



Nathalie Karagiannis

A Line in the Middle of Nowhere is not a Small Thing

A concise correspondence between Nathalie Karagiannis and Hans Theys with regard to the sculpture *'Karoo Wall/Genius Loci'*

Dear Nathalie,

Thank you for sending me some pictures of the brick wall you and a mason built in the Karoo desert. It is so beautiful!

Why a wall? **Why at this particular spot?** How did the adventure start? **With a dream?** With the encounter of some brickworks? An encounter with a bricklayer?

When I visited Cape Town some twenty years ago, apart from the mountains, the clouds, the sea, the trees, the plants and the flowers, I was struck the most by the accidental discovery of a brick manufacturer: huge ziggurat-like constructions of neatly superimposed bricks with nearly invisible fumes leaking out through the cracks between the bricks. Did you also encounter such a brick manufacturer?

Your wall reminds me of Pasolini's film *Oedipus Rex* (1967): a solitary person lost in a vast, desolate landscape with a blinding sun. Did the Karoo desert remind you of Greece, the country of your father?



Does the work evoke unforeseen images in you as it does with me (the bricks in Cape Town, *Oedipus Rex*)?

Or does the thing in itself move you: the colour of the bricks and the surrounding landscape, the scale and the proportions (i.e. the architectural relationship between the wall and the vast space, the sky, the sun, the mountains in the distance), the craftsmanship, the addition of an 'artificial' element to the environment, the wall as an optical instrument (due to the slit)?

Do you see the wall as a poem? Because I do. It immediately made me think of the lines of a poem on a page, surrounded by activated 'empty' space.

A song?

A sculpture?

Building a column, a tower, a road, or a wall seems to be the first sculptural and architectural intervention. Brâncuși's columns and stacks. The barricade of ice blocks built by Panamarenko in 1968, Christo's barricades and towers with used oil barrels, the 'Sweet Wall' built by Allan Kaprow with cinder blocks and slices of bread and jam as mortar (1970), the wall with car tyres and wet cotton wool built by Paul McCarthy (I cannot find images of it, but I heard him speak about it, about twenty years ago, crawling on all fours and making a drawing of the work with a black marker.), Per Kirkeby's constructions with bricks, Anselm Kiefer's towers at Barjac...

Perhaps I am asking you too many questions at the same time. Let me know!

Yours,

Hans

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Dear Hans,

Thank you for being you, whom I so well recognise through your questions!

I'll start with one of the last ones: I never saw the Karoo Wall as a poem, no, but inevitably now it is one. A thought can never be unthought, a question never unasked. So it reminds me of a talk-interview given in front of an audience by Sharon Olds: at some point, to illustrate how she spatially conceives of the poem, she gets up, turns her back to the public and shows on the right and the left the empty spaces of the page; she, her body, is the poem. Many sculptors are unaware of the very strong sense of spatiality poets have. The relation with space (the white spaces left here and there on the page, the obligatory margins, the erasures, the decisions to erase but keep the erasure visible, the decisions to turn white spaces black, etc.) is key in poetry. The relation between writing and producing three-dimensional objects is a conversation I would love to have with you in the future.

I saw the wall as a sculptural gesture, rather. I decided I was going to do it on the third day I arrived in Richmond, which is situated between Cape Town and Johannesburg. There are three things I can identify that may have triggered the decision. The first two were in my luggage: one was the trap of Gaza, the sense of suffocating enclosure from which it is impossible to flee; the other was my own internal turmoil, half-personal, half-artistic, about the relevance of architecture (and thus, walls) in contemporary art, which I find obsessive and uninteresting after a point. Let's call these two elements negative. The third element was site-specific: one of the walls of this utterly unexpected place that the MAPSA Gallery is, is a work by Willem Boshoff, a wall. I liked it more than his work *Jerusalem*, which I had the opportunity to see and think about when I was a resident at Nirox in 2023. I immediately learned that the bricks were made locally, with local clay and manually. Let's call this the positive element.

