



# Site, Materiality and Ritual

Constructively engaging with death and loss

Adelheid von Maltitz



*Window (2018)* Cover image.

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Faculty of the  
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History and Image Studies, with the title:

# Site, Materiality and Ritual

Constructively engaging with death and loss

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Exhibited at Oliewenhuis Art Museum  
13 May - 18 June 2021

# Introduction

For me, making sculpture and installation art involves processes that allow me to think and work through personal anxieties regarding the trauma of loss and death. My interest in how my art-making processes are comparable to conventional historical, as well as contemporary rituals which engage with death and loss, was sparked when I observed (what looked like) a mother and sister continually, over months, rebuild and maintain a roadside shrine which I pass regularly on my daily commute. By initially examining the nature of roadside shrines in relation to my own art-making processes, I realised that the roadside shrine and the mourning rituals associated with it could be investigated as a heuristic device with which to tease out questions related to my studio research. I was struck by the similarities in the ways in which death and loss may be engaged with constructively and in a healing manner, in art. The similarities that emerged are related to aspects of site, materiality and ritual. I was stimulated to examine art-making concerned with trauma and loss and with memorialisation and mourning practices, according to these three categories in historical and contemporary examples in order to illuminate my research questions.

I consider most of the materials I use in my artworks as site-specific, either directly collected from a site of trauma and loss or attempting to reference that site. These site-specific materials include earth, cremated bones, hair, nail clippings, breastmilk and lint. The use of resin and Plexiglas is primarily to support these materials, and they also contribute meanings through their own material characteristics. I think of these site-specific materials as imbued with meaning; I imagine the materials I use, for example earth from Nazi concentration camps in Poland (the country where my grandfather was born) to have “witnessed” that trauma and loss. I further develop this imaginative thinking by means of particular processes when either re-working collected materials or creating new meaningfully imbued materials. These processes become ritual-like due to the structure I impose on the way I collect and re-work the materials into my artworks. The ritualised actions of, for example, repetitive procedures of scattering, sprinkling, burning, pouring and grinding, and my working in specific places or at specific times, are all evocative. Moreover, these repetitive, place- or time-specific actions are enlivened by personal imaginative processes.

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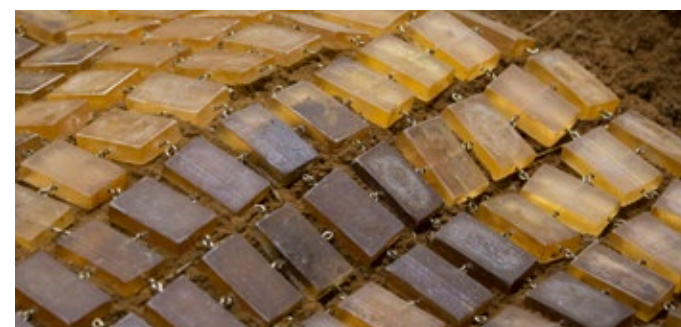
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*Installation images (2021).* Oliewenhuis Art Museum





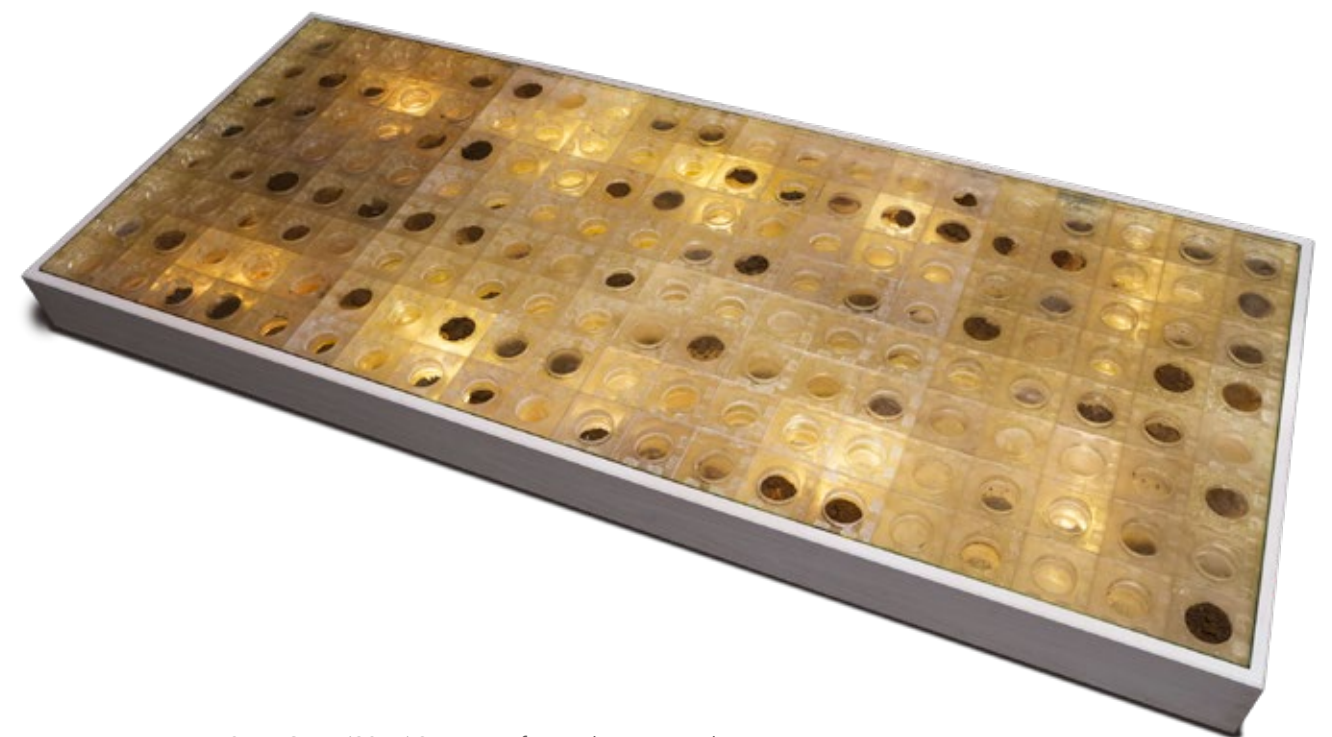
1. *(R)evisit, rebu(l)ld, re(P)eat* (2013). Site-specific earth, ash and resin.  
2540mm X 3800mm 135mm.

