



before four and after two
Christian Nerf

AVA Alumnus in partnership with A4 Arts Foundation

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before four and after two is the first public presentation by conceptual artist Christian Nerf in Cape Town since his residency at the A4 Arts Foundation in 2019, which also marks his first significant 'post-collaborative' body of work.

Collaborative ways of working have long dominated Nerf's praxis, and have produced some enormously influential and generative projects, many of which were presented at the AVA including *Authorised* with Barend de Wet (2003-2013), *And Not But* with Francis Burger (2011) and *Escape to Robben Island* with Douglas Gimberg (2008). These projects differed from his early street-based 'public investigations', notably *Working with Tom* (1999) and his *Polite Force* (2002), which continues to patrol the streets some two decades later.

As Nerf notes, these two phases of collaborative investigations shared a common principle of embracing the possibilities of the "uncalled-for newness" that emerges when working with others. But since attaching himself to drawing as a way to operate individually, Nerf has refined his technologies and techniques through a series of residencies and study opportunities abroad where he focused on "thinking through doing, undoing and redoing."

Sol Lewitt suggested that planning a work ahead can allow for the time that will be spent actually producing it to become "a perfunctory affair", inferring that the necessary actions can be achieved without real interest, feeling, or effort if preceded by a certain investment in method and process. Nerf's praxis now hosts several mark-making systems or 'exercises' which echo Lewitt's proposition, including *Working with Obstacles* (2012) and *Teaching Teachers* (2016). In time, these prompted him to wonder, "how much of the work, or rather the workings, could be left in the hands of others?" and led to the development of a working method he has dubbed 'In and Of Itself' (IAOI).

He has organised the making of his drawings in such a way that he can be "care-less" with his mark making under intensely structured conditions. The "mindlessness" of the resulting repetitive actions and tasks in turn "makes time for thinking through a variety of other important and unimportant things." As he observes,

Once the paper is folded and stapled shut with the graphite nuggets pocketed inside their capsule, then the drawing can be achieved with no real need to pay attention; I can look away. Kathryn Smith commented that I've developed an "ideal 'shake and make' process that is somewhat forensic." I think this is because what emerges is a drawing that has recorded all these impact points; a series of arrivals and departures. They are records of what occurred under certain very specific conditions."

before four and after two focuses primarily on his 'überrest' drawings, a series produced over years through a methodical-mechanical technique that speak directly to the results of this drawing-based investigation. The German word for 'remnant', the überrest series embodies Nerf's interest in "drawings that make themselves". Although the method had its origins nearly a decade ago, the selection presented here, "made around and about now", references a specific period starting at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Titles like *the other day. überrest*

329, some time back. überrest 252, 258 & 261, and just over a year ago. überrest 224.2, 224.5 & 225.2 attempt to evidence the vagueness and peculiarities of these times.

Nerf's first presentation of his non-collaborative and drawing-based works formed part of the AVA's 40-year retrospective, *A Natural Selection: 1991 – 2011*, curated by Clare Butcher, including the unannounced performance *Demonstrating a drawing* with Jared Ginsburg in the AVA stairwell, which sought in part to define the differences between notions of 'working with' and 'participating' and 'collaborating'. Observed by a curious and somewhat sceptical audience, Nerf and Ginsburg traced their interactions up and down the stairs with graphite directly on the wall. As Nerf recalls,

Jared and I were challenged by gallery visitors who thought our actions and our mark making was not a demonstration, but rather an act of vandalism. They watched us bump into each other, at which point we both turned, with him heading back downstairs and me heading upstairs, repeating this brushing-up-against again and again and again, meeting at different points depending on our paces. Towards and away repeat, all the while dragging graphite bars along the stairwell wall and leaving traces of our interaction smeared up and down the space. I think we also had erasers.

