

BRUCE NAUMAN: THE TRUE ARTIST IS AN ABSURD FOUNTAIN

by

ALEX TRAPANI

49207563

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
MASTERS IN VISUAL ARTS

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: DOCTOR GWENNETH MILLER

CO-SUPERVISOR: CELIA DE VILLIERS

February 2017

Declaration

I declare that *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist is an Absurd Fountain* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

24 February 2017

Signature:

Title:

Bruce Nauman: The True Artist is an Absurd Fountain

Summary:

The work of Bruce Nauman can be understood as an enquiry into the absurd. His work is a critique of art, the artist and society, and is in part viewed as a mediation of stereotypical 'truth'. The absurd is defined and analysed to elucidate the nature of art and human behaviour by means of literary comparison, in particular of Camus, Sartre and Wittgenstein. This research focusses on Nauman's subversive performance-based work and analyses how he simulates a particular work of Duchamp. I propose that Nauman espouses human activity into the functionality of objects, such as fountains. My artworks expand on Nauman's interrogation of the concept of a 'true artist' by embodying an absurd fountain as a Sisyphean construct. In contextualising my work in relation to incessant duty, insecurity and double negatives, I offer a regenerative vigour against idolisation of success through contemplation of the artist's doubt and the absurd.

List of key terms

Absurd; conceptual art; cyclical; dialetheism; existentialism; fountains; human body; performance; subversion; truth.

Contents

Preface	i
List of illustrations	iii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY	2
1.2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM	7
1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND AIMS	9
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	11
1.5 THE SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	11
1.6 OUTLINE OF DISSERTATION	14
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW: THE ABSURD IN CONTEXT	17
2.1 NAUMAN IN CONTEXT	19
2.1.1 The Absurd	20
2.1.2 Camus and the Absurd	25
2.1.3 Sartre and the Absurd	27
2.1.4 Wittgenstein and the absurd	29
2.1.5 Meaning in the absurd	29
2.2 FOUNTAINS IN CONTEXT	32
2.2.1 Historical Background of Fountains	33
2.2.2 Perspectives of Fountains in Literature	35
2.2.3 Fountains in Art	38
CHAPTER 3: BRUCE NAUMAN	42
3.1. BACKGROUND	43
3.2. ABSURDITY IN NAUMAN	46
3.3 ABSURDITY IN THE FOUNTAIN	50
CHAPTER 4: ALEX TRAPANI	55
4.1 TRAPANI IN CONTEXT	57
4.1.1 Behaviour, memory and misunderstanding	57
4.1.2 Significance, failing and avoidance	60
4.2 ABSURDITY IN TRAPANI	66
4.2.1 Random behaviour and reflection	67
4.2.2 The plinth, the art establishment and incessant duty	68
4.3 FOUNTAINS OF TRAPANI	71

4.3.1	Sweat, piss and insecurity	71
4.3.2	Language, the unsaid and double negatives	77
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....		81
5.1	VALIDATING THE ABSURD AS A FOUNTAIN.....	81
5.2	SIGNIFICANCE AND EMERGENT MEANING.....	83
5.3	PROPOSED FUTURE RESEARCH.....	85
References.....		86

Preface

As an artist I have ideas about my discernments concerning the world, about myself as an artist, and about art as an establishment. Having experience of the world around me and the peculiarities of humankind's systemisations and formulaic tendencies I believe that there is no predetermination to our existence. The view that there is not predetermination brings into question the significance and value assigned to art. The dissertation explores aspects of how I see my existence in relation to my existence as an artist. The artist, Bruce Nauman and his work in the 1960s, is fundamental to this research. However, the various other artists discussed here have all played a major role in the development of my understanding that the absurd is a necessary conceptual tool in the expressions of art. Investigating significance within an art establishment and the value therein is imperative to the study. My research, demonstrated in the exhibition *Neither Art Nor Art* (2016), explores related notions of the absurd and significance and value in art.

Neither Art Nor Art (2016) is documented in a catalogue that will assist in the reading and greater understanding of the hypotheses discussed in the dissertation. The Introduction (Chapter One) and the Literature Review (Chapter Two) investigates the notion of the absurd as found in the discipline of philosophy and language, predominantly based on Existentialism, and reflects on specific propositions of significance and value. This is done to underpin the existing theories surrounding the research and to assist the reader in identifying those theories' underlying networks throughout the dissertation. Chapter Three identifies these theories as they pertain to the work of Nauman as compared to a Duchampian way of being. These three chapters further inform Chapter Four on my own approach and methodologies to

making art and my state of mind regarding my existence and significance within an art establishment. In the Conclusion I connect back to the introduction and the aims of the research to validate findings that I originally set out to achieve.

In both the dissertation and exhibition the wealth of experience, discipline and dedication from both my Supervisor, Doctor Gwenneth Miller and Co-Supervisor Celia de Villiers is immeasurable. I am extremely grateful to them for their unwavering support and guidance throughout my degree. Without their patience and willingness to assist me this project would not have been possible. A debt of gratitude goes to Mark Fegen for his expertise and commitment in helping me in the making of the sculptures, videos, and photographs and for the setting up of *Neither Art Nor Art* (2016). Your shared vision and tireless dedication will not be forgotten. Thank you to Ciara Struwig and Manu Manjesh Lal for assisting with the installation of work at the exhibition. Thanks must go to Sita Suzanne (Moyo) for her assistance with the exhibition catalogue.

Thank you to the University of South Africa for support, bursaries and the use of the UNISA gallery for the exhibition space. To the staff at the UNISA Gallery, in particular, Bongani Mkhonza, Jacob Lebeko, Simangele Sithole, Zingisa Nkosinkulu, and Lucky Khuzwayo, I extend my gratitude for all their assistance with equipment, promotions, installing, and dismantling of the exhibition.

A special thanks must go to my wife Yolandi Coetser for her believing in me, for her constant encouragement and her expertise and advice with writing and research. Thank you to my girls Zoey, Mia, and Aya for your encouragement, patience and understanding, and the occasional assistance in the studio.

List of illustrations

1. Bruce Nauman, *The True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (c.1966). (photograph taken by Jack Fulton).
<http://www.artpractical.com/feature/a-rose-has-bite> (Accessed 21 November 2015).
2. Bruce Nauman, *Drawing for The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966). Pencil and ink on paper, 60.9 x 48.3 cm, Sonnabend Collection, New York.
<http://www.phaidon.com/resource/brucenauman-luminous.jpg> (accessed 21 November 2015).
3. Bruce Nauman, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign)* (1967). Artist's proof, neon tubing with clear glass tubing suspension frame, 149.9 x 139.7 x 5.1 cm, collection Philadelphia Museum of Art. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/global-culture/identity-body/identity-body-united-states> (Accessed 21 November 2015).
4. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917). Found object, 36 x 48 x 61 cm (unconfirmed), original lost, (photograph taken by Alfred Stieglitz).
<http://www.radford.edu/rbarris/art428/Dada.html> (Accessed 21 November 2015).
5. Alexander Calder, *Mercury Fountain* (1937). Painted iron and aluminium and mercury, 114 x 293 x 196 cm, collection Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona.
<http://www.fmirobcn.org/col-leccio/catalog-works/11303/mercury-fountain> (Accessed on 21 November 2015).
6. Michael Craig Martin, *An Oak Tree* (1973). Glass, water, shelf, and printed text, 14.9 x 46 x 14 cm, collection Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/craig-martin-an-oak-tree-l02262> (Accessed 06 July 2016).
7. Michael Craig-Martin, *An Oak Tree* (Text Detail) (1973). Glass, water, shelf, and printed text, 14.9 x 46 x 14 cm, collection Australian National Gallery, Canberra. <http://www.michaelcraigmartin.co.uk/work-index/#/early-work/> (Accessed 06 July 2016)
 8. Bruce Nauman, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67). Chromogenic print, 51 x 60.8 cm, collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. <http://collection.whitney.org/object/5714> (Accessed 09 October 2015).
 9. Bruce Nauman, *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966). Black-and-white photographic print, 50.8 x 61 cm, collection the artist. <http://repulsion66.tumblr.com/post/60261846592/gallowhill-bruce-nauman-failing-to-levitate> (accessed 12 December 2016).
 10. Nicola Salvi, *Fontana di Trevi* (The Trevi Fountain) (1732). Travertine stone, 26.3 m x 49.15 m, public fountain in Rome, Italy. <http://more-sky.com/group/trevi-fountain-wallpaper> (Accessed 09 December 2016).
 11. Bruce Nauman, *A Rose Has No Teeth* (1965). Lead plaque, 19 x 20.5 cm, collection Daros, Switzerland. <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/A-Rose-Has-No-Teeth/DEA22DE6A847EC1C> (Accessed 06 June 2016).
 12. Alex Trapani, *Ascending and Descending* (video still) (2016). Video performance, with sound, 11 minutes, 3 seconds.
 13. Alex Trapani, *(over)look (under)stand* (2016). Photographic print, 100 x 80 cm.
 14. Alex Trapani, *(sub)merge* (2016). Photographic print, 100 x 80 cm.
 15. Alex Trapani, *9 Desaturated Photograph* (2016). Installation of photographic prints, 30 x 22 cm each, installation dimensions variable.

16. Alex Trapani, *Neither Up Nor Down* (2016). Mixed media sculpture, 190 x 40 x 33 cm.
17. Alex Trapani, *Cutting Corners* (video Still) (2016). Video performance, with sound, 13 minutes, 23 seconds.
18. Alex Trapani, *Wet Behind the Ears and Wet Feet* (video still) (2016). Video performance, without sound, 30 minutes, 48 seconds.
19. Alex Trapani, *Sweat Fountain (Driver's Tan)* (2016). Mixed media sculpture, 130 x 50 x 40 cm.
20. Bruce Nauman, *Wall-Floor Positions* (video still) (1968). 16mm film on video, black-and-white, with sound, 60 mins, collection Museum of Modern Art, New York. <http://www.vdb.org/titles/wallfloor-positions> (accessed 09 December 2016).
21. Bruce Nauman, *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (video still) (1967/68). 16mm film on video, black-and-white, with sound, 8 minutes, 24 seconds, collection Gift of Society for Contemporary Art, New York. <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/184168> (Accessed 09 December 2016).
22. Alex Trapani, *Self-Wetting Portrait* (2016). Mixed media fountain sculpture, 140 x 33 x 33 cm.
23. Alex Trapani, *Self-Wetting Portrait* (detail) (2016). Mixed media fountain sculpture, 140 x 33 x 33 cm.
24. Alex Trapani, *Plinth*, (2016). Photographic print, 58 x 45 cm.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The title of this dissertation, *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist is an Absurd Fountain* is a parody on *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1) by Bruce Nauman. The dissertation title accentuates the dialogue within the concepts located in many of Nauman's artworks. The statement that a 'true artist' is an absurd fountain explicates the idea that a legitimate ('true') artist will inevitably create artworks with a degree of absurdity. It argues that such absurdity offers a critical view of society through the subversive character of the artist. The absurdity discussed pertains to existentialism and is applied to Nauman's use of visual and literary references. The intention is to probe the stance that the valuable and the significant - that which society subconsciously accepts and adopts as conventional (everyday) behaviour - is situated in the absurd (Nagel 1971:717).



Fig 1. Bruce Nauman, *The True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966)

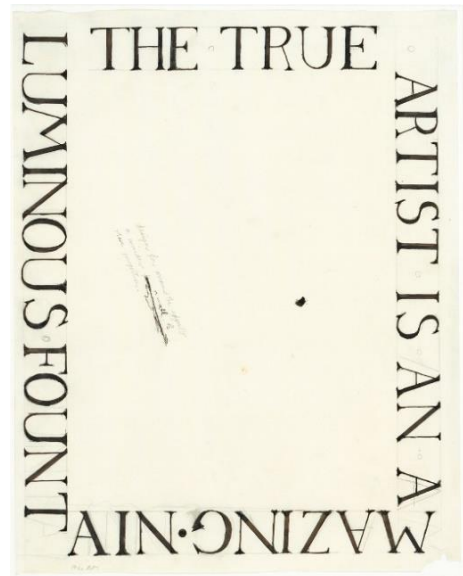


Fig 2. Bruce Nauman, *Drawing for The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966)

The title suggests that the artist is a fountain. The metaphorical comparison refers to the importance of the artist's practice – the giving forth of something significant, sustainable and even essential. However, the fountain is an object that, although animated, is not living. By referring to the fountain as an absurd metaphor, it emphasises the paradoxical nature of art. According to Tony Godfrey (1998:4) in his book *Conceptual Art* (1998) art is given status and is “something that we should admire and respect”. At the same time, Godfrey (1998:4) states that the artwork – as a ‘sacred object’ – “is something that conceptual artists have seized in glee [to] be an outright denouncement of the institution [of art]” (Godfrey 1998:4).

1.1 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Disruption as a paradigm is of particular interest in Nauman's work. His conceptual thinking unsettled modernist notions of art in the 1960s (Tomkins 2009). This dissertation addresses the notions of ‘value’ and ‘significance’ in art, as well as how human behaviour is confronted by Nauman (particularly in the 1960s), and it builds on the strength of such critical disruption. The disruption that Nauman caused was not in isolation but corresponded with other conceptual theorists of his time. For example, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Arthur C. Danto both engage with theories relating to the way we think about language and art. Tony Godfrey (1998:125 and 100) says that Wittgenstein elicits language to disrupt a logical rationalisation of the world around us, and Danto refers to conceptual thinking in art as “a concerted attack on tradition” (Godfrey 1998:100).

Personal understanding and engagement with Nauman's artworks have been prolific in my practice and my interactions and engagements with the art establishment over

many years. Therefore it has formed a foundation for continued research. For brevity, I focus almost exclusively on Nauman's fountain artworks, occasionally referring to other representations such as *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967) (fig 3) only to corroborate my stance.



Fig 3. Bruce Nauman, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967)

Comparisons are made to other artworks that allude to the nature of fountains or the use of elements of the absurd and repetitious behaviour to justify the absurd as a conceptual device in the making of artworks. Some of these examples that are compared to Nauman are Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4), Alexander Calder's *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5), and Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6). Referencing other artworks substantiates the rationale that art, and by extension, the artist, can be measured for value, but can simultaneously enforce a sense of purposelessness in art through the inclusion of the absurd and the

paradoxical. Therefore, the dissertation also examines the concept and role of the 'true artists' and the implied meanings that Nauman expresses. The absurd is an unavoidable fact of our existence (Sartre 1938:68, Camus 1955:69) and is investigated and proposed as being the 'true' that Nauman refers to in his work. The 'true' is investigated under the assumption that legitimacy is dependent on the authority of an 'artworld', or art establishment¹ and its forces (Danto 1964:571). The fountain provides the metaphor for the argument that the absurd is an unavoidable fact of our existence that resurfaces perpetually in art.



Fig 4. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917)

¹ I make use of the term 'art establishment' throughout this dissertation. It refers to a community within the discipline of visual arts and encompasses museums, galleries, art events, institutions of research, academia, as well as the media, critics, the art lover, the art viewer, and the artist. The 'art establishment' is synonymous with what George Dickie (1984:9) defines as the 'artworld', which is not a "formally organised body [but,] consists of individual systems [made up by] a totality of roles... of artist and public at its core" (Dickie 1984:75). (See also Danto's The Artworld here, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/visualarts/Danto-Artworld.pdf>)



Fig 5. Alexander Calder, *Mercury Fountain* (1937)

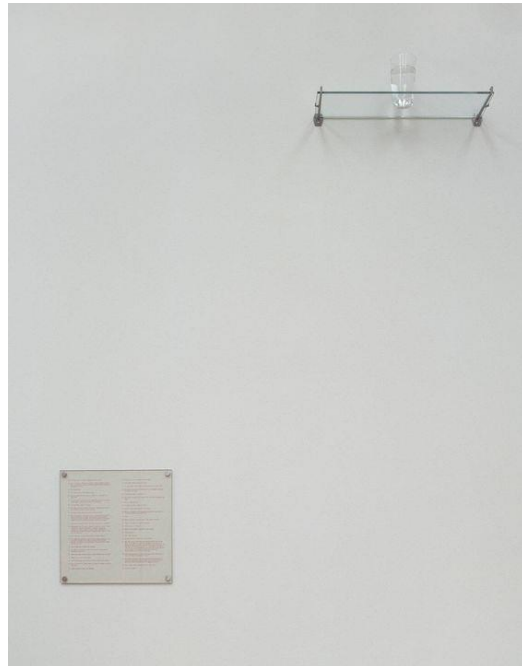


Fig 6. Michael Craig Martin, *An Oak Tree* (1973)

(Please see the full text from Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree* [1973] [fig 6] on the following page)

Q: To begin with, could you describe this work?

A: Yes, of course. What I've done is change a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water.

Q: The accidents?

A: Yes. The colour, feel, weight, size ...

Q: Do you mean that the glass of water is a symbol of an oak tree?

A: No. It's not a symbol. I've changed the physical substance of the glass of water into that of an oak tree.

Q: It looks like a glass of water ...

A: Of course it does. I didn't change its appearance. But it's not a glass of water. It's an oak tree.

Q: Can you prove what you claim to have done?

A: Well, yes and no. I claim to have maintained the physical form of the glass of water and, as you can see, I have. However, as one normally looks for evidence of physical change in terms of altered form, no such proof exists.

Q: Haven't you simply called this glass of water an oak tree?

A: Absolutely not. It is not a glass of water any more. I have changed its actual substance. It would no longer be accurate to call it a glass of water. One could call it anything one wished but that would not alter the fact that it is an oak tree.

Q: Isn't this just a case of the emperor's new clothes?

A: No. With the emperor's new clothes people claimed to see something which wasn't there because they felt they should. I would be very surprised if anyone told me they saw an oak tree.

Q: Was it difficult to effect the change?

