



# stitching connections

cutting threads again and again

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Dedicated to my late mother  
**Joyce Hannah Kramer** (16.12.1923 – 25.10.2000)

She kept appearing in my work. I think of her love,  
her philosophy and her way of thinking.  
She will always be an inspiration.  
I miss her more and more but her light shines on.  
I wanted a good down sleeping bag for my 21 st birthday  
but she insisted I get a sewing machine and a sleeping bag.



“Play is the highest form of research “  
- Albert Einstein

inverted photograph of the needle of a Singer handwheel sewing machine





sewn transparency projection

## Essay

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results,” Einstein is believed to have said this. I must therefore be mad as I repeat my patterns over and over again. ‘But according to quantum mechanics you can do the same thing many times and get different results. This is the premise underlying great high-energy particle colliders. In those colliders, physicists bash together the same particles in precisely the same way, trillions upon trillions of times.’(Wilczek, 2015)

In Newtonian physics there is a linear equation of cause and effect but chaos theory proves that even the slightest change can affect everything. I embrace the changes and the experimentation in my work and have not followed a linear line even though this artwork began with linear sewing and the restrictions of the stitch.

I felt somewhat mad, somewhat absurd sewing over and over but as I used the language of sewing it was repetition and the unexpected that attracted my attention.

The work I have been making uses sewing, sewing machines, cloth, thread, plastic, pins, needles, the linearity of the stitch, the industrial nature of the machine and plastic waste as poetic devices to guide me in whatever way the thread would lead. The materials and process led me to examine the concept of repetition and the unexpected that occurs within the process driven work. German American sculptor Eva Hesse, Polish sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz and South African contemporary artist Paul Edmunds are three artists that I have examined and how they have used repetition in their work. Time, labour, discipline, pattern, materiality and process can be seen as different ways of looking at repetition. (Saptouw, 2015)

In this essay I describe how I have used repetition and process in a post minimalist way. I explain my process and how my exploration with the materials changed my artworks, how my interest in the sewing machine and the textile industry transformed my work from two dimensional stitching on fabric to three dimensional steel kinetic sculptures.

My investigation began with an old sewing machine, a Frick’s sewing machine which I bought in a shop in Roeland Street, Cape Town. It is a beautiful machine, structurally curvaceous and solid with a bobbin that is bullet shaped.

As a child I remember playing with my grandmother 's Singer Treadle sewing machine. Kneeling on the floor of my grandparent's house in Germiston, South Africa I would push the treadle up and down with my hands, transfixed by the mechanism and the repeat motion. I had to kneel as I was too small to turn the handle of the machine and reach the treadle at the same time. I was mesmerised by the motion, the rhythm and the workings of the mechanism.

When I moved to Cape Town the textile industry was a huge part of its landscape. I lived in Observatory and Woodstock where many of the textile factories were situated so I would see many garment workers going daily to and from the factories. At the time I worked at Groote Schuur Hospital as a physiotherapist and many of the workers would attend the outpatient clinic with back and neck injuries. This industry is very much ingrained in the history and texture of the city, Cape Town which I now call home. It was an industry that thrived in Salt River and Woodstock, an industry that has changed dramatically.

The textile industry in the Western Cape has a long history. It made military uniforms during world war one but it only became firmly established after 1925 when protective tariffs on imports were imposed. After 1939 it became the leading employer of labour in the Western Cape. Salt River and Woodstock became a hub of the Cape Town textile factories. During the apartheid era it flourished but post-apartheid saw a downturn in local manufacturing due to cheap imports and globalisation. The modernist Rex Trueform building, one of the clothing factories in Salt River now stands empty and up for auction. It is derelict and has windows boarded up. For me it was iconic and representative of the industry. There has been much effort recently to revive the industry.





textile workers in a factory in Johannesburg 1990



bales of cloth Kwaai Lappies Salt River Cape Town

I proposed using the sewing machine as a starting point to examine connections to this industry, to this city, to garment workers. I wanted to see where the thread and sewing would lead me. Process and material driven the sewing machine led me on an unexpected path. I am not proficient with sewing but I began to sew on the Frick's hand wheel sewing machine, a borrowed Singer hand wheel sewing machine, an electric machine and by hand. The sewing machine became a vehicle to examine repetition.