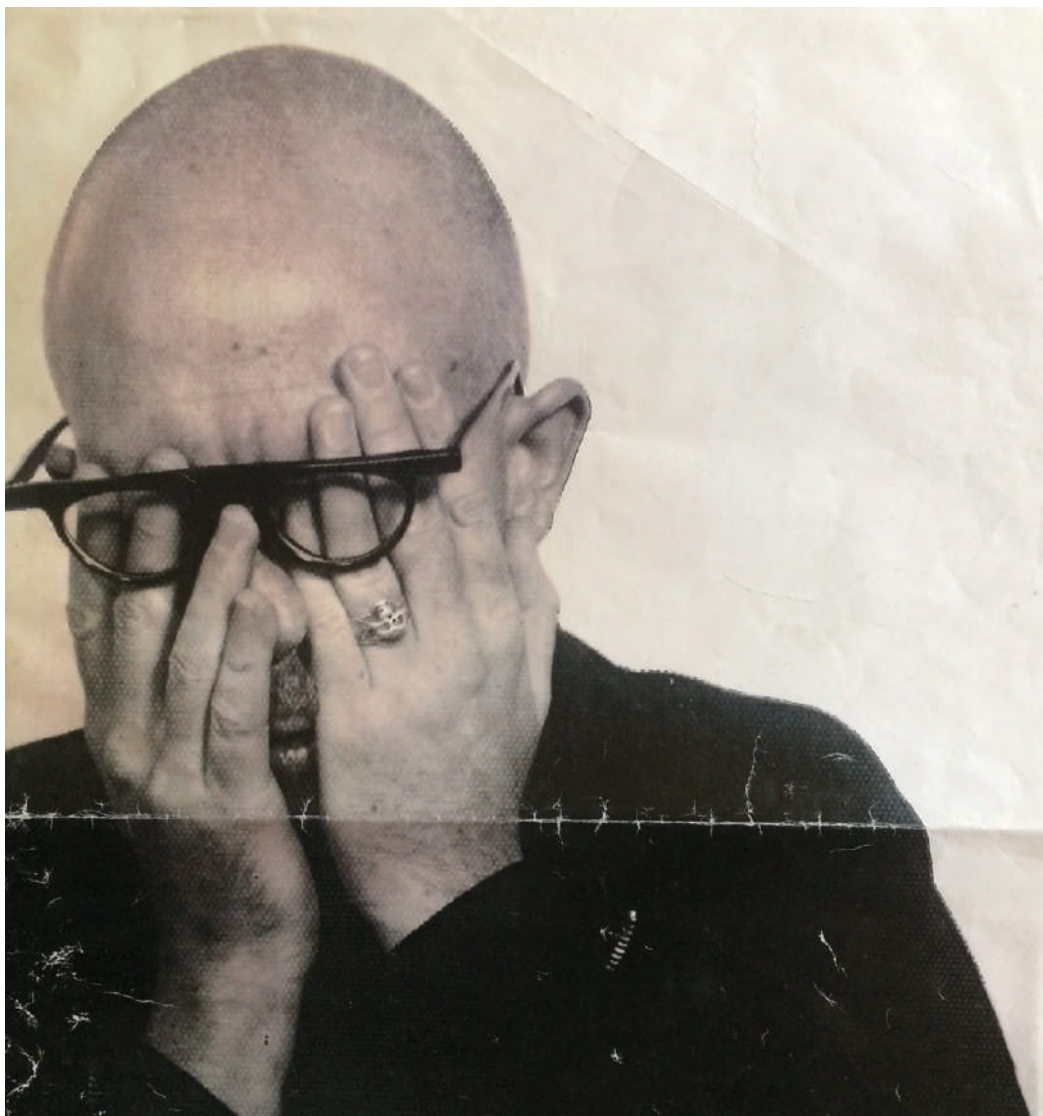
before four and after two features the video *Demonstrating a drawing, again* (2019), installed in the New Media Room. Here, Nerf and Ginsburg revisit their initial exercise at the AVA, this time staged in the stairwell of the A4 Arts Foundation. Considering the subsequent impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, this intimate response to each other's physical proximity is still performable, but now with heavier implications.