Very soon after I imagined the construction of a wall, I sought out the local brick manufacturer. I found it on my first walk in the veld. I was fascinated by the simplicity and the hard work of the process. I'll send you videos, but I doubt the scale is comparable to what you saw in CT, even though, yes, the image of the fumes escaping from the square towers of bricks is similar to what I saw. There are basically four stages: the production of the clay (with the help of a donkey), the moulding of the bricks in wooden crates, their drying and their burning (and burning again). There is another important but secondary element, which is the fabrication of the grey stone powder that is used to burn the bricks: this part of the process, I used in another sculpture. The work as a whole is very hard and very hot under the sun.

The limit is a very useful starting point. I always work according to what there is where I am, so knowing I had this resource available there immediately unlocked the imagination.

Two things demanded a lot of effort on my side, and they are there in your questions: the first was to find the right place. The second was to find the right man. This is how - chronologically - they were posed to me, but I'll start with Munya, the bricklayer. After I had secured the permission of the municipality, I had a very hard time finding a bricklayer whom I could trust to do the work exactly the way I imagined it and pay the right, local amount of money for it.

In the end, I was introduced to Munya and Milton, respectively, 23 and 28 years old, childhood friends from the same town in Zimbabwe. One loves whiskey, the other one dagga, and both love South African girls. Munya is the bricklayer, and Milton is the guy who makes the mortar by hand. They are reliable people, hard workers, and totally honest. As somebody in town told me later, I was blessed to find them. It took a long time, and I had many encounters with people asking for ridiculous amounts of money and did not show up on the agreed time. I almost gave up, my time in Richmond was running out, and I didn't have anyone to help me build the wall.

In the meantime, though, I had found where I would build it. Against all advice, I decided to build it on the other side of the N1 (National route), the side to which the town turned its back, as it were. The reason was the simplest ever: it is infinitely

more beautiful and has no human-made visual interference. I was very much pulled towards that part of the landscape, just as it can happen to me when I'm in a particularly creative bout: I wake up and this is the first thing on my mind, I feel an irresistible attraction to find my drawing-sculpture-text-landscape-walk. So, after I first walked there, I started wanting to go back every day. I would start at around 5:30-6 and walk for a couple of hours, sometimes three. Beautiful, beautiful Karoo, a semi-desertic landscape with its strange succulent plants and cacti, its birds with the weird noises, its colourful insects, its tortoises, its occasional springbok and the infinite view of earth and sky. How could a wall planted there uphold any seriousness?

When I finished it and sent the first pictures to one of my oldest friends, who is an architect, he wrote: 'You have an inborn inclination for freedom, for large, open spaces. I always liked this in you since you were young. A line in the middle of nowhere is not a small thing.'

To answer another one of your questions, I think you and I have talked before about how Greece always comes to mind when I am in Southern Africa, just as Southern Africa is there with me when I'm in Greece: the often semi-desertic or dry (as some islands are called in Greece, those where political prisoners were sent) land, the red earth, the truly starry sky, the chaos and anarchism, the quick friendships, the bluntness and boldness and ingenuity, the way to always find a way around the obstacle. Yes, I feel quickly at ease in both places because I feel relatively free. This was no nowhere, of course, let alone the middle of it. The work has a double

name: *Karoo Wall/Genius Loci* (Spirit of the Place). The veld is a habitat, and it is often privately owned, even though there might only be a fallen bit of barbed wire or a rotten wooden pole to indicate this. And yes, there are huge political stakes around land ownership in South Africa.

As soon as you start walking in a systematic way, you know you're always somewhere. Somewhere where other beings (human or not) have been and left traces. You learn to see this, and you learn that it is very seldom that you are entirely alone. However, I must admit that it often felt like this, and I entertained the illusion. But isn't this individual feeling as important as the property papers? After all, I never met anybody on foot during my walks in the month I was there.

Recently, I was thinking of Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Martin and their love of space. O'Keeffe walked, too. There is a beautiful picture of her from high above, walking with her dogs.