From the onset of producing my oeuvre, I would collect materials, such as earth, from meaningful sites and carry them across the thresholds of my studio space and those of galleries, thus artistically transforming them. In my work *(R)evisit, rebu(l)ld, re(P)eat* (Figure 1) each of the suggested figures in the resin sheets were made from earth sourced from roadside shrines in Bloemfontein. The same holds for the earth samples in my work *Sites* (Figure 2). This physical carrying of materials across thresholds from significant places, was augmented by imaginative movements across my own inner thresholds of anxiety. It became apparent to me that I was moving material objects to make sense of my own anxieties and fears.





The transfer of meaningful materials between significant places is for me a form of translation that produces transitory images within my imagination and body. Translation (from the word *trans-latio*) literally means to “carry across”, or “bring across” (Harper 2021). “Meaning” in a conceptual sense is transferred in language translation, but I have learnt that “meaning” as and within a material object is also transferred during rituals of mourning, memorialisation, and during art-making processes. Transference during mourning processes is an old idea.



2. *Sites (2016)* Site-specific earth, resin and mirrors.  
8350mm X 2020mm X 130mm.

The Old English origins of the word ferry come from *ferian*, “to carry, bring”, and is related to the Old Norse *ferja* which is “to transport”. It is interesting to note that the predominantly early use of the word *ferry* is in Greek mythology where, “Charon the ferryman carried the souls of the dead across the River Styx” (Britannica.com 2021). Even in contemporary mourning practices, it is very common to transfer either a corpse or cremated remains to a significant place.





3. *Coordinates (2019)* Site-specific earth, bone ash, hair, Plexiglas and resin.  
1080mm X 1990mm X 440mm.

In my work *Coordinates* (Figure 3), not only did I source and use site-specific earth, but I further considered how the knowledge about site-specificity, which imbues the earth with meaning for me, could be beneficial, soothing or healing for a viewer in a gallery as well. Each of the site-specific samples of earth is labeled with GPS coordinates. When it becomes apparent to the viewer that the object (earth) being looked at is cut from a background, and the object becomes differentiated from that background within the viewer's imagination, this is the moment when a picture looks back at the viewer.



Gottfried Boehm (2009) elaborates on this event of the image. It is therefore relevant to me that the carrying across a threshold, which brings about an image event in my body and imagination, be made available to viewers in the gallery. The event of an object or a material becoming an image will always be idiosyncratic, and what I experience when moving site-specific materials will differ greatly from what a viewer experiences when becoming aware of these types of movements. The differences facilitate cascades of new image events.





4. *Roadside* (2015) Sourced earth, wooden crosses.  
Dimensions variable.

In this earlier experimental work, *Roadside* (Figure 4), I explored the transference of materials between significant places in the everyday public domain, rather than to institutionalised places such as the gallery or the cemetery. I did this in order to investigate the ways in which places affect our ways of seeing, over and above the ways in which materials and the processes affect our viewing. When we move meaningful materials or objects between significant places, we may change the way that we look at them. The museum as an institutional site produces a specific way of seeing; Svetlana Alpers (1991: 27) describes this as the “museum effect”, which enables “attentive looking”.

