



*Hannelie Coetzee*

Visual Art

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WORKS  
IN  
**STONE**

(WERKE IN KLIP)

**HANNELIE COETZEE**

2010–2012



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**Works in Stone** by Zunelle Breytenbach

Neil MacGregor<sup>1</sup> argues that the stories originating from the earliest times in human history can probably best be told in stone, because, apart from human and animal remains, stone objects are all that survive the ravages of time. He believes that stone, more than any other material, is able to communicate details about different peoples and environments, and particular moments in history. Compared to the frailty of the human body and the fragility of so many of the objects we create, it is perhaps tempting to assume, like MacGregor seems to suggest, that stone is somehow rooted in time itself.

Yet, stone, despite outliving us by several thousands of years, continues to move, breathe and change throughout its entire lifespan. "The past is a foreign country", goes the opening sentence of L.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go-Between*, "they do things differently there".<sup>2</sup>

But what if this idea were to be challenged, if indeed the present were no less foreign than the past? What if the past, as the dwelling of certain deeply held notions about identity, was not only a foreign place, but also a place that has been lost altogether? Lost in the sense that, perhaps, it has only ever been accessible through imaginary constructs that are constantly being reconfigured from within the context of an ever-unfolding present?

Collecting, rearranging and documenting stone – particularly "stones out of place" – have been recurring themes in Hannelie Coetzee's work over the past ten years. Through a variety of practical applications of this methodology, she poses questions about the nature of longing and the nature of "site", and the limitations of pursuing connectedness to a specific time and place in history. In her body of work, absence, distance and ruptures of time and space often seem to be at play in how "home" is defined.

To her, stone is not simply a mute, unmoving entity that can be manipulated into parting with its secrets about the past, but a living, porous, metamorphic medium that can allow for a reading and re-reading of our own identity, our being-in-time, in the present, to unfold.

<sup>1</sup>MacGregor, N. 2010. *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. London: Allen Lane. <sup>2</sup>Hartley, L.P. 2002. *The Go-Between*. New York: The New York Review of Books

## 1. Buigkrag

Stone is easily taken for granted. As a material that is considered to be naturally one of the most inert and solid, it is not often associated with being dynamic. It is possible that the movement of stone is only contemplated once it translates into something unfamiliar and disturbing, such as a rockslide or an earthquake. *Buigkrag (The Strength it Takes to Bend Something as Far as it Can Go)* is a large-scale, land-art piece, comprising hundreds of boulders, installed at Nirox at the Cradle of Humankind in 2012, which aptly encapsulates a sense of witnessing a moment-before-movement. Intended as a meditation on the relationship between industrialisation and the natural/aesthetic world, the boulders are stacked into a series of cairns, slanted precariously towards the electricity pylons on the site.

As with George Quasha's sculptural series *Axial Stones*, many of the boulders in *Buigkrag* are balanced at what appears to be an almost impossible point of contact. The result is a sense of precipice, of a moment before collapse that never happens, yet is always implied. The particular angle at which the cairns are stacked causes them to appear as though they are simultaneously attempting to embrace and repel the pylons.

This prompts a reconsideration of whether any physical manifestation of contemporary life in nature should necessarily be seen as evidence of humans' intrusion on the ideals of natural and aesthetic beauty, or whether it could also serve as a reminder that co-habitation, when accepted and honoured, will have better prospects for averting the abuse of natural resources.<sup>3</sup>

Here, Quasha's notion of the "axial", as applied to *Buigkrag*, can be interpreted as "the moment of symmetry between stone and body, where a proprioceptive sense of balance is mirrored between action and

expectation",<sup>4</sup> hinting at the necessity to recognise the point at which such instances of perceived intrusion overlap sufficiently with nature to become an integral part of one and the same landscape.

## 2. Familie Portret

In many ways *Buigkrag* can be seen as an extension of Coetzee's earlier investigations into the limits of stability, probably best exemplified in the 2011 installation, *Familie Portret (Family Portrait)*. With *Familie Portret*, Coetzee's explorations took the form of stacking boulders in such a way that the actual moment of collapse was not suspended indefinitely, but became inevitable.

During the Site-Specific Land Art Festival in 2011, Coetzee installed thirteen dry-stacked stone cairns along the high-tide line on Lookout Beach at Plettenberg Bay. As the high tide rolled in, the cairns (each representing a member of Coetzee's family) gradually succumbed to the rising waves.

