



# Character (and absence) as a narrative key in installation art



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Installation art has been critically interpreted with reference to themes or situations, the transgressive nature of this art form, place and space, material, or immersion and embodied perception. To a lesser degree, installation art's narrative possibilities have also been explored. However, the centrality of *character* as a narratological tool for the interpretation of installation art has not yet been comprehensively investigated. As the viewer in installation art is transformed into an active participant by virtue of physically entering and 'completing' the work, it is argued that he or she also becomes a character in the storyworld of the artwork. Furthermore, it is posited that this participant-character becomes a focaliser who co-constructs the narrative suggested by the work by engaging with the narrativised elements presented in the work, often together with suggested absences at which the work hints. This article shows that character as a narratological tool creates interpretative possibilities for installation art and adds new dimensions to the narrative potential of this art form. Using character (and absence) in the South African installation artist Jan van der Merwe's work *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003) as an example, an expansion of the narratological toolbox of installation art is suggested, that could find broader application in many works in this genre.

**Keywords:** Postclassical (visual) narratology; character narration (in installation art); focalisation (in installation art); fabula; intersubjectivity; self and other; Jan van der Merwe; *Biegbak/Confessional*.

## Installation art and narratology

Installation art refers to a practice of art making or to a genre in contemporary art. This difficult-to-define art form had risen to prominence during the 1970s (Bishop 2005; Cray 2003; Davies 1997). In addition, it normally entails the activation of an entire space which allows the viewer to enter the work physically and to become immersed inside the work (Bishop 2005). Many installation artworks puzzle gallery visitors (if they are exhibited in a gallery, which is often not the case – cf. Suderberg 2000) as they defy the expectations of what 'art' should be. For example, the spectator may either be presented with an empty space<sup>1</sup> as the 'work' or with live objects<sup>2</sup> or other seemingly esoteric objects (or non-objects) in the artwork. Thus, this art form deviates from the more conventional understanding of art as being, for example, a painting or a sculpture. Also, installation art has resisted traditional art-historical approaches and, for this reason and also perhaps because it normally 'ceases' after being dismantled (Reiss 2001:xv), has received relatively marginal scholarly attention. Therefore, a comparatively small number of publications exemplify scholarly engagement with installation art.<sup>3</sup>

Extant scholarly texts do not engage extensively with the narrative possibilities of installation art, although most mention these aspects in passing, and acknowledge that installation art is often narrative in nature. This art form therefore warrants more focused narratological consideration.<sup>4</sup>

This article is situated in the sphere of intermedial studies, a sub-field of postclassical narratology.<sup>5</sup> Intermedial or transmedial studies refer to narratological approaches across media – visual arts,

1. For example, the work called *Untitled Installation* by Michael Asher (b. 1943) simply entailed an invisible column of air – see Bishop (2005:59).

2. The contemporary installation artist Anne Hamilton's work *Dominion* of 1990, for example, consisted of thousands of moths going through their life-cycles in a contained space (see Bishop 2005).

3. Among these works are Bishop (2005), Rosenthal (2003), Reiss (2001), Geczy and Genocchio (2001), De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry (eds. 1993), Suderberg (2000), and Davies (1997).

4. Mieke Bal has done so – but as I aim to demonstrate, I would like to add to this repertoire of tools by emphasising the role of character in installation art (see Bal 1999a:103–126; see also Bal 1999b, 2001a, 2001b, 2010).

5. Postclassical narratology embraces text-based, as well as other types of narrative. See Meister (2014) for a discussion of postclassical narratology.

**Note:** An earlier version of this article was delivered at the 8th Global Storytelling Conference held during September 2015 at Mansfield College, Oxford. It was not published in the proceedings of the conference.

graphic novels, film and computer games, among others<sup>6</sup> (Ryan 2009). Much scholarly interest in the more recent emergence of intermedial narratology, therefore, pertains to storytelling in non-classical or non-text-based platforms – from painting, film and graphic novels to computer games (cf. Chatman 1978; Horstkotte 2009; Horstkotte & Pedri 2011; Steiner [1988] 2004; Wolf [2005] 2010). Less obvious examples where narratological analyses and consideration have been used include medical discourse of the body, the field of music and cyberspace discourse (cf. Kalafenos 2004; Ryan 2009; Young 1999). Law, psychoanalysis, ethics, sociology and theology are further instances that constitute evidence of the ‘narrative turn’ (Meuter 2009).

However, relatively little attention has been directed towards how narration works in installation art. An exception is the Dutch scholar Mieke Bal who has produced a number of groundbreaking studies of this art genre (refer to footnote 5). One of her central concerns is: ‘how can visual works of art ... [especially installation artworks] that resist coherent figurative readings, tell stories?’ (Bal 1999a:101). Among her valuable insights is the notion that the *viewer* has a performative and participatory role in the narrative, suggested by the installation artwork. Furthermore, she suggests that the work does not *tell* a story, but *builds* one. Viewer participation is certainly very important; I also concur that the story (or fabula) in installation art is constructed rather than discovered (cf. Bal 1999a:105). With reference to Bal’s (1978) elements of narrative that include space, time, agent (that becomes character in the story) and event, I present the even more specific argument that storytelling in many installation artworks proceeds in peculiar ways through *character* (and absence) as a central narrative element. While the narration is constructed in the context of installation art, I argue that this constructedness is a focalised function of an intersubjective process that proceeds through character.