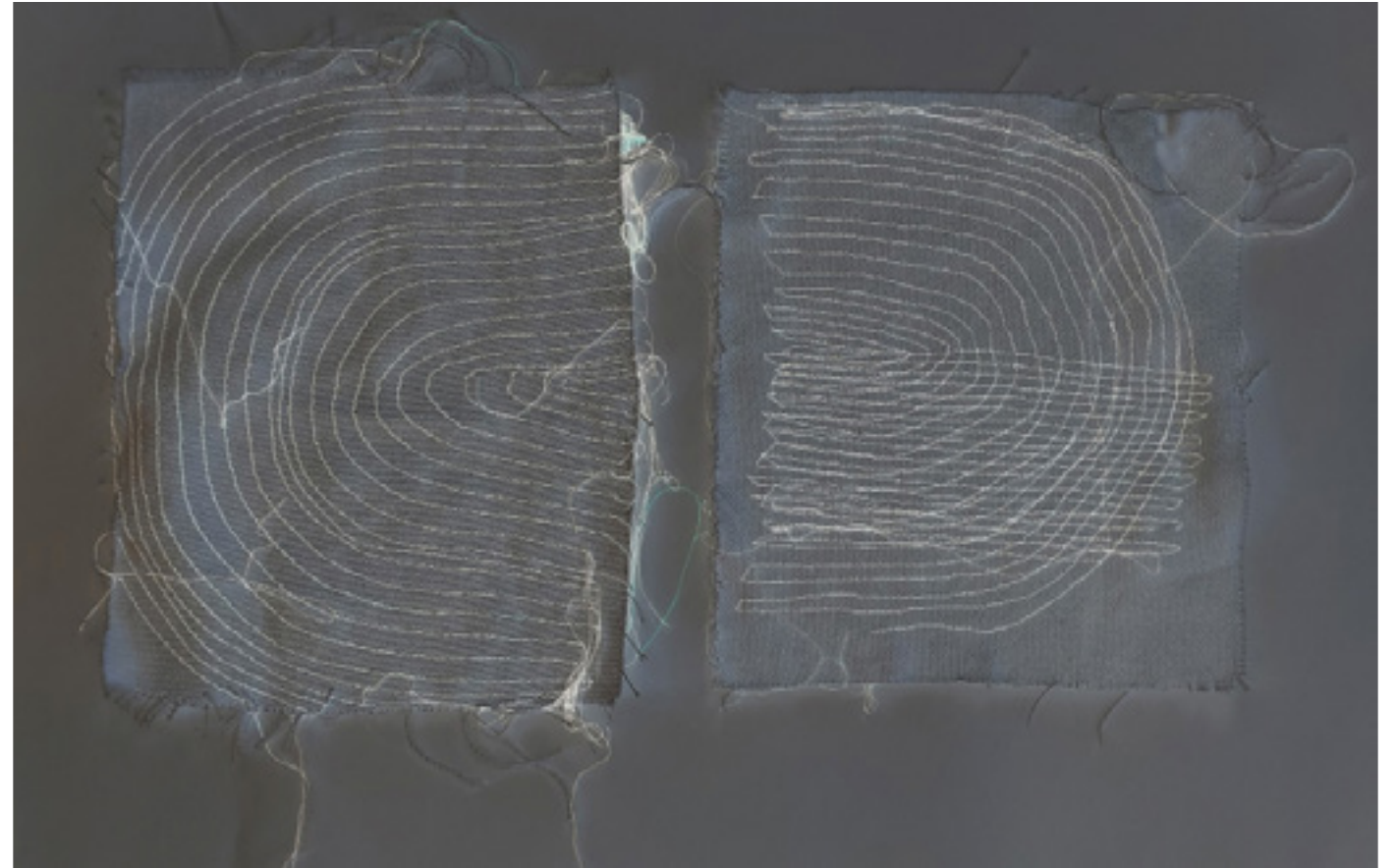
The making created a tension in me, meditative, hypnotic and healing as I tried to 'hold things together' but simultaneously obsessive and making me want to break free. The needle puncturing the cloth or plastic over and over, wounds trying to heal only to suppurate, a stitch attempting to hold together only for it to tear. The sewing machine, the needle, the thread, the sewing, the stitch, the knotting was a way to examine the human condition which often unravelled as I attempted to hold shapes together.

Cycles in life often repeat but not exactly the same. Patterns, trauma, violence, war, exploitation repeating over and over whether physically or psychologically.

As the thread was caught in the machine or knotted or pulled or entangled so too life is not linear. It was not only the entanglement, the knotting and the tearing that interested me, but also the sound of the sewing machine, the needle piercing the cloth over and over, the turning of the hand wheel and the hum of the electric machine. The recurring sound reminded me of minimalist music especially the music of Erik Satie, Michael Nyman, Philip Glass and others.



drawing on fabric stitching with the sewing machine while listening to three minimalist music pieces



an inverted image of drawing on fabric both leading me to examine the concept of repetition digital image



one of my many 'cells', balls, a stuffed plastic ball stitched by hand to hold the stuffing inside plastic, stuffing and thread



one of my many 'cells', balls, a stuffed plastic ball stitched by hand to hold the stuffing inside plastic, stuffing and thread



red knotted cords emerging from the centre of a bursting large plastic ball sewn together  
red thread plastic, stuffing, cord, elastic and thread

Music is often where I begin in my art practice, so I chose three pieces of minimalist music and listened to these repeatedly as I sewed into fragments of cloth. I used three different sewing machines, two hand controlled and one electric.

I sewed over and over in straight lines into these cloths of same dimension and soon became frustrated with the monotony, the lines began to curve, to become angled to become circles and some began to resemble cells and nerves.

The machine sound was reminiscent of a heartbeat, a heartbeat present and a heartbeat absent. The heartbeat of an industry that was once so central in Salt River but now mostly a memory echoing in the empty. The beat of the heart, that rhythmic repetitive sound reminded me of patterns that repeat in life.

I sewed into larger cloths and drew with the thread. Unexpected drawings appeared, many with circles.

I have an affinity with the shape of a circle or spiral. I did not expect the circle to appear in this project but it did. It was partly inspired by huge rolls of cloth in textile shops.

The circle shape has appeared in many artists' works. For Eva Hesse she reflected that for her the circle represented the self-defeating emotional pattern in which she felt locked: The vicious cycle or the painful cycle. (Anna Chave, 2016)

For Louise Bourgeois, a French American artist she describes the spiral as a form of arranging chaos. 'The spiral is completely continuous, predictable or infinite. It is a form of disorientation; you don't know whether its direction comes from right to left, but not in the political sense. .... The references to live in an orderly way disappear. (Crone, R. and Greve, 1998)

The obsessiveness of sewing over and over made me think of the myth of Sisyphus. In Greek mythology Sisyphus is condemned to push his rock up the mountain only for it to roll down again leaving him to start over. This is an endless cycle. French philosopher Albert Camus saw Sisyphus as the absurd hero where humans cannot help but continue to ask after the meaning of life, only to see our answers tumble back. (GreekMythology.com, 2015)

Rather than being exasperated by the Sisyphean task I too followed Camus, accepted the repetition, its' futility relaxing me as I embraced the repeat action. Even if absurd, I continued to sew.