Looking for a Richard Long (another major walker) piece last year in Nirox's reserve resulted in the most disorienting and productive day of my residency there.

But yes, any wanderer in the desert will be Oedipus. Oedipus between the two plays. Tacita Dean's *Antigone* treats that gap. Your mention of Pasolini immediately brought his *Notes Towards an African Orestes* to mind, which I very much like because of its admission of failure.



I think my old friend was right when he pointed out the line that the Karoo Wall is. Or maybe he was referring to the vertical gap or slit in it. Both things are lines. I had some trouble coming up with the particular gap, its directionality, and the proportions in which it would split the wall. Obviously, the existence of the line that the gap intersects with the existence of the line that the whole wall is, forming a cross, an orientation landmark. Another architect friend saw it as the creation of a centre. To me, there were two main elements: the first had to do with verticality, given the Karoo's horizontality. The second is the interruption of the wall, a gesture underlying the whole sculptural gesture, which is about the simultaneity of the significance and insignificance of the wall.

My first friend added: 'The connection is not so much to architecture but to construction. It has its own internal ethics and logic.' And indeed, seeing Munya at work was something to admire. To start with, he took a decision on the exact site of the foundation, on which all the names of the donors are inscribed. The site I originally chose was moved two meters away because of intractable stones. But all the decisions he took and whose logic he helped me see were significant, starting with a self-evident one for him: on which side he was going to work. His gestures were beautifully regular, his attention unflinching and his control of the situation complete. He always supervised Milton's work, who toiled away. He never stopped explaining and guiding me to do those things he thought I could decently do.

In the event, I **fell in love with the wall**. I hadn't felt such great joy for a very long time, not with the publication of books or other supposed achievements. I was

completely exhilarated; I could hardly believe that I had managed to make this piece there. It's difficult to explain to myself. I think there was a sense of adequacy, which is very rare for me, as if this were how things were meant to be, as if I had, at last, matched my own imagination.

My original intention had been to show an absurdity, between denunciation and irony, a half-political, half-artistic plea. And here I was, in the end, walking to the wall, fondling its bricks, the bricks that came from the same earth on which it stands, feeling the wind passing through its gap, watching its changing colour under the changing light, its growing or diminishing shadows, walking away from it, up on the hills surrounding it to have different views of it, and then back down to it, holding my back to each of its faces, East and West, experiencing its sheer presence. Yes, indeed, this transformation of the intellect and determination into pure emotion was completely unforeseen.

A related issue regarding 'place' is who the work is addressed to and whose gaze it invites and deals with. If hardly anybody goes there, if hardly anybody sees it, what sense does it have? What sense does it have to spread the desert with such odd things as artworks? To me, it made all the sense in the world to do it, and I derived great satisfaction from it, maybe precisely because it falls under nobody's authority, nobody's rules and jurisdiction. It is utterly a gift. When I was done with it, somebody from town wrote 'Thank you in the name of the community'. And somebody else said, 'People will understand it'. Perhaps these are the ideal conditions and effects of a work of art, which springs from its own necessity.

I would ask you, Hans: how do you find the wall beautiful?

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Dear Nathalie,

I haven't seen the wall in reality, so I cannot judge it. Not in itself, not with regard to the surrounding veld, the movement of the earth with regard to the sun, the wind. Good you mentioned the wind. I hadn't thought of it. I imagine Munya's choice of his working position was related to the position of the sun in the afternoon, between noon and three? Not to have the sun in his eyes? Which would have the wall cast a strong shadow at his moment? I also imagine that the wall gets very hot during the day. Are the nights cold? In that case, the warmth of the wall might be comforting.

This reminds me of the birds of prey one often sees in France, resting on the poles along the roads. I used to think they were sitting there to prey on casualties of traffic. Later, I thought small animals would become more visible on the road than in the grass. But probably the birds also like the high position, combined with an unobstructed, leafless view. I bet some animal will choose your wall as a vantage point.