A: No effort at all. But it took me years of work before I realized I could do it.

Q: When precisely did the glass of water become an oak tree?

A: When I put water in the glass.

Q: Does this happen every time you fill a glass with water?

A: No, of course not. Only when I intend to change it

into an oak tree.

Q: Then intention causes the change?

A: I would say it precipitates the change.

Q: You don't know how you do it?

A: It contradicts what I feel I know about cause and effect.

Q: It seems to me you're claiming to have worked a miracle. Isn't that the case?

A: I'm flattered that you think so.

Q: But aren't you the only person who can do something like this?

A: How could I know?

Q: Could you teach others to do it?

A: No. It's not something one can teach.

Q: Do you consider that changing the glass of water into an oak tree constitutes an artwork?

A: Yes.

Q: What precisely is the artwork? The glass of water?

A: There is no glass of water any more.

Q: The process of change?

A: There is no process involved in the change.

Q: The oak tree?

A: Yes. the oak tree.

Q: But the oak tree only exists in the mind.

A: No. The actual oak tree is physically present but in the form of the glass of water. As the glass of water was a particular glass of water, the oak tree is also particular. To conceive the category 'oak tree' or to picture a particular oak tree is not to understand and experience what appears to be a glass of water as an oak tree. Just as it is imperceptible, it is also inconceivable.

Q: Did the particular oak tree exist somewhere else before it took the form of the glass of water?

A: No. This particular oak tree did not exist previously. I should also point out that it does not and will not ever have any other form but that of a glass of water.

Q: How long will it continue to be an oak tree?

A: Until I change it.

Fig 7. Michael Craig-Martin, *An Oak Tree* (Text Detail) (1973)

1.2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

I trace the roots of western conceptualism in the context of its opposition to 'retinal pleasure', to Duchamp, when the *status quo* of cultural values was in question (Godfrey 1998:6). In the mid-1960s the role of the artist as a critic who challenges societal behaviour also demystified the significance of the 'talent' of the artist. In other words, the notion of the artist as a master of his skills was in question as the role of the reader (viewer) became as important as the author's² (artist) in how meaning was made (Godfrey 1998:139). As Danto (2005:11) enquired into the relevance of 'beauty' as a measure of aesthetic significance, "the replacement of an aesthetics of forms with an aesthetics of meaning" leaves the responsibility of making meaning in the minds of the viewer and not the honed skills of the artist. Here a question of how much involvement in the skillful making of the work is necessary for the result to be 'true' art and, therefore, questions the role of the 'true artist' (to use Nauman's description - see fig 1. and fig 2.). The Dada movement rejected conventional aesthetics because evoking 'disgust' was an effective way to get the viewer to contemplate the calamities of war (Danto 2007:1). This drive of the anti-aesthetic disseminated after Dadaism into forthcoming manifestations of art leading up to the 1960s and 1970s. Minimalism, for example, attempted ridding the artwork of 'representational imagery' and evidence of the 'artist's touch' (Atkins 1997:116). Arte Povera often made careful considerations of 'cast-off' materials and how these would 'clash' with selected environments to evoke aesthetic meaning within "the geographical or sociological terrain" (Atkins 1997:51). The value attached to the artwork within these movements was therefore determined

² The primary source of this concept comes from the French literary critic, Roland Barthes, (1989:54) who proposes that "writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning. The unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man [sic] without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted".

by a critical challenge presented by the artist and the viewer's engagements, and not to the craftsmanship or skill of the artist (Godfrey 1998:4, 6).

Nauman, and others like him³, viewed making art as an embodied endeavour. His own body became a medium, embedded in and represented through other mediums such as photography, film or text based work (Lewallen 2007:101). For Nauman, the fountain signifies the functionality of the artist within the correct contextual establishment. The fountain is to water what the artist is to art. His body becomes an instrument in art and is metaphorically represented as such by mimicking the behaviour of a fountain, a symbol of a source of life-sustenance. This embodiment is one of meaning and carries with it a reflection of how the body, in proximity to other bodies or objects, becomes a tool that sparks contemplation and re-evaluation. It elicits in the viewer a motivation to make meaning. Nauman's reasoning about art extends beyond the tradition that an artist is a skilled and trained artisan who would make art as a profession to the assessment of an artist as someone who is always an artist even when not making self-portraits or other representational art⁴. Being a 'true artist' is thus a way of being, rather than just an activity or occupation. Frank Owen (2014:26) says of Nauman that "[s]omewhere in there, he began thinking of his own body's vertical centreline as the axis of his evolving and revolving universe of situations and ideas" (Owen cited in Plagens 2014:26). The 'true artist' in Nauman's context, or the 'artist's truth', is 'made' in activity – free from the claims to 'truths'

3 In the 1960s artists such as; Yves Klein, with his imprints of the female body onto canvases; Allan Kaprow, with his 'Happenings'; and Joseph Beuys, with works such as *Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), were some key figures who appropriated the body (of the artist, participant, or audience/viewer) in various ways in their artworks (Atkins 1997:42 and 74).

4 Joseph Beuys believed that the artist was not only so by profession in a traditional sense, but that the role of the artist was to benefit and to 'heal' a society. Although he saw that art originated from personal experiences it simultaneously addresses universal political and social ideas. His work and his contributions "suggest the healing potential of art for a humanity seeking self-revitalization and a sense of renewed hope in the future" (Wolf 2014). Like Nauman, Beuys believed that art is not so much a 'specialised profession', but more so a 'heightened humanitarian attitude', a way of being that filters into all aspects of life (Wolf 2014).

'found' within the art establishment (Rorty 1989:7). Truth is a core concept that is discussed further in the introduction of the Literature Review (Chapter Two) as it pertains to this dissertation. The research problem, therefore, engages with the identity of the artist as a critical voice, the body of the artist as a functioning 'tool' and the artist's way of *truthful* being, within a prodigious art establishment.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND AIMS

The aim of this research is to identify Nauman's criticality through careful analyses of the texts about his work. As aforementioned, I intend to examine the influences on Nauman's reasoning, specifically through the literature on Duchamp's use of paradoxes, puns and non-art objects, and Wittgenstein's use of linguistic arrangements that straddle the line between logic and the irrational. I refer to Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and to a lesser extent, Martin Heidegger to substantiate the argument of the significance of the absurd in art. Having gained insight into Nauman's work, I apply and expand on visual expressions by showing how my artworks are influenced by Nauman and his ideas. His influence is shown through my body representing an artist in artworks; through the use of actions, such as repeated climbing or 'hiding'; and the use of symbols, such as a plinth, a ladder or a fountain. The insights into Nauman's approaches and methodologies are therefore applied as a lens through which to examine and assess my work.

The research objective informs my practice to establish that the absurd is a conceptual crux and is applied to formal principles of sculpture, photography, and performances. When looking at my artwork, I come to realise that being an artist is being incongruent. There is self-awareness at play, and the ambiguities of my past have naturally influenced how I observe and interact with institutions such as art, with 'truths', with

successes and failures, and these observations play a significant role in my creative processes.

As Nauman's work is commenting on Duchamp's practices and understandings of the absurd and paradoxical nature of art, so too my work comments further on Nauman's ideas in this regard. The one is an extension of the other. In the *Performing Arts Journal* John Howell (1977:28) states in an article called 'Art Performance: New York', that "Nauman's early works appear to be a series of footnotes to Duchamp's thesis, using puns". I take note of this approach, and the title of this dissertation enacts this strategy with reference to Nauman. The visual and literary associations made by the use of puns aims to set up an enigmatic reading of an artwork and through this, the objective is to form a dialectic with Duchamp and Nauman.

Wittgenstein, although not an existentialist, emphasises language and how we use words, becoming absurd often confounding in our understanding of the world around us (Lewallen 2007:42). Although a rational use of language defines the natural world the way in which we apply it can create unusual and confusing perspectives even as it remains logical. Accentuating this in the process of defining absurdity and how it relates to Nauman's practice endeavours to clarify my stance regarding language, in the visual and the literary formats. The literary rendition, such as the title of an artwork, is often repetitious of the visual, and vice versa, creating a back and forth or a cycle – at times a mere descriptive of the visual. I elaborate on this in my comparison between Nauman and Duchamp to further justify the applicable philosophical investigation.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions, which structure my research flow from the title *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist is an Absurd Fountain*, are as follows:

- The first question: Which theoretical influences have informed Nauman's criticality towards social constructs and the art establishment? In turn what has informed my critical viewpoint regarding the 'true' and the absurd?
- The second question: How do Nauman's fountains specifically illustrate his understanding of art and the artist as incongruous? This question expands to ask: What is the role of the fountain in the context of a fundamentally absurd worldview and in which way is the body used to represent this?

1.5 THE SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The scope of this dissertation lies in the establishment of Nauman's conceptual framework, not because others have failed to establish a conceptual context that is true to Nauman, but rather to establish a conjectural agenda as it relates to my experience and understanding of his conventions. Fountains emphasise that actions are repeatable, that behaviour is cyclical and speak of activity, process, beginnings and ends, but also represent a regurgitation of the same elements over and over. The fountain is a significant symbol in conceptual art, because of the vast history of fountains and the relationship they have to art. There are publications, spanning nearly five decades, where numerous authors have given valuable contextual reasoning and antithesis for Nauman's work. The authors are, amongst others, Marcia Tucker (1970); Thomas Albright (1985); Brook Adams (1990); Neil Benezra (1993); as well as Danto and Godfrey (1990s and 2000s); and more recently, Philip Larratt-Smith (2013) and Peter Plagens (1994 and 2014) I do not attempt to prove any of these to be incorrect,

inaccurate or misinformed. Rather, I examine the existing literature to establish my foundation and justifications (from an artist's point of view) for further interpretation of Nauman's work. Due to the limited scope of this study, I expand on fountains by referring only to Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4), Calder's *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5), and Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree* (1971) (fig 6 and 7) in Chapter Three. Focusing on Nauman's fountains narrows the argument significantly to specific concepts that are the crux of the dissertation. I hope to clarify the conceptual framework of absurdity as a fundamental methodological process in contemporary art.

In the work *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1968) (fig 3), Nauman is referring to two different types of truth. The 'true'/truth denoted in *True Artist* is something that suggests a genuineness, or rather a legitimacy. For Nauman, there exists a sense of authenticity in how and why the artist makes art. This truth is 'made' (Rorty 1989:7). The second 'true'/truth, a *Mystic Truth*, indicates something less concrete and suggests a type of truth that is more absolute and so belonging to an abstract plane beyond human logic and understanding – a truth 'found' (Rorty 1989:7). Regardless of the type of truth Nauman implies, he places responsibility on the shoulders of the 'true artist', as if enlightenment⁵ were the duty of the artist.

Significance implies more than legitimacy. To have legitimacy an object must bear the qualities of signification. This signification is also applicable to the re-introduction of the non-art object in the 1960 and the 'elitist' qualities previously bestowed upon artworks

⁵ Emanuel Kant (Kant in Bristow 2011) describes Enlightenment as a way one reflects on the world and oneself, a way of being independent in thought. It is possible for the individual to find truth, "as one progressively breaks free from the constraints of institutional ideologies, such as religion, and becomes more self-directed the more fulfilling the human existence becomes" (Bristow 2011). I also acknowledge the critical view of the Enlightenment project that exists today in the critique of authentic truth and reason, and take the view that Duchamp and Nauman contribute to its questioning.

such as *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4)⁶. An object becomes a signal for identifying other objects comparable to it and depending on one's experience of that particular object will determine the importance of how corresponding objects are experienced (Morris 1971:179). The signal object begins to have significance (positively or negatively) held against its counterparts for identification. My interpretations of *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1968) (fig 3), and *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1) are that Nauman suggests the artist is seen as a person with a noteworthy worldview, someone with authority in their field, and therefore has significance in legitimacy. However, in the statement, there is also a strong sense of the impossible, which makes the significance of the artist in the revealing of truths unlikely, and, perhaps, even somewhat humiliating. I discuss these ideas further in Chapter Three on the work of Nauman, and in Chapter Four concerning my own work.

Throughout this study the insights into Nauman's approaches and methodologies are therefore applied as a lens through which to develop, examine and consider my work. Furthermore, my practice becomes a mode of rationality through related ideas and thus brings a unique understanding of Nauman's concepts by referrals made through subject matter (such as the fountain), puns, failing and descriptive titles of works that suggest confounding truths in language (see section 2.1.4 on Wittgenstein and the absurd).

⁶ Many artists in the 1960s were exploring the non-traditional work of Duchamp and other Dadaists again, in order to challenge the modernist notions of 'high' art and the given 'status' to the likes of Duchamp within the art establishment (Godfrey 1998:7-14).

1.6 OUTLINE OF DISSERTATION

Chapter Two provides a specific conceptual framework of the absurd as found in Camus and Sartre's discourses (sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3). The purpose of this literature review is to ascertain what the absurd is in relation to Nauman and my own art practices.

I apply the absurd as a conceptual framework by firstly discussing the writings of Camus where the absurd is a way of being and inescapable. I then tackle specific texts by Sartre who regards the realisation that absurdity is rooted in existence as fundamental to a chosen purpose regardless of the *nausea* it inflicts. Furthermore, I take into account the manner in which Wittgenstein highlights the paradoxical nature of language and the existence of the absurd within a rationalisation of words. To conclude the chapter I refer to meaning found in, or in spite of the absurd. The absurd exists, but it does not prevent one from making meaning. Meaning discovered, by identifying relevant signs, makes what we observe significant and in turn assists in attaching value even to that which is found to be absurd.

Chapter Three discusses Nauman's fountain artworks and shows how the absurd presents itself therein. I put the fountain into context by giving a historical background, referring thereafter to specific literature that applies fountains metaphorically to elicit meaning in art, such as: in the case of Heidegger (1950:31) when explaining the significance of art in a historical context; and regarding Freud's (2009:22) analyses of the subconscious in comparison to a fountain. I then discuss how fountains have been implemented by other artists and compare these to Nauman's conceptualisation thereof.

The investigation into Nauman's work is also considered in Chapter Three. His approach to art is explained before the absurd, as a conceptual framework, is elaborated on in the context of his artworks. The absurd is made applicable to specific fountain works created by Nauman in the 1960s. Comparisons are made to other artworks that hold conceptual and objective relevance to Nauman's approach. Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) is significant because of the multiple absurdities that exist within the reading of his work and assists in establishing the conceptual framework within Nauman's art practice. Many of Nauman's titles become puns about the visual elements and vice versa. Duchamp was interested in visual and literary puns and associations as they not only carried meaning but also produced meaning (Howell 1977:30). The established meanings of the visuals and literary elements start to perform new expressions and challenge conventional understanding of everyday objects and actions. Chapter Three sets up the platform to discuss absurdity in my artworks in Chapter Four.

I elaborate on the absurd as a conceptual framework in Chapter Four by comparing my own practices to those of Nauman, and, by extension, to Duchamp. I break down the important aspects of interest, such as behaviour, significance, and the use of language, to clearly show the influence of Nauman on my thinking, and the concept of the absurd on my approach and analysis of art. The elements in my artworks are indicative of Nauman's use of puns and associations of both the visual and the literary. Puns by definition bring into question the truth of the subject referred to because the wordplay emphasises double meaning and perplexity (Culler 2005:178 and 187). In this light, puns are both truths and deceptions and hinge on how language is constructed around objects or bodies in art. I conclude Chapter Four by referring to the

repetitive nature and solitude of being an artist and express my knowledge that not all areas of conceptual relevance can be surveyed in this dissertation, but only selected concepts are discussed. My work was exhibited in April of 2016 at the UNISA Art Gallery at an exhibition titled *Neither Art Nor Art*. I presented my art inspired by Nauman and his application of the absurd and fountains at that venue (please refer to the accompanying catalogue).

Chapter Five concludes the dissertation by looking back to pertinent issues mentioned in the Introduction. By reflecting on what I set out to achieve in Chapter One is rendered successful or unsuccessful here, and elaborations are made as to the reasons why it is so. The *Research Problem*, *Research Objectives*, *Research Questions* and the *Scope and Significance of the Study* are drawn together to justify the chosen argument that the absurd is a relevant theory in making art.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW: THE ABSURD IN CONTEXT

Rorty's (1989:7) arguments regarding 'truth' is the point of departure in this chapter to clarify that absurdity in art is a truth made rather than found. Furthermore, I discuss the concept of the absurd and how it relates to Nauman. This is followed by an analysis of Sartre and Camus's notion of the absurd respectively. I also examine Wittgenstein's explanation of the absurd in language and show his impact on Nauman. I discuss meaning by referring to Heidegger's reasoning about the absurd, and Morris's theories regarding signification and significance to support the idea that the absurd holds value. Finally, an argument of how the absurd relates to fountains in art is made. The fountain, which is discussed in Section 2.3, is a symbol of the cyclical nature of behaviour in art. As mentioned in Chapter One, a fountain repeats on itself, the representation of a cycle is metaphorical of reflexive behaviours and I regard this as an act of absurdity in the context of my practices as an artist.

Art has a lasting relationship with absurdity, which is fundamental in the mechanisation of the conception, realisation, and understanding of art. The word 'absurd' refers to that which is pointless or meaningless in human life and actions (merriam-webster.com Sv "absurd"). More specifically, it is a "term used by existentialists to describe that which one might have thought to be amenable to reason, but which turns out to be beyond the limits of rationality" (Honderich 2005:3). In Section 2.1.1 I refer briefly to Samuel Beckett, a playwright and author, whose absurdist approach to storytelling has influenced Nauman.