Over the course of a week, Coetzee systematically collected the boulders from where they had fallen the previous day in order to painstakingly restack each of the cairns. Each restacking required of her to look at the boulders anew in order to refigure the point of balance at which they would remain sufficiently stable until the next tide came in.

As a highly process-driven work, this piece seems to suggest a Sisyphean predicament, except that Coetzee approached this as an open-ended ritual rather than a pointless or interminable task.

To her, the revival of defunct ritual, or perhaps even the invention of new ritual, opened up a site of struggle for both a physical and symbolic landscape.



<sup>3</sup>Conversation between Hannelie Coetzee and Benji Liebmann of Nirox, 16 February 2012.

<sup>4</sup>Harrison, J. 2011. Falling stone. In: Patrizio, A. (ed.) *Stone: A legacy and inspiration for art*. London: Black Dog Publishing Ltd.

### Familie Portret (continued)

In its earliest incarnations the majority of site-specific artworks focused on establishing a stable relationship between the work and its site, while demanding the physical presence of the viewer for the work's completion. In both *Buigkrag* and *Familie Portret*, however, the term "site-specificity" had itself become a site of struggle where various conflicting positions concerning the definition of "site" as a stable construct, as well as the "proper" relationship of the artwork and the artist to the site, could be contested.

### 3. Oumagrootjie

Central to Coetzee's interrogations into various states and conditions of belonging are concepts of "the public" and "community", and, specifically, the way in which such concepts, rather than being complete, self-contained entities, can come to be defined through an ongoing, discursive reconstruction of the past. Works such as *Oumagrootjie (Great-grandmother)* embody a self-reflexive investigation into the role that fragmentation plays in the construction of presupposed unities.

The Anglo-Boer War had left many South Africans living in abject poverty, and *Oumagrootjie* is a stone-mosaic portrait of Coetzee's great-grandmother who used to queue for food rations in Fordsburg, Johannesburg, following the end of the war in 1901.

The mosaic, which was installed on a side wall of Lillian Studios, Cnr Lillian and Main Road in Fordsburg in 2010, is made up of pieces of discarded marble and granite, assembled from various quarries and factories across South Africa.

### 4. Ouma Miemie en Tant Vya

Similarly, the mosaic, titled *Ouma Miemie en Tant Vya Commissionerstraat 249 Snapshot, 1940s (A snapshot of Grandma Miemie and Aunt Vya at 249 Commissioner Street in the 1940s)*, installed in May 2012, is made entirely of discarded stone.

Through purposely re-appropriating throwaway pieces of stone – the origins of which could no longer be traced – in reconstructing part of her Afrikaner family history, Coetzee challenges notions about over-simplified readings of heritage, and the degree to which the origins of identity can be reliably pinned to a singular point along the historical time/place axis.

Stone, when it has been fragmented and isolated from its place of origin as in this instance, loses its ability to "speak" in unambiguous terms about the past. When applied as a mosaic, the fragments are further rendered incapable of resurrecting a truthful carbon-copy version of the photographs on which these two pieces were modelled. These, therefore, are portraits not only of Coetzee's female family members, but also of a contemporary Everywoman, whose identity is constantly being co- and reconstructed by the fleeting, participatory gaze of passers-by on the streets of present-day Johannesburg.

These two works propose an alternative model of site-specificity in that the site itself is not simply a geographical location, but a "sited" community formed by a network of temporary, social relations. Site-specificity, in this context, is no longer a purely physical place, but an arena constituted by the cultural mediation of broader social, economic and political processes that underpin the organisation of urban space.



### Ouma Miemie en Tant Vya (continued)

According to Warner<sup>5</sup>, viewers become “a public” at the moment of engagement with the artwork, however fragmentary that engagement might be. “The public” is, therefore, a momentary public (simultaneously identified and constructed) primarily through the viewers’ participation in a discourse with the work, as opposed to being a “known” audience targeted in advance based on nationality, religion, race or gender.

### 5. Uitpak

If the search for place-bound identity in a fragmented space is one characteristic of the postmodern condition, then, Kwon argues, “the efforts to rethink the specificity of the art-site relationship can be viewed as both a compensatory symptom and critical resistance to such conditions”<sup>6</sup>. *Uitpak (Unpacking)* sets out to interrogate the ways in which meaning, as derived from a singular reading of seemingly stable art-site relationships, may be provoked into giving rise to plural sets of readings instead.

*Uitpak* is a corbelled house-structure constructed of discarded, processed, sandstone plaques (some of which had already been engraved with names) that were originally intended for a commemorative memorial at Freedom Park. The artwork was installed in the grounds of the Johannesburg Art Gallery on 6 April 2010.