I am a swimmer and last year I met a Ghanaian activist, Yvonne Tetteh who swam 450km along the Volta River to bring attention to the microfibre pollution of textile waste. She swam while a boat called 'woman who does not fear' followed her collecting water samples. The samples were to examine the micro plastics in the water from the dumping of textile waste in Ghana. Ghana is one of fast fashion's dumping grounds. Cognisant of textile waste I started to introduce plastic into my work.

Stitch by stitch, I meditatively sewed into plastic bags, holding stuffing inside. Each stitch connecting, holding and knotting the round shape. The needle pierced in and out of the plastic over and over trying to hold the structure. The contact point of the needle with thread perforating the plastic often tearing it in the process. Many burst, threads unravelled, the insides pushed out of the torn plastic. The threads red, white or black were sewn by hand in a circular way attempting to hold together, to maintain order sometimes successful, other times not. Threads caught, threads knotted, threads came loose, the stuffing at times pushing out of the 'cells' in an inflammatory way. The stuffed balls at times were playful but fragile and some began to resemble hand grenades, cells and macrophages.

An article that had attracted my attention was about British war time secret weapons used in world war two describing poisoned darts where sewing machine needles were used as prototypes. Scientists in Wiltshire were testing the use of poisoned darts to be used in cluster bombs.

In 1942 Dr Paul Fildes, the man leading British wartime chemical weapons programme approached a sewing company and his letter said 'it is difficult to explain what I want sewing machine needles for...' These needles were part of a novel chemical weapon. (Travis, 2009)

As I pierced the plastic or cloth, I could not forget the reference of these needles to war. I used more red thread, the red of blood, the red of war, the red of passion. My cells bursting as I attempted to keep them together. These ball shaped forms I call my 'cells' or 'balls', or 'genes', units of life. The 'cell' balance precariously on spiral metal springs. They attempt to be containers of pain, suffering and joy. The spiral shape, the double helix, the scaffold for the building blocks of life itself, DNA.

The balls grew in size until I made a large ball which tore with its insides suppurating from its round form. Emerging from its centre red cord which I had ritually knotted in a specific ritual sequence daily. The red cord is umbilical.

WAR poisoned dart → used sewing machine needles as prototypes for biological

Comment is free ...  
Hugh Muir: Boris Johnson's charm is wearing thin  
guardian.co.uk/commentisfree



### British wartime secret weapon: sewing needles

Alan Travis  
Home affairs editor

British biological warfare scientists developed a poisoned dart to rain down on enemy troops during the second world war and used sewing machine needles to make prototypes. It was disclosed today.

A "most secret" War Office file, entitled "research into the use of anthrax" and other poisons for biological warfare", disclosed that scientists at the Porton Down military science park in Wiltshire were testing the use of poisoned darts to be dropped in cluster bombs.

Trials on guinea pigs and sheep demonstrated that even if the dart was removed, the victim was likely to collapse within five minutes. Within the day, and lethal, death followed.

At one stage the British developed 30 million darts in the US via investigation and pronounced feasible.

At first, scientists used a few needles bought at a branch of the Singer sewing machine company in nearby Salisbury, but soon realised that local stocks would not be sufficient.

In January 1942 the man leading Britain's wartime chemical weapons programme, Dr Paul Fildes, made a direct approach to the sewing company. His letter opened with "It is a little difficult to explain what I want sewing machine needles for".

W Bellamy, of Singer's head office, replied: "From your remarks it would seem the needles are required for some purpose other than sewing machines. In any case, we should like to help you, if at all possible."

The Porton Down memorandum on the project describes the poisoned darts as "an entirely novel chemical weapon consisting of agents which are lethal in very small doses".

The scientist admitted that, once used, the darts would quickly lose their light covering such as trees, aircraft and lorries - would be without complete protection against the gas.

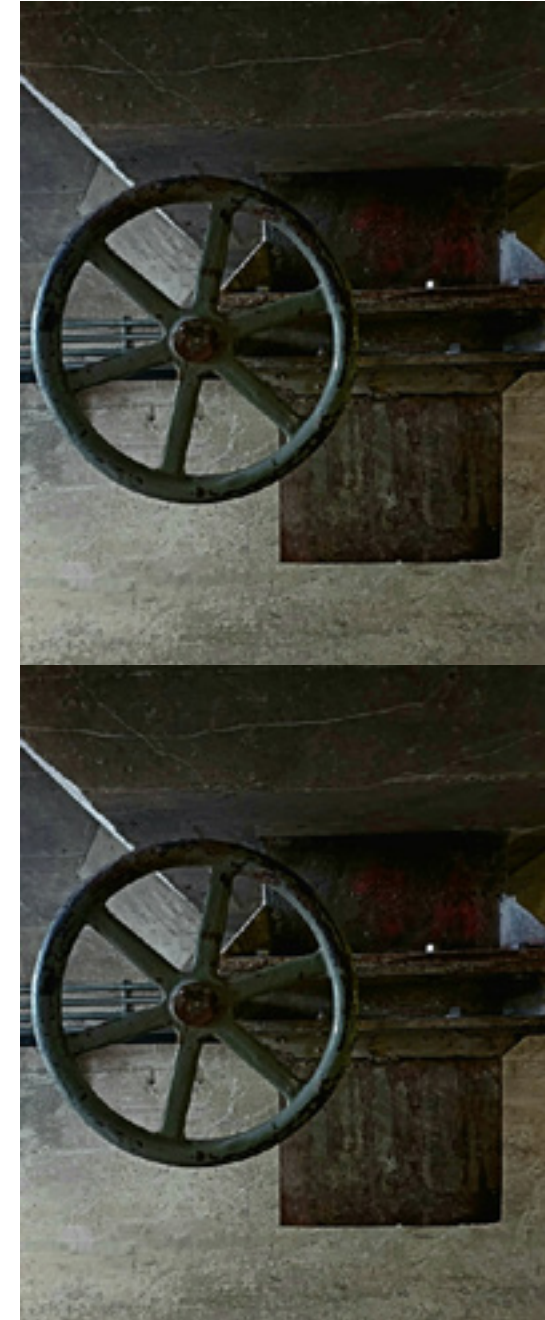
They were part of a programme that saw the development of anti-crop sprays, poison gas and germ weapons that experts say the government have been at pains to play down ever since.



