identifies three stages that the initiate goes through during the initiation rite, namely the pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal phases (Adjaye 1999:6). The middle, liminal stage is described as a state of 'limbo, devoid

of permanence and characterized by ambiguity' (van Gennep paraphrased by Adjaye 1999:6). Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1999:95) describes a liminal subject as being 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention', confirming the notion of temporarily suspended status. In rites of passage, such a state is not sustained indefinitely. When the initiate emerges transformed, he or she is reunited with society to fulfill a new social role. In subsequent critical theory, liminal spaces have come to include virtual space, spaces of transit such as airports, and temporary spaces, such as prison camps. In most of these, the state of limbo is characterised as liminal.

The focus of this article, however, falls on spatial and temporal liminality as productive of nothingness. I interrogate selected examples of South African artist Jan van der Merwe's installation art in order to determine the extent to which this aspect of liminality (that is, spatial and temporal liminality as productive of nothingness) is applicable to an interpretation of his work. Although Van der Merwe has been exhibiting since 1977, a particular approach to the liminal as applied here is argued to surface more clearly in various installations from 1998 onward, and to be foregrounded particularly after 2000. This specific strand in Van der Merwe's works is reflected by repeated references in the works to "transience" and "vulnerability" as well as to "time" and "preservation".

Transience

Van der Merwe positions vulnerability and transience as key aspects of numerous works, such as *Wag* (2000); *No, I Want My Mother* (2000); *Baggage Arrival* (2001); *Eclipse* (2002); *Sunday Suit* (2003); I*t's Cold Outside* (2004) and *Luggage Trolley* (2004) (Van der Merwe 2004c:27; 2004d:31; 2004e:33; 2004f:34; 2004g:39; 2004h:44; 2004i:46). When looking at a work such as *Wag* (2000) (Figure 1), the narrative of the eternal played out by a fiancée awaiting her presumably deceased fiancé, manifests in the medium chosen by the artist, namely rusted metal. The metal is simultaneously tangible and indicative of decay. In this way, transience and permanence are played off against one another. The term *wag* refers to the verb "to wait" in Afrikaans, as well as to the noun "guard" or a person who acts as a guard. In a single word the felt absence of two people is invoked: a girl or woman, who is not present – betrothed to a guard, who is equally absent. The term furthermore alludes to both permanence (endless waiting) and absence (waiting for someone not there).

On an ethereally delicate bedstead, a wedding dress is laid out in anticipation of a future marriage. Dresses hang in a cupboard demarcated by barbed wire. The barbed wire invokes the "absent presence" of the guard who could perhaps be detained in an army or prison camp, or could perhaps be dead. Ambiguously, it might be read that the young woman herself is detained in a camp. In the overlapping narratives summoned by the artist's choice and manipulation of objects, it is the material decay – represented by the rusting tin cans which ubiquitously cover the objects – that speaks "loudest". The vulnerability of material objects and, by extension, human life and dreams, is captured in this and other works because of the conscious choice of rust as material. The viewer is confronted by transience and vulnerability: the feeling of unease brought about by an encounter with mortality.

Figure 1: Jan van der Merwe, *Wag*, 2000, found objects, rusted metal, clothing, dimensions variable. Pretoria Art Museum collection. Courtesy of the artist.

Time

Besides addressing transience and mortality, Van der Merwe problematises the concept of time in the above-mentioned works and in others, such as *Artifacts* (1999), and *Showcase* (2003). Several statements by commentators (see Van der Watt 2004:7, 12; Boshoff 2004:2) as well as by the artist (Van der Merwe 2004:40, 44, 46), point to the confluence in the material art object of the "separate" modes of time, wherein the past, present and future overlap to embody a temporal ambivalence. This ambivalence arises from the conflation of attempts to move into the future, and gaze back at what is happening in the present; the repeated engagement with the past and with memory; and the laborious struggle to preserve the present against the destructive aspects of time.

