

Bad Form | blank projects (Cape Town, ZA)

Curated by Kathryn Smith and Christian Nerf with Francis Burger¹

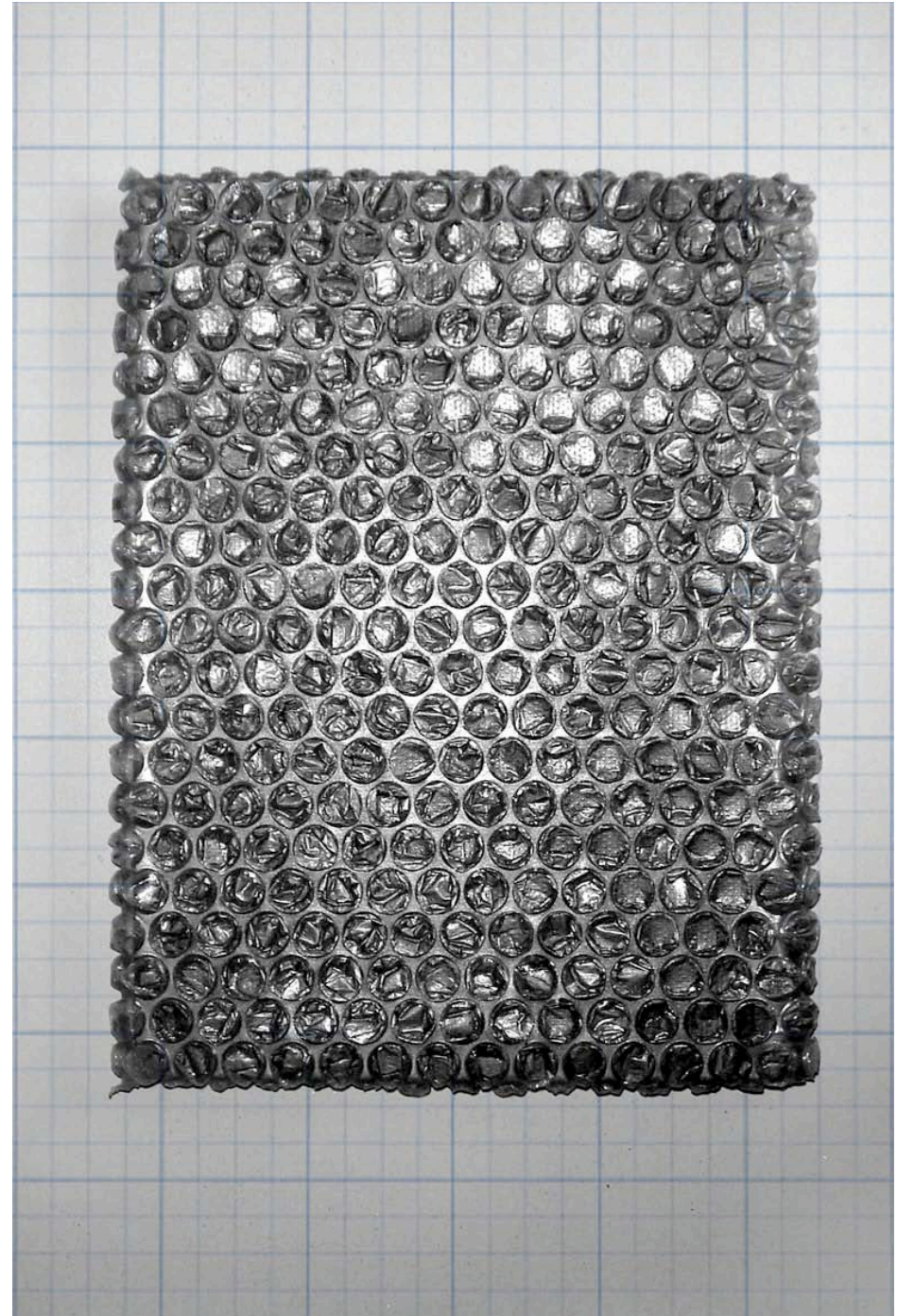
A FRAME

'Bad form' can be understood as referring to many things: in colloquial language, it refers to a notable social *faux pas*. In aesthetic terms, it could refer to something that is badly constructed, or not sufficiently considered or resolved in formalist terms. But more than anything, 'bad form' is relative, relational; it is culturally, socially or even historically conditioned by whoever is declaring what constitutes the 'good', whether in tasteful or formal terms.

