



The Garage Journal:
Studies in Art,
Museums & Culture

Access and Preservation in the Digital Age: The Case of Dumile Feni's Scroll

Sven Christian
University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

This item has been published in Issue 01 'Transitory Parerga: Access and Inclusion in Contemporary Art,' edited by Vlad Strukov.

To cite this item: Christian S (2020) Access and preservation in the digital age: The case of Dumile Feni's scroll. *The Garage Journal: Studies in Art, Museums & Culture*, 01: 205-225. DOI: 10.35074/GJ.2020.11.013

To link to this item: <https://doi.org/10.35074/GJ.2020.11.013>

Published: 30 November 2020

ISSN-2633-4534
thegaragejournal.org

18+

Access and Preservation in the Digital Age: The Case of Dumile Feni's Scroll

Sven Christian

Today, museums around the world face long-standing issues of access, representation, and inclusivity. Although many look to open their doors to broader audiences, to reap the presumed benefits of the digital sphere, and to expand their collections to embrace a plurality of perspectives, far less attention has been paid to how institutions include and represent artists. This

article highlights how the drive for accessibility, an espousal of the promise of new technologies, and the need to preserve artworks might motivate curatorial choices that strip them of their material and contextual idiosyncrasies. It focuses on a scroll created by the artist Dumile Feni, and its exhibition and digitization for *Activate/Captivate* (2016) at Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg.

Keywords: access, collections engagement, collections management, containment, digitizing collections, Dumile Feni, embodied knowledge, mistrust, preservation, transformation, translation



Figure 1. Grant Jurius, *Remembered and Forgotten* (2020). Digital drawing, 33.86 × 25.4 cm (courtesy of the artist)

1. Introduction: Remembered and Forgotten

In June 2012 (Charlton 2012, personal communication¹), a scroll by the artist Dumile Feni was donated to a university museum, the Wits Art Museum (WAM), in Johannesburg.² The scroll had not been exhibited during Feni's lifetime (Manganyi 2012: 21). As such, it's unclear how (or whether) the artist intended for it to be shown. That said, the scroll includes a number of inscriptions—such as, 'This composition is not meant to be a fucking poem,' and 'Your education does not allow you to understand the statement. You wouldn't know'—that suggest he created the work with an audience in mind, and was wary of how this audience might interpret his work.

The emphasis Feni placed upon how (or how not) to read his work has prompted, for me, a number of ethical questions about the scroll's subsequent exhibition, in particular at *Activate/Captivate* (2016) at WAM, where a parallel display was created to offer researchers, students, secondary school learners, and members of the public (De Becker and Nettleton 2015: XI) an opportunity to interact with a digitized version of the work. This version was projected onto a wall in a blacked-out cubicle. By moving their hand across a sensor, visitors could 'scroll' left or right 'through' it. The display attempted to simulate the experience of 'handling' the work, without putting the fragile, material scroll at risk (Leyde 2019, personal communication³). Visitors could also view the original in a vitrine that was installed near the entrance to the cubicle that housed the digital version.⁴ This parallel display of the material and digital objects allowed for visual comparisons to be drawn, yet without being able to handle the physical object, researchers were unable to get a sense of the work's tactility and the layers of meaning embedded therein.

Given the possibility that the digital will outlive the material, and given how unlikely it is that future researchers will be able to physically handle the work (Leyde 2019, personal communication⁵), an important question arises as to how best to preserve the scroll's material and mechanical idiosyncrasies. The work of the scholar Peter Botticelli⁶ (2015) is of particular relevance here; he highlights the need for curators to 'examine closely the potential for digital objects to represent, and possibly distort, the authentic information contained in material objects' (p. 123). Botticelli (2015) notes the importance of 'extensive documentation' that might allow for 'detailed comparisons' between the material and digital, thereby minimizing 'the risk of information loss through successive waves of technology obsolescence' (p. 124).

With the digitization of Feni's scroll, this task is complicated by the fact that much information has either already been lost or is otherwise speculative. This is an important consideration because, as Fiona Cameron (cit. in Botticelli 2015) notes, the digitization of art 'enacts the curatorial process of selection of what is significant, what should be remembered and forgotten, and what categories of meaning, such as classification, cultural values, or aesthetic attributes are given pre-eminence' (p. 131). When the early life of an object has not been well documented, its maker is no longer around, or conflicting perspectives exist as to the maker's intent, how do curators choose what to prioritize?

Here, Botticelli's (2015) case study—which focuses on the digitization of 109 color Polaroid photographs by Andy Warhol (p. 124)—is a useful resource for comparative analysis. Like Feni's scroll, Warhol's polaroids are fragile and light-sensitive, making them difficult to preserve and exhibit (Botticelli 2015: 124). Similarly, Botticelli (2015) recognizes the challenge of not being able to ascertain how the artist would have felt about their digitization, given 'how specific their aesthetic values are to the Polaroid medium' (p. 124). An important difference is that Warhol left behind ample information regarding the Polaroids, including their dates, titles, subjects, and film types (Botticelli 2015: 124). Another is the consistency of existing descriptions, which provide a solid basis for comparisons to be made (Botticelli 2015: 124). With Feni's scroll, such empirical information is often lacking⁷ or inaccurate, and descriptions of the work are few and far between.⁸

Although the challenges around digitization, preservation, and access are not unique to South Africa's museums, the digitization of Feni's scroll reveals a number of case-specific issues that complicate prevalent understandings of access and preservation. 'Access' here refers to the means by which a public is afforded proximity to an artist's work, whether direct or indirect. This may include an artwork's physical exhibition, its documentation online, or the circulation of written and archival materials. Regarding the digitization of Feni's scroll, it is important to note that what is being made accessible is a representation of the artwork. The question of representation—of who has the right to speak for whom (Spivak 1999: 28), or the right to set the terms of engagement⁹—thus functions as an 'umbrella' for all of the concerns addressed in this article. From this perspective, it is worth noting that access, in and of itself, is not necessarily positive: it is possible for an artwork to be misrepresented, and for that misrepresentation to become widely accessible. Consequently, attention needs to be paid to what is being made accessible, and how.

Due to legal complications, WAM was unable to provide images of either the scroll or its digitized version for this article (Charlton 2020, personal communication¹⁰). The images that have been used in their stead are artworks commissioned from the artist Grant Jurius, who created them based on his reading of this essay, his knowledge of the scroll, and his knowledge of Feni's life more broadly. It is important to draw this distinction so that readers do not mistake them for representations of Feni's work, but can recognize their potential as artworks in their own right, which function in dialogue with the text.