With this article, I set out to participate in broadening the field of inter-medial postclassical narratology. Specifically, I show how the interpretative possibilities of narration in certain types of installation art can expand by using character as a narratological tool, thus contributing to the narratological toolbox as it applies to installation art. Conceptualising the viewer of the artwork not only as a viewer but also as a participant – and then as a participant who is also a *character* in the story-world of this type of artwork – is a novel idea, which I use to advance the argument that the viewer as participant-character is co-responsible for constructing the narrative suggested by the artwork.<sup>8</sup> The viewer’s new status as character also implies an ontological crossing between being a ‘real’ character and a storyworld character. As such, the viewer as participant-character may also identify and have empathy

with absent others hinted at in the work – even to the point, I argue, of a temporal inter-subjective merging with the absent other – this means that narration is a ‘shared’ function – of the participant-character who imaginatively embodies the suggested characters to fill the absences suggested in the work. I use the South African artist Jan van der Merwe’s installation *Biegbak/Confessional*<sup>9</sup> of 2003 (b. 1958) to illustrate the arguments, but I propose that such exploration of character and narration also indicates similar possibilities in the narratological interpretation of other installation artworks.

Here, I should perhaps make it very clear to the reader that I am not unaware of the dangers or problems associated with subjectivism. I also realise that many of the works of Van der Merwe are self-referential, and if a spectator is, say, given prior warning of the artist’s initial intentions, it will obviously affect the way a particular work is received. Here I should also speak briefly about reception theory.

Reception is a spectator-centred concept, defined as the meaning or significance that a spectator as *recipient* gives to a work of art as *text*. The process of receiving, that is, giving meaning to an existing text (possibly even within a new context), is shaped by the spectator. Here, the spectator’s context would include such factors as gender, race, culture, tradition, beliefs, physical state, prior knowledge and so forth. Consequently, reception stresses the participation of the receiver as the primary provider of the subject matter that is conveyed by the work of art as text.

Obviously, the ways of receiving are as varied as any communication can be. The recipient can accept, alter, confirm, deny, emphasise, repress and reject the concepts proffered by the art work. Providing novel (unexpected or unplanned) meanings to accessible information, reception will always alter its source in a variety of ways. Here, it might be considered that the most tyrannical way to receive is to erase. Thus, reception is subjective and has to do with individual and personal selection or projection.

It must also be understood that, unapologetically, Van der Merwe intends his installations for people who are sighted and who are fairly mobile. It would be difficult for, say, a no light perception blindness (NLP) person to fully experience a Van der Merwe installation. However, deaf persons should have little problem. Similarly, wheelchair-bound spectators would not be able to successfully navigate certain pieces, including *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003). Lastly, Van der Merwe is an Afrikaner who is very aware of his heritage and often comments on historical events that affect him personally and culturally. As a result, someone not well-versed in Afrikaner history may well miss some of the references in certain of his works.

6.This publication also deals with communicative products that use more than one modality (film, opera, the artist’s book, for example).

7.Although this article has two authors, the pronoun ‘I’ is used throughout since the greatest part of the article is written from the point of view of a subjective experience.

8.The same argument has been brought to bear in text-based narratives – compare, for example, Chatman (1986:189–204).

9.The title is a wordplay in Afrikaans (*Biegbak*) and English (*Confessional*). *Biegbak* can be literally translated to mean a bowl or container (*bak*) used for confessing (*bieg*); there is actually no such word in Afrikaans, but its meaning is clear to Afrikaans speakers. The Afrikaans part of the title is therefore a reflection of the English although not a precise translation. Interestingly, while the notion of a confessional is associated with Roman Catholic practices, the artist functions in a Reformed tradition where formal confessing is not practised; however, the title serves to create a sense of private religious experience. Therefore, the title has an important paratextual function as an interpretative key that narrativises the work (see Genette 1997 and also Abbott 2013).

## Narratological terminology for installation art

Narratologically speaking, installation art can be explored from various angles, such as author and implied author (or artist and implied artist), space and time, and others. In this article, my emphasis is on the role of character in narration. To facilitate a methodologically sequential discussion, I refer to: (1) storyworld, (2) character and (3) narration in installation art. Then I follow (4) focalisation as the means through which these dimensions are bound together and, finally, (5) a definition of the story or fabula in this context. In brief, when approaching the work, therefore, the viewer enters the work (it becomes a storyworld) and this allows for the transformation of the viewer into participant-character. Then, by means of focalised narration a fabula can be constructed. The order in which the terminology is presented here also informs the interpretation of the artwork in order to render my method repeatable for interpreting various instances of installation art.