But, if Wittgenstein is to be believed, ethics and aesthetics are one and the same. 'Bad' in taste terms is one thing, but 'bad' in ethical terms is quite another. This is a point of special interest, particularly in the light of Alain Badiou's final thesis in his *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art*: "It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognises as existent."

Bad Form is motivated by the need to document and reassess experimental practices in South Africa from the 1960s to the present in relation to radical practices here and elsewhere. This is a history that has not yet been written. The early wave of European and American conceptually driven practices, particularly in terms of conceptualism, materiality and 'dematerialisation' dominate our understanding of current forms. This is not the history of our lived experience, but a learned/received one.

1. **Bad Form** intends to present a range of practices that may or may not result in objects in the traditional sense, but all of which demonstrate a particular interest in materiality (indulgence or rejection).
2. **Bad Form** will include new works, older works, and artefacts that relate to finished works or processes by artists based in South Africa and abroad
3. **Bad Form** intends to interrogate work produced in the context of South Africa with works produced elsewhere in the world that seem to demonstrate similar critical concerns yet which may not enjoy the same historical recognition
4. **Bad Form** is interested in work which could be described as 'extemporized' (to devise something in a makeshift fashion; improvise; to perform or speak without prior preparation)
5. **Bad Form** intends to find ways to include works that for whatever reason, it would be impossible to include. These could be works that cannot be released from permanent museum collections; works which do not, no longer, or may have never existed; or works to which we have no access



Warren Siebrits *Untitled 1996/7* Object · multiple prints, hardboard, bubble wrap, glue, silver paint 21.7 x 16.6 x 1.9 cm. Private collection

PARTICIPANTS

We are conducting extensive research and studio visits, inviting works from artists locally and abroad, as well as investigating the possibility of including works that are held in public or private collections.

EXHIBITION STRATEGY

The rotational strategy, active archive and weekly seminars are designed to create an active, discursive environment where people feel free to ask questions, debate the relevance of the exhibition's inclusions and exclusions, and directly or indirectly, contribute to the proposed publication.

1. **Rotate** As the works on *Bad Form* reflect process in very specific ways, so the exhibition itself will be process-orientated. We envision that each week, the exhibition space will be redesigned with new works, guided by a set of theoretical or practical concerns. Works may feature in more than one week, as concerns inevitably overlap.

2. **Active Archive** Behind the gallery's front room, the back room will function as an active archive, where information relating to the works on show can be accessed by visitors, and other supporting materials can be screened (videos, documentaries); live website updates can be compiled (a continuation of the ArtWiki Marathon); and the publication can be developed through informal discussions over coffee.

3. **Discussions** We believe that it is increasingly important to engage in open discussions around works and processes, as a way to demystify some of the processes at work in making and presenting art, and in doing so, destabilize the subjective and market-driven process of value-judgement as both can be declarative in unproductive ways.

We propose a weekly interdisciplinary seminar featuring prominent local practitioners and scholars, in partnership with VANSAs Western Cape and higher education institutions in Cape Town and Stellenbosch.

PUBLICATION

Depending on the material generated by the exhibition's research processes and in/formal discussions, we are proposing either a limited edition broadsheet, or a more extensive publication designed and published via print-on-demand. We aim to pursue a formal book project in partnership with a publisher.

PARTNERSHIPS

Pro Helvetia and the Goethe Institut² | Museum of Contemporary Art, Cape Town
VANSAs Western Cape | University of Stellenbosch
Electric Book Works will be approached as a publication partner

THINGS AND STUFF FOR THE FAIR

'It's always mistakes', Tom Waits is saying. 'Most things begin as a mistake. Most breakthroughs in music come out of a revolution of the form. Someone revolted, and was probably not well-liked. But he [*sic*] ultimately started his own country... Yeah, you go to work and write songs. I still do that but now sometimes I break everything I've found. It's like you give a kid a toy and they play with the wrapping. I do that now.'³

So forgive me if I relapse...into my dream of an art unresentful of its unsurpassable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving.⁴

Bad Form is a phased project, of which the second, *Things And Stuff* is presented as a special project for the Joburg Art Fair. Generally speaking, *Bad Form* is committed to presenting a range of practices that may or may not result in objects in the traditional sense, but all of which demonstrate a particular concern with the material. We are interested in new works, older works, and artefacts that relate to finished works or processes, and are particularly interested in work which could be described as 'extemporized', both in the literal meaning of the word (improvisational, makeshift) as well as work that seems to exist 'ex-tempo' (out of time).