Despite Nerf's self-declared post-collaborative state, visitors to this show are still offered the opportunity to participate in the evolution of drawings designed as time capsules. Several book-like, prism-shaped containers house yet-to-be-unfolded works which span years, allowing for the drawings inside to evolve unseen over time, made by whoever picks up and agitates the objects. Several works are attributed to 'Nerf et al.' because, as the artist remarks, "a few plumbers, couriers and a variety of artists and visitors to the Atlantic House studios have given them a shake".

In the main gallery, a video titled *you have the clock but I have the time* shows Nerf barely (yet stoically) managing to manoeuvre a large unwieldy drawing capsule. For him, this work embodies something of the times in which we are living, where "things are unpredictable and the well-trodden path is now no more convenient than the road less travelled, and we still look forward."

In the upstairs galleries, the triptych *on or about. überrest 298.1, 298.2 & 298.3* is the product of a drawing experiment in structured contingency, with Nerf attempting to repeat a set of choreographed moves three times over three different works. The result resembles a mechanically reproduced edition; the artist as machine.

Given that his various drawing technologies are now generally "making themselves", Nerf has made time to return to his earlier expanded cinema installations, employing whatever technologies and participants are on hand. Sometime, sooner or later, we may get to see them.



About Christian Nerf

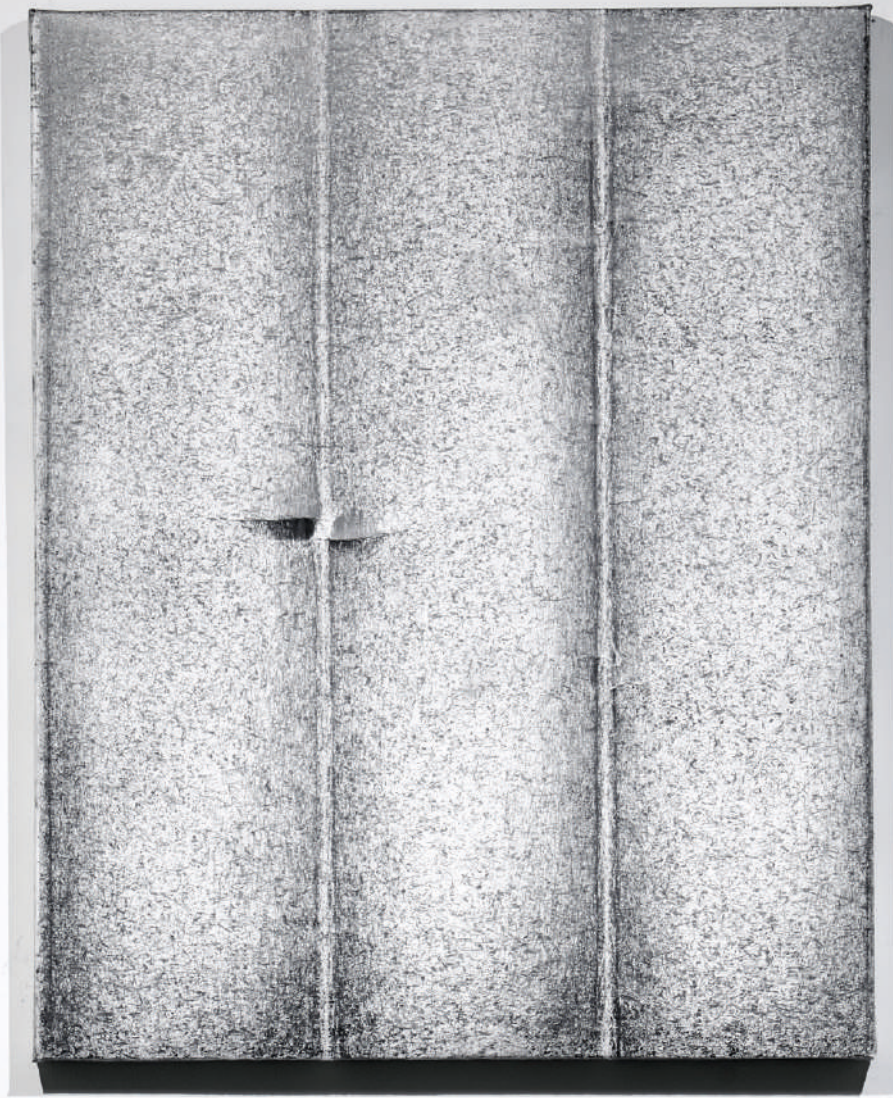
Christian Nerf is a member of Atlantic House studios. He relocated to Cape Town from Johannesburg in 2005 and has been associated with a number of experimental spaces and studios including City+Suburban, Studio 2666, serialworks and Research Arts. A temporary citizen of Liverpool between 2015 and 2020, a return to Cape Town for a residency at the A4 Arts Foundation in 2019 enabled a focused and critical reflection on his expansive and quietly influential praxis through an unpacking of decades worth of personal archive.