Koos van der Watt (2004:7) argues that works such as *Baggage Arrival* (2001), confirm the artist's 'awareness that the past is the present'. With reference to *Baggage Arrival* (2001), and *Wag* (2000), Van der Watt (2004:12) observes that, '[t]ime moves within the parameters of the unique situation van der Merwe establishes – from the present back to the past and *vice-versa*. Van der Merwe maintains that history has no essential structure and always manifests as the present'. The installations are immediate (thus representing the "present") in their physicality and in their use of digital media, but nevertheless, in them, Van der Merwe also displaces all immediacy into an archeologised future past (Van der Watt 2004:13), so that they signify a temporal "double vision" in which several aspects of time are experienced simultaneously. Provocatively, Van der Watt (2004:16) argues that a 'major challenge for the artist would be to address "future time"'. In this article, I pursue a counter-argument, to the effect that in the majority of his works, including the installations under discussion, Van der Merwe *does* address future time, and addresses it in a particular way. This counter-argument is explored below, along with the central theme of transience. I discuss both time and transience (or death) as encountered in Van der Merwe's installations in terms of nothingness and liminality.

Besides spatial and temporal liminality as productive of nothingness, Van der Merwe's works represent several further aspects of the liminal. For instance, the liminality of transformation and of transit emerges in installations such as *Baggage Arrival* (2001), and *Luggage Trolley* (2004). The notion of transit and transition can be argued to subscribe to a linear progression of time in terms of a "before" and "after". Conversely, the designation of liminality wherein nothingness (as silence and absence) is produced (or from which nothingness emanates), manifests in a different temporal framework to linearity. I argue that this liminal space

and time is manifest in installation works such as *Final Inspection (Soldier's Bed)* (1998), *Wag* (2000), and *It's Cold Outside* (2004), explored below. Furthermore, such liminality is explored with reference to Martin Heidegger's (1962) conceptions of time as it pertains to being.

Time and being

In Heidegger's thought, a particular approach to the concept of time lends itself to an investigation of liminality (the suspension of ordinary experience and perception) as the locus from which nothingness may emerge. Whilst Heidegger does not inquire into liminality as such, I find his conception of time as it relates to being, a useful explication of a particular form of the liminal (as productive of nothingness), and apply it to a reading of selected examples of Van der Merwe's installation work. Heidegger (2006:358) interprets time not as the chronological sequence of moments or events but as a 'coming together' of all possible events in a single moment of immanent transcendence, a moment that gives access to a timeless time, or time folded in over itself. I interpret this "locus" created by the folding of time as a variant of liminal space. Heidegger furthermore interprets death (transience) as the fulfillment of life, as opposed to its opposite. Thus concepts such as the simultaneous experience of various modes of time and the intense sensation of the presence of death that Van der Merwe emphasises are also pivotal to Heidegger's exploration of time and being.

Heidegger (1962:19, emphasis in original) notes that, '[o]ur aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of Being … Our provisional aim is the Interpretation of *time* as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being'.[2] When Heidegger refers to time in its relation to Being, and

to *Dasein* (Being-there),[3] he emphasises that what he has in mind is not an "ordinary" conception of time, that is, time as the passing of events which arrive from the future and fade away into the past (Heidegger 1962:39). The conception of time that Heidegger places in relation to an understanding of Being is existential-ontological; time is conceived of as the ground of Being.[4] For Heidegger it is the *unity* of time's past, present and future (as opposed to its linear structure) that enables authentic Being as Being-towards-death (Heidegger 1962:401), because the unity of time is what makes it possible for Being to grasp death as the current actuality of its futural radical possibility. This radical possibility is Being as not-Being, or death. Thus death is *Dasein's* utmost potentiality-for-Being, and the structure of Being that includes not-Being is described as *Dasein's* Being-a-whole (Heidegger 1962:279). This *potentiality*-for-Being means that, 'in Dasein there is always something still outstanding ... which has not yet become "actual"' (Heidegger 1962:279). As soon as *Dasein* has achieved Being-a-whole, in becoming not-Being, it ceases to be (Heidegger 1962:280).