It is increasingly difficult to be truly 'spectacular'. However, in defence of lost causes, art fairs are about the specular (spectacle and speculation) and the material (materiality and materialism). Adrian Searle points out that "It's OK to like art now, but what difference does it make if you do? It is easier to be an artist now, but harder to know what art to make."⁵ *Bad Form* is about things revealing themselves incrementally, no big announcements. Shy art. Intractable art. Reticent things. Committed practice. If art can literally be anything, and anything that is announced as such can be art, is there any other kind of committed, consciously motivated, creative activity that could still exist outside of this category (as well as outside all other possible categories of professional practice)? The contemporary character and demands of art's institutions are considered to inevitably condition praxis. *Bad Form* approaches critical questions facing art from the perspective of art practice. It is concerned with the ethics and aesthetics of praxis and how, in material terms, these concerns are made manifest.

ART AIR*

*spellchecker told me this is how artfair is spelt

Pontificators, warm farts and other things that will disappear into thin air. What the fuck are we doing on an artfair? Good question. We have nothing permanent, let alone tangible, to sell. Temporal, situational and plain dodgy some will say. Frozen blood heads melt and the original ready-mades are often ironically replicas and noted as 'original lost'. Very amusing and may put to bed any argument about how archival an artwork needs to be. Perhaps it is the thought that counts.

My favourite stuff is hard to name, it's best described as a thing.

I am writing this from my studio in Woodstock, the harbour is nearby and a ship has just signalled. Each signal means something specific. Everyone, at least everyone concerned, knows what it means. This uniform conduct allows for simply packaged messages to be simply unpacked. If only things were that simple but we live in a complex world that deserves multifaceted stuff.⁶

Confronted then with the opportunity to stand up for something that no one really believes in, the best course of action is either to lie or do nothing. It's too late to do nothing, and to lie would require an announcement of success, a thigh slapped and a back patted, which would completely undermine the most inspiring aspect of a project, its potential, unashamed failure. Instead, it is enough to transpose one of Slavoj Zizek's favourite Marx Brothers' jokes - 'this man looks as an idiot, acts as an idiot; but this should not deceive you - he is an idiot!' – onto the currencies of art.

The booth will not be a static display. Collections of work will be altered hourly and daily. For **Things And Stuff**, the selection of visual material and other related content is guided by a common principle of how this material reflects on, critiques or offers new perspectives on the ethics and aesthetics of exchange and trade. Additional exhibition material will be developed and extemporised from our observation of the various activities and interactions during the fair.

Kathryn Smith, Christian Nerf and Francis Burger

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NOTES

¹ Kathryn Smith is an artist and researcher. She is senior lecturer and co-ordinator of Studio Practice in the Department of Visual Arts, University of Stellenbosch. Smith is committed to creating new physical and theoretical spaces for experimental art practice in South Africa. She has exhibited and published widely, in South Africa and abroad. Christian Nerf is an artist and public investigator. He is the current director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cape Town. Francis Burger is an artist and writer. She is currently completing a Masters degree at the University of Cape Town.

² blank projects is an independent, artist- run exhibition space founded in Cape Town by Jonathan Garnham in 2005, and dedicated to new developments in contemporary South African Art. blank encourages experimental practice from both emerging and established artists, building a context for the dissemination of ideas around contemporary African arts practice. blank projects also initiates and facilitates artistic exchange programmes, hosting residencies for visiting Swiss- as well as Southern- African artists in association with Pro Helvetia and the SD,. Recently blank began working with the Goethe Institut with a view to developing relationships between local and German artists and institutions., blank has hosted over fifty exhibitions to date by artists including Bianca Baldi, Ralph Borland, Katherine Bull, Julia Rosa Clark, Barend de Wet, Gimberg Nerf, the Gugulective, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Gabi Ngcobo, Peter Regli, James Webb and Ed Young.

³ See Rowland, M. 'Tom Waits is Flying Upside Down (on purpose)' in *Innocent When You Dream*, p. 91. Interview originally published in *Musician*, October 1987

⁴ Beckett, S & Duthuit, G. 1965 *Proust and Three Dialogues*. London: John Calder, p. 112

⁵ Adrian Searle, from response to survey question 'How Has Art Changed' in *Frieze*, October 2005, p. 169

⁶ From Christian Nerf's curator's notes.