Absurdity in art can be seen in how we document art. Tristan Tzara (2003:1) for example, wrote about the nature of art documentation in the 'Dada Manifesto' saying "I

am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense” (Tzara 2003:5). The quote by Tzara explicates that everything with a given purpose has a paradoxical moral value and that, ultimately and simultaneously represents life and means nothing (Tzara 2003:5). Similarly, in the mid-1950s at the advent of Pop Art in the United States, not only did Andy Warhol endeavour to alter the meaning of art by speaking of his desire to be a machine, but he also desired that the ‘art lover’ be regarded more as a consumer and he explicitly positions them as such (De Duve 1989:9). When Conceptualism was at its pinnacle in the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists challenged the elitism of art by re-introducing non-art objects (as referred to in section 1.5), ideas, methodologies, and presentations into art practices in order to disrupt and confound both the art establishment and the ‘art lover’, and in so doing, redefining what constitutes value in an artwork (Alberro and Stimson 1999:421).

It is within the aforementioned historical context that Nauman started creating art in the 1960s (The theatre work and literature of Beckett to which I referred earlier is similar to that of Nauman, for example). The senselessness and the inadequacy of rationality is what Nauman achieves in his artworks and transmits to the viewer. As such, this literature review examines the work of Nauman and relates it to the existentialist notion of the incongruous.

I consider the relevance of the philosophies of the absurd of Sartre and Camus. I establish a theoretical justification of the conceptual framework that is applicable to both my own work and the work of Nauman. What Sartre (1938:68) and Camus (1955:69) say about absurdity – that absurdity is an unavoidable truth in human existence – demonstrates its necessity in art making. Sartre and Camus both

emphasise that life and the world around us, our very existence, is meaningless and therefore absurd (Sartre 1938:4; Camus 1955:9). Camus refers to the “gradual return” emphasising life’s repetitiveness in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955:10)⁷.

2.1 NAUMAN IN CONTEXT

Nauman deals with concepts of the mundane, the everyday human behaviour and activity. In so doing he inadvertently and subversively deals with ideas that are meant to elevate art, or that make it something to be taken seriously⁸. In this dissertation, I engage with the absurd in Nauman’s work and how it becomes a means to subvert the existing art establishment, not with mean intent to overthrow, but rather to expose its shortcomings. Some literature that has been examined regarding the absurd in Nauman’s work include essays and texts from *A Rose has No Teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s* (2007) edited by Constance Lewallen; and *Bruce Nauman: A True Artist* (2014), by Peter Plagens. I predominantly (but not exclusively) look at the writings of Godfrey in *Conceptual Art* (1998); Arthur C. Danto from the *Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (1981); and *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (2003). Both Danto and Godfrey’s links to contemporary sensibilities including and deviating from early twentieth-century conceptual art are further reasons for my selection of these particular sources amongst the myriad of sources on conceptual art. Focusing on the listed writings allows for an underpinning

⁷ In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) Camus tells the story of King Sisyphus who was punished by the god’s for his numerous deceptions and his hubristic nature. The punishment was for Sisyphus to push a large bolder up a hill. Once he had reached its pinnacle the rock would roll back down and Sisyphus would have to repeat this activity for all eternity. Camus uses the story as a parallel to human existence, that what one does from day to day is no more meaningful than what Sisyphus was subjected to (Camus 1955:7 and 34).

⁸ In the 1960’s, when Nauman was starting his career as an artist, Modernism and its pursuit of the ‘Avant-garde’ still governed the popular notions of what art was and for whom it was made under as Modernism still stood as the authority within the art establishment at the time (Atkins, 1993:140).

of the theoretical stance that the absurd is a principled 'device' in the conception and delivery of an artwork. In so doing, I argue that it is perhaps in the absurd where true value in art lies, specifically in the case of Nauman's work. To reach the aforementioned conclusion, I summarise key sources from the writings of Sartre, such as *Nausea* (1938) and *Being and Nothingness* (1949), and from Camus, such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *the Rebel* (1951). I refer to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) by Wittgenstein to support the idea of the absurd in language, a significant linguistic influence on Nauman.

2.1.1 The Absurd

The notion of truth is important in the context of this dissertation, because the absurd is not necessarily deceptive or untrue, but does bring into question the significance of artworks. I discuss Wittgenstein in more detail in section 2.1.4, but when he (2010:223) says "a rose has no teeth" it is empirically so, yet it is a confounding announcement due to its perplexing association. The combining of the propositions, 'teeth', and 'a rose', into a sentence leave one with a sense of questioning, not of truth, but rather of the unusual thought processes of the author. If Wittgenstein intended to be untruthful, he might have said that "a rose *has* teeth". This is obviously untrue as there exists no evidence to substantiate the claim. However, the efficacy of such a statement is dull in comparison to "a rose has *no* teeth". It is believed to be true and is effective in confounding the reader due to its claim. Harry Frankfurt (2005:59) in his book *On Bullshit*, claims that "[b]oth in lying and telling the truth people are guided by their beliefs concerning the way things are". Further, he states that a bullshitter "is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false" (Frankfurt 2005:55). A bullshitter is guided also by his/her beliefs, but is unconcerned about truth or lies and is only

selective of either to “suit his [sic] purpose” (Frankfurt 2005:59). However, what of the artist who is concerned about the viewer’s reception of his/her artwork? The truth about what Nauman is conveying through his work is made in the beliefs of the viewer. To bewilder the viewer into questioning what is true or not places more responsibility on the viewer to grapple with the paradox thereof. As stated in Section 1.5, according to Rorty (1989:7) “truth is made rather than found”, but this is only because of language. He states:

If we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary, then we should at least have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences (Rorty 1989:7).

When Nauman employs the words, ‘the true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths’, it is a case of bewilderment because of the arrangement within ‘linguistic entities’. Changing a urinal into a *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) does not alter the fact that it appears to be a urinal, but it also does not prevent it from being a fountain, at least not in the mind of the viewer in the context of art. The urinal is a fountain because it can be believed to be so and because Duchamp ‘made’ it so. In Nauman’s case specifically the absurd is used to straddle the line between truth and untruth and keeps the viewer in uncertainty.

The concept of the absurd is exemplified in the work of playwright and author, Samuel Beckett⁹. Beckett was a significant contributor to what Martin Esslin called *The*

⁹ Samuel Beckett was a writer who produced a number of plays from the late 1940s until the 1960s. It is evident that most of his plays were written with an underlying structure of absurdity. In the case of Beckett the absurd is that which is irrational and unreasonable and used it as a means to confound an audience. The confusion and inconclusive narratives the plays delivered left spectators with a sense of pondering and the questioning of values and the meaning of life. His most known works are, *Waiting for Godot* (1948-1949) (2010), and *Endgame* (1955-1957) (2009).

Theatre of the Absurd, which is also the title of Esslin's book written in 1961. Esslin (1961:12) says "the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought". Furthermore, the *Theatre of the Absurd* functions as a "dramatic expression to the philosophical notion of the 'absurd', a notion that had received widespread diffusion following the publication of Albert Camus's essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in 1942" (Birch 2009:35). Importantly, "to define the world as absurd is to recognize its fundamentally mysterious nature, and this recognition is frequently associated with feelings of loss, purposelessness, and bewilderment" (Birch 2009:35).

From an existential point of view, accepting the absurd is a good place to start in one's appreciation of the world aesthetically through the experience of nature (Van Deurzen & Kenward 2005:1). For Camus (1955:7) "everything contributes to spreading confusion", yet a confounding existence is a good reason for expressions in art. He says "[i]f the world were clear, art would not exist" (Camus 1955:63).

Existentialism as a philosophical movement can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Existentialism developed especially as a response to Christian faith. For example, Søren Kierkegaard (2009:177) clearly relates absurdity to God's existence, saying:

So what is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come about in time, that God has come about, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come about just as the single human being, indistinguishable from any other, since all immediate recognisability is pre-Socratic paganism and from the Jewish point of view idolatry.

To the existentialist, religion and religious morality are seen as the legacy of slave morality, mediocrity, weakness, and safety/security, as opposed to personal excellence and free will (Mautner 1996:209).

Furthermore, existentialism focuses strongly on the role of the individual and that for which the individual is personally responsible (Mautner 1996:207). Yet, this personal responsibility embraces all people, not only the self, and in so doing burdens us. Sartre (2007:3) asks “[w]hat do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man [sic] first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards” (see also Kearney & Rainwater 1995:67 - 68). The relevance to art, however, is not necessarily so simple. This is especially true in cases where the artist is the subject of the artwork's existence, as is the case in *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), and artworks, generally speaking, are made for an audience and therefore the individual's (artist's) responsibility is to all.



Fig 8. Bruce Nauman, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67)

The utilisation of absurdity is an act of intentional subversion on Nauman's part in order to establish a sense of playful unease in the viewer. This conscious activity makes his practice all the more incongruent. For example, in *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) (fig 9), Nauman discloses his deceptions by revealing the 'trick' of using chairs to attempt to levitate. Revealing the failure is how Nauman takes responsibility for the absurd attempt.



Fig 9. Bruce Nauman, *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966)

The absurd, as a conceptual structure – as if it were a neurological network running through a body – is important in understanding my interpretation of Nauman's phenomenology. Existentially speaking the paradox of life is found in art - the realisation that the only purpose in life is the one I make for myself. Life, and what we purpose in life, is absurd, and since art is, fundamentally speaking, representational of life, art has a responsibility to the absurd.

2.1.2 Camus and the Absurd

For Camus absurdity is a natural phenomenon that is part of human existence and is to be embraced (Jansen 2013). This is illustrated by his works *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel* (1951). In both these works, he remains “sceptical of conclusions about the meaning of life, yet both works assert objectively valid answers to key questions about how to live” (Aronson 2012). His philosophical works focus on subjects such as death and how it is impossible to know the experience of death while living (Marshall 2000:2). Camus (1955:3) says that “there is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that”.

The many notions of death, especially with respect to suicide not being a viable option in a purposeless world, leads Camus to regard existence as absurd and meaningless, as is evident in his rendition of Sisyphus indefinitely rolling the rock up the hill, only to watch it roll down again (Camus 1955:75; Marshall 2000:2). The absurd must be embraced if we are to find a sense of happiness within it (Aronson 2012). The irrational proposition of this story and its tensional implication is the start of my understanding of the absurd via Camus. He says “the absurd is an experience that must be lived through, a point of departure” (Camus 1991:8). In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus asks the reader to identify with the subject by imagining Sisyphus in ‘harmony’ and not ‘hostility’ (Hall 1960:29), despite the fact that he will continue the repetitive activity of rolling the rock over and over for eternity. This was imposed upon Sisyphus as a punishment by the gods for his deceptions, but Camus (1955:75) concludes “[o]ne must imagine Sisyphus happy”.

Trying to make sense of the world and applying rationality to it is in itself futile. This is evident in Nauman's artworks discussed here and demonstrated by Camus (1955:5) asserting that "[b]eginning to think is beginning to be undermined" - existence is, in essence, contradictory. The absurd is a mirror to our existence, and accepting this becomes, in itself, a reason to live (Camus 1955:25).

Essentially, it seems the human state is no more than tragic. The ontological investigations that we make should lead us to understand that nature is unplanned and unpredictable, but that we should still find value in our existence, as Camus suggests Sisyphus should. In the context of art and particularly in Nauman's work *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) the value of the artist's behaviour is compared to that of a fountain. Because of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) fountains have become synonymous with representations of 'non-art' art object¹⁰. Because of *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4), a dialetheia (a self-referencing paradox¹¹) exists within the art establishment (Priest & Berto 2013). Duchamp (2002:38) said in 1961, of his readymades, "[t]here is an absolute contradiction, but that is what is enjoyable, isn't it? Bringing in the idea of contradiction, the notion of contradiction, which is something that has never really been used, you see?"

¹⁰ In *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (O'Brian 1993:253), Clement Greenberg (1967) says that artists working with objects "commit themselves to the third dimension because it is... a coordinate that art has to share with non-art (as Dada, Duchamp and others already saw)". What Duchamp understood about the readymade was that it lived in this space between art and non-art forever committed to its own paradox.

¹¹ A self-referencing paradox, or the paradox of self-reference, falls into the category of set-theory. Set-theory belongs to the broader philosophical theory of Dialetheia, which is a sentence, statement, or a proposition where the subject can both be itself and its negation in the same context. X and the negation of X are both accurate in a statement. Or it can be said that the sentence is both false and true. Therefore, it is fair to say that Dialetheias are true contradictions (Priest & Berto 2013).

2.1.3 Sartre and the Absurd

Sartre encountered Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology¹² while studying at the French Institute in Berlin (Thomas 2013). Sartre challenges phenomenological methodology by developing ontological accounts of what it means to be human. His existential phenomenology grapples with the unstable co-existence of the empirical and the inevitable freedoms within an apathetic world (Onof [Sa]). Furthermore, Sartre proposed that the natural world can be described in a scientific sense, but the empirical nature of things does not necessarily constitute an understanding thereof. In *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) it is clear that Nauman can eject water from his mouth, as would a sculpture in a fountain (such as in *Fontana di Trevi* (The Trevi Fountain) (1732) (fig 10) [see section 2.2.1]), but this does not scientifically render Nauman's body a fountain. The nature of fountains can be described through Nauman's body but fails to reveal the empirical character of a fountain. For Sartre (2007:3), human "existence precedes essence" as he explains in his lecture 'Existentialism Is a Humanism' (1945). A lack of reasoning is encountered when attempting to gain insight into human existence from a purely scientific platform, and meaning is only gained after the fact. He uses the illustration of the paper knife to illustrate. He explains:

[i]f one considers an article of manufacture as, for example, a book or a paper-knife – one sees that it has been made by an artisan who had a conception of it: and he has paid attention, equally, to the conception of a paper-knife and to the pre-existent

¹² Edmund Husserl's phenomenology is considered one of the most important philosophical influences in the twentieth century (Kockelmans 1994:53). Not engaged in thinking about the metaphysical or theoretical speculations phenomenology, to Husserl, is a scientific investigation. For philosophy to become a rigorous science in its own right it would have to push aside an attitude regarding the nature of things (empirical evidence) and rather embrace phenomenology as a science of consciousness (Kockelmans 1994:53). Phenomenology can be understood as describing the human centred experience of a thing regardless of the gathered scientific data that proves its nature (Kockelmans 1994:53). But, for Heidegger, "phenomenology... is not a descriptive, detached analysis of consciousness. It is a method of access to being" (Korab-Karpowicz, [Sa]).

technique of production which is a part of that conception, and is, at bottom, a formula (Sartre 2007:2).

Human essence, however, differs from that of the article of manufacture, such as the paper-knife. He says “[a]theistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man [sic]...” (Sartre 2007:2). As a human being, I have consciousness and I am therefore free, yet my consciousness and my freedom are only my own and not common to others. Sartre (2007:566) states:

It is freedom which is the foundation of all essence since man [sic] reveals intra-mundane essences by surpassing the world toward his own possibilities. But actually the question is of my freedom. Similarly when I describe consciousness, I could not discuss a nature common to certain individuals but only my particular consciousness, which like my freedom is beyond essence.

According to Sartre, the absurd lies in the ontological response to the world, the result of which is ‘nausea’ and ‘disgust’ (Sartre 1938:21-23). However, occasionally, aesthetic experience is what brings moments of worthiness, where the ‘hero’ stands above the drudgery of the mundane nausea (Sartre 1938:88). The aesthetic experience of *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) (fig 9) reveals the failed attempts of the artist achieving the impossible. It also quickly shows that the artist does not attempt to hide how he tries to convince the viewer of the impossible task. The artwork simultaneously embarrasses and exonerates the artist, making Nauman peculiarly courageous and conceivably a ‘true artist’ in his failure. Notions of a ‘true artist’ in this context are discussed further in Section 2.2.3 and in Section 3.2.

2.1.4 Wittgenstein and the absurd

Wittgenstein (1961:76), in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), emphasises how language (and how we use words) often confound our understanding of the world around us. Although a logical and rational application of language defines the natural world, the way in which we use language can create unusual and confusing perspectives even as it remains logical.

Wittgenstein (1961:76) says, “Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits. We cannot, therefore, say in logic: This and this there is in the world, that there is not”. Emphasising the confusing nature of language and the process of defining absurdity will clarify my stance regarding language in the visual and the literary format and how it relates to Nauman’s practice. The literary rendition, for example in the title of an artwork, is often a repeat of the visual and vice versa, thus creating a back and forth and is, at times, a mere descriptive of the object or image presented. I elaborate on this concept in my comparison between Nauman and Duchamp to further justify the applicable philosophical investigation in Section 3.3.

2.1.5 Meaning in the absurd

According to Heidegger, only that which has no meaning, or where meaning cannot be found becomes absurd. Heidegger (1953:65) states “[t]he absurd does not draw you into itself; rather, of its own nature, it pushes you back. It pushes you back from itself, it directs you to the very thing that you experience as slipping out of meaning”. Nauman ‘pushes you back’ in *The True Artist Helps the world by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1968) (fig 3). The very thing (truth) slips out of meaning as the viewer experiences the

artwork. Questions concerning the meaning or purpose to our existence arise, and thereby our value systems begin to surface. Value is given to an object according to how the said object is perceived and what intentionality¹³ it imparts – Nauman's artworks question merit and the importance we attached to things such as artworks. Finding meaning in something implies significance and significance attribute value to 'discovered' meaning. In his research paper *Symbols and Values: an Initial Study* presented at the 1953 *Symposium of the conference on Science, Religion and Philosophy*, Charles Morris (1953:156) indicates that meaning is "double-faced" and his analytical expression of this is that one side of meaning has "signification" while the other side has "significance" (Morris 1953:563). Signification shows what an object's indicative nature is to other objects like it, whereas significance has to do with the object's value. In a later publication, *Writings on the General Theories of Signs*, Morris (1971:179) says:

[i]n reading a poem in which suffering is presented as of great positive significance, the reader... signifies suffering as having such significance. If he himself accords to suffering the importance signified, he may deliberately seek poems of this kind as a way of evoking, strengthening and interrogating his own attitudes; if such is not the case he, as a reader, nevertheless participates for a moment in a sign-process in which suffering is signified as having positive significance.

