

WEIGHT OF LOSS

The diminishing diversity of our planet is a daily occurrence and is of deep personal concern. The Anthropocene Epoch¹ is the current period in modern history where human activity has had a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems, which are becoming more vulnerable and fragile.

The last few years have seen an extraordinary increase in devastating wildfires all over the world largely caused by climate change, drought, faulty machinery, fireworks, agricultural practices, arson and more. The 2019 wildfires in Australia were devastating, but some protected areas experienced less fire damage where they are managed by indigenous people using age-old customary fire management knowledge². Inherent customary knowledge is lost when people move away from the land and this knowledge dies with them. When habitats disappear, that wealth of deep, intelligent knowledge does too.^{3 4}

The fire in April 2021 in Cape Town ravaged fynbos and heritage buildings, including the Jagger Library's vast African Studies collection. In the salvage operations, some materials

¹ The Anthropocene Epoch is the current period in modern history where human activity has had a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems. Some scientists feel the epoch began with the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s when mass production, including the rise of large-scale agriculture, impacted the carbon and methane levels in the earth's atmosphere. Others believe that the Anthropocene Epoch began in 1945 when humans dropped the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. Either way, the exponential increase in the human population during the 20th century as well as into the 21st has secured people's primacy over other species and placed the world firmly in the Anthropocene Epoch, shown by exponential population growth: from 1 billion in 1800 to 2.6 in 1950 to 7.78 billion in 2019. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/anthropocene/>, updated June 7, 2019.

² Thousands of historic Aboriginal sites and artefacts, which occur largely in forested or protected areas and hold huge value for indigenous groups, were damaged or destroyed by these fires. (Pickrell, 2020) However, some of these protected areas experienced less fire damage where the area is managed by indigenous people using their old customary fire management knowledge. (Trauernicht, et al, 2015)

³ Increasing wildfires destroy biodiversity but they are also making an impact on our cultural heritage. In Brazil in 2019, fire destroyed most of the Brazilian National Museum. Lost in the blaze were recordings of myths and stories told in indigenous languages by the people who once spoke them. This is how memory and history vanish forever. (Whewell & Cruz, 2019)

⁴ "Every time a language disappears, a speaking voice also disappears, a way to make sense of reality disappears, a way to interact with nature disappears, a way to describe and name animals and plants disappears," says Jordi Bascompte, researcher in the Department of Evolutional Biology and Environmental Studies, University of Zurich.

retrieved from the vaults below the Jagger Library were paper and film - fragile, vulnerable, unique materials, at odds with the information they hold of a heavily loaded history.⁵

In response to the fire, I began making repositories in the form of delicate, fragile porcelain paper clay boxes, to 'preserve' what was lost. Selected Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system numbers are embedded in the sides of the boxes. Now that much of the Jagger Library's special collection is gone, what remains is only the (colonial) DDC record of what once existed. With the critical debate around the decolonisation of tertiary curricula and the spectre of what was lost, an opportunity arises to remember and provide an inclusive base upon which we can create a new parity – politically, socially, economically, environmentally, culturally; of how future collections of knowledge and information are collected and catalogued.

The whiteness of porcelain depicts insight and illumination associated with knowledge and learning, but also describes an absence, ghostliness, weightlessness and silence. White hot is the hottest heat and aptly describes the intensity of this fire.

By repetitively displaying of most of the objects on the gallery floor⁶, the horizontal rows replicate horizontal shelves of materials in libraries or archives: an aesthetic and lyrical device to demonstrate the magnitude of the works lost in the fire, and which unifies the installation.

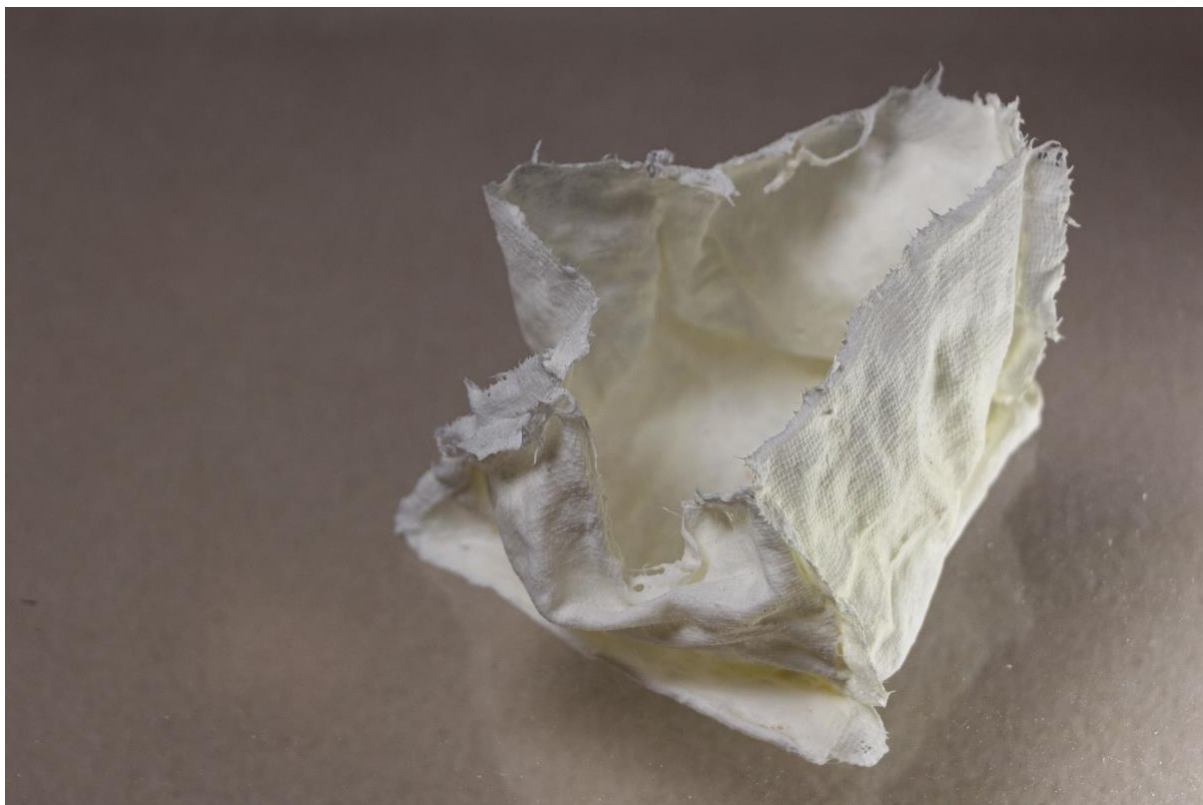
The sound component of the exhibition (created by recording pieces of fired porcelain paper clay under physical pressure, creaking and cracking) adds a further discordant, sensory dimension to the visual narrative of the enormity of the disaster caused by the fire. Sound enhances the fragility of the paper clay material, recognising our human frailties as well as our powerlessness against a natural phenomenon like a wildfire – and warning us of the environment's impending final crack.