Sewing machines at work and, right, a blueprint for a poisoned dart based on a sewing machine needle  
Photographs: George Knaig/KeyStone/Getty; National Archives



"It is a little difficult to explain what"



in the basement tunnel of the Zeitz MOCCA Museum of Contemporary Art Africa. Remaining mechanisms from this grain silo that has been transformed into Zeitz MOCCA. Wheels and pipes in the basement became part of my inspiration to work with motors and machines.

Continually the sound of the machine rang in my mind and I was drawn to the industrial steel and the mechanism of the machine.

One of the garment workers who commented on the sound of the sewing machines at the time where the industry was booming said. “That noise alone gives me a fright. It’s loud! Like a car engine revving,” (Pather,2017)

I attempted to dismantle a machine without success, so began to explore motors that perform repeat movements, specifically car windscreen wiper motors. With these motors I built two steel kinetic sculptures.

As I constructed the first sculpture an unexpected element occurred. I had not designed it to bang but during its construction the round steel rods thudded against each other. This sound was exactly what I wanted.

A loud bang is heard over and over as curved steel rods that extend from a large steel rectangular box lift flimsy fragile cloths vertically and swing them in a wave like motion only to return to the horizontal with a thud. The thud sound echoes repeatedly in the gallery space. Violent in its sound, violent in its tearing as with each repeated bang the rods rub against each other slowly tearing the fabric. The steel box industrial with the motor mechanism exposed and visible as to the workings of the sculpture. An old disused motorcar windscreen wiper was placed inside the constructed steel box and it is this motor that drives the motion of the kinetic sculpture. As the cloth moves in a soothing rhythm the bang is somewhat disturbing creating a tension, an unconscious disturbance of the gentle wave like rhythm alluring and attractive yet repellent at the same time.

In Eva Hesse’s artwork 1968 work Contingent she used muslin and latex. She worked with weight and gravity. The work may deteriorate or change with time. The muslin and latex were skin like and fragile.

Paul Edmunds, a contemporary South African artist born in Johannesburg the year Eva Hesse died, 1970 and who now lives in Cape Town uses repetition in a labour-intensive way. He examines the intense time and labour element in his work. He uses repetition, detail and discipline in his work and works largely with patterns repeated.

He says of his own work, “My work is characterised by an unconventional use of materials and cumulative processes as well as an ongoing exploration of pattern. On the cusp between abstraction and representation, my work seems more concerned with process than depiction.” (Artthrob.co.za, 2024)

Magdalena Abakanowicz, (1930- 2017), the Polish post minimalist fibre sculptor created monumental textile sculptures using constructed repeat forms, abstract and figurative forms but each one never quite the same. (Abakanowicz, 2008: 88) In her studio she built objects rounded like bellies, filled with different matter, ‘like small potatoes’. She called the cycle Embryology.

The cells she created were repeat rounded forms. As I look at these forms, I am reminded of the small cells I create in my studio.

The materials I use are plastic, cloth, thread, sewing machines, industrial steel, and motors. The sewing machine was at times meditative but at other times instead of being peaceful, nurturing, creative and playful the needle became violent and red thread enveloped me as I felt trapped by emotion and holding things together.

The circle goes round as cycles in life rotate and repeat, but in that endless repeat the outcome is not always predictable which is reflective of life itself. I attempt to hold things together even if they fall apart in the same way that our cells continually try to maintain homeostasis in the body.



kinetic sculpture one  
constructed steel box, windscreen wiper motor, electrics, round steel and fabric



sewing pattern

Waistline  
Taille (Normal)  
Línea de la cintura

See ALTERATIONS on chart  
Voyez les modifications sur le plan  
Mira las alteraciones en la gráfica

Waistline

Facing  
Revers de la jupe  
espaldas

CUTTING LINE  
Ligne de coupe  
Línea del corte

Underlining  
Sous-jupon  
refuerzo

SEAM LINE  
Ligne de couture  
Línea de costura

Fold-Center Back  
Plier les deux côtés  
Centre de devant sur couture

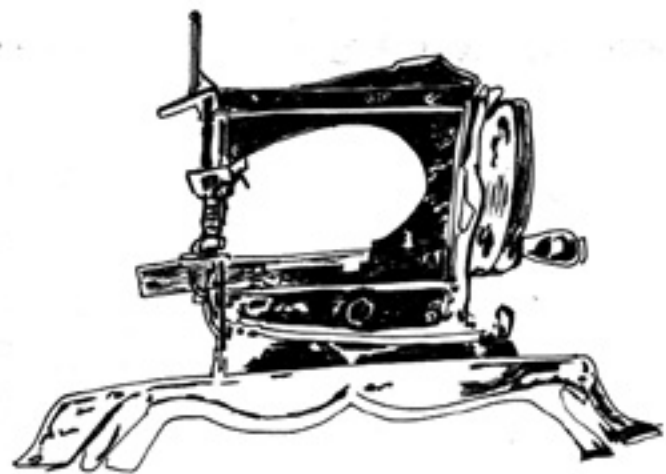
1651—Size 12  
24 Pieces

Cut underlining same as outside  
Coupez le doublage comme l'extérieur  
Corte el refuerzo como el exterior