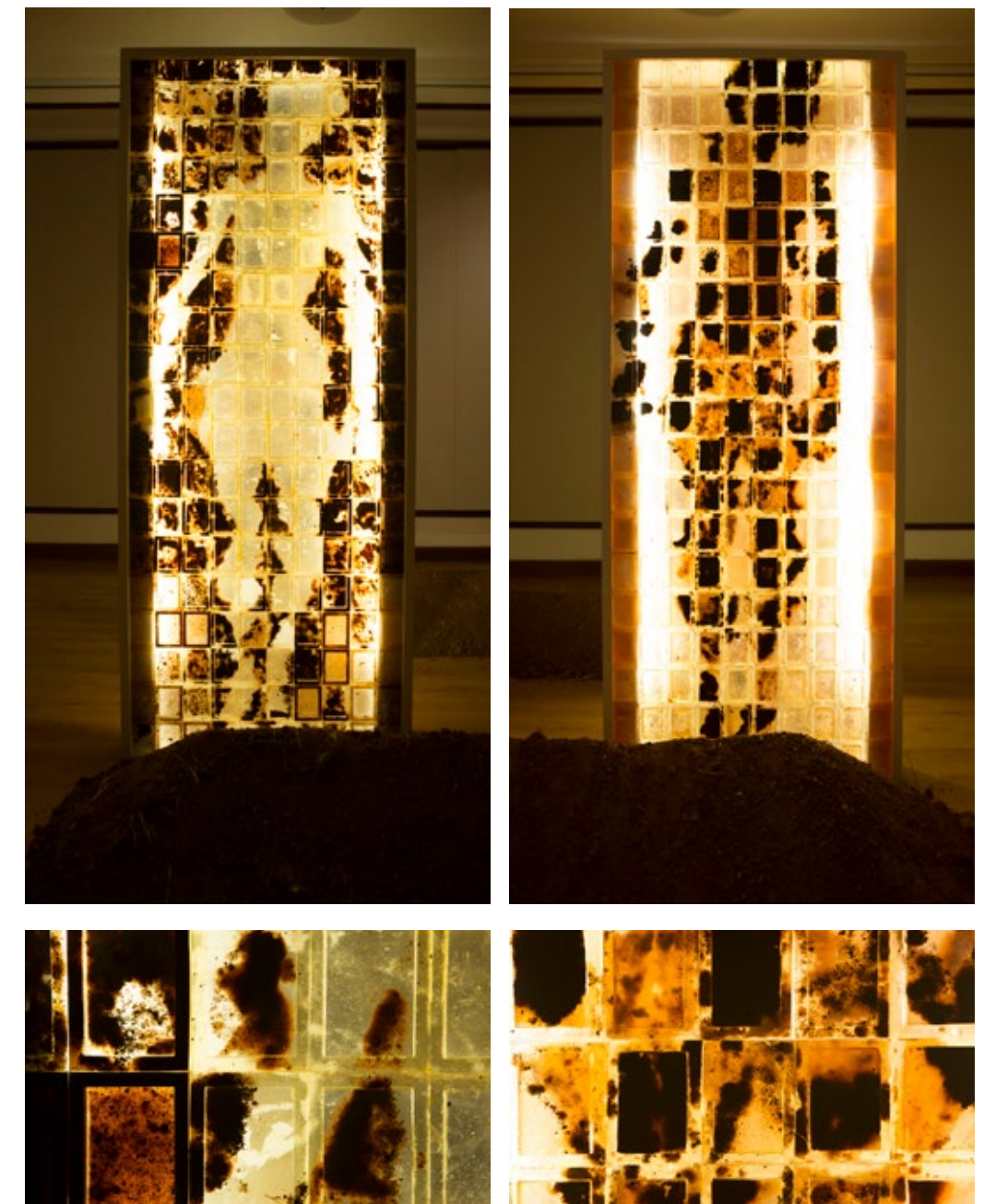
Similarly, I would argue, other institutionalised sites such as cemeteries or memorials also change the way we look at objects and materials transferred there. Contemporary mourning rituals involving the roadside shrine, however, contradict the need to have an institutionalised site, to bring about a way of looking. The roadside shrine is ambiguously a private place within the public domain, and a sacred place within everyday reality (Collins 2010: 107, Mchunu 2020). Similarly, at times, site-specific artworks channel an embodied way of looking that is independent of institutionalised sites. This way of looking could be enhanced or even surpassed by imagined threshold qualities which are opened up by material transfers.