Heidegger (1962:363) describes authentic *Dasein* (that is, *Dasein* that comports itself as Being-towards-death) as *Dasein* that is already ahead of its Being, yet whose birth is still 'caught up in its existence' (Heidegger 1962:443). Such a construct assimilates the various "modes" of time, namely, the past, the present and the future, into the Being of *Dasein*, which becomes the site where time folds over itself. This is in contrast to the linear perception of time, where a future "not yet here" and a past "no longer here", frame a present which is experienced as seemingly "now here". This particular play of time over and against linear time is manifest in works such as *Wag*. In the installation, Van der Merwe makes present a past (in fact, several pasts); a present which includes the viewer and a future past: that is, a future that has gone on before the characters embodied in the narrative (but who are in fact disembodied, absent) and has come back as haunting presence that will endure as long as rust abides. The installation acts as the flickering monitor of a time machine, and the modes of time are simultaneously present in a liminal, waiting space.

It is possible to link this overlapping experience of time that Van der Merwe creates in the installation to an existential awareness of Being that the viewer might experience. Heidegger (1962:373, emphasis in original) explains, '[b]y the term "futural", we do not here have in view a "now" which has *not* yet become "actual" and which sometime *will be* for the first time. We have in view the coming in which *Dasein*, in its own most potentiality-for-Being, comes towards itself'. Being, as coming towards itself from its futural not-Being, becomes 'authentically as it already was' and as such, can 'come towards itself futurally in such a way that it comes back' (Heidegger 1962:373, emphasis in original). For Heidegger (1982:10), 'origin always comes to meet us from the future ... the two call to each other and reflection makes its home within that calling ... and thus becomes true presence'. The past (as "having-been") thus arises from the future. This unity of time – as opposed to the everyday conception of time as a progression of events – facilitates existential, authentic Being-there. Such a "past as having been" emanates from the installation *Wag*, and from other installations by Van der Merwe. In *Wag*, the viewer is projected both into the past (where a wedding was still possible, and awaited) and to a future which consists of interminable waiting for an event no longer possible. These modes of time (the past and the future) are palpable in the present in which the viewer experiences them. Here unity of time exists as a liminal arena which hosts nothingness. The installation becomes the site of "true presence", which is absence.

This time-construct coincides with the way in which Heidegger (1962:373) posits Being as the 'basis of nullity', thus as the origin of not-Being. As such, Being is the liminal site which is productive of not-Being. The relation of existential-ontological time to Being is that Being is and *can* be experienced as the liminal site of the production of not-Being because of the unity of time. Having investigated the way in which Heidegger relates the conception of existential-ontological time to the existentiality of Being, and having interpreted Being as a liminal site foregrounded in Van der Merwe's installations, I now contextualise this liminal site in terms of the 'there' of Being-there, *Dasein*.

Being-*there*

Heidegger (1962:26) posits temporal unity as the origin of a presence (Being) that is more present than the "present-at-hand" (or material presence).[5] Temporal unity is therefore not the origin of being (material existence of things in the world), but of not-being (which is Being). A relationship between being, not-being and Being can be established in the site of Being-*there*. For this reason, 'Dasein's specific spatiality must be grounded in temporality' (Heidegger 1962:418).

Just as Heidegger designates time as non-linear, he does not describe *Dasein's* site (the spatiality of Being) in terms of a space "in which" *Dasein* appears. The site of being, the "there", is not blithely encountered as an aspect of the everyday. Heidegger (1962:142, 147) states that, 'Dasein's spatiality is not to be defined by citing the position at which some corporeal Thing is present-at-hand', and that, '[w]hen space is discovered … by just looking at it, the environmental regions get neutralized to pure dimensions. Places … get reduced to a multiplicity of positions for random Things'. For Heidegger (1962:142), *Dasein's* "there" can, strictly