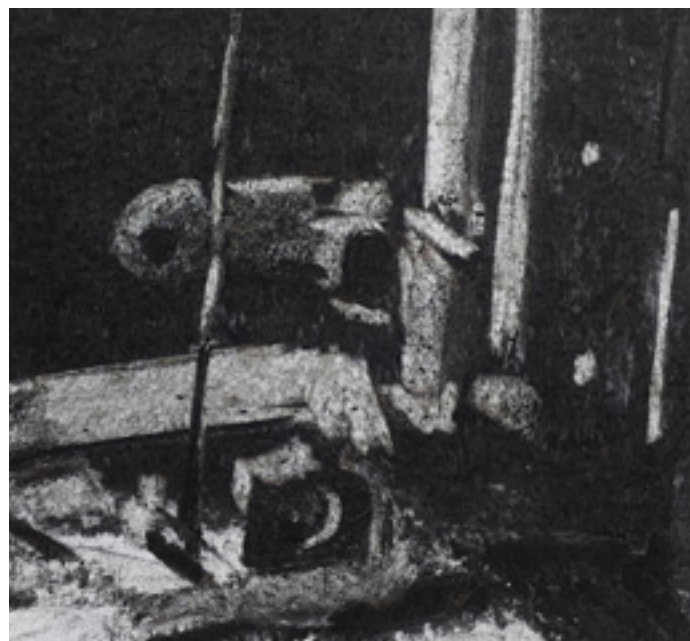
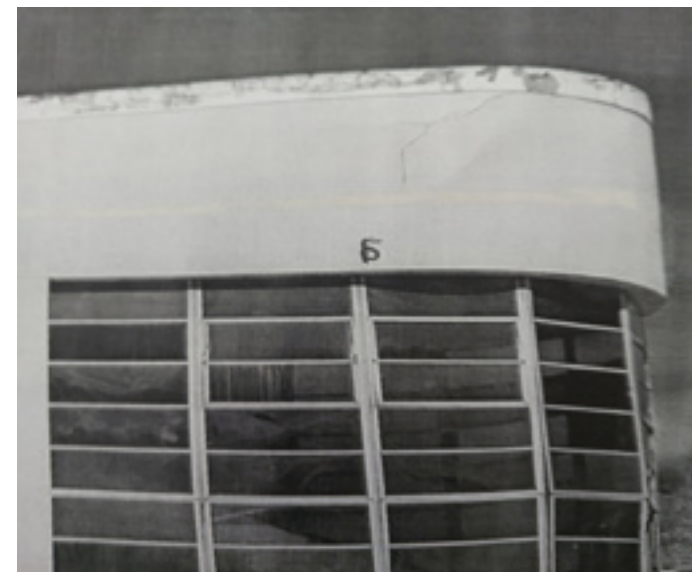
PLACE ON LENGTHWISE GRAIN OF FABRIC  
Placer dans le sens de la longueur du tissu  
Colocar a lo largo del hilo de tela

See ALTERATIONS on chart  
Voyez modifications sur le plan  
Mira las alteraciones en la gráfica  
SHORTEN OR LENGTHEN HERE  
Raccourcir ou rallonger ici  
Alargarse o acortarse aquí

FABRIC



drawing of a machine in black felt tip pen  
the start of my process of exploration



charcoal drawing of sewing needle of machine

pins and buttons  
forms repeated



swimming pool lane divider  
I am a swimmer. I swim stroke after stroke, a reminder of repetition



photograph of needle, pressure foot screw, presser foot and throat plate of my Frick's sewing machine

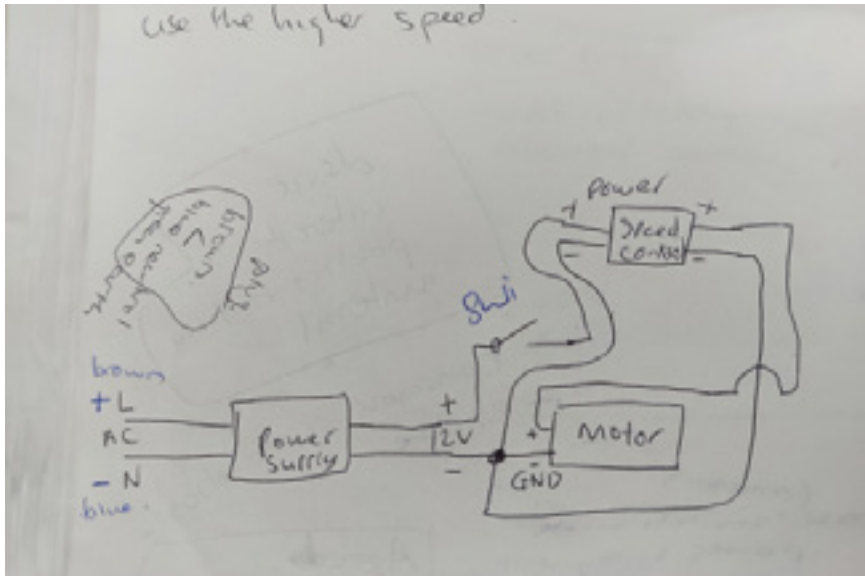


photo compilation of pipes and wheel in the basement of zeitz mocca museum of contemporary art Africa served as part of my inspiration in making kinetic sculptures digital image