2. A Window Onto the 'Real' World

In 2012, WAM initiated a three-year endeavor known as the *Collections Re-engagement Project*, which culminated in a publication (2015) and exhibition (2016) titled *Activate/Captivate*.¹¹ The project was facilitated by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (2011), awarded 'to support the strengthening of student and faculty engagement with the collections' (2011: 91).¹² The



Figure 2. Grant Jurius, *A Window onto the 'Real' World* (2020). Digital drawing, 33.86 × 25.4 cm (courtesy of the artist)

endeavor aimed to improve how the museum 'use[s] collections in teaching and learning processes' (De Becker and Nettleton 2015a: XI). It was 'highly collaborative' and 'interdisciplinary,' involving colleagues from 'different departments across the university as well as students and learners from all grades and ages' (De Becker and Nettleton 2015a: XI).

These foci can be understood in light of the emphasis that the grant placed upon, amongst other things, 'training, collaboration, and knowledge networks,' 'conservation,' 'digital humanities,' 'curatorial innovation,' and 'collection sharing that brings understudied material to light for scholars and the public' (The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2020).¹³ Given the difficulties of preserving and exhibiting Feni's scroll, as well as its limited exhibition history,¹⁴ co-curator Leigh Leyde (2019, personal communication) highlighted its suitability for inclusion, premised on the understanding that it was a little known artwork by a well known artist, and that it might be of interest to potential researchers.

In order to 'activate' the scroll, a series of high-resolution photographs were taken, which were then stitched together digitally (Bristow 2020, personal communication¹⁶). The digital version was then projected onto a wall in a blacked-out cubicle. A plinth, embedded with a sensor, was installed approximately two meters from the projection. This sensor, a 'Leap Motion Controller,' relies upon two infrared cameras to respond to movements within a 120 to 150° field of view (Ultraleap 2019). To interact with the digital version, viewers needed to remain close to the sensor, and, therefore, at a remove from the digital scroll, which was projected horizontally—as one might expect to find a framed work of art on the wall. Interestingly, this set-up mirrors some

of the earliest conceptions of linear perspective in the West, based on the abstract construction of the horizon as a governing principle for orientating oneself in the world (Steyerl 2012: 18).

Here, one's orientation is dependent on the stability and position of the observer, who 'is thought to be located on a ground of sorts' (Steyerl 2012: 14). In addition, Hito Steyerl (2012) notes that the horizon, as construct, historically 'defined the limits of communication and understanding' (p. 14-15). Not only did 'early navigation [consist] of gestures and bodily poses relating to the horizon,' it also made use of instruments—the astrolabe, quadrant, and sextant' (Steyerl 2012: 15). These established 'the view of a one-eyed and immobile spectator as a norm,' creating 'the illusion of a quasi-natural view to the "outside," as if the image plane [were] a window opening onto the "real" world,' enabling 'the calculation of future risk, which can be anticipated, and, therefore, managed' (Steyerl 2012: 18).

As mentioned, Feni's scroll is incredibly fragile. It was made from different sheets of paper, which have started to yellow. The paper shows signs of deterioration along its top and bottom edges, which may have been caused from a reaction between the paper and glue, which binds it to a di-bond laminate backing. Given the risk of the scroll being damaged, it is understandable that the museum enforces regulations around its handling. Nevertheless, its fragility contributes to an enriched understanding of the object as scroll. As Katherine Young describes (2014), 'all objects bear their histories in their fabric, but mass-produced objects are diminished by this wear, whereas works of craft, like works of art, are enhanced by it' (p. 189).

One feels this acutely in the processes of deterioration that have come to mark Feni's scroll. With each passing year, the work becomes older and more susceptible to damage. It becomes increasingly risky to handle, which sensitizes the handler to its wear and tear, and thus to the passage of time. To borrow a phrase from Mikhail Bakhtin (cit. in Young 2014), it is the kind of object through which 'time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible' (p. 178). Importantly, it is also the kind of object through which 'space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history' (Bakhtin, cit. in Young 2014: 178).

This is evident not only in the scroll's deterioration, but in how one's tactile interaction with it is structured. On either end of the scroll are two wooden dowels; these provide a cylindrical and mechanical support for the scrolling process, yet they also shape the limits of one's engagement. One has to be careful when unfurling the scroll, aware that a sharp tug on one end might meet resistance from the weight of the other and damage the work. The work's form relies on this embodied encounter: in one's hands, the scroll 'wants' to open up, to spill out, but the extent of this 'spillage' depends on how it is being held. Unsupported, the two rolls begin to unravel. As much as the work unravels, it also ravel. It reveals and it conceals. In the scrolling process, the rolls of paper oscillate between thick and thin. Time begins to take on shape, like the rings of a tree trunk. All of these attributes are embedded in our understanding of the object as 'scroll,' and engage more than one sense.

With the digital, however, the tension inherent in the paper, as well as the drag produced by the scroll's two dowels, is replaced by an effortless movement that is more akin to 'scrolling' online. One of the concerns here is that, in circumnavigating the work's fragility, its digitization dilutes this charged encounter and the sense of thick time that the physical object makes manifest.

This 'dilution' can, in part, be attributed to the use of the Leap Motion Controller, which is designed for 'simple interaction.' One of its selling points is its 'wide field of view' and its ability to transform 'motion-to-photon latency below the human perception threshold' (Ultraleap 2019). In other words, one of the sensor's strongest features is precisely its ability to reduce the amount of drag—the time lapsed—between one's physical movement and its digital correlate, so that any interaction appears effortless. This is a very different experience to that of the physical object. Feni's scroll is extensive: unfurled to its full length, it spans fifty-three meters. This figure is, admittedly, somewhat misleading, given the work's variable nature, but its length and fragility nonetheless make the physical object a highly time-consuming work. It cannot be handled at speed.

