

*Equals &
Averages*

Nadja Daehnke
Works on Paper

AVA Gallery, Cape Town
28.9.2017 - 24.10.2017



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Time, history and memory haunt Nadja Daehnke's exhibition *Equals & Averages*. The work reflects the relentless passing of time; and yet we obsessively relive this past in our memories in order to form our identities. Memories, necessarily re-imagined, hold us in their grip.

Simultaneously we consider ourselves as incomplete and yearn for a mythical future self. We are told what to aspire to in order to achieve a cultural fantasy of perfect, complete normality.

The exhibition speaks of the tension between what has been and what will be; forever deferring the present. Crucially, however, the past and the future are not fixed events. Rather they constantly get reinvented to reflect dominant ideologies and normative social structures.

In these works on paper disembodied figures mock a cultural fantasy of normality that they represent. Quotes from Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules Marey and Georges Dumenil's time motion studies, in which human and animal motion were minutely analysed, reflect a cultural obsession with achieving control through a myth of rationality and perfection

Equals & Averages is composed of fragile surfaces. Graphite flakes, paper frays and found images are excised and translated. This material decay echoes the tensions of the everyman, who anxiously attempts to hold history and memory static, providing himself with evidence of status and unquestionable context.

The work for the exhibition was produced by Nadja Daehnke whilst she stayed in Europe – over a period that was marked by a seeming resurgence of fascism in the northern hemisphere, and a complicated splintering of the fallacy of West is best.

Essay
Equals & Averages

by Anna Stielau
Cape Town, 2017

I. Time

“Consider incompleteness as a verb. Every verb has a tense, it must take place in time. Yet there are ways to elude these laws. The Greek verb system includes a tense called aorist (which means “unbounded” or “timeless”) to capture that aspect of action in which, for example, a man at noon runs directly on top of his own shadow.”¹

Imagine a man running. His shadow runs beneath him. Around them there is only light.

In Greek lyric poetry, the aorist is one of two tenses used most frequently to tell a story. It has no real equivalent in English. Aorist verbs describe a pattern of completed action without duration: a metrical alternative to both the present and the past that is also a kind of bridge between the two. No, not really a bridge. A mobile horizon.

Roland Barthes argues that the tense of the photograph is aorist. He means that a photographed subject is fixed to this horizon like an insect in amber – time caught with the closing of a shutter and preserved by chemistry. Dead time. The more aggressively it is shored up, the more jarring the relationship to fluid and coherent progression, and perhaps the more aware we are that something is being mummified. The nineteenth century photographer Eadweard Muybridge shows us this. By recording the mechanics of motion, he grants fragments of action the appearance of continuity while also rendering their intervals distinct. What we see through Muybridge is an exacting account of the body’s properties, one of which is its capacity to move through time. But time itself doesn’t move in his images. It becomes malleable. It stops. Muybridge shows us what happens when time behaves like space.

The man would run through ten frames if he could, but each holds him more completely than the last. His black and white feet are suspended above a shadow always rising to meet him.

Nadja Daehnke’s *Equals & Averages* contains many references to source images – Muybridge predominates, although he isn’t alone. But like all good echoes, the artist’s allusions have achieved new and unpredictable acoustics. They exceed their origins. Time, in particular, does something different here; something more oblique but just as decisive.

A Study of Instincts draws on Muybridge’s *Sallie Gardner at a Gallop*, a series of 24 photographs of a horse in motion. Each of those original images was shot in rapid succession, triggered by trip wires as the mare thundered by. Muybridge set out to prove that all four hooves left the ground, and he succeeded. The achievement was more than technological. It afforded the viewer a new way to apprehend reality, splintered into infinitely divisible units. Muybridge “is the man who split the second, as dramatic and far-reaching an action as the splitting of the atom.”² He ushered in a new image language for modernity, creating a world-picture ever more completely under human control.

But *A Study of Instincts* does not replicate this exertion of descriptive power. Horse and rider, serialised by Muybridge, are reinstated by Daehnke onto a single plane. Form barely resolves itself out of oil paint the colour of blood. What the photographer once made crisp dissolves its clear boundaries; what was stencilled off the real becomes abruptly gestural, the product of human hand and eye. Daehnke's horse is no longer torn loose from linear time, but rather reconfigured as multiple and simultaneous. As ongoing. The time here isn't spliced. It is layered, a strata from which the eye excavates meaning.