### Storyworld

Narratologically speaking, the storyworld is an artifice, a construction. It is a fictional space – usually a mental space that exists in the imagination of the reader of a literary text. However, a storyworld can also be a digital space (in computer games) or a physical space – as, I argue, it is in installation art. Here, I am perfectly aware that different levels of immersion are possible. I obviously acknowledge that in terms of specific, individuated experience, different people will interact with this installation piece in different ways. Here such factors as race, gender, age, cultural identification and disablement will each affect the specifics of an individual's interpretation. However, what I attempt here is to produce a workable *model* that better showcases the centrality of *character* as a narratological tool for the interpretation of installation art. Space will not allow for an explication of infinite possibilities of interpretation. Nonetheless, the storyworld space is never simply physical (or digital, for that matter) because it also exists conceptually. For example, it recalls places and events, and it narrativises or thematises the space. The storyworld is also circumscribed by time, which may be foreshortened, made sticky, stretched, frozen, layered, fast-forwarded, shuffled or manipulated in other ways.<sup>10</sup> Typically, the storyworld is ontologically distinct from the actual world – but this notion is challenged in installation art where the space of the artwork is a physical space that bears ontological traces of both the 'real' world and the storyworld. In turn, this ontological blurring allows for a more expansive view of character, because the 'I' who enters the artwork is not only ontologically tied to the 'me' in the real world, but also to the 'me' who becomes a character in the installation artwork.

10. This terminology is used by Bal (2011).

### Character

Character<sup>11</sup> is the central focus of this article and thus deserves more detailed consideration. Narratologically speaking, character can be defined as 'a participant in a storyworld' (Jannidis 2013; Margolin 2007). In art historical terms, the person who enters the installation artwork is described as a participant rather than a viewer, because he or she participates in the work in some or other way – navigating physically through the work, doing something inside the work and 'completing the piece' (Bishop 2005:11). Therefore, if a person as the 'I' enters the work, that 'I' is a participant in its storyworld – 'I' becomes a character. In addition, installation artworks often recall a person or persons that are not actually inside the work; these absences can also be described as characters.<sup>12</sup>

The topology of postmodern characters as proposed by Fokkema (1991) provides salient and useful character dimensions that guide the ways in which character in Van der Merwe's installation artworks (and others) can be interpreted and constructed. Five specific issues are extrapolated from Fokkema's study: (1) the human-like aspects of character, (2) the ontological status of characters, (3) characters as closed versus open entities, (4) multiple or fragmented selves in character constructions and (5) characters as selves in search of others.

#### The human-like aspects of character

Fokkema (1991:19) contends that most scholars concur that characters are 'people' who take on lives of their own, almost as autonomous beings (p. 20). Consequently, there is an inherent overlap between the real world in which these people on whom characters may be based live and the fictional world that the text sketches and that the reader actualises in the reading process. In installation artworks, such as that of Van der Merwe, the participant (who is an actual person) becomes a character by virtue of entering the storyworld of the work, together with the hinted-at absent characters who have very likely existed as real people but who are now imagined or remembered.<sup>13</sup>

#### The ontological status of characters

Some overlap may exist between the ontological dimensions of characters in the 'real' world and characters in the fictional world of the text. A character in a written text may be metafictionally aware of his or her status as a character and may, to complicate matters, cross boundaries between fictional worlds or pretend to cross boundaries between fiction and reality (McHale 1987:121–123). Significant for the current article is the fact that, in fiction, characters cannot literally cross these boundaries, but it may be possible for a

11. Character is not often used in the visual arts where one would often speak of a figure or sitter – compare Rathbone and Lotz (2014). However, I argue that this is different in installation art where the participant has character status – as well as other possible inferred characters.

12. Compare, in this regard, Mahfouz's (2012) reference to offstage or absent characters in stage plays that actually dominate the onstage events.

13. Works by various artists contain clothes or shoes as metonymical of the bodies of people to refer to themes of memory, trauma and violence related to the absence (death) of the characters.

character (such as the participant-character in the installation artwork) *literally* to cross the threshold between the real and the fictional storyworld when entering the artwork.

The absent characters that are inferred by Van der Merwe's works, as in many installation artworks, also inhabit ambiguous ontological ground (Fokkema's term 1991:100) that shifts between their imagined presence (in the mind of the participant-character) and their absence recounted through (the artist's and the interpreter's) memory and imagination. These absent characters may be fictional constructs *and* real people whose lives are remembered and/or imagined.

### Character as closed versus open entities

Character has conventionally been regarded as a fairly closed entity whereas humans are open and unresolved. However, in postmodern fiction, the borderline between fiction and reality, possibly precarious at best, is often self-consciously erased or problematised. Characters may also be partly or entirely constituted by intertexts, a notion that challenges the boundaries between textual constellations. Paratextual elements (titles and preface-like statements, as well as anecdotal evidence – see Genette [1987] 1997) and the participant-character's own associations and connotations (historical, affective and cognitive) inform intertextual inferences in installation artworks, such as Van der Merwe's works. These elements guide the focalisation and narration because they function as cues, but they are slanted in a subjective way.