speaking, not be encountered as a "here". *Dasein* 'understands its "here" in terms of its … "yonder"' and is 'proximally never here but yonder'. Yet Heidegger does not see the yonder as removed from human experience and, for him, the "Da" of *Dasein* is not extrinsic to Being. *Dasein* can 'traverse the "between"', that is, the distance between 'here' and 'yonder' (Heidegger 1962:142). In traversing the between, *Dasein* acts as a bridge, de-severs the farness of yonder (Heidegger 1962:142) and brings it 'close'.[6] Closeness, *Dasein's* 'region', is not to be misconstrued as physical closeness but as an existential encounter with and as Being. For Heidegger (1962:141), that which is closest 'is by no means that which is the smallest distance "from us"'. Bridging the between, *Dasein* also 'embodies' the between, and is *here* as well as *there* (Heidegger 1962: 171), or *t/here*. The t/here is not the sum of a 'there' and a 'here' (is not a worldly place or linear sequence) (Heidegger 2006:289), but is experienced as the site 'for every possible "where", "here" and "there" … "then" and "when"' (Heidegger 2006: 285). Heidegger (2006:116) argues that Being, as the guardian of the between, lies within the between whilst simultaneously standing outside of it.

Heidegger (1962:401) also designates *Dasein* as a clearing; Being-there is 'an entity … that has been "cleared"'. He describes this clearing as the 'siteless place and the hourless time' (Heidegger 2006:18). Conflating the liminal aspect of time, described above, with the 'not-here' of *Dasein's* t/here, Heidegger (2006:127, emphasis in original) describes the unity of time as 'the *elusive* gathering midpoint'. Furthermore, this mid-point is described as an *ab-ground* (or abyss), which is 'a ground that stays away as well as prevails' (Emad & Kalary in Heidegger 2006:xix). It is a region from where that which is nearest, yet least discernable, emanates and 'unto which nothing has entry that returns as the same' (Heidegger 2006:223). I interpret this site as the space
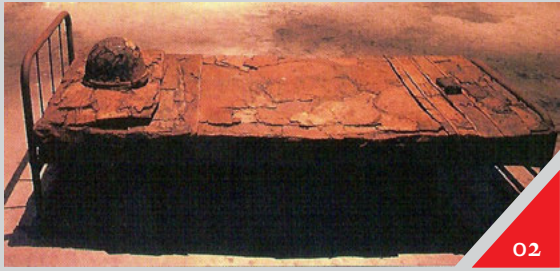
Figure 2: Jan van der Merwe, *Final Inspection (Soldier's Bed)*, 1998, found objects, rusted metal, 76 x 188 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist.

that is created in the installation works under discussion. When looking at (or more accurately, when existentially participating in the presence of) a work such as *Final Inspection (Soldier's Bed)* (1998) (Figure 2), the notion of the artwork as a *bridge* between the "here" and the "there", or between the present and the absent, the tangible and the ineffable, between life and death, can be said to take shape. A formally plain installation becomes, within a Heideggerian interpretation, a site which acts as a mediation between the present and the absent; in Heidegger's terms, the bed becomes the intermediary place where Being and not-Being make their home. As such, it is the liminal site of *Dasein*.

In *Final Inspection (Soldier's Bed)*, the viewer sees a carefully made bed, with a soldier's helmet at the head, and a bar of soap on a neatly folded towel at the bottom end. The pillow, blankets, sheets, soap, towel and helmet have been meticulously constructed out of, or covered in, separate pieces of rusted tin. The only "element" not present is the soldier to whom the bed is or was assigned; but in a Heideggerian turn, it is the absence of the soldier that forcefully invokes his presence.

The word "final" in the title invokes the finality not of an everyday encampment occurrence such as repeated inspections, but of death. For Van der Merwe (2004b:23), the work, part of a series, designates 'the end of the world as we know it'. In this work, it is not the absence of "another" or the death of "an other" that Van der Merwe seeks to evoke through use of the silent rusting objects, although such absence is also keenly present. What makes itself present is the confrontation between Being and Being's acknowledgement of its *own* mortality, as opposed to the general notion of mortality "in the world". For Heidegger (1962:222), preoccupation with the death of an other rises as a barrier between existential Being (*Dasein*) and the latter's full acknowledgement of its own mortality which, like *Dasein*, is in each case one's own, and only that. In this work, the absence (death) of the soldier becomes a *punctum*[6] that precipitates a change in perception: the world as "known" before and the world as "known" after passing through the liminal arena that the presence of the bed and the absence of the soldier inscribes. The absence of an other signifies the "nearness" of one's demise. In such an encounter, Being faces its utmost challenge, that final possibility which 'Dasein cannot outstrip' (Heidegger 1962:294). Typifying the multidimensional space (the between, or abyss) cleared by the bed, this leap in states of consciousness is made possible by the artist's use of a keenly *material* medium, namely rusted metal.