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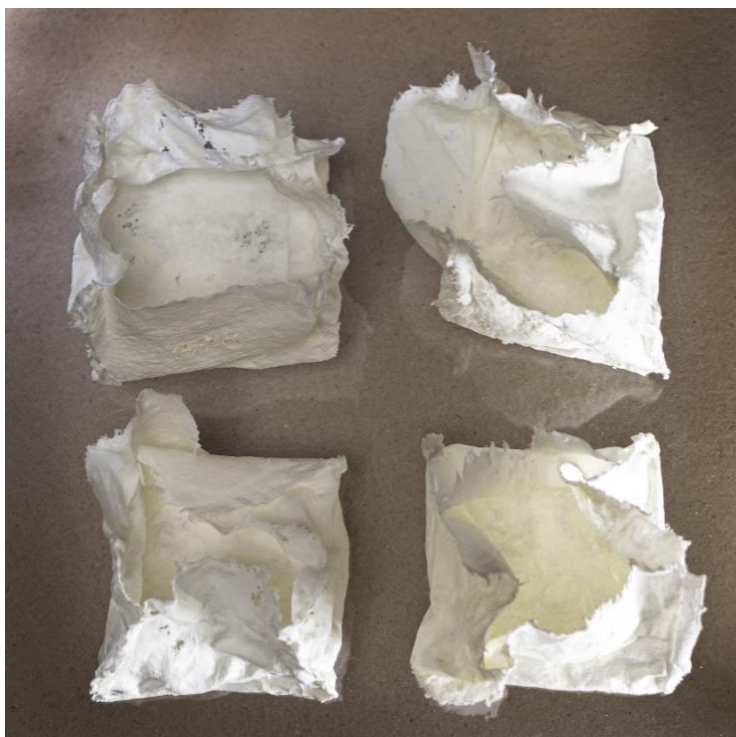
⁵ With regards to the critical debate around the decolonisation of tertiary curricula, it has been proposed that some of the destroyed materials could have contributed to a better understanding and a more positive discussion. Somadoda Fikeni, historian and political analyst, voiced how a colonised and conquered continent "has been struggling to reconstruct its own history" and that "therefore, any special collection⁵ that is frail, no longer available, or no longer printed very often tends to be priceless in terms of its heritage value and in terms of the knowledge project." (Haas, 2021)

⁶ I have employed repetition in my work as the result of obsessive making to demonstrate the magnitude of the works lost in the fire. Repetition in artmaking can be a way to deal with anxiety, depression and trauma, a process employed by Hesse too. Repetition in the assembly of a multiple piece installation is a device to unify the installation. The eye of the viewer is guided to move around the pieces in the installation until the gaze is held on each of the component pieces and the viewer notices more. In making my memory boxes, each started with the same uniform materials but in the making by hand, each developed its own unique form.

IMAGES FROM THE FINAL BODY OF WORK



*A single porcelain paper clay memory box
8.5 x 8.5 x 8.5cm*



Detail of the installation of 99 boxes



Weight of loss installation of porcelain paper clay memory boxes (bird's eye view)



*Dewey Decimal Classification numbers embedded in the walls of the memory boxes
153.1: Memory; 325.3: Colonisation*



233 deg C: The temperature at which books or paper will burn



*Burning pages from **The Other Side Of History** by Van Zyl Slabbert, to make ash for a possible installation piece*



Ghost of an archive

Stacks of 'blank' porcelain paper clay sheets, 8-9cm square



Pieces of hollow, empty porcelain paper clay artefacts: made by from pieces of Charcoal collected from the pine trees t the perimeter of Upper Campus that Burnt in the fire. In firing these pieces in the kiln, the charcoal burnt away completely.



*Sample of the cover for my catalogue – it is a separate sheet of porcelain paper clay
Which would be removed from the portfolio box before the catalogue can be taken out, to be able to engage
with the fragility of the medium.*



Porcelain paper clay objects representing documents and publications burnt in the fire. The shadow below is to make the objects float as 'ghosts'.

8-9cm sheets tied together where the ribbon has burnt off in the firing



Ghost I

What remains after the documents within were burnt off in the kiln



Ash made from burnt books, and blown over books to leave a silhouette on the Wall; a residue of the burnt materials of the African Studies special collections. This will be an installation on the wall with my final body of work. Ghost of an archive II.