How do I find the wall beautiful?

First of all (and all the following happens in a fraction of a second, in the form of a wordless, total appreciation), I love the fact that the bricks are made of the soil they stand on. This is an experience of colour. For instance, the cover of a book I recently finished has the colour of the soil in Keyna (ardhi yetu). Secondly, I perceive the thing as a sculptural decision, an incision. Thirdly, this incision reminds me of an essay I wrote about drawing as a way of thinking, in which I describe the first line as a way to distinguish here from there, night from day, private from public, good from evil, you from me, me from myself and so on. Every thought starts with artificial distinctions, of which we must remember that they don't correspond to anything real (there is no real limit between day and night, good and evil, you and me).

Then I think of Nisa, the !Kung lady, as she appears in both books by Marjorie Shostak: modern, intelligent, consequent, strong. *Nisa* is one of my favourite books.

Then, I think of related artworks or artists that have done similar things.

This brings me to your question regarding the 'sense' of *Karoo Wall*. I cannot help but believe that any form of art has no other direct sense than the fulfilment it gives to the maker. To put it differently: anything one tries to do well obtains 'sense', 'value' or 'meaning' from the diligence and earnestness of this attempt. I write because I like to write. Secretly, I hope it will also be of service to others or

make their lives more liveable or agreeable, but in itself, this cannot be the aim. I don't believe in abstractions. I believe every action or dint of action has a political dimension, but I don't believe in politics or politicians. I believe every act can be artistic, but I don't believe in 'art' as an abstract entity. I avoid being with people who judge and prescribe but don't make anything themselves. I also believe things, trees, for instance, don't need a 'meaning' to be able to 'mean' something to us. I love craftsmanship. I believe all renewal in art comes from improvising craftsmen or craftswomen. I believe any craftsmanship is essentially free, not bound. They only become unfree when schools, teachers and other politicians are involved. I believe your wall speaks of freedom. It speaks of being there. It speaks of breathing, dreaming and doing. And that is, to answer your question for a second time, why I think it is beautiful.

Yours,

Hans

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Dear Hans,

Yes, the wind is frequent in Richmond that time of the year, which is also why a

lot of people cover their mouths and noses when they walk in the veld. It was a central, imponderable, but dependable element in another work I did in Richmond, the Tin Tin Tin Veranda installation. I will send you some more pictures of the wall where one can see the wind in my hair (basically, the only way to know it on photos, given the lack of anything that moves in the wind, apart from dust). I also like the colour of the bricks and how the wall springs out of its very own soil. And to think that I considered painting it at some point! But as soon as the wall existed, it was evident that I shouldn't. In some inscrutable way, the artefact belongs to the landscape.

Munya worked on the Western face, facing the East. I don't think it was so much a question of light as a question of being relatively protected from the heat i.e. raising the bricks in front of him. Protection of the heat in these situations, as you know, means adding layers, not taking them off. He and Milton always wore hats, long sleeves, long trousers and gloves. Me too. The temperature varies hugely, starting with a very cold morning and sometimes rising to 35/36 degrees. It's extremely dry. We drank lots of water and did not pee it.

An interesting aspect of his decision was that the delicate indents I wanted to have between the bricks had to be more carefully traced on the side he had not been. He had not been aware of this because he had never worked on such a thing, where every detail had to be attended to. (One day, he told me, underlying the absurdity – to his eyes – of the project: I'll do a wall wherever you ask me to. If you want it on a hill, I'll do it on a hill.) To softly mark the indents, I used his self-made

instrument: a bent nail protruding from a flat square of wood that fits in the hand. The wood is put flat on the two bricks, and the protruding bit of nail scratches the drying mortar. You just need patience and a steady hand. Then, you brush the rest off.

After the wall was finished, I thought that it might provide shade to different beings. There is nothing else that can provide shade around it.

On the penultimate day, I saw a bird on it, just as you described.

I have often thought of what might now be happening to it, in its gap, around it.

Goodnight,

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