His artistic approach is characterised by a singular ability to produce powerful object-based work as well as performative interventions informed by unique working methods, keen observation of social and political dynamics, and studio-based experimentation. The resulting works, which should be understood more properly as artefacts (or 'by-products' as he prefers) of a deeply invested creative process, are simultaneously (and paradoxically) straightforward and abstracted, enabling complex reconstructions of their initial conditions of production through close dialogue with these objects and their instigator. *The Thing in Breathing* (2012) where Nerf invited musician Darren English to interact with a living plant sculpture, was a transformative transitional moment between earlier collaborative modes of working with others, and more recent post-collaborative strategies. <http://athingforthinga.blogspot.com/> documents this phase of work.

Nerf has been the recipient of numerous local and international residency opportunities including the Ampersand Foundation fellowship (New York, 2005), Fountainhead (Miami, 2013), Goethe on Main (Johannesburg, 2013), and the Royal Drawing School (Dumfries House, Scotland, 2017).

Preferring an arms-length approach to institutions as a rule, he has delivered memorable studio seminars and workshops at the University of Pretoria, Wits School of Art, the Michaelis School of Fine Art and Stellenbosch University; and internationally at the California College of Art (San Francisco) and the Pratt Institute (New York) for over two decades. Despite having avoided formal tertiary education for most of his working life, he completed his MFA at the Liverpool School of Art & Design (Liverpool John Moores University) in 2017, under the tutorship of artists Imogen Stidworthy, Rosalind Nashashibi, Bedwyr Williams, Rory Macbeth and John Hyatt.

His work has appeared on countless exhibitions from independent studios and temporary spaces to major public institutions. His work is held in a number of private collections and lives in the homes of fellow artists in South Africa and abroad.



earlier this year. überrest 294

Graphite, Hahnemühle hot pressed 300g paper, wrapped on wooden frame, 2021
76cm x 61cm x 4cm



just over a year ago. überrest 224.2, 224.5 & 225.2

Triptych. Graphite, wallpapering paper, wood, bookbinding tape, screws, 2020
128cm x 62cm (3 individual sheets)



looking forward. überrest capsules 332.1-332.6

Nerf et al.
Canvas on board, bookbinding tape, wood, tacks, embossing tape, graphite nuggets,
Munken Arctic uncoated book paper, staples. Set of six time released works, 2021 - 2112
61cm x 16.5cm x 16.5cm x 16.5cm each





some time back. überrest 252, 258 & 261

Nerf et al.