windscreen wiper motors and wires for construction of kinetic sculptures



electric circuit diagram for kinetic sculpture one



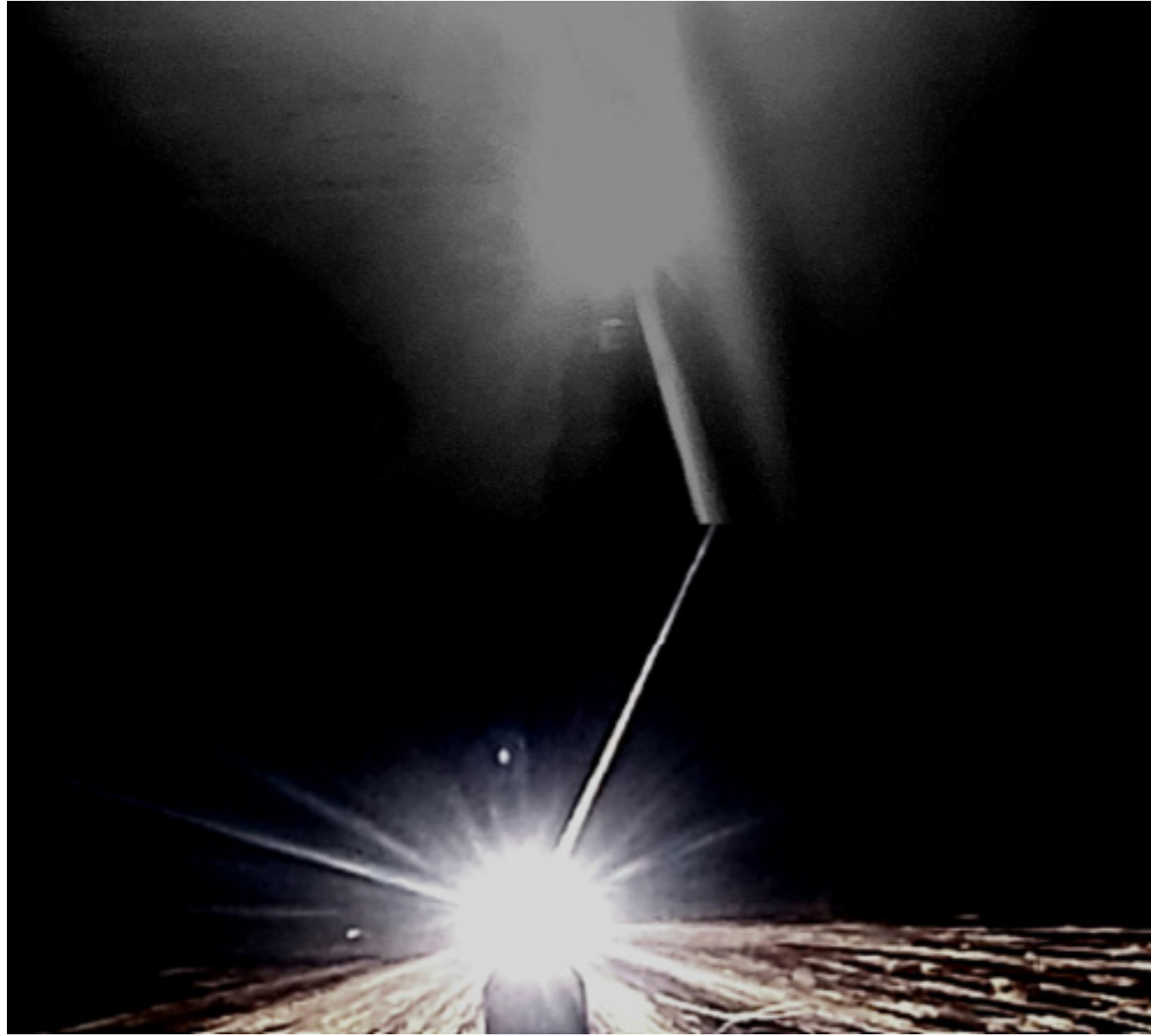
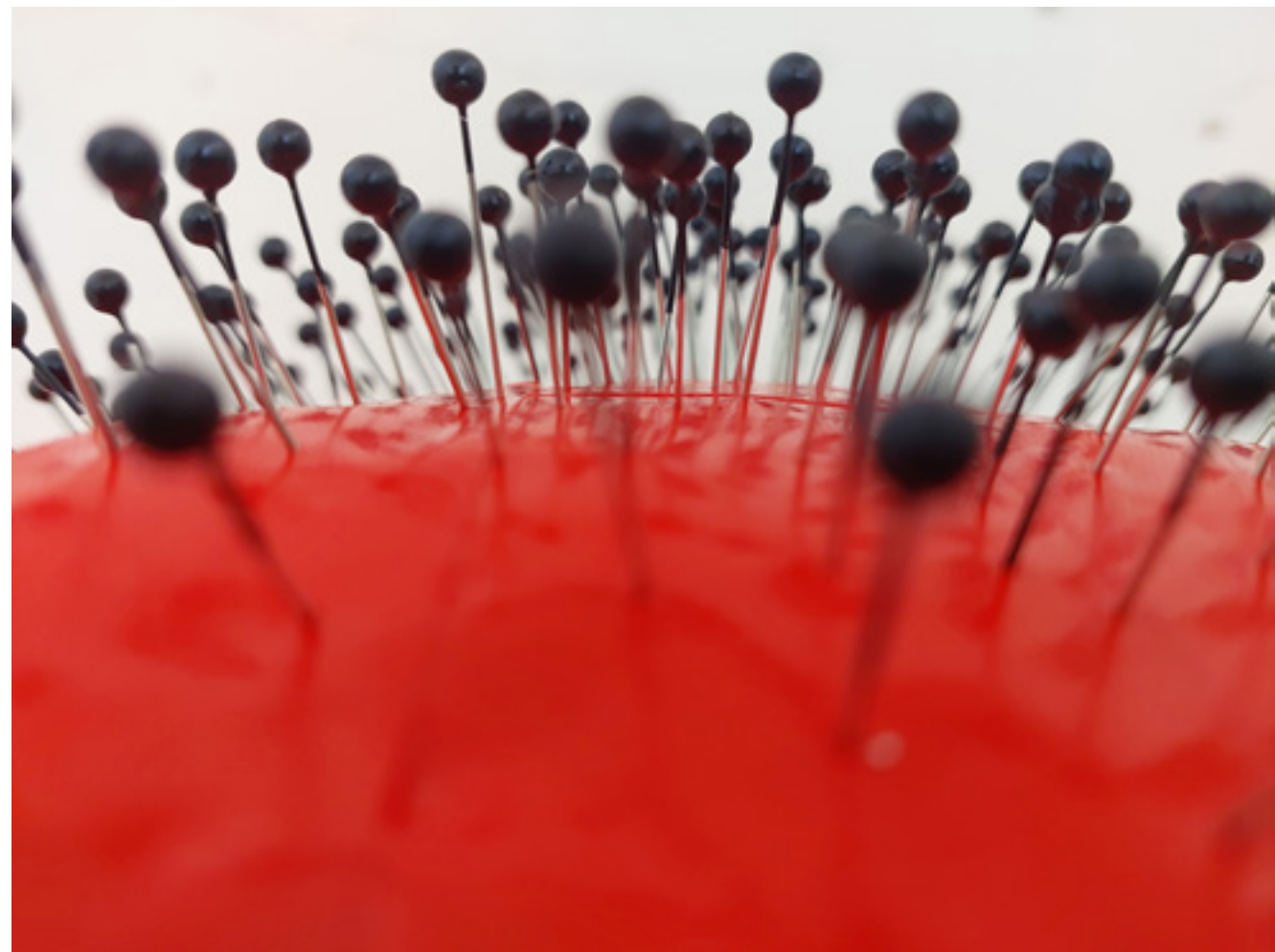