In the same way that time's modes are folded into a liminal singular sphere (as encountered in, for instance, *Wag*), modes of Being, which include non-Being, are conflated and become more than the sum of the constitutive parts. In other words, the bed is not the liminal site of Being "plus" not-Being, but of not-Being as it inheres irreducibly in Being, affording Being its authentic potential to exist as "Being-a-whole". Through the bed's presence, Van der Merwe traverses the between, making the intangible other of Being discernable, and making a virtue of death (or of the awareness of death).

In the above sections, I correlate the Heideggerian notions of unified time and the site of *Dasein's* clearing with the artist's emphasis on the destructive nature of time and its complex relation to transience (or death). Furthermore, I place both Heidegger's and Van der Merwe's approach to time and death within a framework of temporal and spatial liminality, which was applied to an interpretation of specific examples of Van der Merwe's works. The following sections focus on what which emerges from such a framing of the liminal, that is, on the "production" of absence and silence.

Absence

Heidegger (1962:26) notes that, '[t]he Being of entities "is" not itself an entity … Hence Being … must be exhibited in a way of its own'. If, as Heidegger argues, Being is the liminal site of emergence, it follows that the liminal site of emergence, as Being, must be exhibited its own way. Furthermore, Heidegger (1962:187) stipulates that the mode of perception favorable to encountering *Dasein* existentially is the opposite of conventional sight. For Heidegger (1962:187), everyday sight is not equal to the task of perceiving Being, and '"seeing" as a way of access to … Being' should not be confused with 'just perceiving with the bodily eyes'. Heidegger (1962: 59, emphasis in original) asks: '[w]hat is it that [hermeneutic] phenomenology is to "let us see"?' and answers: '[m]anifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all: it is something that lies *hidden*, in contrast to that which ... does show itself'. For Heidegger, there is thus an interface between that which can be "viewed", namely material objects and the world in general, and that which remains hidden. If read in terms of hermeneutic phenomenology, it could be said that Van der Merwe places the artwork in a position to prompt experience of the interface between the visible and the invisible, and in so doing,

presence the absent, which is Being as its own abysmal liminal region. I suggest that such presencing takes place in works such as *Wag* and *Final Inspection (Soldier's Bed)*.

In my reading of the artist's work, the notion of absence is addressed, as is the related notion of silence, which is considered as a category of absence. Thus, both absence and silence are interpreted to be "present" in the work. Heidegger (1982) provides a useful framework for the elucidation of absence, relating it obliquely around the notion of *iki*. The term *iki* describes what is regarded in Japan as a significant quality in artistic expressions such as poetry, painting and Noh theatre. Heidegger's (1982:13) Japanese interlocutor in the dialogue states: 'what endows [Japanese] art and poetry with their nature [is] *Iki*'. Heidegger (1982:14) explains the 'characteristics' of *iki* in order to determine the way in which an artist, who makes use of material media (such as paint, wood, text and so on), might nevertheless invoke the presence of the wholly immaterial, which becomes the actual subject matter. He describes *Iki* as a quality of 'sensuous radiance through whose lively delight there breaks the radiance of something supra-sensuous' (Heidegger 1982:14). Heidegger (1982:14) relates this phenomenon to the conception of *aistheton* – that which 'can be perceived by the senses' but that 'lets the *noeton*, the nonsensuous, shine through'.