One of the effects of moving through the digital at speed is that this velocity accentuates a number of repetitions and transformations in subject.¹⁷ In the scroll, numerous motifs are repeated, most notably the figures of a mother and child, as well as several animal forms and the image of a person playing a wind instrument. In one instant, the image of a mother and child is repeated, but with slight variations each time. By the fourth or fifth repetition, the child and the hands of the mother have shifted position, so that the child, now upside down, can be supplanted with the image of a wind instrument. Later, the instrument is replaced by the image of a snake. Sometimes it is the person playing the instrument that becomes the animal, and vice versa. As the digital version allows the viewer to move through large sections of the scroll at the swipe of a hand, it accentuates the rhythm and flow of the drawings, imparting to the work an animated quality. This is, perhaps, useful for an analysis of the visual work; yet it is also important to point out that the handling process is, by contrast, laborious, meaning that such transformations are not immediately recognizable. Rather, they occur gradually and are punctuated by different images over a series of different 'pages.' Moreover, the dowels 'bracket' one's experience, making one aware that what one is seeing at any given moment is only ever partial. It is therefore possible to overlook the aforementioned transformations entirely. Furthermore, if one reads the scroll in a different direction, they might appear in 'reverse,' and not as described above.

Another important difference is that the digital version included a navigation bar, providing a zoomed-out view of the scroll and one's location therein (similar to a 'You Are Here' sign on a map). It also displayed a percentage indicating 'how far' into the scroll one was at any given moment, belying an implicit conception that the work ought to be read from one end to the other: left to right, from '0' to '100%' (rather than from the center out). If the physical scroll were intended to be read in sequence, a single dowel would have sufficed. Two dowels means that the scroll can be rolled up from both

ends and opened from the center, or wherever the previous handler has left it. Each time someone comes to view the work, they inevitably pick up where the previous handler left off, and have the option of reading outwards in either direction.

Although the digital version required something of the audience, this was less about the materiality of the object as it was about being able to navigate to different parts of the visual work, implying that its 'meaning' is by and large retinal. Yet, as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002), 'our experience contains numerous qualities that would be almost devoid of meaning if considered separately from the reactions they provoke in our bodies' (p. 46). In order to demonstrate this, he draws on the example of honey:

'Honey is sugary. Yet sugariness in the realm of taste [...] constitutes the same sticky presence as honey in the realm of touch. To say that honey is viscous is another way of saying that it is sugary: it is to describe a particular relationship between us and the object or to indicate that we are moved or compelled to treat it in a certain way, or that it has a particular way of seducing, attracting or fascinating the free subject who stands before us [...] Its various attributes do not simply stand side by side but are identical insofar as they all reveal the same way of being or behaving on the part of the honey. The unity of the object *does not lie behind its qualities* [emphasis added], but is reaffirmed by each of them: each of its qualities is the whole' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 46-48).

Mario Pissara has observed that many of Feni's works 'have two contrasting elements in them. They may have two humans, or two bulls, or two totally different forms [...] There are also quite a number of drawings in which there are two figures pulling in different directions' (cit. in Manganyi 2012: 57).¹⁸ Although Pissara is speaking to that which is depicted, the same can be said for one's physical experience of the scroll, where the dual experience of the physical object reinforces the kinds of tensions described by Pissara in reference to the work's subject. In this way, the use of the term 'scroll' does not only reside in the realm of the historical (which can be kept at arm's length). In its concept, it relies on an embodied relationship with the object and its utility; hence the duality implied by the usage of 'scroll' as both noun and verb.

Merleau-Ponty's (2002) observation that 'the unity of the object *does not lie behind its qualities*, but is reaffirmed by each of them,' (pp. 46-48) finds a parallel in Susan Sontag's (1964) description of the modern style of interpretation, which digs "'behind" the text to find a sub-text which is the true one' (p. 3). Interestingly, she traces the project of interpretation back to 'the culture of late classical antiquity, when the power and credibility of myth had been broken by the "realistic" view of the world introduced by scientific enlightenment' (Sontag 1964: 3). As such, 'interpretation was summoned, to reconcile the ancient texts to "modern" demands' (Sontag 1964: 3). In the process of reconciliation, the interpreter not only 'fames the work of art' by making it 'manageable'—by diluting its capacity to 'make us nervous' (1964: 5)—but substantially alters it, all the while claiming to make it more 'intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning' (Sontag 1964: 3). What becomes apparent here and through the scroll's digitization are a number of assumptions that underpin the

curatorial process of selection and display. As will be shown, these assumptions are particularly charged in the context of the South African university museum, and even more so within the context of Feni's work.

3. The Kingdom of Fantasy

In 1987, Njabulo Ndebele (1987) made the observation that in the context of South African universities, 'the white settlers of this country have insisted on being the human point of reference for all the people of this country' (p. 15). He further wrote that in such contexts, 'change means drawing the oppressed into this culture'—one that he describes as 'sterile' and 'derivative'—and 'making its benefits available to all,' whilst not allowing people 'to bring in "the baggage" of their African experience' (Ndebele 1987: 15).¹⁹ This sentiment has been echoed by Julie McGee (2006), who stresses the importance of 'recasting cultural heritage, rewriting, re-examining, and recontextualising social memory' (pp. 183–184). At the same time, McGee (2006) is concerned with what she terms 'transformation ideology,' understood as an act of window-dressing that enables 'certain belief systems' to 'sustain meaning, values, and thereby dominance [...] [by] creating, documenting, proclaiming, writing, publishing, and speaking—in this case, the language of change' (pp. 183–184).

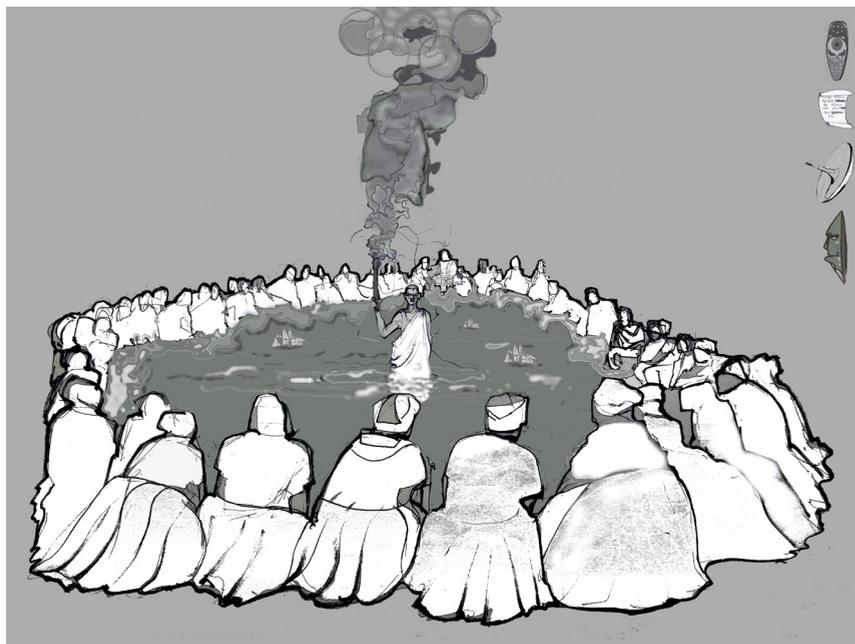


Figure 3. Grant Jurius, *The Kingdom of Fantasy* (2020). Digital drawing, 33.86 × 25.4 cm (courtesy of the artist)