### Multiple or fragmented selves

Characters may also have multiple selves, or at least a fragmented self, that suggest a search for identity (Fokkema 1991:64, 69, 70). An extension of this point pertains to the construction of character. Characters are usually constructed in the reader's mind based on physical descriptions (omitted in Van der Merwe's works), first names (Van der Merwe does not give names for his absent characters while some installation artworks do) or other indications of a character's temperament, for example. Such omissions occur in postmodern fiction. Characters are also constructed around metonymical inferences, that is, around fragments from which characters can be imagined in the text or artwork. These require input from the reader or interpreter to come to life. In Van der Merwe's works, metonymical fragments such as washing (in *Biegbak/Confessional*) are incomplete events that stand for something more profound about the nature of the characters. In this way, character is 'abstracted from the text' and is embedded in and detachable from the text (Fokkema 1991:28, 29). The reader is the locus of character construction, especially in contexts where one considers subjective interpretations of *scriptible* texts (Barthes' term 1973:61; see also Fokkema 1991:61). Consequently, the reader may add attributes to a character by applying codes and 'templates' from the real world – attributes that are not necessarily inscribed in the text or that even run counter to textual information. In Van der Merwe's work, the reader

may attribute qualities to the absent character(s) that emanate from memory, or from probabilities in the real world.

Finally, in the fifth instance, postmodern characters are selves in search of others. The many selves, or diverse aspects of the self, and the lack of coherent boundaries between selves and others culminate in a state that is not either/or but rather either/and (cf. Fokkema 1991:179). The self, like character(s) in a story, is in the process of becoming, of discovering secrets, and unveiling possibilities that can be actualised as one interprets the text. This last point is salient in the context of Van der Merwe's characters; a host of presences may 'live' inside the participant-character's mind – also in an embodied manner, I propose – in whose imagination and memory characters come to be, and whose experience of a self as an other is a culmination of this imaginative process that gives rise to the fabula or story.

*Narration and focalisation* in fiction may take place by means of character or through a narrator. In the context of installation art, narration and focalisation suggest the need for a special understanding of how events are rendered and through which vision these are filtered – most obviously because the linguistic signifiers that indicate narration and focalisation by means of explicit textual directives, such as prepositions, are normally absent in installation artworks (with the exception of titles and artist's statements, for example).

*Narration* entails 'a communicative act in which a chain of happenings is meaningfully structured and transmitted in a particular medium and from a particular point of view' (Hühn & Sommer 2013:1). When dealing with visual art and specifically with installation art, one can argue that narration mostly proceeds without words, even without a clear narrator who relates the story. In brief, one must think of narration as something that is *produced* in imaginative, embodied, visual ways instead of being told in words (cf. Bal 1999a:103–105). Bal's extensive work on installation art and its narrative qualities engages with various dimensions of narrative but does not explore the role of the viewer as participant-character or the absent characters. Thus, I argue that narration is produced not only by the author (or artist in the visual arts) who plants narrative cues in the artwork, but it is co-constructed by the participant-character who engages with these cues and responds to, among others, suggestions of absence in the artwork. Narration here is fairly open-ended: apart from there being no actual narrator, there is no single narrative that is 'discovered' or that unfolds in the course of dealing with the artwork. Rather, the narrative – or narratives – comes into being through the participant-character's active, embodied and imaginative participation in the work's storyworld, and often – I argue – through his or her intersubjective merging with the absent other. The active role of the participant-character is a function of focalisation.

The term *focalisation* was coined by Genette ([1972]1980) (see also Genette 1988); in its simplest form, it relates to the questions 'who sees?' (this answer indicates focalisation) and



'who speaks?' (indicating the narrator); 'seeing' in this sense is a focalising activity (Horstkotte 2009:171). Focalisation refers to the vision through which events or other narrative elements (such as time, space and characters) are filtered (Bal 2001a:43, 44, 47). However, it entails more than vision: it slants the information in the story and gives it emotive and cognitive flavour. Focalisation has also been defined as the selection and regulation – as well as restriction – of narrative information related to the narrator, characters or other 'more hypothetical entities' in the storyworld (Niederhoff 2009:115), such as the absent characters in Van der Merwe's work that are hypothetical and imagined. Furthermore, in a more constructive and synthesising sense, focalisation facilitates the connection between the events that make up the fabula, on the one hand, and the subjects whose 'point of view', or 'perspective', or subjective engagement with events is represented in the narrative, on the other hand (Bal 2001a:214). In other words, focalisation is the function of the work that binds otherwise unrelated elements together (Bal 1981). Focalisation in installation art, I argue, entails choices made by the artist, and it is also a function of the participant-character who is transformed into a text-internal element, and whose consciousness and embodied perception focalise the work through affective, cognitive and imaginative engagement with the work. The active role of the participant-character is a function of focalisation, which, in turn, facilitates the construction of a fabula.

Like character, the narrative of a text or artwork is imaginatively actualised in the mind of the reader – here, I argue, in the mind of the participant-character. The fabula therefore refers to the story that emerges, or rather the possible version(s) of the story that come(s) into being through the participant-character's engagement with the work. A fabula has been defined as a chronologically ordered sequence of events; it is (re)constructed by the perceiver (the reader of a text or the interpreter of a visual artwork) in response to a representation (see Chatman 1978, 1990; Kalafenos 2001). The representation here usually refers to a narrative text that relates the events in a non-chronological way; in a literary text, for example, the reader shuffles the things that happened in the narrative into a sensible 'and then ...' sequence, as if one 'discovers' the 'what really happened' – as if there is only one deep story. However, I contend that the fabula in installation art is not necessarily one logical sequence of events that is discovered or rearranged in the mind of the interpreter (the participant-character), but rather many possible stories that are constructed in an active and participatory manner.