In Van der Merwe's work this relationship between the material and non-material (or the materially absent), is central. In works such as *Final Inspection (Soldier's Bed)* (1998), *Wag* (2000), and *It's Cold Outside* (2004) (Figures 3 & 4), Van der Merwe brings about an unhomely experience of Being as not-Being: of the null-point that defines human Being-as-whole as the acknowledgement of the peculiarity that in any moment Being bears its dissolution within itself. Death, 'the possibility of no-longer being-able-to-be-there' (Heidegger 1962:294), becomes a guest in the liminal space cleared

Figure 3: Jan van der Merwe, *It's Cold Outside*, 2004, found objects, rusted metal, TV monitor, DVD player, 300 x 115 x 205 cm. Photograph by Stephan Hundt. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

for it by *Dasein* and by the artist. As Heidegger (1962: 294, 310) states, '[t]he possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein' is uncovered in the clearing, its possibility no longer concealed, and 'Dasein opens itself to a constant threat arising out of its own "there"'.

The viewer may experience such absence as death in the works discussed above and in the work *It's Cold Outside* (Figures 3 & 4). This installation consists of a chair with a slip draped over the back, a stool with a vanity case, a suitcase, a small bar heater and a curtained
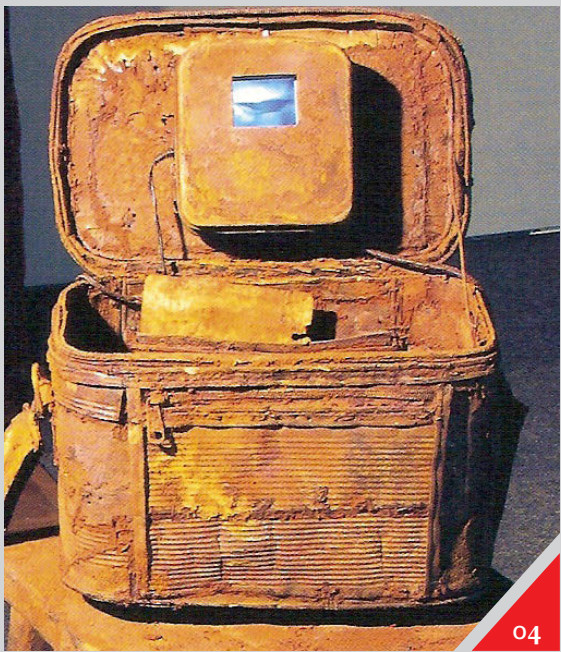
Figure 4: Jan van der Merwe, *It's Cold Outside - Detail*, 2004, found objects, rusted metal, TV monitor, DVD player, 300 x 115 x 205 cm. Photograph by Stephan Hundt. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

the mirror, reflects the small rituals of daily life that endure in the face of oblivion. In this work, dread, ritual and absence are communicated by means of furniture, luggage and clothing, which are all in the process of rusting away, almost audibly. Cases have been packed for a final hospital departure, and the space between waiting and departure has been frozen, as if to forestall the end. As in *Wag*, waiting becomes a tangible sensation.

In this space, the thickening of time presences that which is ontologically furtherest from the viewer when he/she comports him/herself in the mode of falling. Falling denotes the mode of denial of the deathly aspect of Being and a subsequent defensive involvement in the world of distracting events. When *Dasein's* finite aspect is encountered in the liminal space of the installation, the viewer may be engulfed by a sense of anxiety – that 'basic state-of-mind [which is the] distinctive way in which Dasein is disclosed' (Heidegger 1962:228). This anxiety is not caused by something *in* the world, but by 'nothing' (Heidegger 1962:231). The edge of anxiety in the work indicates the existential mode of Being *in* the clearing, as clearing, as nothing: Being as also not-Being. *It's Cold Outside* and other works by Van der Merwe can be interpreted as embodying a liminality that is productive of absence – an absence which encapsulates the fullest extent of Dasein's existence. As such, what is present in the works is the interface between the ontic and the ontological, between being and Being, between the materially present and its inhering transcendence, and between existence and obliteration.