Here, discussions drawn from the field of translation studies are germane to an analysis of Feni's scroll and its (mis)representational exhibition history. Translation and curatorial practice both share a colonial history, are

seen as agents of change, and are often celebrated for their mediatory role (Andreasen and Larsen 2007: 28; Lind 2013: 85).²⁰ Many arguments have been made for the benefits of translation; among them, its ability to bridge cultural barriers and to expand the parameters of the 'target' language (Bassnett 2014: 2). Yet, as Carli Coetzee (2013) highlights, verbal and literary translation is often a one-sided affair that allows for the dominant language to remain the norm, privileging and perpetuating its hegemonic status so that monolingual speakers do not need to learn a different language (p. 3). This perspective is helpful for contexts in which 'do not touch' labels remain the norm; in which artworks that engage a more holistic sensory experience are reduced or contained to a single element—sight.

Olufemi Taiwo (cit. in Okeke-Agulu 2015) has described processes of indirect rule as 'the ignoble science of cryopreserving social forms, arresting them and denying them and those whose social forms they are the opportunity of deciding what, how, and when to keep any other social forms' (p. 23). This description seems applicable to the treatment and display of Feni's scroll. In addition to its digitization, Taiwo's use of the prefix 'cryo-' (meaning to 'put on ice,' as in the science of 'cryogenics') has a particular resonance in relation to the choice to display Feni's scroll in a vitrine. As Nadia Seremetakis (cit. in Young 2014) describes, the historical use of vitrines in the West to display cultural material objects believed to originate from beyond its own praxis creates a scenario in which difference is both 'petrified' and easy to 'consume,' to the extent that:

'items of older periods and other cultures which had their particular aromatic, tactile, and auditory realities were desensualized and permitted a purely visual existence. In this process, vision itself was desensualized and subsequently metaphorized as and reduced to a transparent double of the mind unmediated by any material, spatial and temporal interference. That taming of difference through sensory neutralization fabricated a false historical continuity between past and present through the cover of dust' (p. 178).

This 'false historical continuity' is evident, not only in the display choices in exhibiting Feni's scroll, but in some of the earliest writings on his work, which were widely propagated by white writers during the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of apartheid. Such writing insisted on holding Feni's work at arm's length by objectifying black life in the townships of South Africa. A typical example can be found in the following excerpt by El de Jager, published sometime²¹ between 1971 and 1975:

'Dumile's art is a serious and meaningful commentary on the life of the Black man in South Africa. Township life is a very real experience for many African artists. They feel concern about its hardships, they want to portray it as a reflection of the life of their people and they want to protest against it. Dumile can be justly regarded as one of the founders of the so-called school of Township Art, one of the few really indigenous art movements to come out of South Africa' (De Jager, n.d).

Here, Feni's art is perceived as something that can only be understood from a distance, and only in relation to the experience of black life

in the townships. Proximity is also denied through the use of the pronoun 'they,' which Lize van Robbroeck (2003) points out was often used 'to refer to a generic body of largely unspecified black South African artists,' serving to 'unambiguously [declare] the race of the writer,' and to designate '[such] texts for white consumption' (2003: 173). The emphasis placed upon 'Township Art' as a rare example of 'really indigenous art' also reinforced the belief that South Africa had no artistic heritage of its own (Carman 2006: XVI– XVII; Van Robbroeck 2003: 174).²² This view promoted art (with a capital A) as the sole inheritance of the West: the pinnacle of Enlightenment and modernist ideals of individualism, rationality, and progress (Van Robbroeck 2003: 172). It relied on the construction of an African other that was seen to exist in a temporal vacuum, untouched by the course of history (Van Robbroeck 2003: 177). South African artistic heritages were, thereby, often relegated to the domain of anthropological or ethnographic study, perceived as primitive, irrational, and ahistorical (Van Robbroeck 2003: 173-178). In other words, they served as ontological 'evidence' of the West's cultural superiority and, therefore, as a justification for colonial imperialism and indirect rule. From this perspective, 'contact with the West is seen as the foundation of historicity of different cultures. Once discovered by the Europeans, the Other finally enters the human world' (Trouillot 1995: 114).²³

Van Robbroeck (2003), moreover, observes how Feni's 'tortured existential images' were often 'interpreted as cries for help' (p. 181). She draws on the writing of Francis Verstraete (1989), who interprets the image of a mother and child as an 'image of pathos, a memory of a lost unity,' affirming thus 'the tragic alienation of the "natural African" in the unfamiliar and terrifying urbanised world of the "European"' (cit. in Van Robbroeck 2003: 179). Van Robbroeck (2003) notes how, from the 1930s onwards, this construction of the African other became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the emergence of African cultural modernities (p. 174). She points out how, 'by transgressing the boundaries of cultural territory reserved for Africans in the colonial binary of barbarism and civilisation, the modern black artist brought to the inner circle of European cultural modernity an uncomfortable difference and an even less digestible sameness' (Van Robbroeck 2003: 171). Attempts made to manage or contain the work of black artists 'led to the development of discursive strategies and the invention of numerous taxonomies to deny proximity [...] and to reestablish spatial and temporal distance' (Van Robbroeck 2003: 171). Here, it becomes possible to discern how such discursive strategies were, perhaps unconsciously, mirrored in the display choices for the exhibition of Feni's scroll.