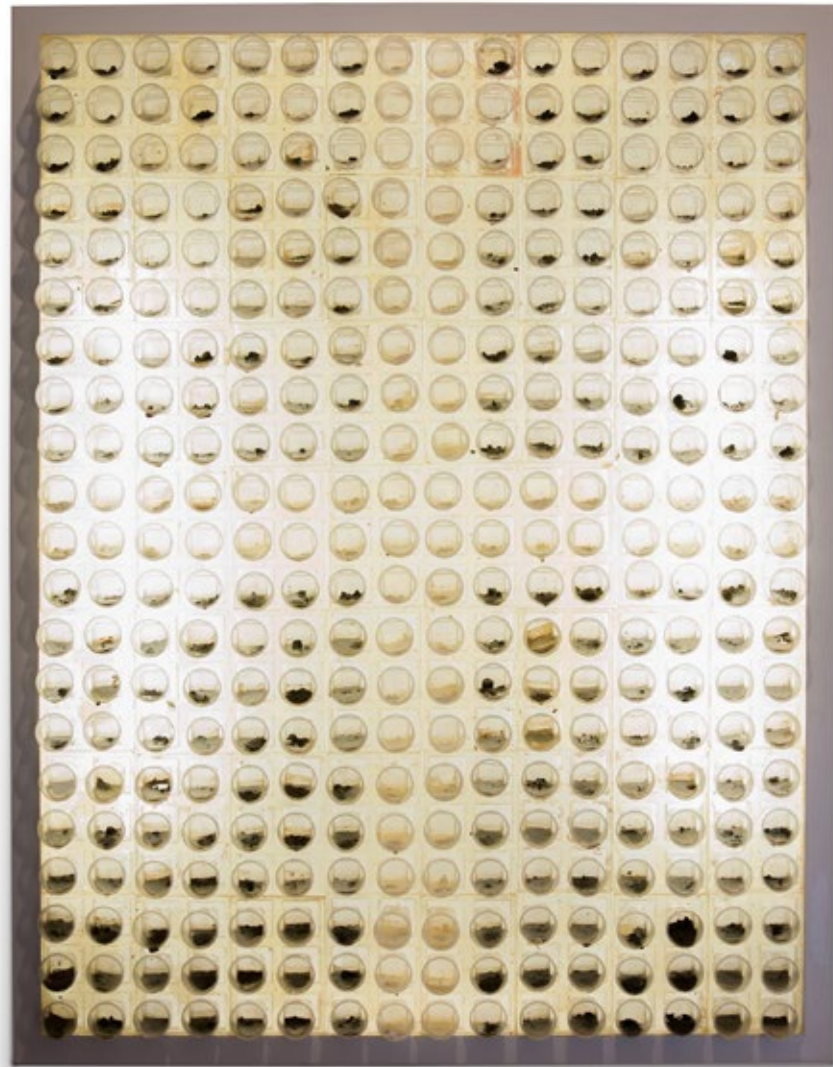
5. *Bodies* (2014) Site-specific earth, ash and resin.  
2650mm X 1950mm X 1895mm.

In my work *Bodies* (Figure 5), the role of the body in facilitating both physical and imaginary movements among sites is suggested. The body serves as a fixed, yet mobile location where image production in the imagination occurs. The body in its own right, in Hans Belting's description of *An Anthropology of Images* (2011), is also a site and only at this site can images actually be generated and recognised. These images are not permanent; we do not know where they come from or where they go when they are forgotten, or where they return from if they are remembered. As such, they are "transitory images" (Belting 2011:37).



These images "process personal meaning for us" and thereby "compensate for their lack of permanence" (Belting 2011:38). Transitory images in the body are not restricted and, possibly for this reason, could support making literal and metaphorical connections, especially in terms of crossing thresholds.