Negative space informs this reading as much as, if not more than, the imaged body. In the lower of the two horses, emptiness threatens to engulf the animal as it has already swallowed the rider. Together the pair read as a process in time – the first horse a beginning, the second an end – in a way that gives their motion an implied duration. Time's operation in *A Study* is entropic. These horses are not being made so much as they are becoming un-made.

What would it mean to incomplete an image? To undo its tether to the real?

He runs in a meandering, kinetic line now, unsure of his direction.

II. History

"History, like religion, myth or poetry, share the common property that a thing done is not simply done, but is re-done or pre-done," says the poet Charles Olson.³ He had a "special view of history" that was also a stance toward reality. For Olson history is a continuum extending in every direction and determining the course of every action. Each path through it has been walked before and will be walked again, and all are littered with wreckage we are compelled to navigate. Given this conviction, it is understandable that Olson proposed a violent creative project that took history as its object. We must act upon history like a hammer or a cyclotron, he maintains, forcibly inserting the living present into the rubble of the past. We must send a tremor through it.

In Daehnke's *Onwards and Upwards*, static bodies inherited from Muybridge have transformed from form to silhouette, and shifted further still from natural rhythms into a pattern that shares more with the empty choreography of a chorus line. The surrounding pictorial space has compressed, and the intruding filaments of door structures make no greater sense of it. Like decaying surface, paint peels and congeales revealing the paper's interior. The final effect is ambivalent, privileging process alongside image and evoking a delicate engagement with surface that is equal parts chiselling away and opening up. *Equals & Averages* is full of fragile surfaces. Graphite chips and becomes dust, paper frays and found images are excised, transferred and translated.

That said, history persists throughout in more than just the afterlife of images. *Equals & Averages* is dominated by the figure of a man in a grey suit. Although never fully articulated, he is still the a leitmotif of the show, defaced in *Attention must be paid, to such a man* dismantled in *Onward and Upward*; deformed in *Untitled (bending backwards)*; repeated in *The Great Complaint*. He and his suit are symbolic shorthand for many of the anxieties that plague the twentieth century. In the West he has come to embody establishment politics – think of dour Gregory Peck in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*– but also the tyranny of conformity. The man in the grey suit, the company man, is well rounded and well behaved. He keeps his front lawn trimmed and his nose clean. He does what he is told and is assured of the absolute rightness of his actions. He is in every corporation and at every genocide.

The appeal of this figure is his use value as floating signifier, detached from the body but not the referent. He is an historical archetype in the truest sense. However, Daehnke makes this man a portrait of history that is not a likeness. It is an abstraction, and, in a way, an absurdity. His body becomes pliable and peculiar. His face becomes a void.

A man bends backwards in an agony of angle. He has no shadow now.

Reimagining the man in the suit allows for a challenge to the cultural fantasy of perfect (and perfectly moral) normality that he represents. The gesture concretises something subtler also, at the interface between this generic body and the larger arc of history. Prototypical human motifs make for compelling storytelling, but they have very unstable foundations.

Others run with him now. He's sure of it. One day it will no longer be noon.

III. Memory

Memory is what grants duration *within time* and brings history home. It's what gives us a past, without which there would be only the instantaneous. An exorcism of the aorist in favour of the progressive. One damn thing happening after another. This gift has a price, because memory can also bring the past closer than we might like, and so many pasts are painful.

Remembering Backwards II, has something of the spectral about it. The eyes are closed - the subject seems hopelessly remote. The mood is melancholy. The source for the repeated head is a historical photograph, its subject long dead. That's one of the costs of photography, of course – it testifies to the relentless passage of time and in so doing the photograph, like memory, become a token of absence. Lost time and dead time overlap within it.

To remember is to be haunted by a “ghostly matter” at once embodied and incorporeal, “a sticky dream.”⁴ I’ve been wondering, writing this, if memory is one of the things that separates us from each other – that places you both beside and beyond me. It is such a personalised thing, this haunting: the accumulated thoughts of a single life lived alone in a head, subject to the inexorable forward momentum of time and the inescapable backward pull of history, but belonging wholly neither to one nor the other.

His shadow may have always been a sundial. It tells him the time.