4. The Right to Opacity

Although Feni did not speak all that much about his work, it was not uncommon for him to express his frustration with writers and journalists who sought to contain or package his work. Upon hearing that he had been referred to 'as the founder of the Township Movement in South African art,' Manganyi (2012)

writes that Feni 'was angered to the point of using an expletive,' noting that 'his rejection of this notion was blunt and absolute' (p. 38). As if in response to spurious claims that South Africa had no artistic heritage of its own, he said: 'I do not come from the First, Second, or Third World. I come from an ancient culture' (Feni, cit. in Manganyi 2012: 29). This remark was recorded by a New York-based journalist following an exhibition of Feni's at the United Nations in 1983, which had been organized with funds acquired through the African National Congress (ANC) (Manganyi 2012: 28). Manganyi (2012) makes the important observation that during the 1980s, financial support and opportunities for Feni to exhibit were often mobilized via the anti-apartheid movement (p. 36). While Feni sought to maintain a position for his art that was irreducible to the claims made by art historians, so too did he have to contend with an increasing pressure to produce a particular type of political art. As Manganyi (2012) describes:

'Dumile knew the meaning and value of his art better than any one else. Yet many commentators were unable to resist the temptation to use it as a banner for the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s in the United States. Similarly, some overseas commentators and publicists turned the harassment Dumile had experienced at the hands of the apartheid government into a badge of honour, which, in their eyes, appeared to matter more than his art' (p.26).²⁴



Figure 4. Grant Jurius, *The Right to Opacity* (2020). Digital drawing, 33.86 × 25.4 cm (courtesy of the artist)

In this light, Feni's statement that he does not 'come from' the First, Second, or Third World may evince his resistance to the image of victimization, pain, and suffering, which was also instrumental in some anti-apartheid and nationalist rhetoric (Mbembe 2002: 243). That said, it is clear that Feni felt more aligned with the politics of the time than he did with the art worlds of Johan-

nesburg, London, and New York City (Manganyi 2012: 37). For example, Feni is known to have produced artwork for the ANC, and to have lived in their offices in London (Manganyi 2012). He is also recorded as having said, 'I am ANC' (Feni, cit. in Manganyi 2012: 38). The context of this statement is, however, important; he was addressing a journalist. On other, more intimate occasions, Feni is remembered as someone who would often distance himself from the party. Neo Moikangoa (2012) recalls how, 'on visits to the ANC offices [Feni] made it very clear that he was coming as an uprooted South African and not as a card-carrying member' (p. 113). Similarly, Justice Albie Sachs (2012) writes that '[Feni] made it very clear that he was not aligned. He did not want anybody to feel that they owned him' (p. 129). It thus appears that his responses to questions of affiliation were contextually specific. When questioned by an outsider, he was willing to say 'I am ANC,' yet within the inner circles of the party, or amongst friends, he maintained his independence.²⁵

Others' desire to fix his person and his work to one or other interpretive armature appears to have been a source of continual frustration for Feni: 'Do not ask what the work means! Look at it and it will reach out to you and you may recognise what I was feeling' (Feni, cit. in Manganyi 2012: 40). Although the scroll includes numerous inscriptions, these do not dictate one's understanding of the work. Instead, they often challenge any fixed or singular reading. In addition to those already mentioned, other inscriptions include: 'Victim, you wouldn't know non from nothing for your familiarity is the kingdom of fantasy but then again,' or 'all the writing of intent on this scroll is not meant to be read as poetry for it is not.'²⁶ Interestingly, such lines are often inserted in proximity to larger chunks of writing, which do read very much like poetry.²⁷

To me, this reads as a form of deliberate obfuscation, premised upon an understanding—as has been expressed by Khwezi Gule (2013) in relation to the work of Nicholas Hlobo²⁸—that 'for desire to work, something has to be denied, that a desire fulfilled is also a desire lost.' If so, then this is an important consideration, given the kind of instant gratification that the scroll's digitization enables. 'It is at this very intersection,' continues Gule (2013), 'where things are revealed and things are concealed—whether these things are linguistic or personal biographical details—that the mystery begins.' Here, I am drawn back to Feni's refusal to explain the 'meaning' of his work, his insistence that audiences engage directly with it, and the very literal way in which the physical scroll reveals and conceals itself when handled. With reference to an argument by Thembinkosi Goniwe, Gule (2013) notes that 'reading artworks necessarily involves pleasure. The pleasure of looking, of contemplating, of configuring meaning [...] [T]o rush too quickly into burdening the process of appreciation with politics denies the artwork the very complexity that makes art potentially liberating.' At the same time, he acknowledges that 'hard questions need to be asked: At what point is the biographical handed over to the viewer as something simply to consume, and to what degree is the visual merely a seduction that prevents one from being critical?' (Gule 2013).

Interestingly, many consider the scroll to be autobiographical (Dube 2006; Manganyi 2012: 21, 199).²⁹ I am not going to debate the merits of this

perspective—to my mind, all art is autobiographical—but even if one could say that Feni set out to chronicle his life story in the scroll, a biographical reading still needs to confront the fact that Feni's story is punctuated by 'loud silences' (Manganyi 2012: 54). Feni passed away unexpectedly in New York in 1991. Although the facts of his life have been gradually pieced together through letters and the memories of those who knew him (Dube 2006; Manganyi 2012; Zwelidumile 2009), Feni was not prone to talking about his life and work. As a result, what we do know is deeply embedded in, and stems from, the lives and perspectives of other people. To read the scroll as autobiographical is therefore to read it in relation to what other people have made of his life. The challenge here is trying to ascertain what is of the artist and what is not. After Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), 'How do we decide—and how does the collectivity decide—which events to include and which to exclude?' (p. 16).

I imagine the understanding that the scroll is autobiographical stems, in part, from its various inscriptions, which make reference to people Feni knew and the places he lived in, often in the form of a dedication: 'Patricia / Badsha / Chameleon,' 'Song for my ma,' 'Theme for kuli pepe zaki / Wally moss nzimeni Ndumi my two / mothers,' and 'Amen book for serote pefe mokae and the crusifixion statements.' Many of these names—such as 'Badsha' (presumably Omar Badsha) and 'Wally' (presumably Mongane Wally Serote)—are those of his friends. Although such biographical information is not explicit, one does get a sense of intimacy from the mention of each; the sense that there are stories and private moments that are, at least for me, out of reach. Once again, Feni appears to be addressing two different audiences: one with whom he shares a sense of kinship, and another whom he mistrusts. Here, he offers biographical information, but only insofar as he is willing. In this sense, access is both granted and denied by the artist, depending on the audience's level of familiarity with his biography, or their readiness to listen.³⁰

Speaking with Stacy Hardy (2019, personal communication³¹) about mistrust in Feni's scroll, she highlighted how, during apartheid, many liberation songs made it onto the radio because the authorities 'didn't understand the simple codes that made them liberation songs':

'The way everything worked under apartheid was that you were able to speak in two languages, which the oppressor never was. Things that they could not recognize as [...] subversive were in fact incredibly subversive. So there is a whole language that deliberately excludes a white audience, as you know. [Feni] chooses only to address that when he wants to, but there are layers of complexity that I know I can never understand [...] That's where someone like Édouard Glissant, who says we have a "right to opacity," comes in. It's ok that there are things about each other that we don't understand. That doesn't mean you can't engage.'