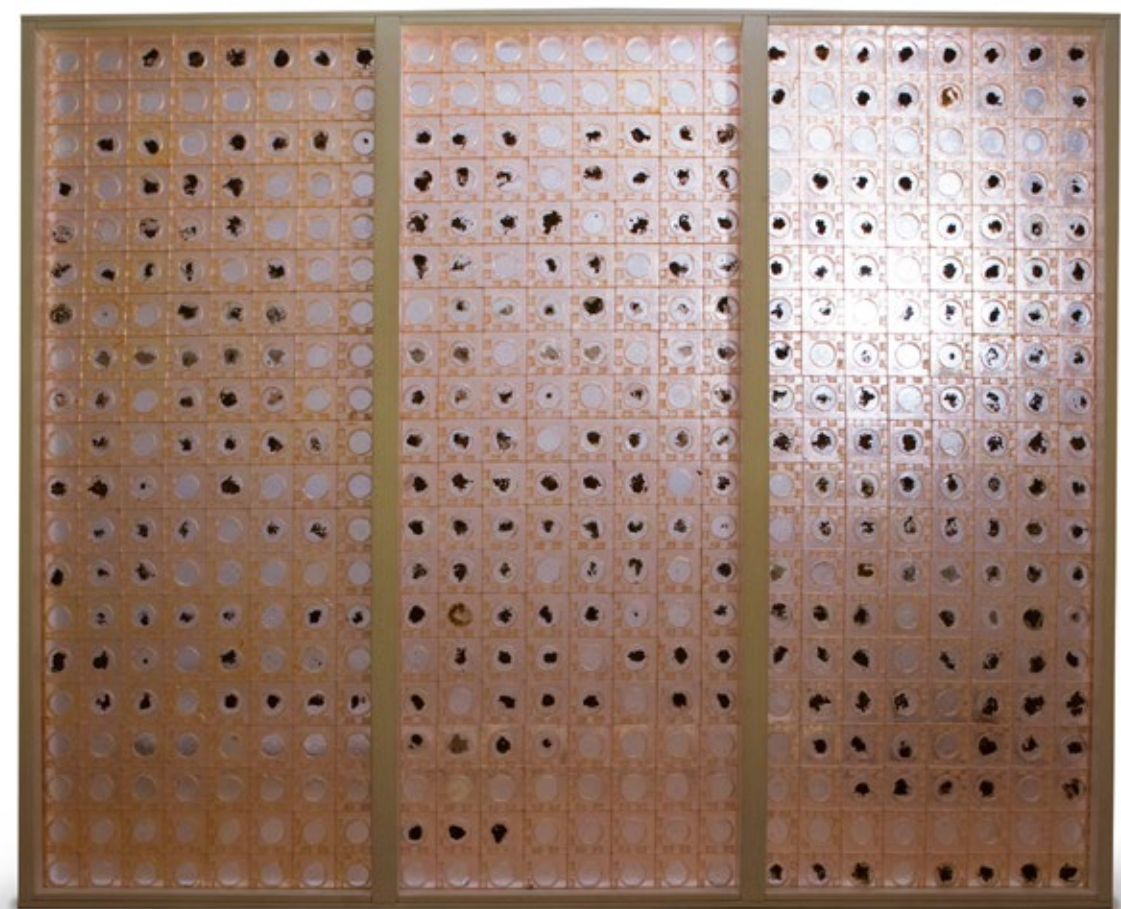


6. *Window (2018)* Site-specific earth, bone ash, resin and sample bottles.  
690mm X 885mm 145mm.



The “edge” between life and death is experienced as changeable because it is not a physical edge, such as the edge of a place, but rather a “psychical edge” (Casey 2017: 236). In both the works *Window* (Figure 6) and *Screen* (Figure 7), I explore the idea of psychical edges as especially relevant and necessary, but also as challenged and changed, when engaging with the trauma of death. These types of edges, which are within the imagination and the psyche, are directly related to self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, according to Davies (2017: 4), is the reason why “death is perceived as a challenge”.





7. *Screen* (2017) Site-specific earth and resin.  
2480mm X 2015mm 135mm.

Windows and screens are edges or thresholds between places; edges that one cannot walk through, but one can, at times, see through. To see through an edge, if it is a psychically charged imaginative edge, is a way of going through that threshold, as there is no bodily restriction.