Human existence signifies precisely itself, a human existence, but it can only be made significant (have value) because of how we choose to perceive it. "Life has a meaning if we choose to give it one", says Sartre, in *Nausea* (1938:58). We are thrown into a world with no meaning or design (Sartre 1938:2). Difficulties (suffering) are the order of the day – as is evident in Nauman's artworks that constitute his failures, such as

¹³ Intentionality, in this particular case, refers to the ability the mind has to form representations of things and has little to do with the intention to act on something. Things exist purely because they are in the mind (Jacob 2014). Intentionality has to do with how connected to the surrounding world a subject is (Honderich 2014:36-37). It is the ability of the mind to form representations, but for Heidegger intentionality refers to the ability to 'care'. If care is taken or given to something (a thing or a being) the potential for significance (given value) is possible (Heidegger 1953:293). Nauman playfully draws his viewer's attention to the seriousness of what we care for.

Failing to Levitate in the Studio (1966) (fig 9); and in my own artworks, such as *Cutting Corners* (2016) (fig 17) – as human beings try to find their worth in the world. Camus (1955:63) claims that art only exists because the world is confusing and unclear, yet it is acceptable that we extend value to artworks when they echo (or attempt to escape) the difficulties humanity faces from day to day.

It is not unreasonable to state that intentionality is (broadly speaking) the ability of the mind to form representations or particular states of being, such as believing, hoping, or judging (Jacobs 2014). In his publication, *Being and Time* (1953:299), Heidegger refers to intentionality as the ability to 'care'. Adding value to that which exists and how we perceive the world is what adds value to existence, both physically and mentally (Heidegger 1953:299). However, at times, something unusual occurs between the physical world and a cerebral landscape. According to Sartre (1938:65-66), this is where absurdity resides. He writes the following regarding this space between physical existence and attempts at rationalising existence:

The word absurdity is coming to life under my pen; a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it: I thought without words, on things, with things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head [...] without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nauseas, to my own life. In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental Absurdity (Sartre 1938:65-66).

It is paradoxical that the world has nothing rational to offer and that humankind still tries to rationalize it (Camus 1955:15), yet embracing the absurd leaves an occasional sense of harmony with the world, moments where a shared experience with nature is extraordinary and sublime (Deranty 2015). It is through art that the experience shared is reflected upon, such as the mirror that reflects the absurdity of life for Camus, or the key to existence for Sartre. It all returns to a fundamental absurdity like water from a fountain that returns on itself.

2.2 FOUNTAINS IN CONTEXT

In this section, I discuss fountains in the context of the title of this dissertation, *Bruce Nauman: The Artist is an Absurd Fountain*. The fountain is elementary as it signifies the cyclical nature of existence and the reoccurrence of absurdity in human expression. The repetitive nature of the artist's behaviour expresses the absurdity of the artist's practice. The repetitive process when making art is discussed in this dissertation as it pertains to the cyclical nature of fountains. I will firstly discuss a historical background to the fountain to stress the importance of fountains and the sustainability and basic survival of communities. Maurus Servius Honoratus (1471)¹⁴, an Italian Grammarian in the fourth century AD, said, "*Nullus enim fons non sacer*" translated, "there is no spring which is not sacred" (global.britannica.com 1998 Sv "fountain"). The significance of fountains changed due to the advancements in water supply systems and plumbing technology and by the end of the nineteenth century rendered the value of the fountain to monuments or decorative features in towns and cities and no longer exclusively to its necessity (Ghisi 2015:2314). It is then essential to look at the legend of Juan Ponce De Leon and the myth of the *Fountain of Youth* (1513), and its bearing on the narrative that flowed through history, its influence on religion and the "sacred" (Greenspan 2013). The fountain becomes an object that carries with it historical and mythical concepts that formulate ideas of 'truth'. These truths become absurd in the variety of ways they are used in art that expresses the human condition, as evidenced in figure 1, 7, 11, 12 13, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20, where I consider how fountains are metaphorically used to speak of existence and human

¹⁴ Maurus Servius Honoratus (1471) was regarded in the late fourth-century as the most learned scholar in Italy of his generation. His greatest achievement was his works of significant commentary on Virgil, a first century Roman poet, best known for the *Aeneid*, which was unfinished at the time of Virgil's death in c. 30 AD (global.britannica.com 1998).

behaviour. The fountain is often compared to Freud's interconnectivity and activities between the conscious and subconscious mind (Funderburk 2009:22).

Furthermore, for the sake of comparison, I consider Calder's *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5) and its emphasis on death in opposition to life-sustaining fountains. Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) will be briefly discussed here, but an in-depth analysis and comparison to Nauman's fountains will be made in the next chapter. The fountain has been a significant symbol of subversion in art over the last hundred years, and I discuss its significance to justify the statement that 'the true artist is an absurd fountain'.

2.2.1 Historical Background of Fountains



Fig 10. Nicola Salvi, *Fontana di Trevi* (The Trevi Fountain) (1732)

Understanding the concepts of the existence of fountains in history assists in understanding their value within the establishment of art. Fountains are significant contributions to social development, the structuring of communities, and town

planning. As illustrated in the aforementioned examples fountains are interesting metaphors for human behaviour and necessity. According to an article titled 'Short Global History of Fountains' (Ghisi 2015:2315) "[f]ountains were also introduced in several regions as decorations and to celebrate their builders, besides being sources of drinking water".

Art and fountains have a significant historical relationship. As time passed and the functionalities of fountains were adjusted and developed, no longer posing serious mechanical problems, artists were invited to make these public places aesthetically pleasing by decorating and adorning them with socially relevant symbols. For example, the famous *Fontana di Trevi* (The Trevi Fountain) (1732) (fig 10), is a Baroque fountain situated in Rome. Designed by Nicola Salvi in 1732 (Pastirik 2016) the *Trevi Fountain* (1732) (fig 10) is adorned with sculptures of mythological gods and creatures.

The word 'fountain' is derived from the Latin word *fontes*, the general name given to both natural and artificially constructed water sources for the supply of water to a community. These water sources were not just used for drinking, but for bathing, washing and ritualistic practices, such as to make a 'wish' or used for 'holy rites' (Ghisi 2015:2314 – 2315). With bronze statues, stone masks of heroes, gods and animals in the Pagan-Christian cultures, and elaborate textile and ceramic designs in the Islamic world the aesthetic value of fountains played a significant role in the uplifting and sustainability of communities (Ghisi 2015:2315 – 2316). By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fountains were utilised in celebratory events to mark these occasions, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the necessity of most fountains was replaced by the advent of modern plumbing. The advances in water supply technologies rapidly improved and supplied water to various destinations within cities

for multiple purposes assigning the value of fountains to their entertainment and aesthetic qualities (Ghisi 2015:2316).

In 1513 Ponce de Leon, the Spanish explorer set out to locate the *Fountain of Youth*. The legend built around Ponce de Leon is clouded with speculation, furthering the mythical narrative that already existed regarding the *Fountain of Youth* (Greenspan 2013). The average fountain already supplies life-sustaining water, but imagine if it were possible for a fountain to give water that sustained one's life eternally. The myth of the *Fountain of Youth* (1513) claims that drinking from it will heal the sick and reverse the aging process, an escape from the clutches of death (Greenspan 2013). Because of its metaphysical qualities, the value of the *Fountain of Youth* (1513) is much greater than any ordinary fountain. However, the legend has no true value as it is a myth. Its mystical properties, however, allows the imagination to explore the possibilities of such an object in existence, even if the rational mind knows that such a fountain cannot exist. The *Fountain of Youth* (1513) becomes a fairy-tale, yet the legend continues to live on perpetuating a worthiness that is embedded in its own absurdity.

2.2.2 Perspectives of Fountains in Literature

Following the contextualising of the relevant history of fountains in this section, I reflect on literature where fountains have been applied in a metaphorical manner in relation to human existence and human activity within art.

In his essay 'The Origins of the Work of Art', Heidegger (1950:31) makes reference to a poem by C.F. Meyer called, *The Roman Fountain* (Belmore 1956:49):

High climbs the jet and, falling, fills
up to the brim the marble rounds
that overflow in veils and frills,
into a second basin's grounds;
the second, now too rich, forsakes
its waves and on the third one spills
and equally it gives and takes
and stirs and stills.

For Heidegger the poem holds aesthetic significance because it suggests to him a historical decline of “being” (*sein*) (Thomson 2015) and human forgetfulness - the “fall”, suggesting a continuation of the forgetting of the “origin” (*Ur-sprung*) (Thomson 2015), such as the cyclical nature of a fountain. It also broadly suggests to Heidegger a hope for art to assist in introducing new historical beginnings (Thomson 2015). The perpetuation of a historical cycle is non-progressive (in the sense that nothing really changes) and the realisation thereof accentuates purposelessness and the ‘nausea’ of existence, to which Sartre refers.

To Nauman, the re-contextualising of the fountain in conceptual art is of primary importance. In the case of Duchamp, an object that exists as a receptacle for urinary waste is comparable to a fountain. A fountain is an object that brings satisfaction and sustenance to the body and mind, but Duchamp manages to subvert this in *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4). It is not unreasonable to state that a urinal is the opposite of a fountain. It catches and drains away undesirable bodily fluids. The fountain gives forth clean consumable fluids. The mind compares these opposites that are now presented to the viewer as one-and-the-same object, yet simultaneously Duchamp does not conceal the fact that they are not the same. In fact, the difference between the two objects is emphasised by the comparison. Duchamp achieves a new ‘historical beginning’ of fountains in art emphasising the forgotten intentions of the fountain in history.

In contrast, Sigmund Freud (2009:22) says, “The conscious mind may be compared to a fountain playing in the sun and falling back into the great subterranean pool of the subconscious from which it rises”. Regarding Freud’s psychoanalytical theories, Jason Funderburk (2009:25) explains in his essay, ‘The Great Subterranean Pool of the Subconscious’, that what lies in the deepest subconscious mind reveals itself occasionally through a reader’s interpretation of texts. The re-emerging memories “discover the reality and truth behind the vagueness of words and idea” (Funderburk 2009:25). In other words, the conscious mind will occasionally bring forth thoughts that are dormant in the subconscious, refer to them for clarity and let them settle once more in the subconscious from where they came. Freud’s comparison of the conscious mind to a fountain suggests that this thought behaviour is cyclical when stimulated by the reading of various texts. In searching for ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ (Funderburk 2009:25) these interpretations of texts are not confined to writing, such as in Heidegger’s interpretation of Meyer’s poem, but also exist for the interpretations of conceptual artworks, such as Calder’s *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5), Craig-martin’s *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6), Nauman’s *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), and my own works, such as *(over)look (under)stand* (2016) (fig 13), and *(sub)merge* (2016) (fig 14).

Like Duchamp, but fifty years later, Nauman seditiously adopted the fountain into his art making, which allows the spectator to question the object’s function in art. The emphasis on the fountain in *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) is subversively reflected by turning the artist into the object that performs the function Duchamp spoke of metaphorically, yet paradoxically. Here Nauman allows that which lies in the “subterranean pool” (Freud cited in Funderburk 2009:22) to once again resurface into the conscious mind of the viewer.

2.2.3 Fountains in Art

Fountain (1917) (fig 4) was signed by one of Duchamp's pseudonyms, R. Mutt and dated 1917 in black paint (Godfrey 1998:6). It was placed on its back, at ninety degrees from its intended position, suggesting that its function is no longer a receptacle. The plumbing was removed from the piece, perhaps suggesting that its title is figurative, as there is no way in which liquid can enter or exit the urinal. The object was not literally converted into a fountain but demands that the viewer makes a conceptual shift from urinal to fountain. In his important work *Conceptual Art*, Godfrey (1998:6) says "... the readymade, [*Fountain* (1917) (fig 4)] is presented not as a statement, 'This is a urinal', but as a question or challenge: 'Could this urinal be an artwork? Imagine it as art' ...an artwork in its own right". But the urinal was also introduced into art as a fountain.

In 1937 at the World's Fair in Barcelona Calder created *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5). The use of mercury flowing through it reflects the many deaths of slave and criminal workers at the Spanish Almaden Mercury Mine who died from mercury poisoning (atlasobscura.com Sv "mercury"). *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5) is clearly a subversion of the traditions of a fountain but exists within the expected parameters of what constitutes a modern artwork and its aesthetic qualities. Here a fountain is appropriated into art yet remains a fountain as was intended by the artist.

Duchamp, on the other hand, subverted ideas of what qualifies something as art or non-art (Judovitz 1995:114). Duchamp selected an everyday object, a urinal, as an artwork, and in so doing, inadvertently redefined art. The intentions of Duchamp to subvert conventional perceptions succeeded in confounding the art establishment and

shifted the aesthetic parameters that existed at the time. Regarding aesthetic value and ideas concerning beauty Danto (1981:93) expressed of *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4), “what we appreciate in artworks is just what we would appreciate in non-artworks when in fact, they happen materially to be the same, as *Fountain* is from countless urinals...”, as if the quality of an artwork could be reduced to a “sensory examination of an object” (Danto 1981:98). According to Danto (1981:94), what distinguishes *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) from other urinals is that “the work itself has properties that the urinals themselves lack: it is daring, impudent, irreverent, witty and clever.” Furthermore, he states, “[n]o sensory examination of an object will tell me that it is an artwork, since quality for quality it may be matched by an object that is not one, so far at least the qualities to which the normal senses are responsive are concerned.” (Danto 1981:99). To put it simply, what distinguishes an object as an artwork from its non-art counterparts would be the intention of the artist and the context it is placed in, which links to the previous discussion in Section 2.1.5 regarding meaning (Heidegger 1953:65), significance and value (Sartre 1938:58 and Morris 1953:563), and truth we make or place on things such as artworks (Section 2.1.1. [Rorty 1989:7]).

Arguably, if this is the case with a urinal, then the same could be said for any other object in existence. If fountains are primarily functional objects and one is appropriated into art the conceptual properties of the selected fountain distinguish it from other fountains. This is only true to the conceptual nature of *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) as it was only called ‘Fountain’ and is not physically a fountain. In the case of *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), where Nauman physically steps into the role of a fountain, allowing the viewer to recall from the “subterranean pool of the subconscious” (Freud 2009:22) all other fountains whether found inside or outside of art.

The living body of Nauman is not only an artwork but a fountain, a functional object in its own right. If one is to imagine Nauman as a fountain and as an artwork, then one can imagine him as Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4). Like many of his contemporaries Nauman's work was about everyday activity and failure, but what Godfrey (1998:128) says about Nauman – that is most noteworthy in the context of this dissertation – that distinguished Nauman from other conceptual artists was about “the connection, or disconnection, between thought and body ...an examination of bodily experience”. Godfrey (1998:127) also states that “Nauman is putting centre stage the whole problematic nature of truth-telling by asking such questions as ‘What does this mean?’ ‘Is it true?’ ‘How do we know that it is true?’ ‘Could it be metaphorically true?’”. When looking at his various works where Nauman directly refers to the ‘true artist’, in particular, *A True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1), it is clear that to Nauman the question of the ‘true’ is an absurd question that most likely has no definitive answer, yet it must be asked. The ‘true’, and its connections to the fountain reside in Nauman's metaphorical connections to *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4), as well as the tradition of fountains carried through history. I discuss these ideas further in Chapter Three.

In conclusion, understanding the profound influence of *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) on the art establishment, and the intention of Duchamp in the making thereof elucidates Nauman's choice to create a self-portrait that shows himself as the artist as a fountain. Because of Duchamp's contribution, the metaphor of the fountain carries complex connotation in conceptual art and therefore Nauman is simultaneously commenting on art and on himself as an artist by becoming a fountain. Danto's reasoning about *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) justifies the significant use of fountains in art. Godfrey's arguments, regarding the question of the ‘true’ and the artist's experience in body and

thought connectivity, further establishes the relevance of Nauman's conceptual approach and his significance in challenging established art practices before the 1960s.

Existential aesthetics –particularly in the case of Sartre's (1943:738) arguments regarding freedom to choose and existential discontent, and Camus' (1955:9) understanding of harmonious responsibility – reminds us of how art is a representation of existence. It is one of the ways humans have an expression of their freedom, to choose how they exist, how we engage with the world. It is an example of free human activity. Art is therefore often devoted to expressing “the basic absurdity of the human condition” (Esslin 1965:13). Therefore art is able to reveal the potential of how an ethical and political perspective on our existence is played out, for example (Deranty 2015).

To Sartre (1938:88) and Camus (1991:8) what matters is in which manner we perceive our experiences of the world. The way in which human experience and the reflection of those experiences play off against one another, be it in art or other forms of representation, becomes relevant. It is not only about experiencing one's day-to-day life but the level of contemplation about experiences that holds a sense of value. Therefore the absurd gains a sense of meaning in the work of Nauman and in my own work. These points about absurdity and the 'true' – how they relate to fountains, and in art practices – are discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3: BRUCE NAUMAN

In this chapter, the reader is introduced firstly to a background on Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) and its inadvertent influence on Nauman's artworks. This is done in conjunction with the theoretical underpinning as articulated by the first research question of this dissertation:

[W]hich theoretical influences have informed Nauman's criticality towards social constructs and the art establishment; and therefore what has informed my critical viewpoint regarding the 'true' and the absurd?