Although the work was originally intended as a temporary installation, it was realised later that the stone would be too heavy (and, therefore, too costly) to move. Now, after more than two years on site, it may seem appropriate to declare the installation permanent, but even though it has exceeded the deadline of its temporary stay at the gallery, there is still a possibility of it being moved and reinstalled in a new configuration, at a different site – thereby rendering it “semi-permanent”, or transient

rather than temporary. *Uitpak*, therefore, holds the potential for a further unhinging of site-specificity and its attendant associations with history and belonging – a methodology already evident in Coetzee’s other land art and site-specific pieces.

Several seminal site-specific works from the 1960s–70s, once assumed to be almost impossible to move or reproduce, have since reappeared in exhibitions. For exhibitions such as *Immaterial Objects* at the Whitney Museum in 1992, site-specific works were relocated or re-fabricated, and in some cases the “new original” had come to coexist with, or even replace, the original artwork. The shape and materiality of *Uitpak* further adds to the impression that its site of belonging is “a place out-of-place”.

The corbel house is regarded as an architectural style unique to the north-western Karoo. It is considered unique in that it is built entirely of stone, with flat stones used as scaffolding protruding from a domed roof to form a structure resembling a beehive. It is believed that these corbel houses have been built by early Afrikaner trekboers, who didn’t have access to wood with which to make trusses. The day on which *Uitpak* was installed, 6 April, is the date on which Jan van Riebeeck is thought to have landed at the Cape to establish the first Dutch colony in South Africa. The trekboers, who built the corbel houses in the Karoo, would have been direct descendants of these settlers, yet instead of settling down, their own existence was largely nomadic.

Coetzee’s decision to reconstruct a corbel house on the highveld, far from its indigenous site in the Karoo, by using commemorative name plaques that were discarded before they could find a home at Freedom Park, further emphasises the idea of “home” as a selective, unstable construct. *Uitpak*, through its deliberate embodiment of open-ended questions about the



<sup>5</sup>Warner, W. 2002. *Publics and counterpublics*. *Public Culture* 14(1), 56.

<sup>6</sup>Kwon, M. 2002. *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

**Uitpak (continued)**

nature of “home”, can be said to belong in many places all at once rather than in any one, specific place – and this provides a speculative impetus for imagining a new model of belonging-in-transience.

Coetzee draws on her own contested heritage as an Afrikaner woman to tease out a framework through which broader issues around the construction of identity in general may be investigated. While her point of departure may be a critical unpacking of deeply personal presumptions about her own Afrikaner identity, her methodology assumes a kind of postmodern archaeology in which the “making” (by the artist, as well as the viewer) of the artwork comes to substitute an actual “digging” for artefacts – artefacts, in this sense, being associated with objects or facts that are presumed stable, waiting to be uncovered, interpreted and represented as truth. In this context, Coetzee’s use of stone is often ironic.

The use of stone – an ancient, seemingly solid material – in the making of fragmented, often-temporary work translates into a rallying call for greater scepticism in dealing with all deeply-held, seemingly universal presumptions about identity, and, by extension, one’s own “place” in the world.

**List of artworks****1. Buigkrag**

**Title:** *Buigkrag* (The strength it takes to bend something as far as it can go) 2012

**Collection:** Nirox Permanent Collection, Cradle of Humankind, Gauteng, South Africa

**Medium:** Land Art

**Exhibition:** The process was documented and exhibited concurrently at the Nirox Project Space at Arts on Main in March 2012 in collaboration with Reney Warrington

**Dimensions:** 100m x 50m x 2m high

For *Buigkrag*, Coetzee worked with small, existing Pelindaba rock formations that protruded from the ground at an angle and pointed towards the electricity pylons in the horizon. She dry-stacked 128 stone stacks on top of these formations, to reach a height of 1–2 metres, thus ‘extending’ their angle and size. What a visitor to the area will see is a crowd of figures, bending the knee to the pylons. Through this artwork, Coetzee is commenting on society’s dependency on electricity.

**2. Familie Portret**

**Title:** *Familie Portret* (Family portrait), Plettenberg Bay, South Africa

**Collection:** Ephemeral artwork made in May 2011 for the International Site\_Specific Land Art Festival, Plettenberg Bay.

**Medium:** Land Art

**Dimensions:** 100m x 10m deep x 2m high

“During Site\_Specific, she installed a series of 13 stone cairns along the high tide mark at Plettenberg bay’s Lookout Beach – icons of her family members. This seemingly straightforward Land Art work was a week-long, meditative exercise at what it means to stand beside one’s family.