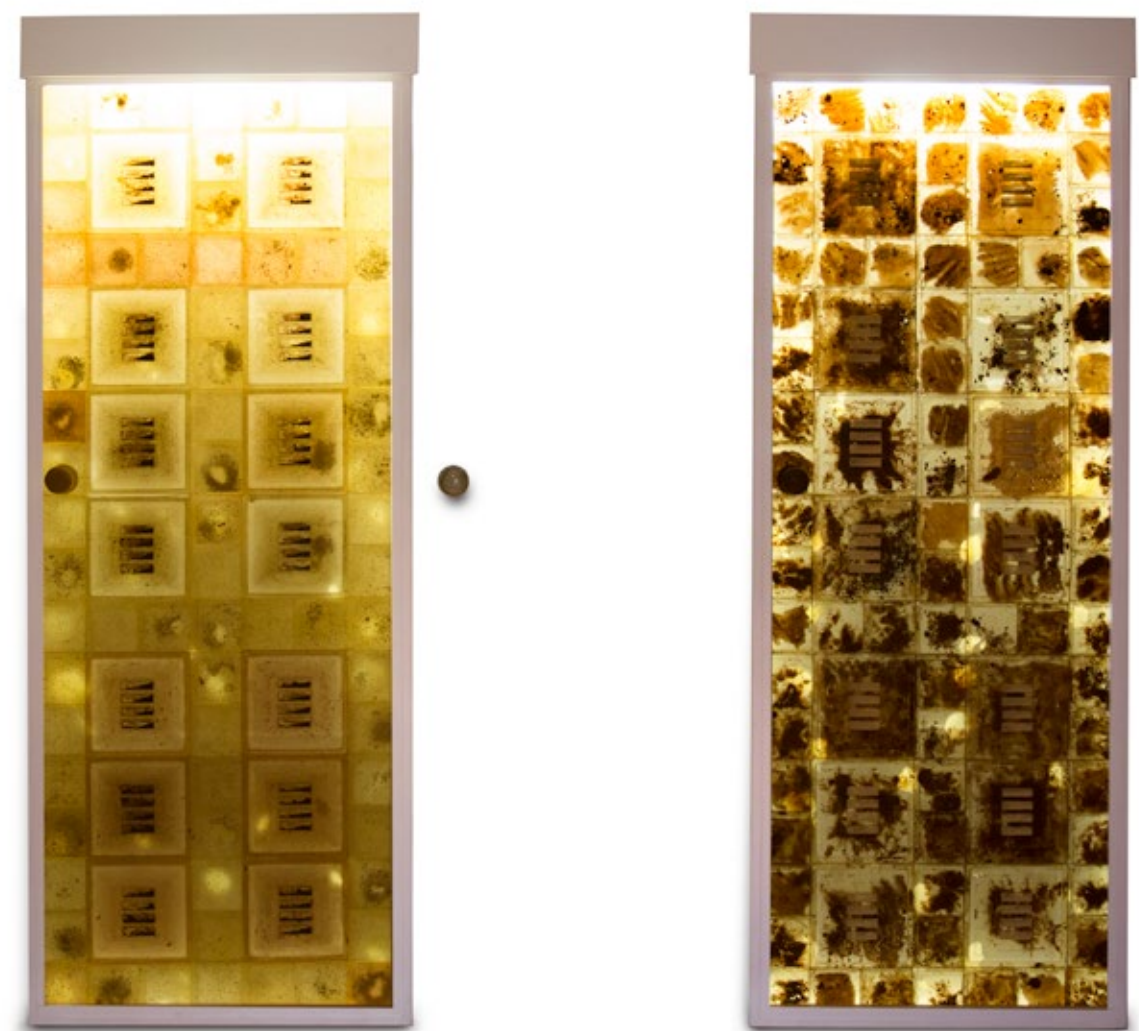


Cremated bone ash is seen in my work *Invisible threshold* (Figure 8) and to a lesser extent in other works, *Coordinates*, *Cleansing*, *Window*, *Entombed and Cleansing/Entombing* (Figures 3, 11, 6, 14, 16). Cremated bone ash is a material by means of which I explore the contradiction of avoiding and confronting death in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. The cremation of human remains often entails fewer rituals and formalities, and mostly lacks a permanent final location. As such, Philippe Aries already in 1975, in his discussion of Western attitudes towards death from the Middle Ages to the present, explains cremation as the ultimate modern way of avoiding death. This avoidance of death is the outstanding characteristic whereby Aries defines the “Forbidden Death period”, which for him commenced in the 19th century, when hospitals became commonplace. During these modern times, the ideal emotional state is to be happy at all times and because death

and dying are sorrowful and ugly, the best way to deal with it is by denial (Aries 1975). As the place of death changed from being mostly at home to being mostly in hospital, those who were typically involved at the time of death also changed. Family and friends were replaced by medical staff, and as such, contact with a corpse has become unusual for those of us who are not in the medical or mortuary profession. However, while the materiality of cremated remains may signal a desire to avoid the face of death, it also aids in shaping an abstract image of death, which is then personally imagined. Cremated remains,

whether human or animal, is a material that shows exceptional endurance in the face of destruction by fire or heat. Bone ash, unlike bones or a body, is unidentifiable as a specific kind of bodily object. Instead, it is more easily explained as a material consisting of dry calcium phosphate particles. The cremated bone ash of a specific body will look more or less the same as that of any other body, if cremated and processed in the same way. However, even if the enduring, yet unidentifiable quality of cremated bone ash may point to avoidance, I suggest that because cremated bone ash is also an indestructible material,

the edge between life and death is imagined and challenged to a greater extent in modern times. When I contemplate the urn that contained the ashes of my great-grandmother, which was kept inside a special cupboard in my childhood home, I recall that I was able to imaginatively interrelate her past living body with that of the cremated ashes in the present. In this way, cremated remains and the qualities of this material as enduring and silent, interrelate sites imaginatively across time and space and across thresholds in the imagination.



8. *Invisible threshold* (2019) Site-specific earth, bone ash, resin and Plexiglas.  
2215mm X 1910mm X 145mm.





9. *Lint I (2018)* Lint and Plexiglas.  
890mm X 2055mm X 200mm.

10. *Lint II (2018)* Lint and Plexiglas.  
890mm X 870mm X 200mm.