Therefore, not only in installation art but also in fiction, the fabula is an abstraction (see Eco [1979] 1985:14 et seq.) that is constructed in the minds of the readers. Eco suggests that the fabula does not, however, need to be restricted to one version of a story – and that is important for the present article as I argue for a conceptualisation of the fabula, in the context of installation art, as a subjective and variable construction in the mind of the interpreter (the participant-character). I use the term 'fabula' in accordance with Eco's conceptualisation

of the *extended* fabula, as this view allows for more than one version of the fabula – basically, this means that each interpreter may come up with his or her own story or stories. Constructing one's own version of a story is conditioned by focalisation (cf. Bal 2001a:214).

To demonstrate how a narratological interpretation with emphasis on character can illuminate interpretative possibilities, I present a narratological interpretation of Jan van der Merwe's work *Biegbak/Confessional* (2003). To better illustrate the centrality of *character* as a narratological tool for the interpretation of installation art, I will refer to a hypothetical 'I'. Again, it is not possible to anticipate the plethora of experiences that are possible in reality. Each 'I' comes with its own particular, individual worldview and experiences. Here, I merely want to emphasise the structure of the individual experiencing installation art as a central character. I theorise an 'I' that is not disabled and is sighted. Obviously in the case of a differently abled 'I', the experience will be altered. However, this will not invalidate the *structure* of experiencing an installation piece.

Thus, with these provisos in place, 'I' begin with a description of a typical individual, entering the work – the storyworld – using a free-flowing approach that draws on Bal's (1999a:8) view that the first phases of description tend to have a subjective and already even a narrative quality.

Once 'I' begin to reflect on this description, it becomes possible to trace the processes through which 'I' become a character. From here, 'my' focalisation guides the possible processes that drive the narration. This allows 'me' to trace the way in which this type of focalised narration allows for a new approach towards the construction of character and the fabula.

Before describing the work, I will briefly introduce the artist Jan van der Merwe and then proceed to describe the artwork-as-storyworld in subjective terms as 'I' experienced it. Finally, I will offer some interpretative insights on character, narration and focalisation as these contribute towards constructing thematised fabulae in the context of the work.

## Jan van der Merwe's installation art

Jan van der Merwe is a South African installation artist. His works typically feature life-size interiors clad or created with or in rusted cans.<sup>14</sup> Often monitors are placed strategically inside the works; in these monitors, one may see video images, or there are projections onto parts of the work in which, usually, a simple video sequence repeats itself every few seconds. Van der Merwe's works allow the gallery visitor to enter them physically and to experience them cognitively, emotionally and physically. Once inside the work, a viewer often has the sense of participating in some story that is hinted at but not fully told. This is also the case with *Biegbak/Confessional* (see Figures 1-4).

14. Examples of the artist's work, as well as essays on his art can be perused at <http://www.art.co.za/janvandermerwe/>.



Source: Photograph taken by Louisemarié Combrink

**FIGURE 1:** Van der Merwe's *Biegbak/Confessional*: Outside view of cubicle that houses the work – January 2003.



Note: This image appears as a looping moving image in a monitor inside the kitchen sink.  
Source: Photograph taken by Louisemarié Combrink

**FIGURE 3:** Van der Merwe's *Biegbak/Confessional*: Still image of hands that wash a cooking vessel – January 2003.



Source: Photograph taken by Louisemarié Combrink

**FIGURE 4:** Projected image of rain on window in Van der Merwe's *Biegbak/Confessional* – January 2003.



Source: Photograph taken by Louisemarié Combrink

**FIGURE 2:** Van der Merwe's *Biegbak/Confessional*: Inside view of cubicle showing apron and washing-up space – January 2003.

### A personal encounter with *Biegbak/Confessional*

There is a cubicle in the gallery, only large enough to accommodate one or two persons (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> A label title on the wall next to the cubicle informs me that this is Jan van der Merwe's *Biegbak/Confessional*. 'I' enter the cubicle that houses the work through a white curtain. The space is small and intimate and looks like a washing-up space in a poorly equipped kitchen (Figures 2 and 3). Everything inside has the likeness of the familiar; all the objects and fixtures are life-size and recognisable. But everything is also strange: it is made of or covered in rusted metal – cloths, drying rack, apron, sink and taps. It seems as if 'I' am in a fictional domestic space where everything is made of something else (like Hansel and Gretel's house of cake and sweets). In another sense, it seems as if 'I' am looking at things

<sup>15</sup>This description reflects on the artwork as it appeared at the Oliewenhuis Gallery in Van der Merwe's solo show *Time and Space* from 9 July to 18 August 2013. This subjective narrative description given in this section of my personal encounter with the artwork reflects similar descriptive passages in Bal's *Louise Bourgeois' Spider* (2001), *The architecture of art-writing* (1999a:9–30) and *Of what one cannot speak: The political art of Doris Salcedo* (2010) when dealing with installation art.



that recall those captivating underwater rusted images of the Titanic resting on the ocean bed, where divers have discovered plates, dishes and other objects crusty with sea-age – used things that suggest traces of human presence. Like in these images, time is transfixed. Ordinary things become extraordinary, archaeological: they are coated with layers of time, and they tell the stories that their now absent users cannot. The things here in the artwork seem old and therefore infinitely fragile, and they pervasively suggest a time long gone.