Although Nauman's fountain artworks from the 1960s, such as *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) and *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1), are key representations to be discussed, referrals are made to other artworks in his oeuvre. The purpose of investigating these artworks is to substantiate the argument that Nauman's work is rooted in a dedicated practice of the absurd. In response to the second research question, pinpointing how the body represents the incongruent nature of life is tackled here. For further corroboration, an investigation into persons who influenced Nauman is necessary, such as the Austrian-British philosopher Wittgenstein and his solicitations of language. It is important to make the connection and comparison between Nauman's *Self-Portrait as a fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) and Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) to support the title and crux of this dissertation – of which Nauman is a primary influence in my understanding that I too can be a 'true artist', and can investigate in what ways my own body represents an absurd fountain. At some point, there may be a moment when an incongruent reality is met with clarity through the body's activity. By simply presenting the absurd in life through art I already engage in purpose, and therefore this questioning in itself is meaningful, absurdity and meaning can co-exist.

3.1. BACKGROUND

As aforementioned in 1917 Duchamp's introduction of *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4), a urinal, and everyday object inadvertently redefined art. Placing it in the gallery emphasized that it is no longer like other urinals, but had now been misappropriated to function as an action that questioned what constitutes an artwork. This, of course, is justified only by the context it was usurped to, the context of art, as all other urinals without plumbing, found in a plumber's supply shop appear to be the same. It is not a urinal's sensory properties – what it looks like – that makes *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) an artwork, but the vast history in aesthetics that it shares with art and because of its absorption into the art establishment (in spite of Duchamp's original intention to question art).

Danto (1981:93-94) explicates the following about these sensory properties:

[n]o: the properties of the object deposited in the artworld it shares with most items of industrial porcelain while the properties *Fountain* possesses as an artwork it shared with the Julian Tomb by Michelangelo and the Great Perseus of Cellini. If what made *Fountain* an artwork were only the qualities it shared with urinals, the question would arise as to what makes it an artwork and not those.

As Godfrey (1998:6) articulates (as previously stated in Chapter Two) that the emphasis on *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) is not that it 'is a urinal', but rather challenges the viewer to imagine this particular urinal as an artwork – and by its title, a *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4). Yet, it still leaves it unjustified as an artwork. It is not difficult to imagine the urinal as a fountain, even if it is merely an ironic understanding, but it remains challenging to imagine this particular urinal as art and not the same as all other urinals.

Danto (1981:5) elaborates:

[f]or the Institutional Theory of Art leaves unexplained, even if it can account for why such a work as Duchamp's *Fountain* might have been elevated from a mere thing to an artwork, why that particular urinal should have sustained so impressive a promotion, while other urinals, like it in every obvious respect, should remain in an ontologically degraded category.

At the time Duchamp's paradox was difficult to accept, particularly by the institutions that claimed authority as the electors of high art (Cairns 2012). With the entry of *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) into the *Society of Independent Artists* exhibition (1917), Duchamp's intention was to subvert and undermine the art establishment questioning the elitist notions that determine what art is (Gopnik 2011). This critical questioning becomes one of the core characteristics and remains essential in contemporary art.

As previously stated, what is also important is that the urinal was not literally converted into a fountain, but by calling it something other than what it appears to be, elicits a comparison between the two objects in the mind of the viewer. Duchamp's turn away from the realm of aesthetics to a conceptual paradigm within art, moved art away from a visual satisfaction to one rooted in critical thought. "I by contrast see Duchamp as the artist who above all has sought to produce an artwork without aesthetics, and to replace the sensuous with the intellectual" (Danto 2005:96). Duchamp was making 'non-art' (Judovitz 1995:114) in order to challenge the *status quo* of art.

Understanding the profound influence of *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) on the art establishment, and the perceived intention of Duchamp in the making of this artwork elucidates Nauman's choice to create a self-portrait that shows himself as a fountain. It is due to Duchamp's gesture that the conceptual embodiment of the fountain has carried complex and far-reaching connotation into conceptual art. Therefore Nauman, in *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), is simultaneously commenting on art – not only as a practice but also as an institution – and on himself as an artist by embodying a fountain.

In the mid-1960's Nauman's interactions and collaborations with language, performance, new mediums, and documentation, such as film, were fast becoming the foundational elements in art practice particularly in conceptual art (Schellekens 2009). Nauman employed the above against a backdrop of simple human behaviour and activity. For example, he was concerned with psychologically understanding what he was doing in the studio, particularly when he found himself in the 1960s with little money to purchase materials for making work (Plagens 2014:72). Questions such as: 'how should I behave? How should I think? How should I feel?' would be asked against the fundamental understanding of himself as an artist in the studio, not necessarily doing anything specifically artistic in the conventional sense of the word.

It is against this background that *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) was created. His actions as a fountain in *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) are expressed through a photograph where the artist acts out a somewhat childlike activity. The action of squirting water from one's mouth is reminiscent of a child playing in the bathtub, juvenile perhaps, but a behaviour that is relatable for the viewer. The title, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966//67) (fig 8), directly refers to Nauman's intention for this to be seen as art, as self-portraits are by definition artworks, yet the action is one of 'non-art'. The artwork is also reminiscent of fountains that are located in city squares, often containing sculptural elements and figures where water continuously flows from orifices in the sculpted bodies, such as in the *Fontana di Trevi* (1732) (Fig 10). If the viewer is initially confused by the presentation of the idea (of the artist as a fountain), perhaps Nauman has succeeded in his intention. However, there is enough information to beguile the viewer's thinking about the image presented, despite the initial absurd experience.

The intrigue for understanding or to make meaning of an event is in the nature of humankind. In Sartre's (2001:3) words, "man [sic] first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards". Nauman's self-exploration, and that of his non-art activity in the studio is a critical reflection of the artist's body that has to produce art. One could perceive it as a sensible response to a non-sensible condition of the artist as the source of creative outpouring. These are fundamental catalysts that allowed Nauman to continue working in ways that are true to his phenomenological practices.

3.2. ABSURDITY IN NAUMAN

In *The True Artist*, Peter Plagens (2014:66) states that Nauman "knew that an object, in fact, loses much of its power if [pretending to look] like something else, i.e., having visual expression or implied visual referents, doesn't really matter". Danto (1981:111) claims that "whatever we are to say about aesthetic responses, it is possible to imagine that works with a common material counterpart elicit very different responses". If one agrees with Plagens and Danto, when referring to the qualitative distinction between ordinary objects and their counterpart art objects, the difference comes with the appropriation of the object into an art context. The same argument can be made for the artist when the artist becomes the object appropriated into the artwork. The qualities are different when the artist becomes an artwork from when the artist is not an artwork. Yet the artist is always an artist whether in the artwork or not, or in the studio or not. Nauman (2014:72) explains this comparison when he states, "If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio you sit in a chair or pace around. And then the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around the studio". It is a back and forth that has no reasoning within itself. Imagine a

text that says, “This is true →” that points to a text that says, “← That’s a lie” that points back at “This is true→”. It is a true contradiction, in a sense a dialetheia (Priest & Berto 2013).¹⁵

It can be argued that Nauman’s *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1), refers to Tristan Tzara’s *Dada Manifesto* (2003:4) which states, “to strip one’s church of every useless and unwieldy accessory; to spew out like a luminous cascade any offensive or loving thought, or to cherish it - with the lively satisfaction that it’s all precisely the same thing”. I argue that Nauman’s oeuvre endorses the same attitudes.

The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade) (1966) (fig 1), consists of a large window or wall shade, resembling those hanging in shop windows with text advertising the shop’s latest product pricing. The words, ‘the true artist is an amazing luminous fountain’, are printed on the outer parameter of the shade on all four sides. Nauman is mimicking a Dadaist ideal in this artwork by placing the text on a window or wall shade, something that resembles an everyday object, unobtrusive and ordinary (Lewallen 2007:252). A mundane object exhibited in an art space suggests an elevation of that object to ‘high art’ elitism, but when adopting a Dadaist or Duchampian viewpoint, it simultaneously strips art of its status. In spite of the text alluding to modernist notions of the role of the ‘true artist’, the elitism is contradicted when placed on a seemingly arbitrary object that bears little importance to the preservation of high art inimitable/exclusive art standards. Nauman declares

¹⁵ For example, the liar paradox is the easiest of self-referencing paradoxes to understand. It is self-referencing because it is both true and false at the same time. If I were to state, “this statement is a lie”. A question is raised whether or not the statement is true. If the statement is true then it must be a lie, but if the statement is a lie then what has been stated must be true (Beall & Glansberg 2014).

himself a 'true artist' when he makes *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), because he creates an ironic parody by acting out what he claims in *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1), and furthermore blends the real and the fictitious when doing so.

Failing to levitate in the studio (1966) (fig 9), a double-exposed black and white photograph of Nauman attempting to balance himself between two chairs is indicative of his satirical understanding of contradictory states in his practice. He fails, expectedly, at achieving something that is impossible to achieve in the first place, yet documenting the attempt and turning it into an artwork becomes necessary. Multiple absurdities are contained in this work. For example; Nauman's approach to making art is the documentation of his own actions; and if considered from a traditional perspective, the preposterousness/incongruity of those actions. He claims to know what a 'true artist' must be and performs the actions of this 'true artist', but it fails to convince aesthetically and conceptually. Of course, this is precisely Nauman's intention, an intention to fall short of the somewhat bold and abstract claims, because Nauman understands that they are in contradiction to his own ideas of an artist.



Fig 11. Bruce Nauman, *A Rose has no Teeth* (1965)

Titles in artworks act as pointers assisting the viewer with the reading of the work. In *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), an embodiment of meaning is in the title. Nauman titled a work *A Rose Has No Teeth* (1965) (fig 11), after a theoretical argument regarding rational as opposed to absurd propositions in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). The bronze plaque, curved to wrap around a tree and embossed with the words 'A Rose Has No Teeth' indicates how Nauman thinks about the relationship between the art object and language. For Wittgenstein, the statement is an absurd yet truthful one that needs no justification within itself. Wittgenstein (2010:223) says "[a] new-born child has no teeth. A goose has no teeth. A rose has no teeth. This last description at any rate – one would like to say – is obviously true!" A child has no teeth but will gain teeth as it grows. A goose has no teeth but can bite behaving as if it has teeth. Of course, a rose has no teeth and will not grow to have them at any point, nor does it behave as if it has teeth. By putting two unrelated subjects together, such as roses and teeth, the imagination may formulate images in the mind of the strangeness of the idea. It is not a false statement, but an

absurd and provocative one nonetheless, and Nauman – through reference to Wittgenstein – pushes concepts “to the point where logic and language break down” (Lewallen 2007:42). Using the word ‘fountain’, whether to extract meaning from the readymade or to rid it of meaning, eludes to more than just the object presented.

Nauman’s approach in the text based piece *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1), for example, holds enough interest and strangeness for a viewer to formulate images in her mind and question the statement. However, the statement falls victim to its own ludicrous associations causing a similar absurdity found in Wittgenstein’s (2010:223) statement “a rose has no teeth”.

3.3 ABSURDITY IN THE FOUNTAIN

Fountains have a long standing relationship with art (as discussed in section 2.2.1) and are symbolic of multiple idioms and ideas that extend far into archived understandings of the functionality and aesthetics of fountains. When Nauman decided to use a fountain to underpin his actions he also created links to the existent consciousness of other fountains found all over the world. The viewer, on encountering *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), may extract experiences and knowledge of other fountains in the reading of Nauman’s representation. The viewer would have a similar recollection of fountains on an encounter with Calder’s *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5), but there are enormous differences in the intentions of Calder and Nauman. The *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5) is using the fountain ironically as a symbol of death, not death in a general sense, but as stated earlier, specifically the deaths of the mine workers at the Almaden Mercury Mines (atlasobscura.com). Calder subverts the

fountain that traditionally symbolises life and converts it to a giver of death. Although ironic, it remains in the tradition of fountains in art. *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), on the other hand, subverts the symbolic nature of the fountain not by changing the substance moving through the fountain, but by changing the essence of the object that transports the life-giving water. Nauman's body becomes the fountain, but the very meaning of 'fountain' is challenged, because it no longer needs to appear as a fountain or function as one traditionally. Yet in the case of *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) Nauman seems to mimic – and in a sense mock – the tradition of sculptural fountains of old, such as *Fontana di Trevi* (1732) (Fig 10). He is not forsaking all embodied meaning in 'fountain', but he is altering it, bestowing it with a re-embodiment to physically adopt the properties of 'fountain'. Furthermore, the purpose of being the fountain is not simply to represent/signify a fountain, it is in all respects challenging a tradition of aesthetics in art.

In 1973 Craig-Martin created *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6). The artwork looks nothing like an oak tree and looks precisely like a glass of water on a glass shelf accompanied by a text (fig 7). According to the text (fig 7) of questions and answers that accompany the glass of water as part of the artwork, it is clearly and justifiably an oak tree. Also, it is not just any oak tree, but one specifically made by Craig-Martin. Sartre (2007:3) explains that if 'existence precedes essence' then humankind is free to choose their essence, the purpose of their existence. Craig-Martin explains in the text (fig 7) for *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6) that just because the work appears as a glass of water, it does not change the fact that the artist altered its physical properties. Conceptually, Craig-Martin chose to amend the essence of the already existing object. As Craig-Martin expresses in *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6) Nauman continues to be a fountain until he decides to change that.

An Oak Tree (1973) (fig 6) is not that different to *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) where Duchamp conceptually changed the properties of a urinal into an artwork, except that Craig-Martin philosophically justifies it (see fig 7). As Godfrey (1998:248) explains about *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6) “the point was no longer to say something new, but rather to say it precisely”. It is a logical absurdity, as is a self-referencing paradox (dialetheia). It is both a glass of water and an oak tree at the same time. Nauman’s fountain qualities are preserved in the form of a photograph, even if he chooses to become something else. He is both an artist as a fountain and a fountain as an artist. It is a paradox that continuously repeats on itself¹⁶. Although not all fountains are absurd Nauman’s fountains are deliberately intentioned to be so, similarly as absurd as it is to try and justify what a ‘true artist’ is.

In *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), Nauman reminding us of the original intention of Duchamp, that art is more about contemplation when confronted with an artwork than about whether or not we enjoy it on a mere aesthetic level. Duchamp was saying something about the fundamental ontology of art – in its paradoxical nature art should not be taken so seriously. For Nauman, the spitting of water from the mouth, like pissing into the urinal, is showing the artworld how absurd it is and does so by making his own fountain more peculiar.

¹⁶ The action of repeating oneself emerges later in Nauman’s practice when he revisits the fountains a number of times, such as in *Three Heads Fountain* in 2005 and again in *One Hundred Fish Fountain* in 2005 (see <http://mocoloco.com/one-hundred-fish-fountain> for images of these fountains). In both cases Nauman does not physically take on the properties of a fountain but allows elements from his personal life and activities, outside of the studio to adopt fountain properties, such as relationships with friends or pleasant fishing experiences “as a child ,with his father, and later, with his Chigo friend and dealer, the late Donald Young” (Plagens 1994:212).

The absurd as a conceptual tool exists in the paradox most effectively when what is being made is simultaneously considered art and not art, or true and not true. Of *The True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1), Nauman (2007:72) says “on the one hand I believe it... it’s true and not true at the same time. It depends on how you interpret it and how seriously you take yourself. For me it’s still a very strong thought”. Engaging conceptually with the fountain, adopting its inherent, historical and functional qualities, makes Nauman’s exploration of the artist’s role in art a bewildering experience for the viewer, reminding them of what Duchamp achieved fifty years earlier.

In *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/7) (fig 8), Nauman immerses himself into the artwork not only because it is a self-portrait, himself being the subject, but also as the object of investigation, a fountain. As said in the introduction the action of spitting from the mouth seems immature and Nauman produces an action that is frivolous and institutes it as art. However, art is traditionally understood as something important – it is to be taken seriously. Here Nauman twists traditional ways of seeing and understanding art ever so slightly – he is, in all seriousness, making elements of art seem ironic and absurd. One of his approaches to this ‘twisting’ of traditions is eliminating the aesthetic qualities that had come to be expected in the art establishment, as I point out earlier in section 3.2 regarding Duchamp’s aesthetic choices. Through analysing *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) and making comparisons between Duchamp and Nauman’s artworks I have demonstrated how the absurd, as a lens through which to view the world, becomes a critical approach to art. In this section of the dissertation, I have explained the value of contradictions (dialetheia) by comparing the works in discussion with Craig-Martin’s *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6) and *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5) by Calder. The reflexive contemplation of the absurd is evident

in Nauman's solicitation of language, deliberate application of contradictions, the existence of failure, and a disregard for a traditional aesthetic.

In this chapter, I have shown how the absurd is a conceptual framework used by Nauman, particularly the absurd as theorised by existential philosophy. In this regard, I link Nauman's conceptual approach to the theoretical arguments of Camus and Sartre (as discussed more comprehensively in Chapter Two). Indicating the mechanism through which the body becomes an absurd fountain or object in the context of art presents the incongruent reality that includes both absurdity and meaning. By simply presenting absurdity in life through art already proposes that we reflect on life. This questioning in itself is a meaningful act which is incongruent with the absurd. Therefore one can propose that the recurrence of the fountain in Nauman's artworks, as 'rethinking', is simultaneously meaningful and a dialetheia.

In the next chapter, I explore the notion/concept of the absurd as a lens through which to view the world. I will discuss my own work in that regard and make reference to Nauman and Duchamp to substantiate my comparisons.

CHAPTER 4: ALEX TRAPANI

In this chapter, I investigate my own thoughts about art, and my reflection thereof relates to the conceptual stances that Nauman takes when making art. This dissertation is written in relation to my exhibition held in April 2016 titled *Neither Art Nor Art*.¹⁷ Both the exhibition and the dissertation investigate the existence of conundrums in conceptual engagements with art. My intention was to indicate that absurdities resulting from ambiguities and contradictions are the elements that connected the viewers to the artworks. As previously discussed Nauman's *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966-67) (fig 8) confronts Marcel Duchamp's artworks, specifically as it pertains to the paradoxical spirit of art. As Nauman comments on Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4), so I comment on Nauman's fountains. More specifically, I interrogate the artist's worth as mediated by precarious recognition or by being perceived as making a contribution to the art establishment, and by extension, of life in general. In my exhibition, I reveal aspects of insecurity and a lack of self-confidence of the artist functioning within art and the world around me. This is in contrast to both Nauman and Duchamp's ostensible persuasions of confidence, which appear to radiate from their artworks.