The soft consistency of lint in my works *Lint I*, *Lint II*, *Washing* and *Cleansing* (Figures 9, 10, 11), suggests muffled and subdued sounds. Lint, while being especially fragile, is nonetheless a material that also speaks of survival. Lint, as a byproduct of tumble-drying clothing, is unlike the earth samples I had been collecting, and rather site-specific to my home and family. I started exploring lint after the birth of my second daughter when I felt especially “broken” from childbirth. During that time, I felt physical loss while simultaneously experiencing the fulfillment of having a new baby and family member. Similar to cremated bone ash, lint is a material made up of particles that have endured a process of heat.



The gentle material texture of lint is more apparent than the robust quality of the diverse particles of which it consists, such as textile fibers, hairs, skin cells, plant fibers and dust – particles that seem to be resistant and imperishable, yet hidden in the fragile material quality itself. Lint is able to suggest the body and its precarious indestructibility, not by being an object but through its material qualities. For example, I imagine the hair, nails and skin cells of my family as being part of the lint and I further imagine the textile fibers that make up the lint as once having been part of that which forms a protective, soft and warm layer against the skins of my family members.





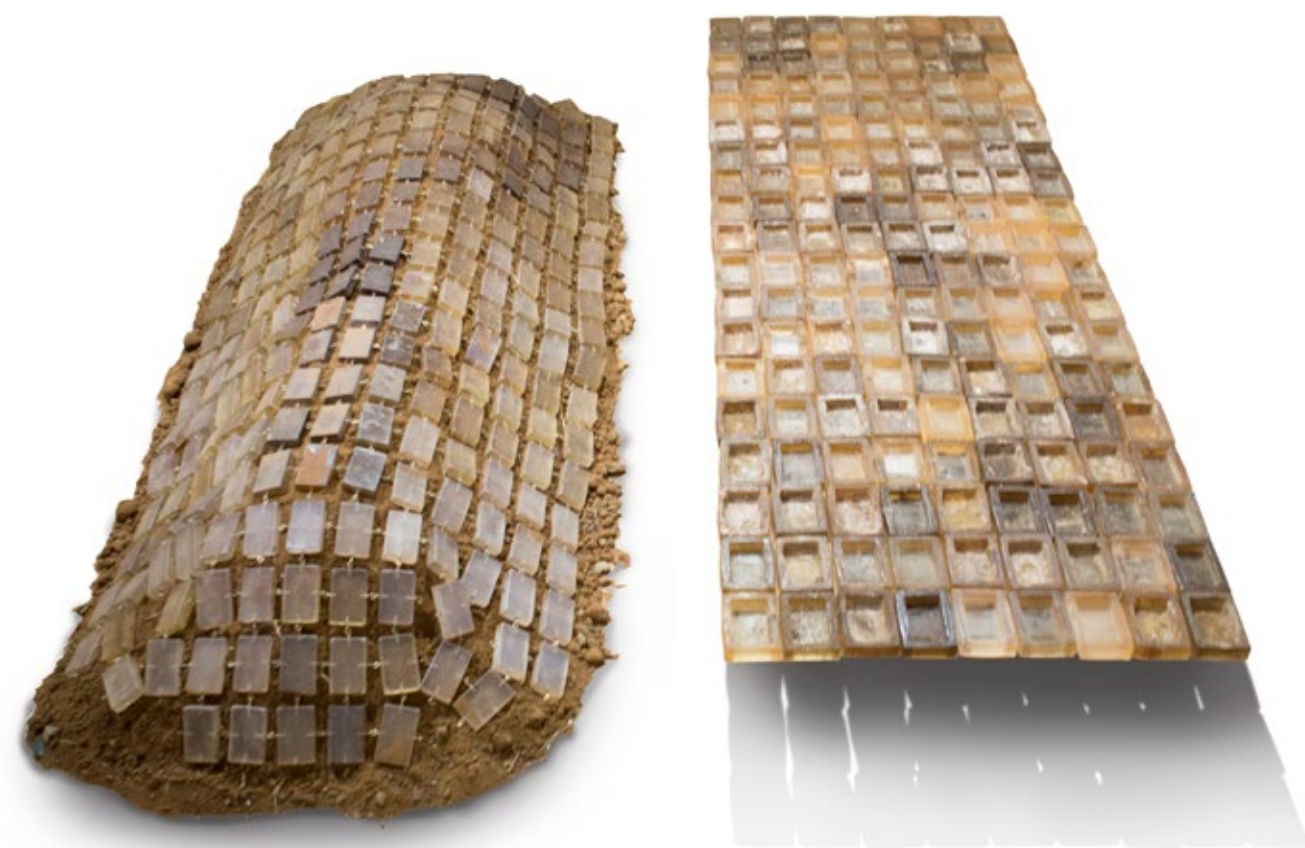
11. *Cleansing* (2019) Lint, site-specific earth from Nazi concentration camps, bone ash, soap, hair, nail clippings, resin and found objects. 1425mm X 670mm X 120mm.