5. Conclusion

I am aware that, in speculating about what the artist may or may not have wanted done to his work, or why he chose the particular form of a scroll, I am

making assumptions of my own. For all I know, Feni may have loved the digital version that was later produced. The 'problem', of course, is that we may never know his intentions for it. 'Problem,' because perhaps this is as it should be. In this sense, Roman Krznaric's (2014) empathic twist, 'Do unto others as they would have you do unto them' (p. 59), calls for a less presumptive ear. Given the conflicting narratives that surround the artist's practice, the only reliable evidence as to the artist's intent is the scroll itself: the specificity of his chosen medium, the various inscriptions therein, and the degrees of access that he himself affords. If the digitization of artworks necessitates decisions about 'what should be remembered and forgotten' (Cameron, cit. in Botticelli 2015: 131), then it is worth trying to dwell a little longer on those elements of the scroll that are not so easily parsed; those aspects that refuse a fixed reading, that unravel and ravel, reveal and conceal, thicken and thin; how the work 'takes on flesh'; how it 'becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history' (Bakhtin, cit. in Young 2014: 178). Rather than tip-toeing around the scroll's fragility, scale, and laborious nature, or, for that matter, the lack of personal source materials about it, what scope is there to preserve and celebrate its inherent difficulties? Answering such questions would mean grappling, not just with the object's innate qualities but with the environment it is responding to. It would mean acknowledging the impossibilities of digitization, its perjuries and omissions, whilst recognizing its value as a new text, distinct from the original. In thinking about issues of preservation, access, inclusivity, and representation, perhaps one of the most rewarding exercises would be to imagine an alternate existence for the scroll. In what context would it feel most alive? And how could we access that?

1. Charlton J (2020, February 6) Personal communication, e-mail, 'Feni's scroll_Acquisition query.'
2. Although the exact date has been contested, most sources suggest that Dumile Feni was born in 1942 in Worcester, South Africa. He passed away unexpectedly whilst living in New York City, in 1991. By then, he had been in exile for some 23 years, having left South Africa in 1968 for London, following increased harassment from the apartheid police. It is presumed that he began working on the scroll in London, but that he continued to work on it after his move to the United States in 1977 (see endnote 7).
3. Leyde L (2019, February 20) Personal communication, face-to-face interview, *Activate/Captivate*.
4. The section of the scroll that was visible changed each day (Leyde 2019, personal communication).
5. Leyde L (2019, February 20) Personal communication, face-to-face interview, *Activate/Captivate*.
6. My sincere thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer who suggested I read Botticelli's paper.

7. The title attributed to the scroll in both the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* catalogue and in WAM's records—*You wouldn't know God if he spat in your eye* (Dube 2006)—was chosen by Grosvenor Gallery's Conor Macklin, based on an inscription found therein (Macklin, personal communication). Both also date the scroll to 1975. The implication is that Feni finished making the scroll whilst he was living in London, yet there are some inscriptions—such as 'Crusifixionz at skid row' or 'In respect of the people out in places like skid row put there by governments'—which suggest he worked on it during his tenure at the University of California in 1977 (Manganyi 2012: 23). There is also evidence to suggest that he continued working on it in New York City during the 1980s. Moeletsi Mbeki, for example, remembers Feni preparing for an exhibition at the United Nations (New York City) in 1983. One of the works he saw was the scroll, which Feni 'had brought with him from London. Bulky as it was, he carried it around and was always adding to it' (Manganyi 2012: 108). Barbara Masekela tells a similar story, highlighting how *The Scroll* meant everything to him. He worked on it in London before he went to the United States and was always adding to it. In a way, *The Scroll* was a medium of inspiration for different pieces that he worked on later. As he worked on *The Scroll* he would think ahead of a sculpture' (Manganyi 2012: 101). Although it is by no means uncommon for dates to be wrong, such inaccuracies can affect how the work is understood. This is evident by the scroll's inclusion in a temporally- and geographically-specific section of the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* (2005), namely the 'London period: 1968–1976' (Dube 2006). Here, the potential for the scroll to be read in relation to work Feni produced later, when in the United States, is foreclosed. This is relevant in light of Masekela's observation that the scroll had functioned as a sound-ing board for other works produced in the 1980s.
8. Chabani Manganyi's *The Beauty of The Line: Life and times of Dumile Feni* (2012) includes a number of insightful accounts by the likes of Moeletsi Mbeki, Barbara Masekela, Joe Overstreet, Morley Nkosi, and Louis Maqhubela, all of whom saw the scroll at one point or another while visiting the artist. Aside from the descriptions found in Manganyi's book, very little has been written on the subject.
9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) draws an important distinction between 'representation'—defined as "'speaking for," as in politics'—and the idea of representation as it is often applied 'in art or philosophy,' namely, to 're-present.' She highlights the dangers of conflating the two, pointing out that in writing about the subaltern subject, the theorist, despite attempts to the contrary, 'does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group' (Spivak 1999: 28).
10. Charlton J (2020a, August 18) Personal communication, e-mail, 'Research Article_Garage Journal_Comments and Image Request.'
11. Rather than attempting to document the work on display, the publication aimed to contextualize the project itself.
12. In 2011, similarly described grants were awarded to the University of Virginia (\$315,000), the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum of Art