Neither Art Nor Art (2016) appropriates the fountain as representative of the cyclical mentality of a productive, equitable, and sustainable system i.e. a system that has worked successfully for centuries. In this cyclical sense, a fountain reflects when art is being made about art and about behaviours within art. Art needs no justification for its existence; it just is, and the praxis itself is without consciousness, as is a fountain. What I mean by this is that art is part of the human condition but is not cognitive of its

¹⁷ UNISA Art Gallery, Pretoria

existence as I am of my own. It is not a being, but I am a being that exists within art – art is non-conscious, it is the artist that is perceived to possess consciousness therein. A fountain is also without consciousness. When I, as a conscious being, behave as a fountain I comment on this ‘non-conscious’ state. An artist has consciousness and choosing to behave as a non-conscious entity implies self-reflection and a paradoxical metaphor. *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) is reflective in that the subject (the artist) becomes the object (the fountain) and this self-containment implies sustainability because of the indicative actions. To support the claim that the fountain reflects repetitive behaviour, represents the body, and supports a worldview of the fundamentality of the absurd in art, I compare Nauman’s artworks discussed in Chapter 3 with my own. I indicate my viewpoints regarding the ‘true artist’ and my criticality towards social constructs and the art establishment.

As indicated earlier, the fountain implies a containment of water. Water is a symbol of sustenance. It is imperative to our survival. Not only is water symbolic of cleansing and a life sustaining substance but, nonetheless, inanimate. Water is paradoxical in itself. It gives life, yet is only ‘alive’ when it is put into motion. However, water also has all the attributes to take life, for example in drowning. It too has no consciousness. Water is made animate through objects like fountains, and the fountain implies the longevity of life. Symbolically water can also be seen as the fluids that lubricate the behaviours and actions I choose to perform in my exhibition. Keeping these actions animated is significant in the nurturing of art and, paradoxically, the activities I express can also imply ‘drowning’, such as being engulfed, submerged, and water-logged– the demise of the artist.

In the case of *Neither Art Nor Art* (2016) movement is cyclical, which is integral to the sustainability of a significant art practice. I refer to Sartre, Camus, and Wittgenstein to substantiate the applications of the absurd as discussed in Chapter Two. The conscious choice to behave un-consciously and repetitively in video performances is seemingly superfluous. The application of apparent arbitrary conceptual choices is discussed in the context of the absurd. When Nauman adopted the window or wall shade to express that 'the true artist is an amazing luminous fountain' he chose quotidian object to do so. Introducing subjects into the artworks that are not usually considered relevant to art but are executed as if they were worthy of art bestrides the valuable and the insignificant. In some of the performances where I work exceptionally hard at nothing important (fig 13) also straddles this line between relevance and purposelessness, and is indicative of the lengths to which the artist might go to establish a sense of prodigiousness in the artworld. In the context of absurdity, I consider such applications as a conceptual practice that contemplates the body as incongruous: the body of the artist as a 'useless' subject/object to society, and yet the creative intellectual body of the artist as a life-sustaining critic giving meaning to the everyday existence through the absurd.

4.1 TRAPANI IN CONTEXT

4.1.1 Behaviour, memory and misunderstanding

My art reflects what I think about the world and how I behave in the world, i.e. my "being-in-the-world" (Sartre 1943:331, Heidegger 1953:39). Thinking influences behaviour and since I see art as a way of being, my praxis embodies a critical investigation of my own behaviour. As a result, I embody a subversive temperament, often toward my own behaviour within the context of society and the art establishment.

This subversive disposition is embedded in the absurd as a means of investigation. The results are records of the familiar, yet the activities captured or projected are incongruous. *Neither Art Nor Art* (2016) explores aspects of human nature as it pertains to finding meaning in achievement and significance in the day to day living, most specifically in art. Efforts to establish purpose in life affirms a sense of worthiness. However it is often accompanied with a level of absurdity in behaviour when reflected upon (Sartre 1938:21-23).

Art of a conceptual nature holds relevance in a contemporary context not because it is logically justifiable or holds rationality, but because it is a reflection of the peculiarity of existence. Godfrey (1998:387) states that “conceptual art is most fruitful when conscious of its own contradictions” making it aware of the fallibility of art and the artist. An artwork in its full realisation exists, regardless of whether or not it is understood. A paradox is found because even if I misunderstand the reason an artwork occurs it still exists, but it exists in my misunderstanding. Proximity to an artwork does not immediately reveal the value it may hold, but it may inspire memory in the viewer. The artwork then holds significance to a personal memory experience and therefore has potential value. In this dissertation (Section 2.3.2) *The Great Subterranean Pool of the Subconscious* by Jason Funderburk (2009:25) has been explained in relation to Freud’s psychoanalytical theories with specific reference to what lies in the deepest subconscious mind that reveals itself occasionally through a reader’s interpretation of texts (artworks). The interpretation occurs in order to “discover the reality and truth behind the vagueness of words and ideas” (Funderburk 2009:2). It is the ‘reality and truth’ (of the interpretation) where value is elicited. In this manner, I begin to observe, assess, analyse and understand meaning in artworks. I may attach importance to existing things in proximity to artworks that I have observed

previously, and vice versa. My own work and process of working have fundamental implications because I conceive it and bring it to fruition, but different artworks have different kinds of connotations. Some artworks hold a worth that is connected to the commitment to laboured execution (for example in *Cutting Corners* [fig 13]), or are substantial because of the lack of work involved – as in cases where value is attributed to inspiration or craftsmanship (for example in *Self-Wetting Portrait* [fig 22]). Other artworks carry significance because they have a popular aesthetic appeal, or they have been desaturated of aesthetic familiarities, those having an alternative aesthetic appeal (Danto 2005:194-195) (for example *Plinth* [fig 23]). I attach prominence to the absurd and to that which subverts intended social expectation. I have consummation in the misunderstanding of things, because they allow for different ways of observing the world. Attaching meaning to other artworks because of the way I think about them, and not because of their intended meaning, can elicit differences in attachments of appraisal. I understand through the appreciation of artists such as Duchamp and Nauman that an artwork need not have a conceptual justification rooted in logic or popular aesthetic appeal. The contradiction is that some artworks can be rationalised but do not have to fit the rational world.

Furthermore, in text-based artworks, or in the title of some artworks, such as *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966) (fig 1), Nauman sets up the ambiguity from the start. As discussed in Chapter Three, the ludicrous nature of the statement, ‘the true artist is an amazing luminous fountain’ embedded in the artwork surfaces when the viewer starts to question the purpose of the piece. The title holds clues as to how the viewer can investigate the work in relation to what is presented in the physical. Asking questions about the meaning of the work may send the viewer in the direction of thought (logical or illogical), leading

them back to the source, the text. Wittgenstein (2010:48) argues that in grasping “the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? – what we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use”. The viewer is left with a sense that there is more to the piece than can be interpreted in a single viewing, but perhaps will never be fully understood despite repeated viewings and the return to the essence of words, in the title of an artwork, for example. Regardless of the text accompanying Craig-Martin’s *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6) that philosophically justifies the artist’s intentions, expecting a complete understanding of the artwork is unlikely. ‘To say it precisely’ does not guarantee a precise reading (Godfrey (1998:248).

4.1.2 Significance, failing and avoidance

In a video performance, *Ascending and Descending* (2016) (fig 12), the artist climbs up and down each side of a plinth repeatedly. This Sisyphean act is a comment on the artist’s ‘worthiness’ or ‘lowliness’ within the art establishment (and the world). The behaviour is indicative of the lengths to which the artist will go in order to gain significance in the artworld. However, every ascent is followed by descent. An interrogation of the artist’s significance is at play which asks the question whether the artist’s aspirations and dedication or the levels of exposed fallibility and desperate repetitions are responsible for achievements of notoriety.



Fig 12. *Ascending and Descending*, (2016)

Climbing up and down the plinth is a metaphor for the artist's successes and failures, how he can at times be on the ascent or descent in his career. It is a personal reflection on my own career as an artist. In practice trials and errors become key methods in creating an artwork. Testing things and seeing if they are equitable or not is an essential part of the process. Often reflections on failed experiments become key elements in the creative process, and these lead to establishing an artistic purpose. Sartre reminds us in *Nausea* (1938:89) that purpose is chosen and assigning one's will to it is all that can be done. Documenting failures is perhaps a way of coping with existential disappointment, despite knowing that failure is non-optional, such as in Nauman's *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) (fig 9). Camus (1991:7) states that suicide (giving up) is not an answer to this dilemma as we are presented with the opportunity to make our purposes count for something, simply because we find

ourselves in existence. As Sisyphus found harmony with the rock – his symbol of his own failures – so I can find harmony with art (Camus 1955:78).



Fig 13. Alex Trapani, *(over)look (under)stand* (2016)

In the photographic print, *(over)look (under)stand* (2016) (fig 13), failure as a conceptual element is evident from an early encounter with it. The deliberation of the inverted photograph hopes to trick the viewer into believing that the artist is performing this activity upside-down, but very quickly fails to convince. The artist's entire body grasps the plinth as if his survival depends on it. Being immersed in the investigation of art (as the plinth is a symbol of art) the artist is focused on the task at hand, but clearly unobservant of the world around him as his head is immersed in the plinth. A sense of avoidance is present, but more so a sense of solipsism¹⁸ is implied giving the

¹⁸ The Merriam Webster Dictionary describes Solipsism as “a theory holding that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing; *also*: extreme

impression that understanding the commitment to the selected task is truly significant to the artist, yet what the actual task is remains undefined (within the parameters of art) rendering the efforts to hold on to the plinth self-indulgent and pointless. The work, therefore, can be interpreted as a critique of the character of the artist and art as an institution, not unlike Duchamp's critique of the artworld via *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) (Godfrey 1998:31). Much like Duchamp's artwork, evidence of the hand of the artist (in making) is absent, yet in *(over)look (under)stand* (2016) (fig 12) the body of the artist is enacted as object in merger with (engulf by) another object, the plinth, which is the symbol of the artworld.



Fig 14. Alex Trapani, *(sub)merge* (2016)

egocentrism" (www.merriam-webster.com, Sv "solipsism"). This more popular description implies that there is no external observations of the world and understanding is only allowed by introspection. On the other hand the cognitive scientist Jerry Fodor (1987) suggests about Solipsism "that the content of beliefs is determined by what is in the agent's head, and not what is in the world" (Heath, 2015).

In *(sub)merge* (2016) (fig 14), the artist is present in the work consumed by elements that epitomise his art practice, perhaps in thinking about the symbol of the plinth. The absorption becomes a meditation expelling the outside world (or the artworld), yet, paradoxically, the artist appears to be hiding, like a child who believes she cannot be seen by merely placing her hands over her eyes. Also, a sense of disgrace is evident as if the artist were trying to disappear into his own conceptions of art out of sheer discomfort – submerging his head in water to escape the world. In the case of *(sub)merge* (2016) (fig 14), the fact that the artist is doing things with his eyes closed is at once hubristic and shameful for him. The artist is focused but disabled by his own focus, engrossed in his practice while trapped by its limitations.

When Nauman created *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) (fig 9) the activity was doomed to fail from the start, yet remained significant for the artist to attempt. Here Nauman reveals the ‘trick’ up front by showing the chairs that he tried balancing on to imply levitation. In *(over)look (under)stand* (2016) the selection of words are not as deliberate as Nauman’s in *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) (fig 9), but rather play a word game that emphasises the paradoxical nature of the artwork. To ‘overlook’ something implies observation, to inspect, manage or supervise a situation – to oversee. Paradoxically, if I ‘overlook’ something I have missed elements in observation, such as neglecting to use an ingredient in a cake recipe – I fail to see (merriam-webster.com Sv “overlook”). However, to ‘over-look’ could also imply looking at something for too long – an excessive looking that causes a failure to see accurately. ‘Over’ also shows the end of something – indicating the end of seeing altogether. To ‘understand’ also implies seeing – seeing things as they are. It is a ‘true’ observation. However, to ‘understand’ is more than seeing as it indicates a revelation of the nature of things – to grasp the meaning of things seen (merriam-webster.com Sv

“understand”). To ‘under-stand’ can simply imply standing under something – underneath – to be ‘under’ the rule of something as if suppressed by it – standing in submission. A ‘stand’ also implies the plinth to which the artist clings, but by inversion, the plinth is no longer standing but rather hanging upside-down. The paradox of the work fails to reveal what its ‘true’ state is but reveals the artist is failing in the activities presented.

In *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966), Nauman not only presents the viewer with the possibilities of unlocking the secrets of what a ‘true artist’ is but sets up an expectation of failure too, knowing that the discourse around what makes a ‘true artist’ is unending. In the inverse, the reality that Nauman points to is the impossibility to produce ‘truth’ at all, which is determined by the deliberate absence of an image. The significance thereof lies in the failure to produce the luminous fountain. Through the repetitive activity in *Ascending and Descending* (2016) (fig 12) the purpose of the artist becomes mundane and nonsensical. It can easily lose the viewer’s attention due to its banality, but potentially holds the viewer in observation because of the very pointlessness of the actions played out. Like Sisyphus, there is no longer a purpose beyond the activity itself. I have come to believe that the most significant thing in art is activity. The act of doing what an artist does results in art, but this does not warranty significance beyond the activity, nor does it guaranty expounding value. The paradox is that regardless of the importance and merit given to art practices post the existence of the art object; I will keep creating and thinking about what I create.

4.2 ABSURDITY IN TRAPANI



Fig 15. Alex Trapani, *9 Desaturated Photographs* (2016)

In 'Works of Art and Mere Real Things', a chapter from *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), Danto (1981:5) discusses how actions in artworks can be voluntary but are complimented by the involuntary. Actions in artworks (particularly from performance based works) can be intentional, planned and choreographed for the purposes of the artwork, "[a]n action is a bodily movement that is covered by a rule" (Danto 1981:5). The deliberate action is accompanied by unintentional actions, such as 'tics' and 'spasms' (Danto 1981:5), and are too part of the artwork, regardless of their significance and irrespective of the presupposition to the artwork's existence. As *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) does not make all urinals artworks, so too not all tics and spasms are artworks unless they have been so intentioned. A paradox emerges – the involuntary action is subsequently volunteered as art. What appears to be random behaviour is now analysed and justified as significant to the purposes of the artwork.

4.2.1 Random behaviour and reflection

I can't stop myself from thinking. At this very moment – it's frightful – if I exist it is because I am horrified at existing. I am the one who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire. Jean-Paul Sartre (*Nausea* 1936:99)

In *9 Desaturated Photographs* (2016) (fig 15) I exhibited a series of images, some of which are familiar to what has already been seen on *Neither Art Nor Art* (2016). Each photograph in the series captures a moment during performances by the artist. They are documents of activity, yet reveal little about the processes of those activities or the intentions of the artist. The connecting factors between the selected photographs are unclear, and it is as if they were randomly selected. A sense of a casual recall of the artist's experiences during performances is presented as if they are a recollection of something one has seen before when observing something completely unrelated. I reveal a randomness that goes on in my conscious mind when attempting non-conscious behaviour. Self-reflection is deemed irrelevant, but escaping it is not possible. In choosing images 'at random' I reflect on them and remember the behaviour, or how I felt during the activity – they are now 'covered by a rule' (Danto 1981:5). I think about not thinking and therefore think about thinking. It is an inescapable loop.

Thinking about behaviour influences behaviour. One's existence is confirmed as one reflects on personal re/actions, regardless of life's absurdities, modifying one's behaviour to achieve desired outcomes. "I am the one who pulls myself back from the nothingness to which I aspire" (Sartre 1936:99). As Nauman found himself thinking about what an artist does in the studio, I find myself thinking about what an artist does in the artwork.

4.2.2 The plinth, the art establishment and incessant duty

A recurring object that appears in most of the artworks on *Neither Art Nor Art* (2016) is a plinth. The use of the plinth in my work is indicative of its practicality but raises conceptual awareness of its propagandistic nature and particularly in an art context where an object is elevated to a more practical viewing height. The plinth also acts as an archetype that epitomises the desire for accolades awarded for achievements, such as a stepped podium on a stage when a qualification is awarded, or a pedestal at a sports event for the receiving of a prize. It is indicative of its use in communicative or institutional constructs, such as in political debates, or religious services, and is purposed to elevate the speaker above the heads of the respective audience in order to be seen and heard more clearly. In my body of work the plinth becomes a symbol for the art establishment, how it 'over'-sees the practitioners that stand-'under' its authority.

The aspects of 'over' and 'under' are evident in *Neither Up Nor Down* (2016) (fig 16). The plinth symbolises the achievements or elevation of the artist, as seen in *Ascending and Descending* (2016) (fig 12). Here the plinth is precariously raised off the ground and emerges from the gallery wall as if it were one with the structure. The upside-down ladder is illuminated from inside the plinth and is no longer a mere functional object of ascent and descent – particularly due to its inversion atop the plinth – becoming an object of admiration. It is confounding in the sense that the ladder has been elevated by the plinth, yet it is denied its own ability to elevate.



Fig 16. Alex Trapani, *Neither Up Nor Down* (2016)

In Section 6.54 of the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein (2002:89) expresses the following about his propositions, which to him are the symbols we use to express our understanding of things in the surrounding world: “anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical, when he [sic] has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright”. Wittgenstein’s very next point (point 7) in the *Tractatus* states, “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 2002:89). In *Neither Up Nor Down* (2016) (fig 16) the nonsensical, or that of which ‘we cannot speak’ is the joining of propositions (by light) and are rather confronted with the idea of a conceptual *regurgitation* of the nonsensical rather than the discarding of the symbols of expression. There is a sense of endurance and

commitment to the surmounting of the nonsensical to be noticed by the art establishment regardless of succeeding in making sense thereof.