'My' presence in the artwork initially seems almost invasive: 'I' am looking at someone else's ordinary, intimate things in a space that is not 'my own'. But yet, 'I' am inside, and strangely engulfed. The space is someone else's, but in another sense it accommodates 'me'. It is familiar enough to be 'my world'. I look down into the kitchen sink, and it is possible to imagine that this is 'my' sink, 'my' place to stand. Obviously, the subjective is not universal but it is paradoxically universal, that each 'I' may experience the world subjectively. Van der Merwe plays on this point in his art. It also feels, however, as if 'I' am standing in the place of someone else who may have used it long ago and is now departed, or 'I' am standing in the place of someone who never was here but who was wished into this place, almost like a memorial that functions to recall someone who is not there. Indeed, Van der Merwe (Van der Merwe pers. comm., 12 Dec. 2012 and 23 July 2013) calls his works 'monuments to the unknown' – a phrase he uses to draw attention to the memorialisation of people who may appear invisible to the world but who were important to him.

In the work, 'I' notice movement in a monitor positioned inside the sink. 'I' see hands moving around in a perpetual circular motion – they are scrubbing a saucepan, continuously, over and over:

- Whose hands are they?
- A washing-up area is viewed by many people, perhaps automatically, as a woman's place?
- Certainly the hands belong to a female, and because the space is so intimate, so nostalgic, so *old*, it seems logical that the space might conceivably belong to a mother, a grandmother, an aunt?
- All possibilities exist here. Perhaps it is meant to be the artist's grandmother?
- He could have made this for her, and so it's a place of memory?

Also there are other possibilities. For example, 'I' (at this early stage) see the hands as most likely those of a European woman. Thus, as a small example of the significance which a spectator as *recipient* gives to a work of art as *text*; 'my' race, 'my' gender and 'my' assumptions, will inform 'my' interpretation. For example, if the 'I' is also European, the hands could also be 'my' hands, or 'my' grandmother's hands. Perhaps 'I' stand inside the space and imagine 'her' kitchen, 'her' washing up space?

Therefore, there seems to be important but absent role-player(s) in the story: in *Biegbak/Confessional* (Van der Merwe 2003),

this absence refers to the person whose hands appear in a monitor inside the sink scrubbing a cooking vessel in a video loop that repeats the same movements every few seconds. The sense of absence is made tangible by the use of placeholders that stand for human presence – aprons, kitchen things and moving hands but no actual person aside from fragments or suggestions. I argue that the key to the stories told by the works is the unknown absent character(s). 'My' presence as a viewer in the work is *as* crucial: 'I' am standing where the absent person(s) should be standing, and thus 'I' take this person's place for the duration of my engagement with the work. How does the absent person(s) tell 'their' stories? These become 'my' concerns, as well as 'theirs', 'my' telling and 'theirs'. This is clearly not a story that is discovered, but rather one that is constructed in a subjective manner.

For one illustrative example, the artwork may present 'me' with the suggestion that 'I', 'my assumed aunt', or perhaps the artist's imagined grandmother, can all be accommodated in this work. The work generates a sense of longing, possibly because it recalls the absent 'one(s)' whose space 'I' occupy. When 'I' look up, 'I' see raindrops like tears drizzling down a window in a continuous motion, above the kitchen sink (Figure 3). It is a projection of the image of a window with video material that loops. The circular motion of the hands that wash, the raindrops that are slowly and endlessly making their tearful way downwards and the nostalgic sense of the entire small space generate a thick tangle of emotion: longing mostly, but more. There is a sense that there are stories waiting to take shape inside this very personal place. This is a representation of a domestic space that someone goes into in order to disappear, to perform 'her' duties, but also to meditate – the name *Biegbak/Confessional*<sup>16</sup> suggests a religious contemplation. One is aware that in the Catholic Church a confessional is a place where one goes to have his or her sins 'washed away'. Perhaps there is a link between absolution of sin and the hands 'washing the dirty pot'. There are many stories here, and in some ways 'I' understand them completely. 'My' stories, 'my' memories and the artist's stories of his grandmother conflate. This is perhaps because 'I' feel myself merging with the absent person who is suggested by the work, and 'my' stories merge quite easily with 'hers'. It makes perfect sense, on one level. Nonetheless, this is an entirely subjective process; but 'I' realise that my co-feeling and co-narrating are part and parcel of this process. 'I' share a story position with the artist, and with the absent people 'I' imagine or produce here. Why and how this is possible, and why these stories matter, are involved questions, and they propel my interest into the stories in Jan van der Merwe's installation artworks.

### How are the stories told in *Biegbak/Confessional*?

As suggested above, *Biegbak/Confessional* ostensibly recalls an absent (and most likely departed) grandmother: (the artist

16. As noted in footnote 11, giving the title *Biegbak/Confessional* to a work that features an 'ordinary' washing-up area prompts one to consider a religious dimension in this work. Confessing suggests privacy (the confessor shares his or her confession only with a priest, or with another trusted person or with God). The Afrikaans word *biegbak* (a made-up word whose meaning is clear enough to native speakers) reverberates with meaning: not only does it have alliterative qualities (the b-sound) but also points more specifically to the idea of *bak* [bowl] as the focus and locus of the confessing (*bieg*) in this work – the confessing and cleansing are projected into the activities inside the sink.

confirms this hunch that the work is 'about' his late grandmother,<sup>17</sup> for those willing to suspend suspicion of the intentional fallacy). But, it is also about me and about my grandmother because the work allows me to project my stories into the space through my body, mind and emotion.