Silence

Related to absence and its ability to indicate "true presence", is silence. Heidegger (1962:208) designates presence as a type of reticence, given that only those who

window. Again, a stage has been set for a drama acted out *in absentia*. A cold breeze emanates from behind the curtain. The vanity case is open, displaying a small digital monitor embedded inside its unzipped cover. On the monitor, imagery is displayed to the viewer in the place where a mirror would usually be seen. Thus the vanity case "mirror" flickers with images that become the viewer's own "reflection". The imagery of the video shows the repetitive motion of a woman applying and re-applying lipstick in an endless loop. The anonymous woman is metonymically the viewer. The artist's use of endless repetition seems to invoke timelessness rather than linear, progressive time. An unease and quiet anxiety emanates from the household objects – an apprehension that is heightened by the way in which time "stands still" and becomes oppressive when awaiting mortality. The only "activity", as replayed in

have something to say can choose to remain silent. Not having anything to say is not the silence to which Heidegger refers. Once more, that which is not there indicates more forcefully the presence behind the absence; the spoken inside the silence. For this reason, for Heidegger (2006:50, 81, emphasis in original), 'thinking-saying' is 'not-saying'. Heidegger (1982:16) emphasises the heightened significance of silent gesture, 'calling from afar' and ... 'brought [by] stillness'. In the artist's work, an example of such a silent gesture may be seen in the mirror of a vanity case. Heidegger (1982:52, 53) notes that 'true dialogue' has 'more silence than talk. Above all, silence about silence ... Who could simply be silent of silence? ... That would be authentic saying'. Such subtle presencing and fertile silence can be understood in terms of the Japanese word for language, *Koto ba*, which broadly translated means 'petals from the void' (Heidegger 1982:47) or "petals" from the prevailing abyss of the t/here. Heidegger (1982:26) explicates the importance of this silence as reticence in terms of its significance for *Dasein* as follows: in the existential dimension of Dasein (its only dimension), sidelong glances serve a better purpose than headlong charging, as "Being-t/here" entails the withholding of machinations and purposefulness in the pursuit of "clarity". It is thus 'hints and gestures' and not 'signs and chiffres' (Heidegger 1982:26) that point to ways to Being. Heidegger (1982:26, emphasis in original) notes that hints 'are enigmatic. They beckon to us. They beckon *away*. They beckon us *toward* that from which they unexpectedly bear themselves toward us'.

What beckons when confronted by the silence of the liminal spaces inscribed by traces of human having-been, is that which haunts the viewer when coming face-to-face with absence: nothing. The "call", which manifests as silence, is *Dasein's* call to consciousness of Being-towards-death. This call 'dispenses with any kind of utterance ... does not put itself into words at all ...

Conscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of being silent' (Heidegger 1962:318, emphasis in original). What calls is nothing, because the calling, as silence, is the voice of *Dasein*: *Dasein*, in the depth of its uncanniness, in the liminal presence of nothing and the sound of silence is the caller (Heidegger 1962:321). In the same way that awareness of non-Being as absence makes the fullness of Being possible, so silence plays its role in the conscientising of *Dasein*. Silence, as much as absence, is thus a conscious component of not only the installations discussed, but of other installations by Van der Merwe. The sensation the viewer might experience when confronted by the works is one of heightened awareness of absence and silence. Heidegger (1982:40, emphasis in original) notes: '[m]an [*sic*], to the extent that he is [hu]man, listens to this message [sounded by silence] ... Man [*sic*] is used for hearing the message ... and this is what [is called] *being* human'.

Conclusion

In the above-described works, the viewer may feel absence and silence, as the presence of nothing, keenly. Such absence and silence are not "mere nothingness"; they should not be conflated with a state of privation, as "nothing" here is designated positively (as "something"). Together absence and presence manifest emptiness, 'the other, to all that is present and absent', and emptiness, or *iki*, becomes 'the loftiest name for ... "Being"', or *Dasein* (Heidegger 1982:19, emphasis in original). In his prickling of consciousness to take heed of (and experience) the inhering nature of absence, decay, death and silence through the works, Van der Merwe can be said to transform consciousness, making it receptive to *Dasein's* presence and call, as staged in a specific space and time. In certain instances, the artist seems to desperately attempt to "stop" time; to mitigate its destruction (Van der Merwe 2004b:24). The

careful and incessant "knitting" together of thousands of rusted tins can be read as a reverse ritual in which the original function of the tins (to preserve food) is invoked in the very moment that the abyss of death and decay is addressed.