Fig 17. Alex Trapani, *Cutting Corners* (2016)

Incessant duty to the art establishment becomes a form of submission to authority. *Cutting Corners* (2016) (fig 17) is a video performance that reveals aspects of incessant duty as the artist performs the difficult and somewhat destructive task of removing the four top corners of a plinth, the symbol of the art establishment. The activity of cutting corners to succeed in the artworld is contrasted with the sustained destructive efforts of the artist in achieving this goal, as if destroying the structures of authority that recognises the artist's role, in order to further the recognition of the artist within the institution of art. A paradox exists between the path to success and the hard

work in taking short cuts to get there. The determined behaviour of the artist, performed upon the chosen symbol, accentuates the duty of the artist to his craft and faithfulness to the establishment, regardless of the obvious discomfort.

The plinth metaphorically affirms the aspirations associated with critical achievement and therefore serves as a structural representation of the prodigious character of art. As Sisyphus finds his purpose in incessant duty, the artist responds perpetually to an over-rationalised world through his tacit understanding.

4.3 FOUNTAINS OF TRAPANI

4.3.1 Sweat, piss and insecurity

In *Neither Art Nor Art* (2016) the artist performs rudimentary idiomatic actions. The contrast between getting one's feet wet – actively gaining some experience in art – and being wet behind the ears – being immature and inexperienced in art – is evident simultaneously, as in *Wet Behind the Ears and Wet Feet* (2016) (fig 18). The contrast of experience and inexperience accentuates the anxieties about the artist's position in the practices of art. The artist is coqualified and unqualified in every new project embarked on. This can be bewildering for the artist and is conceptually continued through the discomfort of having pissed oneself in fear of failure or having wet feet in gaining experience in art.



Fig 18. Alex Trapani, *Wet Behind the Ears and Wet Feet* (2016)

When Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) is viewed, piss and the act of pissing must be imagined. The action is imagined by the object (urinal) represented in the artwork.

When Nauman creates *Self-portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), he clearly shows the action he takes in being a fountain represented in the photograph of Nauman spitting water from his mouth. For the well informed in art Nauman's fountains can elicit memories of *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4). Therefore, it is not a difficult leap of the imagination to connect Nauman's spitting to Duchamp's pissing. In fact, because of the discourse existing about *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), it is not hard for the informed to associate my fountain pieces with Nauman's or Duchamp's, as is conceptually intended.



Fig 19. Alex Trapani, *Sweat Fountain (Driver's Tan)* (2016)

Bearing reference to the odd yet common practice of an arm hanging outside the car window whilst driving, in *Sweat Fountain (Driver's Tan)* (2016 (fig 19) the artist positions himself in art as if it were taking him on a journey. As the artist's arm hangs outside of the plinth while appearing to be involved in nothing significant, in reality, the rest of his body is actively engaged in specific augmentation – as if I were driving a car. The involuntary ones accompany the voluntary actions, but it is as if the voluntary becomes involuntary. The artist's arm, although flaccid, still sweats, not just from exertion, but also from the sun, like a light shining upon the extremity of the artist. The bucket represents attempts at preserving the by-product of involuntary labour so that it is not just left to dry up or evaporate. The result of working hard at nothing important is nonetheless contained significantly.

In many of Nauman's video works in the 1960s, he acts out seemingly capricious behaviours physically exerting himself to achieve the desired outcome. For example, in *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968) (fig 20), Nauman uses his body to fill the space where the floor and the wall meet holding each position for forty-five seconds (Plagens 2014:26). Nauman's *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (1968) (fig 21) shows the artist engaged in choreographed movements for eight minutes and twenty-four seconds – there is no involuntary action here but the activities captured were experiments. The artist uses his body and documents the movements as “notes for future live performances” (Plagens 2014:70) capturing the physicality of the activity, working hard for reasons not commonly deductive in art. The behaviour is Sisyphean in nature.



Fig 20. Bruce Nauman, *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968)

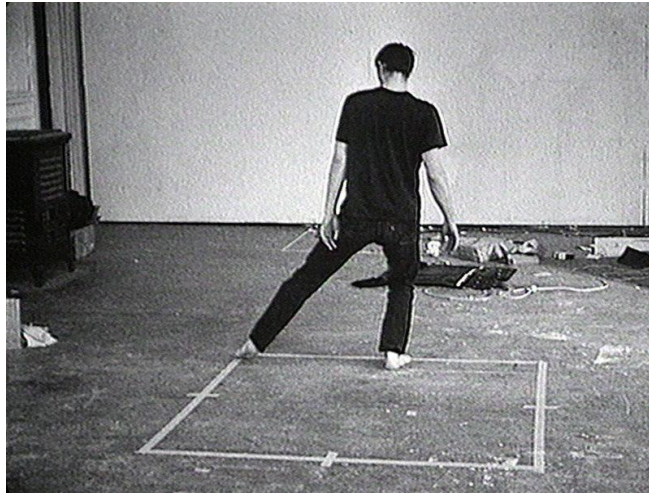


Fig 21. Bruce Nauman, *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (1968)



Fig 22. Alex Trapani, *Self-Wetting Portrait* (2016)



Fig 23. Alex Trapani, *Self-Wetting Portrait* (detail) (2016)

In *Self-Wetting Portrait* (2016) (fig 22 and 23), is a small sculpted fountain embedded in the plinth. The bottom half of the artist's body is reduced to approximately one tenth of its size (as if shrunken) and fitted with a fountain that overflows at the pants line. Impressions of pissing oneself out of nervous anxiety or fear of ridicule are apparent in the awkward partial self-portrait. Attention to anatomical correctness and surface detail is indicative of my commitment to my craft, and the down-scaling of forms and the body language shows insecurity and insignificance, the artist's 'smallness' within the art establishment. The continuous flow of water accentuates the perpetual nature of the artist's discomfort and uncertainty with being an artist, a type of perpetual pants-wetting. The worthiness of the artist is interrogated here, and self-reflection reveals anxieties and self-doubt within the assumed expectations of the art establishment as if the establishment were keeping a watchful eye on the artist's compliance. Like a

fountain, the pursuit of recognition is cyclical no matter how precarious – yet again a Sisyphean behaviour.

4.3.2 Language, the unsaid and double negatives

When thinking about Wittgenstein's (2002:89) expression "[w]hat we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" in the context of the artist's intentions it brings to mind that which the artist has chosen not to say. Just because Duchamp did not use the word 'piss' in *Fountain* (1917) (Fig 4) does not mean it cannot allude to urine. In 6.522 of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein (2002:89) claims "[t]here are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical".

Nauman conceived *The True Artist Helps the World By Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967) (fig 3) where the elements, the 'true artist', the 'world' and 'mystic truths', are set off against one another to give a sense of hope and hopelessness simultaneously. It becomes difficult for the viewer to remain silent about 'what we cannot speak about' (Wittgenstein 2002:89) because Nauman chooses to talk about that which continues to be undetermined and unanswerable. Nauman plays in a space where links between language and object are obvious yet nonsensical, such as in the statement 'a rose has no teeth' (Wittgenstein 2010:223). What Nauman does not say is what constitutes a 'true artist', what constitutes 'mystic truths' and how they are revealed, and neither does he tell us how the world will be helped, which also links to Camus' (1955:63) observation concerning the need for art. All of what is unsaid becomes more profound than what is said as if the unsaid or unseen is hiding away in plain sight. In *(sub)merge* (2016) (fig 14) the concept of the unseen is twofold: the artist fails at not being seen and simultaneously fails at seeing. Submerged in his own focus on investigation he

misses what is outside of himself. The open-ended evaluations suggest the artist hiding away from his own reality in spite of his investigations therein.

A double negative, in essence, is that which negates its own conclusion, where two forms of negative are used in one statement. The double negative in the exhibition title *Neither Art Nor Art* (2016) insinuates that what you are seeing is about 'not art' and it is also about 'non-art', yet it remains about art. Regardless of how many negations the artworks use to justify the non-art nature of the exhibition, there is no escaping the paradigm of art or the overarching authority of the establishment. When you make non-art about art it is re-confined to art. I strive to escape the restraints of art but use art to do so. In my contemplations as an artist, I have not yet surrendered to the inevitability (or condemnation) of art as Sisyphus did to his duty of rolling the rock for eternity because I wish to resign from the 'responsibilities' forced upon me by the authority of the art establishment. Even resigning as an art practitioner and divorcing myself from the establishment has not worked in the past, because I have not succeeded in changing my ways of thinking. Like Sartre's (Phillips 1981:23-31) waiter who dedicates his being to his purpose in serving the best way he possibly could whilst the nausea in realising that there is no preordained purpose to existence is overwhelming. The double negative as an artist is that I am both free to choose my purpose and condemned by that very choice I have made.



Fig 24. Alex Trapani, *Plinth* (2016)

As stated in the introduction, the title of my dissertation, *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist is an Absurd Fountain*, is derived from *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966/67) (fig 1). The text is written in a rectangle in and around the frame for the wall-shade insinuating that there is no beginning and no end. It emphasises aspects of the cyclical nature of thinking and behaviour within the practices of art as well as under the authority of the art establishment. The plinth stands alone, white in a white space, in the artwork titled, *Plinth* (2016) (fig 24). There are almost no shadows presented, and the photograph insinuates that there is a light coming from the plinth itself as if it were glowing in its own presence. This piece becomes a beacon for the body of work as it attempts to monumentalise the symbol of the art establishment and its prodigious nature, yet in its solidarity, it becomes cold and lifeless without the interactions of the artist.

By investigating behaviours in art practices with a subversive temperament toward the art establishment, I expand on artistic activities by engaging with the object as symbols of expression, such as plinths, fountains (water) and my body, or parts thereof. By interacting with these objects in various ways, I attempted to affirm that my most basic engagements with objects have a place in art, regardless of the acceptance thereof by the establishment. By using art as a context in which to 'act-out' these banal engagements, I further subverted my own behaviours within the art establishment, affirming the nonsensical, and my own desires and aspirations for worthiness as an artist. The continued subversive cycle of the absurd as a legitimised art practice is what I aspire to, yet the research through practice and the literary research done within this dissertation simultaneously became a constructive investigation into the impossibility of research into the absurd, being absurd. Therefore the return to incongruity became a sensible answer indicative of the cyclical nature as represented through the fountain.

At its most base level the word 'true', in the context of Nauman's artworks, most commonly refers to the legitimate. The 'true artist' is actually the 'legitimate artist', which does not take away from the hermeneutical response that the statement conjures. In *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966/67) (fig 1), the artist is legitimised by the fact that he is a fountain, that he rises up, actively achieves, continues to behave selectively (or involuntarily), only to descend once more to repeat the process. The body of the artist behaves as an animated object that refreshes the point of view associated with existent artworks of a related conceptual embodiment. The very choice to behave incongruously is a conscious act, and the artist behaving as an unconscious object has an awareness of his actions, a true contradiction in terms, a dialetheia.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In Chapter One under the heading *The Research Problem*, I discussed how the advent of conceptual art addressed the issue of 'retinal pleasures' (Danto 2007:1) where critical thinking started to surpass aesthetics. The found object became important in dealing with social issues and almost replaced the necessity of the laboured, well-crafted art object. Documentation of implicit actions and bodily movements became a benchmark for representations in criticality and the understanding of art. Furthermore, I have studied, analysed and interpreted the demystification of the artist, a substantive notion in conceptual art. This is evident in Nauman's artworks, as in *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1967) (fig 9), which reveals the fallibility of the artist. The role of the artist and specifically the artist's body re-contextualised as a quotidian object, and the overlooked mundane action of our day to day existence has now become pertinent as a critical comment on society.

5.1 VALIDATING THE ABSURD AS A FOUNTAIN

The research question pertaining to Nauman's criticality towards social constructs and the art establishment was investigated by comparing *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8) to Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) and other artists' works; Calder's *Mercury Fountain* (1937) (fig 5); and Craig-Martins's *An Oak Tree* (1973) (fig 6); and defends the rationalisation of the absurd as a conceptual device. Therefore, the aim to examine influences on Nauman was also addressed by searching beyond art. Wittgenstein's absurdity directed Nauman in language, and his influence is clearly visible in *A Rose has no Teeth* (1965) (fig 11), which jests with the structural applications of propositions in language. Justifying the absurd as a legitimate method

in art, *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain (Window or Wall Shade)* (1966/67) (fig 1), interrogates the provocative aspects of language where it gets pushed to its limits by remaining rational but simultaneously incongruent (Wittgenstein 1961:76).

Further consideration of the absurd was made in Chapter Two by referring to Camus and Sartre's validations that human existence is essentially absurd (Sartre 1938:21-23). The absurd is poignant in that it cannot be avoided and should operate as a catalyst to choosing one's purpose, a point of departure (Camus 1991:8). This dissertation referred to Camus' (1955:63) view that art would not be needed if our reality was lucid, which implies that it becomes necessary for art to address the meaninglessness of existence. It is not unreasonable for an artist therefore to express insecurities and the 'nausea' that accompany existential realisation (Sartre 1938:66). During this study I have ascertained that, like a neurological network reaching the extremities of a body, the absurd runs throughout Nauman's practice. It lies as a conceptual structure embodied in the artworks and surfaces (and resurfaces) at moments to reveal the nausea of a purposeless endeavour in art. As explored in this dissertation appropriating himself, an artist as an object (mimicking the fountain), mediates Nauman's criticality towards the artist, the art establishment, and, by extension, human existence. Attention was drawn to the fact that the fountain becomes the point of reference for repetitious and banal behaviour echoing the absurdity of our existence and practices in art. In this context, the 'true artist' is self-made, as "truth is made rather than found" (Rorty 1989:7)

5.2 SIGNIFICANCE AND EMERGENT MEANING

I have concerned myself with what the artist does in the establishment of art reflecting what Nauman has done in response to Duchamp, who critically retorted the artworld. Unlike Nauman, I use traditional 'artistic' skills in conjunction with more contemporary skills, such as performance videos. By doing this, I do not subtract from the notion that an artist is always an artist regardless of whether or not he is in the studio (or not making art outside of the studio). Being an artist is a way of being and not only justified by artistic activity. What the combining of traditional and non-traditional approaches does is compound the insecurities surrounding the significance of the artist under the authority of the establishment. Thus art and the artist are incongruent yet analogous in that the activities I perform as an artist, under the authority of the art establishment, are merely self-referencing paradoxes. However, this expanded the research question that reached for conclusive arguments that my own work could be 'true', yet perplexing, concurrently. My creative exploration of the body tapped into the tacit knowledge of artistic thinking as a well of understanding. By simultaneously using the body as an object, as a thinking medium and a theoretical construct, this research captured in writing and artmaking my search for absurd truths. The documented enactments of the body that mimic the activity of a fountain mirror Freud's (2009:22) argument about truth in texts that the subconscious mind is like a subterranean pool that springs forth memories and experiences into the conscious mind. The fountain fulfils the metaphor of a non-conscious, yet active – thereby repetitive – and therefore absurd truth. It is thus not conceited, nor is it fallacious to refer to myself as a 'true artist' and an 'absurd fountain' – as Nauman is a 'true artist' and an 'absurd fountain' as defined in the context of this dissertation.

Through this research and the investigation into Nauman's artworks and practice I have gained insights into my own artmaking. Firstly, my approach to art is embedded in a fundamental absurdity, as I have come to the understanding that the search for a personal truth as an artist can be established on a foundation of the absurd.

Furthermore, this foundation later allows for the viewer to be free of the want for logical justification in the engagement of my works. Meaning is made by the viewer and, as previously stated in section 1.2, when Danto (2005:11) claims that "the replacement of an aesthetics of forms with an aesthetics of meaning" suggests that the responsibility to make meaning moves to the viewer rather than coming from the artist.

Secondly, by investigating Nauman, a realisation that a search for a truth is necessary for a continuation of an art practice, but it becomes superfluous to discover it. In fact, the search for truth is an absurd endeavour, and therefore the absurd is a truth.

Existentially speaking, applying a conceptual framework of the absurd is a truthful action, as I have come to understand from Nauman's work. Duchamp applied absurdity in *Fountain* (1917) (fig 4) which opened the perpetual debate of the constitutions of art and the institutionalisation thereof. In *Self-portrait as a Fountain* (1966/67) (fig 8), Nauman similarly engaged with the absurd questioning what comprises an artwork and the role of the 'true artist' therein. In response to Nauman and Duchamp, and through further use of the fountain, I attempted to engage with the absurd, in order to legitimize it as a conceptual device in art. The absurd therefore reflects itself in the end result of the artwork completing a cycle of truth, creating in the meaning of art, as well as in the actions of the artist, a true contradiction.

5.3 PROPOSED FUTURE RESEARCH

There are research limitations due to demands for the requirements of setting specific boundaries in any dissertation. Issues arising regarding the hypotheses of: success as an artist; significance; art and non-art; and the paradox; are only touched on here and can supplement additional investigations. The potential for further research was particularly realised when my practice revealed the fragility of my body as a tool to think about the artist's Sisyphean task of social critique (Camus 1955:75; Marshall 2000:2).

The study can be extended with comparisons between the absurd and my search for purgatory meaning as a conceptual framework. Investigating specifically South African artists and their views on obtaining success within the art establishment could reveal true contradictions. Furthermore, such dialetheism and the self-referencing paradox can be interrogated for innovative material application to expand the language of the artist.

The cyclical subversion of absurdity itself holds the potential for artistic doubt to produce a recurrent resourceful fountain in art. If truth can reside in the absurd and the artist legitimized by repeated activity and the applications of the absurd as a conceptual device, then it can be acceptable to state that a true artist is an absurd fountain.