Arguably memory is at its most seductive when filtered through the tinted lens of nostalgia. When we remember that the photographed subject in *You move me (so)* once was and, and maybe was happy, and maybe so were we. But nostalgia brings such sharp pain with it that it amplifies memory’s haunting to the point of pathology. In the past it was considered a disease to be treated with opium and leeches. Rather charmingly, a doctor even ascribed the symptoms of nostalgic yearning to a “hypochondria of the heart”: a past that acts upon us and makes us believe we are ill.⁵ I don’t think the pain is simply imagined, however, but maybe it is misunderstood. Nostalgia comes under the guise of a longing for a place that is lost but it isn’t, really. It is the longing for a time that has passed, or should have been, or never was. Time-sickness.

Barthes’ synonym for aorist is “anterior future.” A memory of what has-been and what will-be, forever deferring the present. A remembering backwards.

The man and his shadow run in a present continuous, toward a future, perfect.

¹ Carson, A., 2000. *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*. New York: Vintage.

² Soinit, R., 2004. *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*. New York: Penguin.

³ Olson, C., 1970. *The special view of history*. Berkeley: Oyez.

⁴ Scanlan, J., 2013. *Memory: Encounters with the Strange and the Familiar*. London: Reaktion Books.

⁵ Boym, S., 2002. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Installation

AVA Gallery, Cape Town
28 September - 24 October 2017







Artworks

Exhibited at the AVA Gallery, Cape Town
28 September - 24 October 2017

Onwards and Upwards

2017

Oil paint and pastel on

425 gsm Bockingford

100% cotton-rag paper

76 x 57 cm



Attention must be paid, to such a man

2016

Photocopy transfer and acrylic paint on

425 gsm Bockingford 100%

cotton-rag paper

76 x 57 cm



Untitled (part man)

2016

Acrylic and enamel paint on 425 gsm

Bockingford 100% cotton-rag paper

76 x 57 cm



Untitled

2017

Enamel, wood, acrylic and photograph
printed on board

76 x 57 cm



Cat

2016

Pastel on 300 gsm Bockingford

100% cotton-rag paper

76 x 57 cm



Rabbit

2017

Oil paint on sized 425 gsm
Bockingford 100% cotton-rag paper
76 x 57 cm



hound

2017

Pastel on 300 gsm Bockingford

100% cotton-rag paper

76 x 57 cm



A study of instincts

2017

Monoprint using oil paint on sized 400
gsm Atlantis 100% cotton-rag paper

152 x 122 cm



Equals & Averages

2017

Monoprint using oil paint on sized 400

gsm Atlantis 100% cotton-rag paper

152 x 122 cm



From strenght to strenght

2017

Graphite, acrylic paint on 400 gsm

Atlantis 100% cotton-rag paper

152 x 122 cm



The Great Complaint

2017

Acrylic paint and wax on 400 gsm

Atlantis 100% cotton-rag paper

152 x 122 cm



Pastel on silicon carbide paper and 400
gsm Atlantis 100% cotton-rag paper
152 x 122 cm



Remembering Backwards II

2017

Pastel, Perspex, wood, acrylic on 425
gsm 100% cotton-rag paper on board

76 x 57 cm



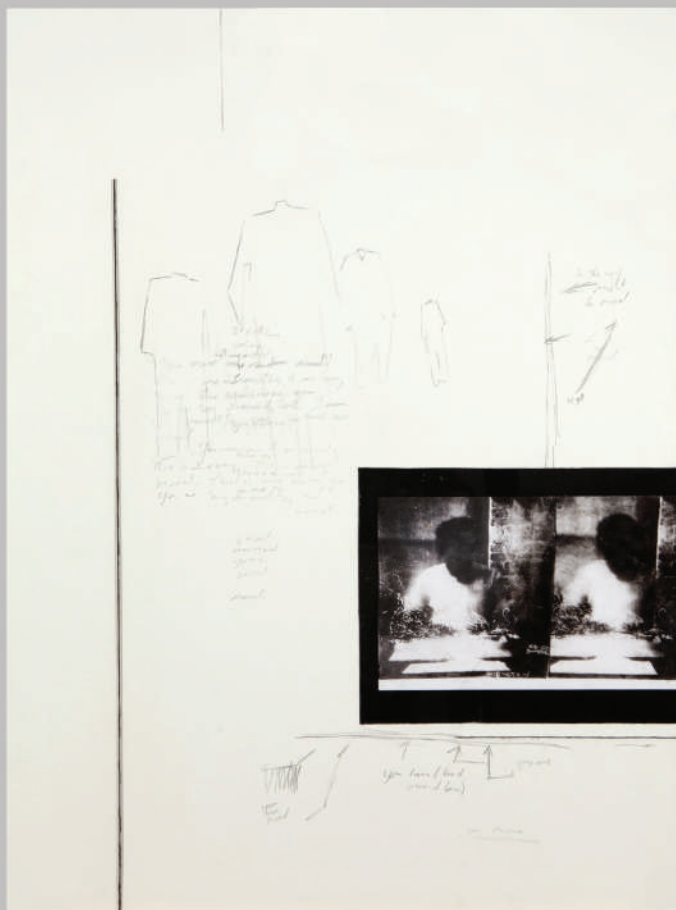
You move me (so)