The artist creates a space from which a hint (or *iki*) beckons; a region of spatio-temporal liminality, the t/here which is the provenance of *Dasein*, from a medium carrying double connotations: decay and preservation. The medium thus simultaneously denotes Heideggerian Being in the modes of anxiety and falling, in its association with death, and denial thereof. This space, from which a hint (or *iki*) beckons, is a region of spatio-temporal liminality, the t/here which is the provenance of Dasein. Heidegger designates this as the abyss, clearing or "between". In these works, the modes of Being (*Dasein*) and being (material existence) together make possible the entirety of presence – a form of unity that Heidegger (1982:30) refers to as the 'two-fold'. Heidegger (1982:33, emphasis added) explains that this two-fold unity 'is the clearing in which present beings as such, and presence, can be discerned'.

The conspicuous absence of human inhabitants is foregrounded in the works discussed. Such absence can result in a flash of recognition of the radical inherent nothingness of Being. The installations can be interpreted as giving form to nothing. This nothing, as the ground of Being, simultaneously emanates from and engenders the t/here of Being's liminality. In his installations, Van der Merwe thus gestalts liminal time and space in order to "bring back" Being from the closest distance of the abyss.

Notes

1 The term was developed in the writings of Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) and subsequently those of Victor Turner (1920-1983).

2 In Heidegger, various forms of capitalisation and hyphenation are used to differentiate between the notion of Being (*Dasein*) and being, that is, the material being of entities in the world. In *Being and time* (1962) the difference is indicated by capitalising, thus Being is contrasted with being. In *Mindfulness* (2006), the difference is indicated by hyphenation, and here be-ing is contrasted with being. In this article, the form Being is used instead of be-ing, except when quoting from *Mindfulness*.

3 The term "Being-there" emphasises the existential necessity of Being human in a particular mode, which can manifest as the mastery of Being (Heidegger 2006:170) or as "falling". Falling constitutes a form of forgetful concern with the world which entails fleeing in the face of death, particularly one's own death. Falling is 'a basic kind of Being which belongs to everydayness' that 'tranquillizes' *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962:219, 222).

4 Heidegger uses the terms ontological and ontical to indicate opposite concepts or entities. The translator's footnote # 3 (Heidegger 1962:31, emphasis in original) states: '[o]ntological inquiry is concerned primarily with Being; ontical inquiry is concerned primarily with *entities* [in the world] and the facts about them'.

5 On one hand, Heidegger (1962:251) uses the term "present-at-hand" to refer to the materially present,

objects in the world, or beings. As Heidegger (1962: 26) notes, '[e]verything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in a way, is being'. On the other hand, the term Being refers to '[t]his entity which each of us is himself [*sic*]' (Heidegger 1962:27). Its mode of experience is existential. For Heidegger (1962:152, emphasis in original), 'in each case Dasein is its Self only in *existing*'.

6   "De-sever" is a verb denoting an action only possible for *Dasein*. De-severance is indicative of *Dasein's* presence. For Heidegger (1962:139) '"[d]e-severing" amounts to making the farness vanish – that is, making the remoteness of something disappear, bringing it close'.

7   This work dates from 1998, and should be differentiated from the work *Final Inspection* (1997), in which the artist collaged war images and army paraphernalia onto his army coat. The subsequent work, referred to here, grew out of this initial work, and was part of the exhibition *Final Inspection*, held at the Cultural History Museum (formerly the African Window Museum) in Tshwane/Pretoria in 1998.

8   The *punctum*, or "point", is used here to refer to '[t]he major idea or essential part of a concept or narrative … A significant, outstanding, or effective idea, argument, or suggestion … A separate, distinguishing item or element; a detail' (The Free Dictionary 2000). In a work of art, the *punctum* is the element which spurs consciousness of the particular content of the work.

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