### List of Artworks (continued)

As the high tide rolled in, the oddly shaped family succumbed to the waves one by one. Because of the weight of the stones, they remained where they fell. For the entire week, Coetzee waited for the tide to retreat and then began rebuilding, each time having to find the correct balance when stacking the rocks, one on top of the other. Coetzee explains that this was probably the only time she had spent a week with all of her family – conservative and not always accepting of her life choices. Spending time with this symbolic family, restoring them each time they fell, was highly therapeutic.” (Meredith Randall, 2011 from the Site\_Specific Catalogue)

### 3. Oumagrootjie

**Title:** *Oumagrootjie (Great Grandmother)* Fordsburg, Johannesburg - 2010 Collection. Public artwork

**Medium:** Granite and marble off-cuts  
Dimensions: 1800mm wide x 2900 high

**Site:** 38 Lillian Street (corner Main Road), Fordsburg, Johannesburg  
**Date Installed:** Heritage day, 24 September 2010. Installation sponsored by the Arts Alive Festival.

*Oumagrootjie* is a portrait of Coetzee’s maternal great-grandmother taken in 1908 on her wedding day. She was 16 at the time. Installed in Fordsburg as a site-specific work, it is a tribute to the times that she, along with her family, cued up for food at the butcheries in Fordsburg, due to the abject poverty that many like them were left in after the Anglo Boer-War (1899–1901).

### 4. Ouma Miemie & Tant Vya

**Title:** *Ouma Miemie & Tant Vya*, 249 Commissioner Street, 1940’s snapshot - 2012 Collection. Public artwork

**Medium:** Granite and marble off-cuts

**Dimensions:** 4m x 4m on second storey of building

After the Second World War, Coetzee’s maternal grandmother left the family farm in Burgersdorp to find employment in Johannesburg as a seamstress for Greatermans in Commissioner Street. A street photographer’s photograph of her walking through the streets was used as the reference for this art work.

### 5. Uitpak

**Title:** *Uitpak (Unpacking)* - 2010

**Medium:** Dry stacked discarded processed sand stoned packed in a corbelled house

**Dimensions:** 2500mm wide x 2500mm high x 2500mm deep  
**Exhibition:** Temporary installation at Johannesburg Art Gallery from April 2010

*Uitpak*, a traditional corbel house, was built using 336 sandstone slabs Coetzee found discarded at a factory in ga-Rankuwa. According to the owners, the slabs were ordered by Freedom Park, the memorial monument in Pretoria, engraved with the names of South African freedom fighters, but then never collected for reasons unknown. Instead of being dumped in a landfill, it was given to Coetzee.

The corbel house is a commentary, firstly, on sustainability (the waste of discarded stone, off-cuts being dumped in landfills) and, secondly, on heritage (Coetzee’s own heritage, the fighters who died, traditional corbel houses not being protected as part of our heritage).



## Artist's Biography

Hannelie Coetzee is a Johannesburg-based visual artist and photographer.

### Photography

In a career spanning 20 years, Coetzee has specialised in documentary/narrative photography. With a few select images, she can capture the essence of a story or a person. She has worked on many photographic books, annual reports and photo libraries. She is represented by agencies in New York and Germany.

### Sculpture

Coetzee's career transitioning into stone was quite logical. She started by photographing stone – corbel houses, other stone structures, scars in the landscape from 2000 onwards. Pretty soon she was bringing stone back from travels, asking curious questions about their histories, geological significance, mining journeys and movement in general. Stone is the medium through which Coetzee can reconnect to the earth, to her heritage and her being. She is at her happiest whilst collecting, rearranging, cutting or engraving stone.

### Exhibitions

Coetzee has had two solo exhibitions in 2002 (Bossie Exhibition) and 2010 (Uitpak) and various group exhibitions. She was granted a residency at the Nirox Sculpture Garden in 2012. She has installed a number of site-specific land and public art works throughout South Africa. Her works are in private and public collections.

### Collaboration

Coetzee formed Such Initiative along with artist Usha Seejarim. They won the BASA Environmental Art Award 2011 for Tomorrow's Joy, a 100m<sup>2</sup> plastic bottle top mosaic woven together by 140 children and crafters from Johannesburg during the Fifa World Cup. They continue to develop participatory public art projects with an eco-conscious slant.

*Hannelie Coetzee*

Visual Art

# WORKS IN STONE

(WERKE IN KLIP)

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NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL  
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