In this sense, I argue that 'I' as the viewer-character experience narrative identification – 'I' identify with the absent other sufficiently to care about 'her'. However, narrative identification does not fully circumscribe the sense that 'I am', in some sense, 'her' – in other words, being-with and being-through *another* (cf. Chamarette 2013).

To empathise takes one further: '[I]n regards to narratives, empathy facilitates imaginative participation' (Daly 2014:229). Yet, narrative empathy still does not account, to a satisfactory extent, for the experience of the self that becomes the other, but internalises the assumed 'her', if only temporarily. That is because with empathy the distinction between the self and the other remains intact. In order to achieve a sense of self-other transcendence, I argue that what is required is narrative intersubjectivity. This would allow 'me' to experience the self *as* the other. Intersubjective experience is intensely embodied,<sup>18</sup> subjective and participatory (see Chamarette 2013).

The experience of intersubjective becoming the other is a function, I argue, of focalisation. Firstly, focalisation is a means of *identifying* with a character (Mainar 1993) – but to *co-focalise* with the absent other, allows the experience of identification to become empathy, and then to make intersubjectivity happen. This is because 'I' am cognitively, emotively and even in an embodied sense shaping the narrative content when 'I' (co-)focalise. 'I' feel with the absent 'other' ('I' experience empathy) but 'I' also experience a loss of boundaries between 'myself' and the absent 'one': physically, mentally and emotively. 'I' conflate with 'her' – this is the shared mind and body of intersubjectivity – where the self becomes the other. And so it is by means of focalisation that the ontologically complex absent character can tell 'her' stories through 'me'.

The intersubjective experience whereby the participant-character in Van der Merwe's works co-focalises with the

17.The artist's intention, or his version of the narrative, is taken into consideration in this article because artistic intention, ominously fallacious for some scholars, can play a role in the interpretation of an artwork. This is the case here because Van der Merwe's work engages with highly personal, mostly autobiographical themes (albeit with a rather universal resonance – see Hundt 2004:i) and also because my contact with the artist means that I have been informed about aspects of his intentions and therefore this knowledge cannot be erased or, once the connection between the work and the artist's statements about it has been made, completely disregarded. Such information is regarded as part of the paratextual frames of the texts, together with the name of the artwork, the artist's statement and other similar information (see the reference to Genette's *Paratexts* in the discussion on character above). Mieke Bal (2010:3) in her book-length study of Doris Salcedo's political installation art (*Of what one cannot speak*) likewise cautions against a too heavy reliance on artistic intention but concedes that she, too, 'use[s] some artist information' in her reading of the works. While I concur that taking an artist's intentions as the *sole* guiding principle during interpretation is unwise, subjectivity, personal accounts, insight into the artist's view of art and life and the like can, if felt to be useful, be part of the interpreter's toolkit. I have conducted a personal interview with the artist on 08 December 2012 at his house in Pretoria, and was also present during a walkabout he conducted on 10 July 2013 at Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein following the opening of his solo show there called *Time and space*. Van der Merwe presented a lecture at the North-West University during November 2013 where he discussed his work, and I had telephone interviews with him during 2012, 2013 and 2014, and another face-to-face interview at his house on 02 February 2014.

18.In the Merleau-Pontian sense; Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1962, 1964).

absent person allows for the sense that the absent protagonist is remembered and re-remembered (made real, and corporeal) because the body and the self of the participant are in some way 'home' to the absent other.

## Re-remembering

Re-remembering has to do with 'fleshing out' – it entails that an absent person's physical body gains some sort of physical existence. This happens, of course, through focalisation: 'I' as the participant-character see the rain on the 'window' created by the projection ('I' see what the absent person's position suggests, 'her' seeing). 'I' look down, directing 'my' embodied gaze where the 'looking' absent subject would also cast 'her' gaze – at hands which are neither 'mine' nor 'hers', but suggestive of being both 'mine' and 'hers'.

The incompleteness, the layered complexity of character<sup>19</sup> and the self becoming the other in *Biegbak/Confessional* becomes more acute when one suddenly notices this: *the hands washing the cooking vessel are a man's – they are hairy and muscular!* Perhaps because the space has such feminine overtones, and the work of doing dishes typically recalls a woman (albeit from 'my' perspective), the hands 'I' thought (or believed or projected) 'I' saw, are not the same as the hands 'I' now find myself seeing (an instance of cognitive dissonance where one sees what one *thinks* one sees). Conversations with people who have seen *Biegbak/Confessional* confirm that the hands are not at first sight necessarily recognised as masculine, but once one notices this, it seems very obvious that they are not a woman's hands. These hands now seem utterly puzzling – the work is supposed to memorialise, even venerate, someone like a grandmother! And thus, quite clearly, those hands should have been a woman's.