12. *Resting place (2015)* Site-specific earth, ash and resin.  
2300mm X 1550mm X 500mm.





13. *Resting place II (2016)* Site-specific earth, ash and resin.  
2300mm X 1550mm X 500mm.





Repetition as a ritualised process is apparent in all the works that form part of my oeuvre. I personally find repetitive action to be soothing when considering the trauma of loss and death. The persistent casting process, as seen in *Resting place*, *Resting place II* and *Entombed* (Figure 12, 13, 14), explores repetition as a means of continuation in the process of finding closure. When death occurs, there is an abrupt end. However, mourning rituals typically assist the living to focus on the perpetuation of life in spite of death (Malinowski 1974: 51, 52, 53, Davies 2017: 4). By focusing on life instead of death and/or life after death, mourning rituals shift the attention from that which is actually happening physically in the decaying corpse, to that which can only be imagined to be happening in a life after death (Davies 2017: 10). In this way, processes which embody continuation in mourning rituals, or artistic ritualised processes such as my own, may be productive and healing in a stage of closure that is a crucial part of dealing with death.



14. *Entombed* (2021) Site-specific earth, bone ash, ash, hair, sample bottles and resin.  
585mm X 1440mm X 50mm.

These imaginative ways of thinking about life instead of death or life after death, supersede reality. For me, the activity of repetitively casting resin into molds suggests a never-ending cycle of life beyond my understanding, while the molds also resemble caskets or coffins. The repetitive entombment of meaningful materials, such as the site-specific earth, bone ash, breastmilk, nail clippings and hair, embodies a sense of continuation, as well as a sense of closing off and of closing up.





15. *Smoke* (2017-2021) Pencil on paper.  
880mm X 1630mm X 65mm.

In the work *Smoke* (Figure 15) I explore the idea that smoke may embody the indestructible qualities of corpses by its irrepressible and unmanageable movement and volume. I perform this exploration through means of ritualised repetitive mark-making which ultimately resembles the movement of smoke. Smoke is an important byproduct of the time-consuming art-making process of many of my works containing bone ash. Cremating bone in a kiln produces an extensive amount of smoke, which necessitates work away from human presence. The smoke produced during cremation, when I fire bones in a kiln up to 1000 degrees Celsius, is initially overwhelming in volume and smell, and then as time passes, it dissipates, reduces in bulk and becomes the most inconspicuous of all the materials produced by processes of heat which I exhibit like lint and bone ash. I experience the smoke that forms part of my preparation of bone ash as double-edged,

ambiguous and allusive to the utmost degree, as it materialises overpoweringly and then completely disappears. Malinowski (1974: 51) discusses the “double-edged play” between hope and fear which comes about in responses to death and which “sets in always in the face of death”. Smoke shuns the comfortable oppositional dynamics of death/life, pain/healing and exclusion/inclusion and is able to imaginatively open up such limiting responses to death.





16. *Cleansing/Entombing* (2021) Site-specific earth from Poland and Germany, cremated bone ash, ash, nail clippings, breastmilk, hair, lint, resin and Plexiglas. 850mm X 4450mm X 201mm.

In the work *Cleansing/Entombing* (Figure 16) I explore the idea of opening up my ritualised processes to the viewer in the gallery, as opposed to the previous vitrines cast in resin that seals off the contents of bone ash, earth, hair, nail clippings and breastmilk. This installation intends to invite the viewer to move into the tomb, crypt, or shower with bare feet onto the bone ash – if not physically, then at least imaginatively. In this way, the viewer mindfully participates in further crushing the cremated bones, and, to an extent, becomes part of the work, if only for a short period. While the tomb, crypt, or shower is meant to be inviting, it also suggests a sense of unease, which is what I experience when collecting earth from roadside shrines, imagining losing my own child, or seeing a mother setting up a roadside shrine.

However, as much as I can imagine my way into something terrible like the trauma of death, my art work, in all its various facets, allows me to engage with those thoughts and feelings and to some extent imagine my way out of it again. It helps me to be less paralysed and overcome, while it does not smooth over or hide realities. The ability to integrate the awareness of the certainty of death with the lush consciousness of the continuation of life is what makes humans exceptional.





17 Installation images (2021). Oliewenhuis Art Museum.





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# Abbreviated Biography

Adelheid von Maltitz is currently the Academic Head of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of the Free State. Von Maltitz holds a Masters’ Degree in Fine Arts from the University of the Free State. Von Maltitz has participated in several local and international exhibitions, and in 2014 she was awarded the ‘runner up’ prize in Sasol New Signatures. Von Maltitz has co-authored the chapter, “Spontaneous shrines and the studio desk: learning from working with objects through an arts-informed, practice-led lens” in the book, *Object Medleys: Interpretive possibilities for educational research (2017)*.

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