photo compilation of steel being cut in the fabrication department of Michaelis School of Fine Art  
the compilation forms part of my process and fascination with industry steel cutting and photography

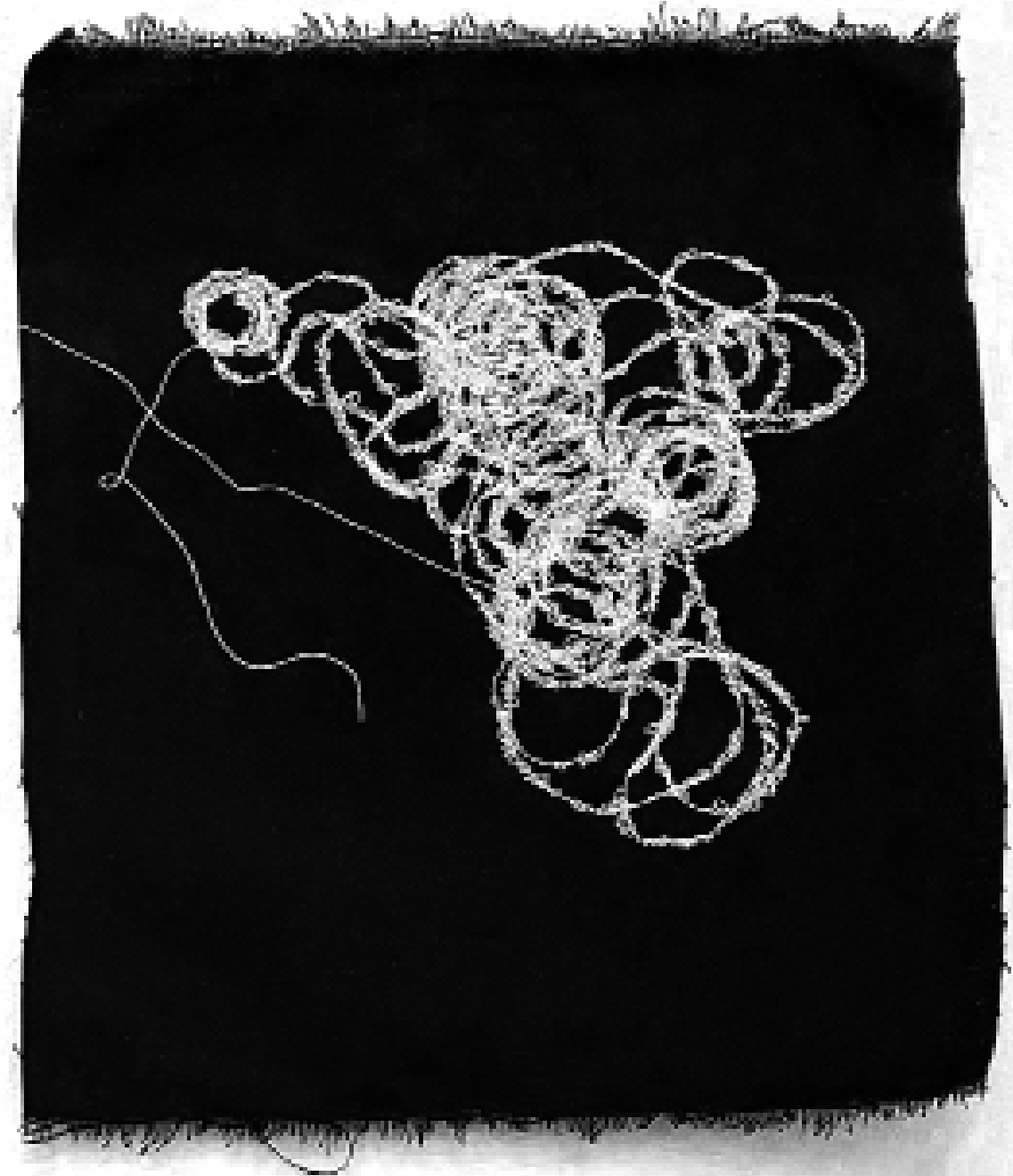
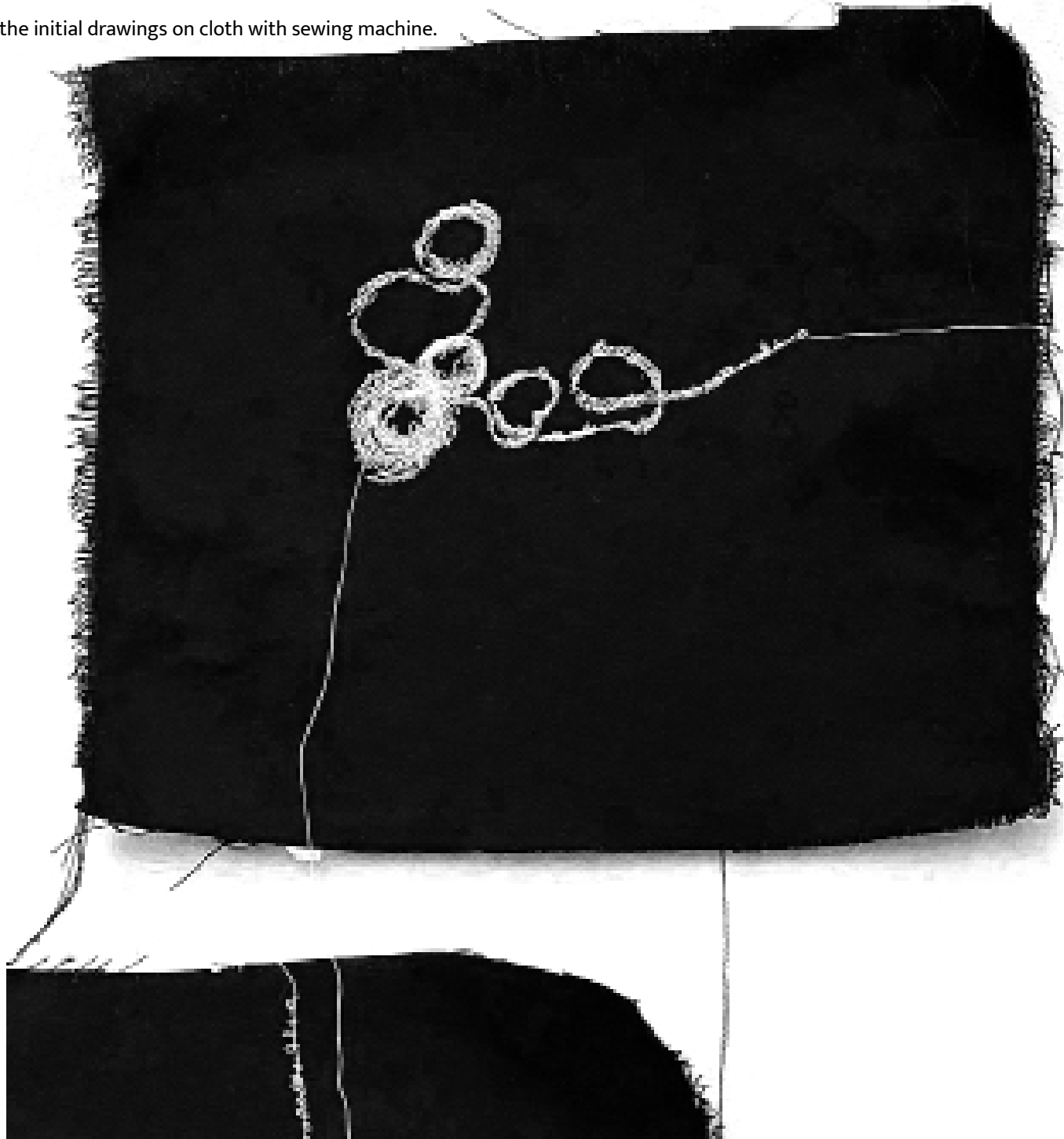






one of my many 'cells', balls, a stuffed plastic ball stitched by hand to hold the stuffing inside plastic, stuffing and thread

Sewing on cloths an extension to the initial drawings on cloth with sewing machine.  
Black cloth, white thread



'cell' on steel spiral  
plastic, string, stuffing, steel





kinetic sculpture two  
constructed steel box, windscreen wiper motor, electrics  
and found steel parts

rotating mechanism  
found object from scrap metal yard (used in kinetic sculpture two)



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I will miss my view from my studio on the second floor. I am now fit from climbing all those stairs.

And thank you to my family especially my sons.

I'm going to miss everyone but have enjoyed every minute.

There's never an end, only a beginning and you have all ignited that new beginning.

It's only the start.



**Sue Kramer** is a South African photojournalist, physiotherapist and artist based in Cape Town.

This project serves as a completion of her Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art at Michaelis - University of Cape Town.

She has worked as a social documentary photographer since the late 1980's. Her career as a photojournalist began when she documented the struggle against apartheid for local and international publications.

It has taken many directions since, but she continues to work as a freelance social documentary photographer, part time physiotherapist, produce children's books, educational materials, picture researcher, collaborate with other artists and curate exhibitions.

She has worked for Afrapix, iAfrika Photo Agency, Africa Media Online, Demotix , Sunday Times and many more local and international publications.

She has won awards for her work and participated in many group exhibitions.

Her only previous solo exhibition was “Joy in the ordinary moment” March, Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town, MOP (Month of Photography) 2002

Her mother told her it’s never too late to do what you want to do. She follows in that philosophy with gratitude to her mom.

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