For the current interpretation, the layeredness and complexity of character suggested by Van der Merwe's works are therefore lodged precisely in this incredulous appearance of a man's hands where a woman is imagined as standing. The artist also put himself in the place of the late grandmother who is re-remembered in the work – a loss of boundaries occurs between himself and another character.<sup>20</sup> The absent grandmother therefore accommodates different subjectivities and ontologies<sup>21</sup> at the same time – even her grandson's – as well as 'me' and 'my' grandmother. (Van der Merwe recalls that his grandmother would pray while doing the dishes – hence the name of the work – for family, friends and even, endearingly, for the fictional characters of serial programmes she followed on *Springbok Radio*. This adds another character layer and adds fictional characters to the character constellations suggested in the work. In this sense, one can argue that 'she' and 'I' are *unstable, incomplete and selves in search of others*).

19.Fokkema's (1991) typology as discussed above (from *Postmodern characters*) is relevant here.

20.Again, I refer to Fokkema's character typology in *Postmodern characters*.

21.Both Fokkema (in *Postmodern characters*) and McHale (in *Postmodern fiction*) suggest that this is possible.



## Selves in search of others: A story of mourning

The absent grandmother can accommodate the artist, but more significantly, 'I' also *become* 'her'. 'I' stand in the fictional place that commemorates 'where she used to stand'. 'She' may also be 'my' grandmother whom 'I' remember. 'I' am constantly shifting between being 'me' and imagining (being?) 'my' grandmother, recalling also the artist, his grandmother and a generalised notion of a dearly loved woman caring for her folk.

Metaphorically speaking, the work gives a voice to one who is not there and who does not have a voice. This is much like offstage characters that actually constitute the central concern of a stage play (Mahfouz 2012). Often if a character is absent, this absence is the consequence of having crossed the threshold between life and death. Therefore, he or she is not only absent, but may also be remembered with a sense of mourning or bereavement. Freudian views of absence and death entail that in order to mourn healthily, one is supposed to 'let go' of those who are mourned. However, such thinking is giving way to current ideas in which 'living with', or maintaining a relationship with, the absent other (often one who is dead) is celebrated (Maddrell 2013:501, 506). Embodied intersubjectivity is one way of achieving this: sharing mental, emotional and physical space with the absent (or departed) other – keeping her alive in oneself.

This intersubjective merging with the other allows one to transcend the self. Self-transcendence is concerned with a greater awareness that rises above the self so that the body as well as the mind can transfer themselves into another tangible or intangible, living or imagined entity.

While transcending the self, in installation artworks like this, one also allows the participant-characters to insert recollections from their own lives in order to integrate their experiences with the experiences of characters so that they can construct the story *as themselves*.<sup>22</sup> Van der Merwe's installation artwork allows the participant-character to 'fill in' the works physically, by *being* the self *and* the absent character, and to insert his or her own recollections while constructing the fabula(e) of the work.

In the process of making sense of the narrative, 'I' am therefore myself narrated and 'I' am aware of myself as a character; 'I' also become an 'other'. All these becomings are transformations brought about in the context of the artwork parallels – a process that Paul Ricoeur (1992:164) calls 'the refiguration of action by the narrative' (Ricoeur 1992:64) – a way of understanding how identity is shaped through 'a privileged place of aporias' (p. 234) into which 'I' project 'my/her' stories.

## Conclusion

This article argues that given the paucity of narratological consideration of installation art, the narratological toolbox applicable to this artform can be expanded by using terms such

22. A similar argument is presented with reference to a film based on a graphic novel in the article by Nixon (2010:97).

as 'character', 'narration', 'focalisation' and 'the fabula' in a more flexible and synthesising manner. Specifically, I propose that *character* can be used towards exploring how narration and focalisation take place in this often narrative art form in order to construct various versions of stories, or fabulae. This argument was proposed with reference to the South African installation artist Jan van der Merwe's work *Biegbak/Confessional*. In this work (as in many, if not all, installation artworks), the viewer becomes a participant, who then assumes the nature of a character who co-narrates and co-focalises with an absent character – in this case, most possibly a grandmother – in order to construct a fabula. I suggested, in light of my interpretation, that the fabula(e) that can be constructed in the context of *Biegbak/Confessional* could speak of mourning and re-membering. Using Fokkema's (1991) typology of postmodern characters, I argued that the participant-character experiences the self as unstable, in search of an other, and able to cross ontological boundaries – between the 'real' world and the imagined world of the absent other, and even with the artist and his grandmother at which the work also hints. The process of re-membering entails a physical, emotional and cognitive focalising construction of a narrative that allows one, in a quite therapeutic sense, to briefly experience an intersubjective sense of merging with the absent or departed other so that her presence and the participant-character's body, mind and emotions are merged in the space of the artwork. Ontologically speaking, the space and the characters infer fictional, as well as 'real' spaces and people, and allow for a sense of self-transcendence.

In conclusion: Interpretative possibilities have been facilitated by using character with focalisation, narration and concurrent embodied processes of the cognitive, as well as emotional intersubjective possibilities of merging with absences as a narrative key in installation art. Thus, the expansion of the narratological toolbox for purposes of installation art has proven to open up various possibilities of experiencing this art form in profound and meaningful ways.

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### Author's contributions

This article was co-written by L.C. and N.P.L.A. and they thus contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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