2017

Graphite, Perspex, metal, digital
photograph on 425 gsm Bockingford

100% cotton-rag paper on board

76 x 57 cm



Untitled (Gaze)

2016

Acrylic paint on 400 gsm Atlantis

100% cotton-rag paper

152 x 122 cm



Doing other peoples' thinking

2017

Ink, acrylic and wax on 425 gsm

Bockingford 100% cotton-rag paper

76 x 57 cm



After Image

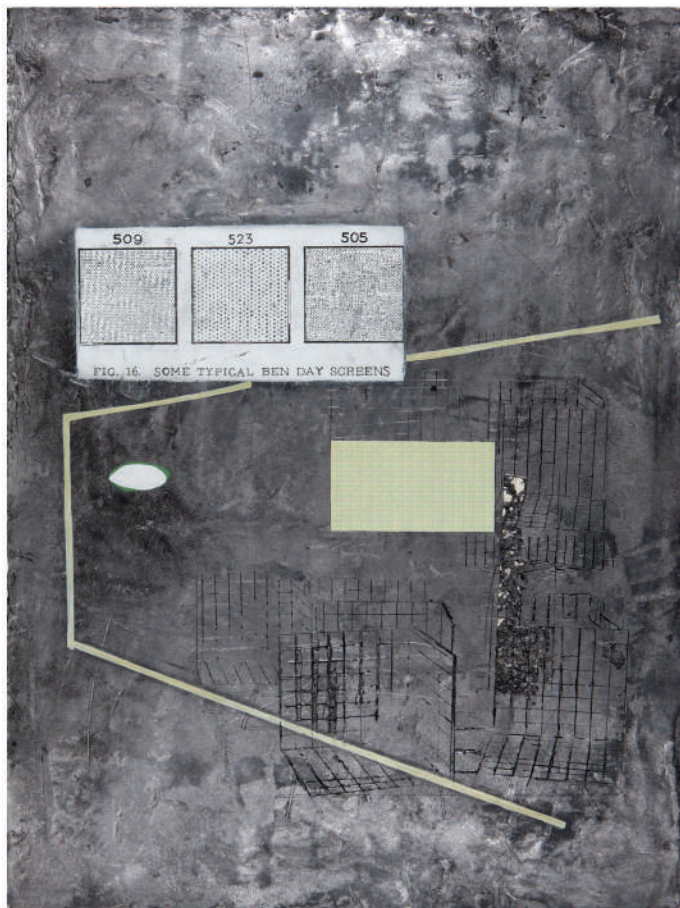
2017

Oil paint, graphite, vinyl on

425 gsm Bockingford

100% cotton-rag paper

76 x 57 cm



Untitled (leaning back)

2017

Transfer on 400 gsm Atlantis 100%

cotton-rag paper

152 x 122 cm



Nadja Daehnke attained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of Cape Town, followed by Masters in Fine Art and Masters in History of Art degrees. Nadja has exhibited nationally and internationally and has lectured at various tertiary institutions in both theory and practical subjects. Now working as independent curator and artist, Nadja held the post of curator of the Michaelis Galleries, University of Cape Town, from 2010 to early-2013. Prior to this she worked at the Iziko South African National Gallery as Curator for Contemporary Painting and Sculpture. Nadja returned to Cape Town in July 2017 following four years in France and the UK.

With thanks to:

Anna Stielau
Virginia MacKenny
Justin Brett
Philip Todres
Vanessa Cowling Photography
Anton de Beer from Framed by Anton
Garth Erasmus
and
my studio mates in the UK

The AVA Gallery, Cape Town, and especially

Mirjam Asmal, Director of AVA Gallery
Bonolo Kavula, Project Organiser at AVA Gallery
and the AVA Committee



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