- and Archaeology (\$1,100,000), the University of Michigan (\$650,000), and Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (\$500,000). Of the 43 institutions that secured grants in 2011 under the subcategory of 'Art History, Conservation, and Museums,' which allocated a total of \$25,740,756 to all recipients, only four (including WAM) were located outside of the United States (The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2011: 85–91).
13. In addition to the broader imperatives of the grant, the drive for accessibility at WAM can be attributed to the fact that between 2002 and 2012, the university's collection lacked a permanent exhibition space. 'Well aware of the underexposure that had been the fate of many of the holdings at the time,' it was only natural to 'actively pursue the *Collections Re-engagement Project* upon reopening' (De Becker and Nettleton 2015: 3).
 14. Leyde L (2020, February 20) Personal communication, face-to-face interview, *Activate/Captivate*.
 15. Bristow T (2020, February 26) Personal communication, WhatsApp call, digitizing Feni's scroll.
 16. Repetition is common to much of Feni's work. Feni not only repeated things within the same work, but carried over motifs and figurations from one work to the next, across forms.
 17. That the physical scroll supports a reading in both directions is important, not only for our understanding of the scroll, but of Feni's work more broadly. His bronze sculpture, *History* (2003), installed outside South Africa's Constitutional Court, serves as a clear example. *History* depicts a man on all fours, pulling a cart strapped to his waist. Although static, his body is stretched from the waist up, straining against the weight of the cart and its three occupants, a man and a woman—themselves seated back to back (i.e., in opposite directions)—atop another woman, who, similarly, bears their weight.
 18. In a 1968 interview with Barney Simon, Feni made a similar point: 'Art historians are like preachers. They say this happened then and that happened then and this is what these people say and that is what those people say. And when you go along after church and say "What do you yourself think?" and he says "Get out of here you ruffian!" and he would like to have you locked away' (cit. in Nettleton 2011: 8).
 19. Sontag (1964) also draws a direct connection between the modern, excavatory style of interpretation and the task of translation (p. 3). This comparison is helpful because, despite the fact that translation requires interpretation, translations are often thought to be more objective, yet translation is not a simple transfer of a text from one language to another; it requires an act of 'rewriting' (Grossman 2010: 7), and it is this presumed objectivity which is detrimental to a deeper engagement with Feni's work.
 20. The text includes a list of various exhibitions in which Feni's work was shown, the most recent of which is dated 1971. The next time that Feni exhibited work was at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, in 1975, so I am assuming that de Jager's text was written sometime between these two dates.
 21. A typical example can be found in the 1910 catalogue of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), in which the Anglo-Irish art dealer Hugh Lane articulates

his intention to establish 'a *representative* collection of Modern Art for South Africa' (Carman 2006: XVI), one which might appeal to those 'who favour the development of art and the cultivation of a spirit of enlightenment and refinement' (Carman 2006: 153). Lane goes on to mention 'several important gaps to be filled up before the collection may be considered representative' (Carman 2006: XVI-XVII). At the time, such 'gaps' were exclusive to artists like Courbet, Manet, Renoir, Degas, and Whistler, 'to name but a few that must still be gathered' (Carman 2006: XVI-XVII). The Eurocentrism of JAG's founding collection—typical of most, if not all, of South Africa's public museums (Tietze 2017: 25)—can be understood as part of a 'grand social-engineering plan [that] sought to encourage a particular type of settler to Johannesburg, to regulate their social lives and to assert the superiority of British culture' (Carman 2006: 55).

22. The language of discovery is also evident in the many accounts of how Feni was 'discovered' by a matron while receiving treatment for tuberculosis in Johannesburg.
23. Feni's art had drawn a lot of attention following the success of his first solo exhibition at Gallery 101 in Johannesburg in 1966 (Manganyi 2012: 14). This attention was something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Feni was making money from his work. On the other, his increased visibility made him a target for the apartheid police, who saw him as 'a political agitator masquerading as an artist' and attempted to weaponize his contravention of the Urban Areas Act (Manganyi 2012: 14). Faced with 'the nightmarish prospect of internal exile to some rural homeland in the Eastern Cape' (Manganyi 2012: 14), Feni left South Africa for London in 1968, leaving behind his friends and family—including his wife and unborn child. Years later, reflecting on the harassment that he had experienced, Feni emphasized that his work had struck a chord with the authorities, in particular the works' titles and his open celebration of figures such as Albert Luthuli (Manganyi 2012: 14), who was president of the (then banned) ANC, from 1952 until his passing in 1967 (Vinson 2019).
24. Carli Coetzee's (2013) reading of a text by the academic Tlhalo Raditlhalo is helpful in this regard. In the text, Raditlhalo recalls an awkward experience with a colleague following a lecture he had given on the work of Professor Es'kia Mphahlele, during a seminar in 2004 at the University of Cape Town—an 'English department of an English language university' (Coetzee 2013: 47). In her analysis, Coetzee (2013) describes the context of the seminar room, which is 'shown to be home, and also not home, to his argument' (p. 46), before highlighting how, through the use of the untranslated word 'ntate' (a term of respect), Raditlhalo 'places Mphahlele's worth outside English, and beyond the reaches of the room,' thus highlighting his affiliation to his subject and not his colleagues, whilst betraying 'a suspicion that he will not be heard in the way he wants to be—or at least he wants to foreground this possibility' (Coetzee 2013: 46).
25. Such inscriptions are usually included along the base of the scroll. However, words such as 'Children,' 'Solitude,' 'Sacred Freedom,' and 'Body and

- Soul' are occasionally included in other areas, floating between different figurations.
26. Respectively: 'My understanding for the / Analyses / In familiarity conversation / At the university of life / And your monstrous precious love / And other intelligent themes / Of nature / For you dear child,' and 'Re-enactment of the Verwoed killing / Between gentle straddled loins of the soft wound or my child / Glitter from the ancient rainbow beckoning your freedom / Showing through the glow and touching of toes / As she magnified in multitude glide by / With the severed head of a shouting man / Precarious ballanced on a silver tray / covered in a blister of coal.'
 27. Nicholas Hlobo (b. 1975) is a South African artist. For more information on his work, see Stevenson 2020. Nicholas Hlobo, *Stevenson*, <https://www.stevenson.info/artist/nicholas-hlobo/texts> (11.25.2020).
 28. Omar Badsha, Louis Maqhubela, and Morley Nkosi have all expressed the idea that the work is autobiographic (Manganyi 2012). It was also listed as such in the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* catalog produced by JAG (Dube 2006).
 29. This is a nod to Lawrence Abu Hamdan's performance lecture, *Contra Diction: Speech Against Itself* (2016), which talks about 'an old piece of Islamic jurisprudence' known as *taqiyya*, which 'allows a believing individual to deny his faith or commit otherwise illegal acts while they are at risk of persecution or in a condition of statelessness' (Hamdan 2016). *Taqiyya* 'means you speak to people on the level of the other's readiness to listen' (Hamdan 2016).
 30. Hardy S (2020, January 15) Personal communication, WhatsApp call.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Grant Jurius for supplying original artworks for this article.