References

- Alberro, A & Stimson, B. 1999. *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. London: The MIT Press.
- Aronson, R. 2012. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/camus/> (Accessed 15 January 2015).
- Atkins, R. 1993. *Art Spoke: a Guide to Modern Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1848 – 1944*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- Atkins, R. 1997. *Art Speak. A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the present*. second edition ed. New York: Abbeville Press.
- Atlantas Obscura. Sa. *Calder Mercury Fountain Sv "mercury"*.
<http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/calder-mercury-fountain> (Accessed 10 June 2016).
- Barthes, R. 1989. *The Rustle of Language*. California: University of California Press.
- Beall, J & Glansberg, M. 2016. *Liar Paradox*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=liar-paradox> (Accessed 15 December 2016).
- Beckett, S. 2009. *Endgame*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Beckett, S. 2010. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Belmore, HW. 1956. Two Poems on a Fountain in Rome: C. F. Meyer and R. M. Rilke. *German Life and Letters*, Volume 10, pp. 49 - 53.
- Birch, D. 2009. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. seventh Edition ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bristow, W. 2011. *Enlightenment*.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/enlightenmen> (Accessed 10 June 2016).

- Butler, AM. 2016. *Performance Art*. www.theartstory.org/movement-performance-art.htm (Accessed 10 September 2016).
- Cairns, J. 2012. *Antagonist Approach*.
http://www.intermediamfa.org/imd501/index.php?pg=blog&post_id=1096 (Accessed 10 June 2015).
- Camus, A. 1955. *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Camus, A. 1991. *The Rebel. An Essay on Man in Revolt*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Caumont, J & Szeemann, H. 2002. *Marcel Duchamp*. Stuttgart:Hatje Cantz Publishers.
- Culler, J. 2005. *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*.
<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/3659>. (Accessed 31 January 2017).
- Dahlstrom, D. 2011. *Interpreting Heidegger. Critical Essays*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Danto, AC. 1964. The Artworld. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61(19), pp. 571 - 584.
- Danto, AC. 1981. *The transfiguration of the commonplace: a Philosophy of Art*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Danto, AC. 2005. *Symposium: Arthur Danto, The abuse of Beauty* Embodiment, Art History, Theodicy, and the Abuse of Beauty: A Response to My Critics*. New York: Routledge, pp. 189 - 200.
- Danto, AC. 2007. *Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste: A Defense of Contemporary Art*. <http://toutfait.com/duchamp.jsp?postid=846> (Accessed 23 January 2017).
- De Duve, T. 1989. Andy Warhol or the Machine Perfected. *October*, Volume Volume 48.
- Deranty, J. 2015. *Existential Aesthetics. Art and the Absurd*.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/aesthetics-existentialist> (Accessed 30 June 2014).
- Dickie, G. 1997. *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*. Chicago: Chicago Spectrum Press.

- Encyclopaedia Britannica. 1998. *Servius. Roman Auter Sv "fountain"*.
<https://global.britannica.com/biography/Servius> (Accessed 14 December 2016).
- Esslin, M. 1961. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. California: Doubleday.
- Funderburk, J. 2009. The Great Subterranean Pool of the Subconscious:
 Psychoanalyzing the Subjectivity of Marlow and Kurtz in Conrad's Heart of Darkness.
Elf, Volume 1, p. 22 – 26.
- Ghisi, E. 2015. *Short Global History of Fountains*. <http://www.mdpi.com/2073-4441/7/5/2314/htm> (Accessed 13 October 2016).
- Girst, T. 2003. *Using Marcel Duchamp: The Concept of the Readymade in Post-War and Contemporary American Art*. www.toutfait.com/usingmarcelduchamp/ (Accessed 29 October 2016).
- Godfrey, T. 1998. *Conceptual Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.
- Gopnik, B. 2011. *Duchamp's Fountain Was Subversive—but Subverting What?*
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/12/15/duchamp-s-fountain-was-subversive-but-subverting-what.html> (Accessed 01 October 2014).
- Greenspan, J. 2013. *The Myth of Ponce de León and the Fountain of Youth*.
<http://www.history.com/news/the-myth-of-ponce-de-leon-and-the-fountain-of-youth>
 (Accessed 14 December 2016).
- Greenspan, J. 2013. *The Myth of Ponce de Leon and the Fountain of Youth*.
<http://www.history.com/news/the-myth-of-ponce-de-leon-and-the-fountain-of-youth>
 (Accessed 16 August 2016).
- Hall, G. 1960. Aspects of the Absurd. *Yale French Studies*, Volume No. 25, p. 26 – 32.
- Heath, J. 2015. *Methodological Individualism*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/methodological-individualism/> (Accessed 08 January 2017).
- Heidegger, M. 1950. *Off the Beaten Track*. London. Cambridge University Press.

Heidegger, M. 1953. *Being and Time*. New York. State University of New York Press.

Honderich, T. 2005. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. New Edition ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Honderich, T. 2014. *Actual Consciousness*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Howell, J. 1977. Art Performance: New York. *Performing Arts Journal*, 1(3), pp. 28-39.

Jacob, P. 2014. *Intentionality*.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/intentionality> (Accessed 30 October 2016).

Jansen, J. 2013. *syntheism.org*. <http://syntheism.org/index.php/2013/09/> (Accessed 20 November 2014).

jenkins, R. 2000. Categorization: Identity, social process and epistemology. *Current sociology*, 48(3), pp. 7-25.

Judovitz, D. 1995. Ready-Mades: (Non) sense and (Non) art. In: *Unpacking Duchamp*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 75 - 119.

Kearney, R & Rainwater, M. 1996. *The Continental Philosophy Reader*. London: Routledge.

Klerkergaard, S & Hannay, A. 2009. *Kiekergaard: Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kockelmans, JJ. 1994. *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*. Indiana: Purdue University Press.

Korab-Karpowicz, W.J. [Sa]. *Martin Heidegger (1889 - 1976)*.
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/heidegge/#H2> (Accessed 24 February 2017).

Lewallen, C. 2007. *A Rose Has No Teeth. Bruce Nauman in the 1960s*. California: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

Marshall, J. 2000. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Education*.
http://eepat.net/doku.php?id=camus_a (Accessed 16 January 2015).

- Mautner, T. 1996. *Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Blackwell Publishers.
- Mautner, T. 1996. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Penguin Books.
- Merriam-Webster. 1831. Sv "absurd". <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/absurd> (Accessed 12 November 2016).
- Merriam-Webster. 1831. *Merriam-Webster Sv "overlook"*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/overlook> (Accessed 16 December 2016).
- Merriam-Webster. 1831. *Merriam-Webster Sv "solipsism"*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/solipsism> (Accessed 04 January 2017).
- Merriam-Webster. 1831. *Merriam-Webster Sv "understand"*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/understand> (Accessed 23 November 2016).
- Morris, WC. 1953. *Symbols and Values: an Initial Study*. New York, s.n.
- Morris, WC. 1956. *Varieties of Human Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morris, WC. 1971. *Writings on the General Theories of Signs*. Paris, The Hague.
- Nagel, T. 1971. The Absurd. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 21 10, 68(20), pp. 716-727.
- O'Brian, J. 1993. *Clement Greenburg: The collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 4. Modernism with a Vengeance. 1957 – 1969*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Onof, C. Sa. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Existentialism*. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sartre-ex/> (Accessed 04 January 2017).
- Pastirik, Z. 2016. *Trevi Fountain (Fontana di Trevi)*. <http://www.rome.info/about> (Accessed 10 December 2016).
- Phillips, DZ. 1981. Bad Faith and Sartre's Waiter. *philosophy*, Jan, 56(215), pp. 23-31.
- Plagens, P. 2014. *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist*. New York: Phaidon.
- Priest, G. & Berto, F. 2013. *Dialetheism*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/dialetheism> (Accessed 27 October 2016).

- Rorty, R. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sartre, J-P. 1938. *Nausea*. New York: New Directions Publishing.
- Sartre, J-P. 1943. *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Sartre, J-P. 2007. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. London: Yale University Press.
- Sartre, J-P. & Priest, S. 2001. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*. New York: Routledge.
- Schellekens, E. 2009. *Conceptual Art*.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/conceptual-art> (Accessed 16 September 2014).
- Thomas, F. 2013. *Jean-Paul Sartre*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/sartre/> (Accessed 12 December 2015).
- Thomson, I. 2015. *Heidegger's Aesthetics*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/heidegger-aesthetics> (Accessed 10 October 2015).
- Tomkins, C. 2009. *Western Disturbances: Bruce Nauman's Singular Influence*.
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/01/western-disturbances> (Accessed 21 January 2015).
- Tzara, T. 2003. *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*. Richmond: Calder Publications.
- Van Dearzen, E & Kenward, R. 2005. *Dictionary of Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling*. London: Sage Publications .
- Wittgenstein, L. 1961. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wittgenstein, L. 2010. *Philosophical Investigations*. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wolf, J. 2014. *Joseph Beuys. German Sculptor and Performance Artist.*
www.theartstory.org/artist-beuys-joseph.htm (Accessed 20 July 2016).



neither art nor art
alex trapani



+27 73 170 9176
alextrapani@gmail.com

instagram.com/alex.trapani.art
facebook.com/artistartistaalextrapani

UNISA Art Gallery, Pretoria
9 to 22 April 2016

The catalogue is produced in conjunction
with the requirement for a Masters in
Visual Arts degree and is accompanied
by a dissertation and forms part of the
exhibition *neither art nor art*.

Photography: Mark Fegen
Videography: Daandrey Steyn
Layout & Design: Sita Suzanne

neither art nor art
alex trapani



fig. 1

contents

artist's statement	2
ascending and descending	3
cutting corners	5
wet behind the ears and wet feet	7
water falls and water ascends	8
self-wetting portrait	9
neither up nor down	11
sweat fountain (driver's tan)	13
wet behind the ears II	15
9 desaturated photographs	17
(over)look (under)stand	19
(sub)merge	21
plinth	23
list of illustrations	25
bibliography	27
selected exhibitions	28

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

Jean-Paul Sartre (Nausea 1936:99)



fig. 2

artist's statement

2016

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

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

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

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

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

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



ascending and descending

stills from video performance
2016

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



fig. 3, 4 & 5

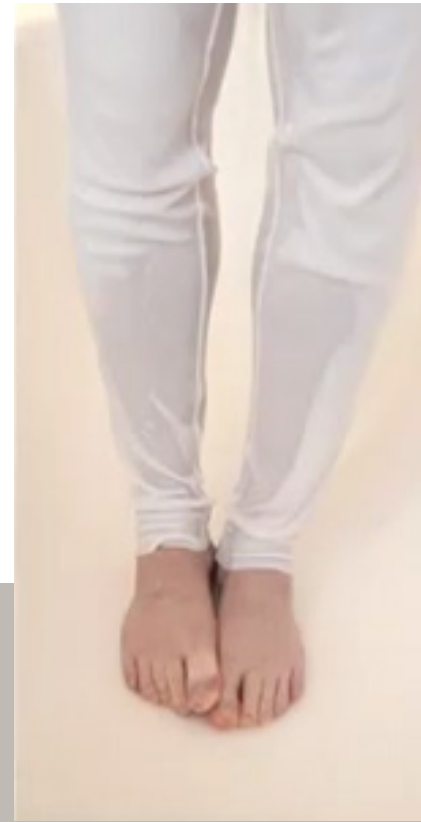
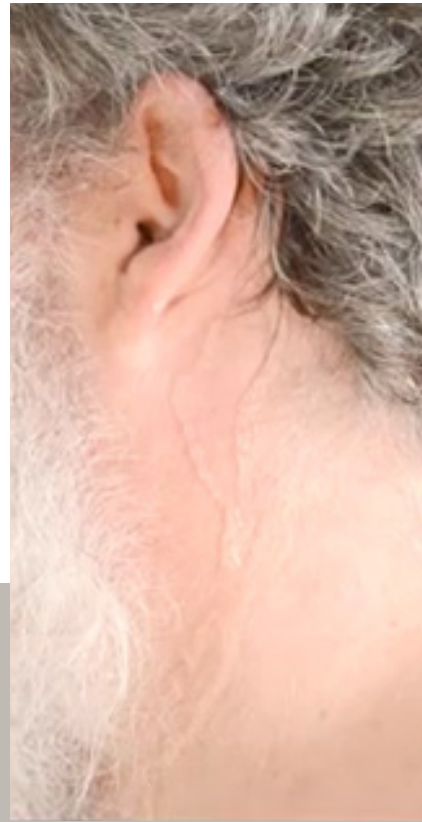


fig. 6, 7 & 8

cutting corners

stills from video performance
2016

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



wet behind the ears and wet feet

stills from video performance
2016

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

fig. 9

fig. 10

water falls and water ascends

stills from video performance
2016

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

self-wetting portrait

mixed media fountain sculpture
2016

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

fig. 11 & 12





fig. 13 & 14

neither up nor down

mixed media sculpture
2016

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

sweat fountain (driver's tan)

mixed media sculpture
2016

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

fig. 15 & 16



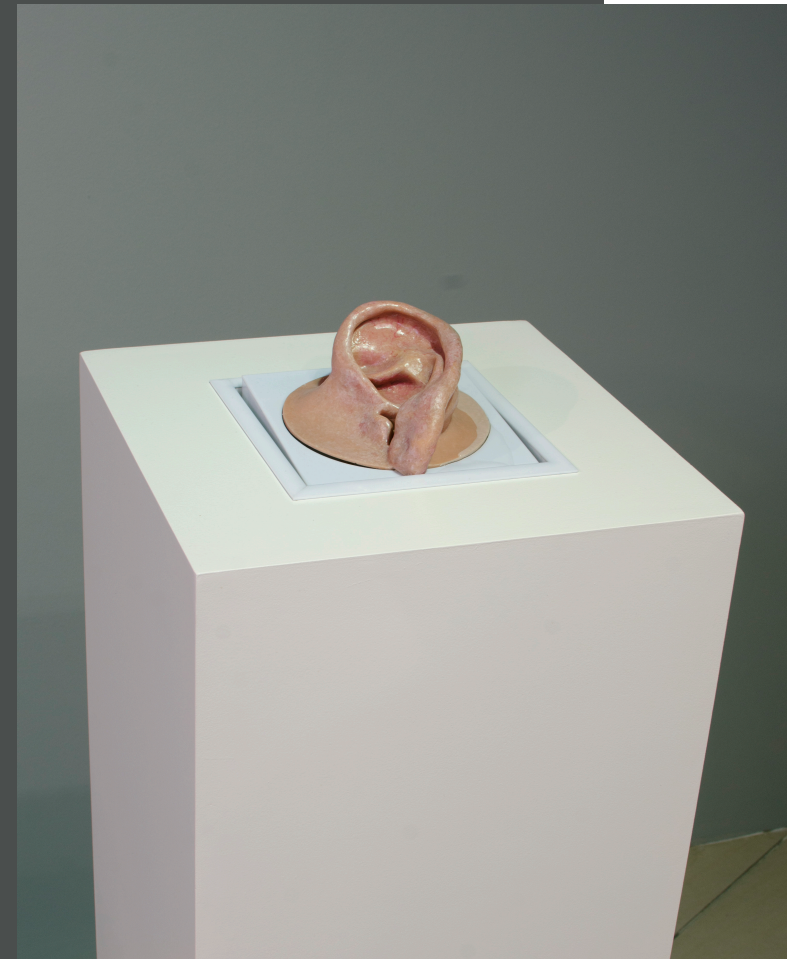
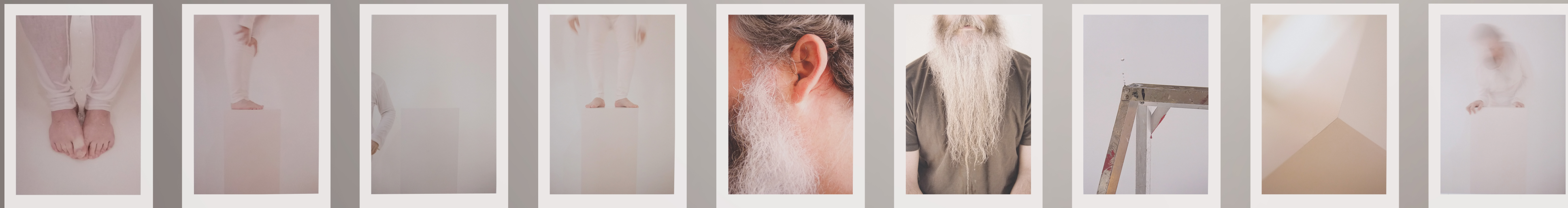


fig. 17 & 18

wet behind the ears II

mixed media fountain sculpture
2016

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



9 desaturated photographs

photographic print installation
2016

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

fig. 19



fig. 20

(over)look (under)stand

photographic print
2016

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



(sub)merge

photographic print
2016

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

fig. 21





plinth

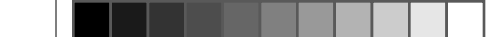
photographic print
2016

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



fig. 22





list of illustrations

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

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



fig. 23

selected exhibitions

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

bibliography

- Camus, A. 1955. *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Danto, A. C. 2007. *Mercez Duchamp and the End of Taste: A Defence of Contemporary Art*. <http://toutfait.com/duchamp.jsp?postid=846>. (Accessed 23 of January 2017).
- Dickie, G. 1974. *Art and the aesthetic: an institutional analysis*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Godfrey, T. 1998. *Conceptual Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.
- Lewallen, C. 2007. *A Rose Has No Teeth. Bruce Nauman in the 1960s*. California: University of California (Berkley Art Museum and Public Film Archive).
- Plagens, P. 2014. *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist*. New York: Phaidon Press Limited.
- Sartre, J.P. 1938. *Nausea*. New York: New Directions Publishing.



If the world were clear, art would not exist.

(Albert Camus 1955:63)