Bibliography

1. Andreasen S and Larsen L B (2007) The middleman: Beginning to talk about mediation. In O'Neil P (ed), *Curating Subjects*. Amsterdam, de Appel: 20–30.
2. Bassnett S (2014) *Translation*. London and New York, NY, Routledge.
3. Botticelli P (2013) Preserving artworks digitally: The case of Andy Warhol's Polaroid photographs. *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture*, 44(3): 123–134.
4. Carman J (2006) *Uplifting the Colonial Philistine: Florence Phillips and the Making of the Johannesburg Art Gallery*. Johannesburg, Wits University Press.
5. Coetzee C (2013) *Accented Futures: Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid*. Johannesburg, Wits University Press.
6. De Becker L and Nettleton A (2015) Engaging collections and collections

- engagement at Wits Art Museum. In: De Becker L and Nettleton A (eds), *Activate/Captivate: Collections Re-Engagement at Wits Art Museum*. Johannesburg, Wits University Press: 1–13.
7. De Becker L and Nettleton A (2015a) Acknowledgements. In: De Becker L and Nettleton A (eds), *Activate/Captivate: Collections re-engagement at Wits Art Museum*. Johannesburg, Wits University Press: 1–13.
 8. De Jager EJ (n.d.) Fort Hare Papers. Johannesburg Art Gallery archives.
 9. Dube PM (2006) *Dumile Feni Retrospective*. Johannesburg, Johannesburg Art Gallery.
 10. Ealey P (2013) What about responsibility? In Hoffmann J (ed), *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*. Milan, Mousse Publishing: 113–119.
 11. Grossman E (2010) *Why Translation Matters*. New Haven, CT and London, Yale University Press.
 12. Gule K (2013, May 17) Nicholas Hlobo: Master of mystery goes bland. *Mail&Guardian*, <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-17-00-nicholas-hlobo-master-of-mystery-goes-bland> (08.17.2020).
 13. Krznicaric R (2014) *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*. London, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg, Rider Books.
 14. Lind M (2013) Why mediate art? In: Hoffmann J (ed), *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*. Milan, Mousse Publishing: 85–91.
 15. Manganyi C (2012) *The beauty of the line: Life and times of Dumile Feni*. Johannesburg, KMM Review Publishing Company.
 16. Mbembe A (2002) African modes of self-writing. In: *Public Culture*, 14(1): 239–273.
 17. Merleau-Ponty M (2002) Exploring the world of perception: Sensory objects. In: Merleau-Ponty M, (trans) Davis O, *The World of Perception*. London and New York, Routledge: 46–48.
 18. McGee J (2006) Restructuring South African museums: Reality and rhetoric in Cape Town. In: Marstine J (ed), *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing: 178–199.
 19. Ndebele N (2007/1987) Good morning, South Africa: Whose universities, whose standards? In: Ndebele N and Raditlhalo T (eds) (2007) *Fine Lines from the Box: further thoughts about our country*. Cape Town, Umuzi: 13–18.
 20. Nettleton A (2011) Writing artists into history: Dumile Feni and the South African canon. In: *African Arts*, 44(1): 8–25.
 21. Online Etymology Dictionary (2020) To include (v), <https://www.etymonline.com/word/include> (17.08.2020).
 22. Sachs A (2012) Albie Sachs. In: Manganyi C (ed), *The beauty of the line: Life and times of Dumile Feni*. Johannesburg, KMM Review Publishing Company.
 23. Sontag S (1964) *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. London, Picador.
 24. Spivak GC (2006/1999) Can the subaltern speak? In: Ashcroft B, Griffiths G and Tiffin, H (eds), (2006) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Second Edition). London and New York, Routledge: 28–37.
 25. Steyerl H (2012) *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin, Sternberg Press.
 26. Suleman R (2009) *Zwelidumile*. Johannesburg, Natives at Large. DVD, 115mins.
 27. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (2011) The Andrew W. Mellon Founda-

- tion: Report from January 1, 2011 through December 31, 2011. *The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation*, https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/f2/2c/f22ced-dd-5788-414a-8aee-7b580de5f494/2011.pdf (10.04.2020).
28. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (2020) Art History, Conservation, and Museums. *The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation*, <https://mellon.org/programs/arts-and-culture/art-history-conservation-museums> (10.04.2020).
 29. Tietze A (2017) *A History of the Iziko South African National Gallery: Reflections on art and national identity*. Cape Town, UCT Press.
 30. Trouillot MR (1995) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, MA, Beacon Press.
 31. Ultraleap (2019, December 15) Ultraleap: Leap Motion Controller datasheet. *Ultraleap*, https://www.ultraleap.com/datasheets/Leap_Motion_Controller_Datasheet.pdf (03.02.2020).
 32. Van Robbroeck L (2003) Writing white on black: Identity and difference in South African art writing of the twentieth century. *Third Text*, 17(2): 171–182.
 33. Vinson RT (2019, January 1) Albert Luthuli, MLK and global human rights. *Africa Is a Country*, <https://africasacountry.com/2019/01/albert-luthuli-martin-luther-king-jr-and-global-human-rights> (10.10.2020).
 34. Young K (2014) Aesthetic ecologies: Reflections on what makes artefacts art. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 51(2): 177–198.
 35. Younge G (2008) Book reviews: *Dumile Feni retrospective*—Johannesburg Art Gallery. *Academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/1362506/Dumile_Feni_Retrospective (10.10.2020).

Author's bio

Sven Christian is an independent writer, editor, and curator. He was the organizing curator of the inaugural iteration of *Publishing Against the Grain*, a travelling exhibition conceived and produced by ICI, New York City, which opened at Zeitz MOCAA in 2017. He is the editor of Ashraf Jamal's forthcoming book, *Strange Cargo: Essays on Art* (2021), co-editor of *Why Should I Hesitate: Putting Drawings to Work* (2019), and co-editor of *Five Bhobh: Painting at the End of an Era* (2018). In 2019, he completed an MA in Contemporary Curatorial Practices at the University of the Witwatersrand, which focused on the curation of Dumile Feni's scroll. The accompanying project was published by *Ellipses: Journal of Creative Research* and can be found on their website, <http://www.ellipses.org.za>.

E-mail: no.ism.no.skism@gmail.com.

ORCID: 0000-0003-1875-302X.

ISSN-2633-4534

thegaragejournal.org