Triptych. Graphite, Munken Arctic uncoated book paper and salvaged decal backing paper, magnets, 2020-2021

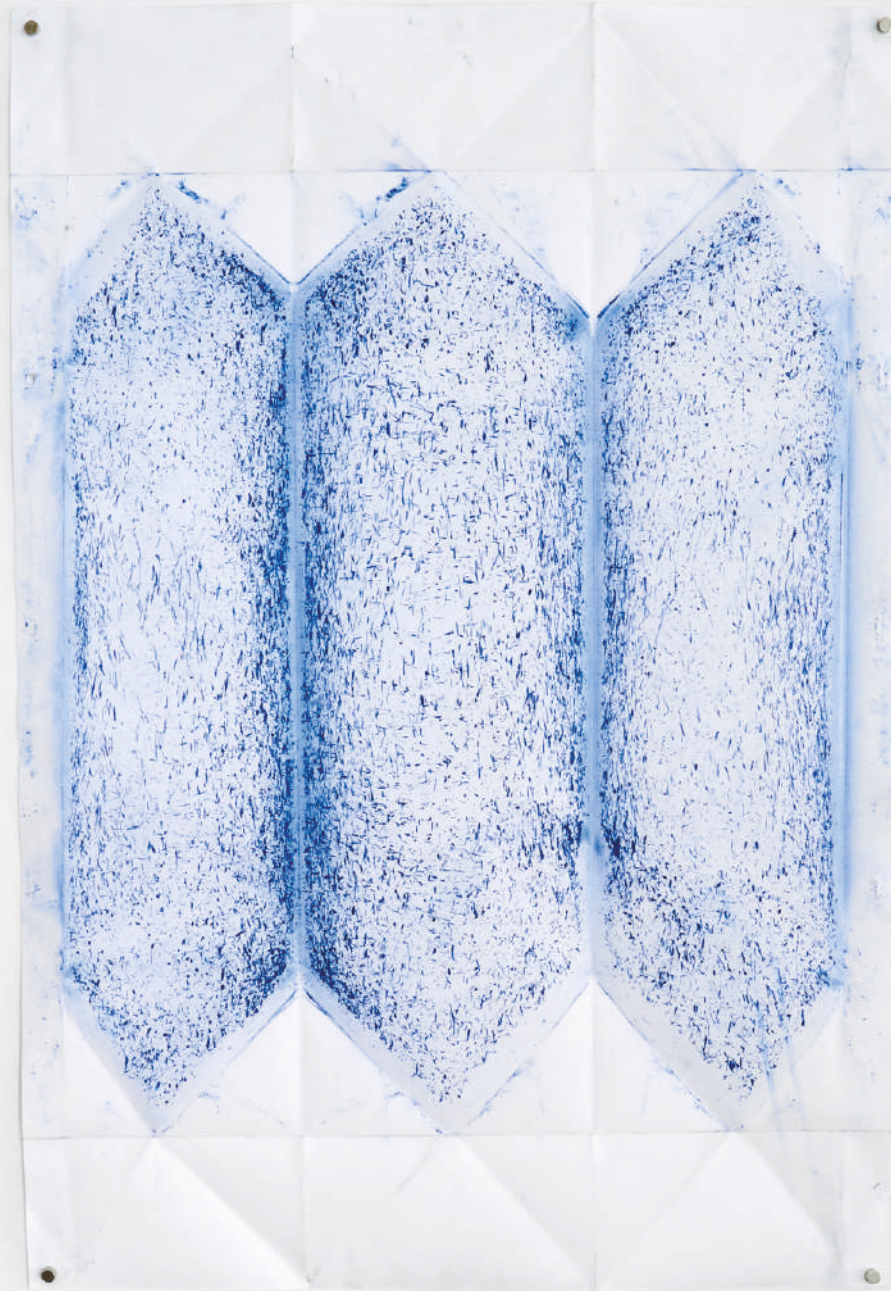
90cm x 64cm and 81cm x 63cm



the other day. überrest 329

Nerf et al.
Graphite, Hahnemühle hot pressed 300g paper,
wood, bookbinding tape, screws, 2021
280cm x 125cm





several days ago. überrest 311
Pastel, Munken Arctic uncoated book paper,
magnets, 2021
89cm x 61cm



on or about. überrest 298.1, 298.2 & 298.3
Triptych, Graphite, Munken Arctic uncoated book paper, magnets, 2020
90cm x 64cm each



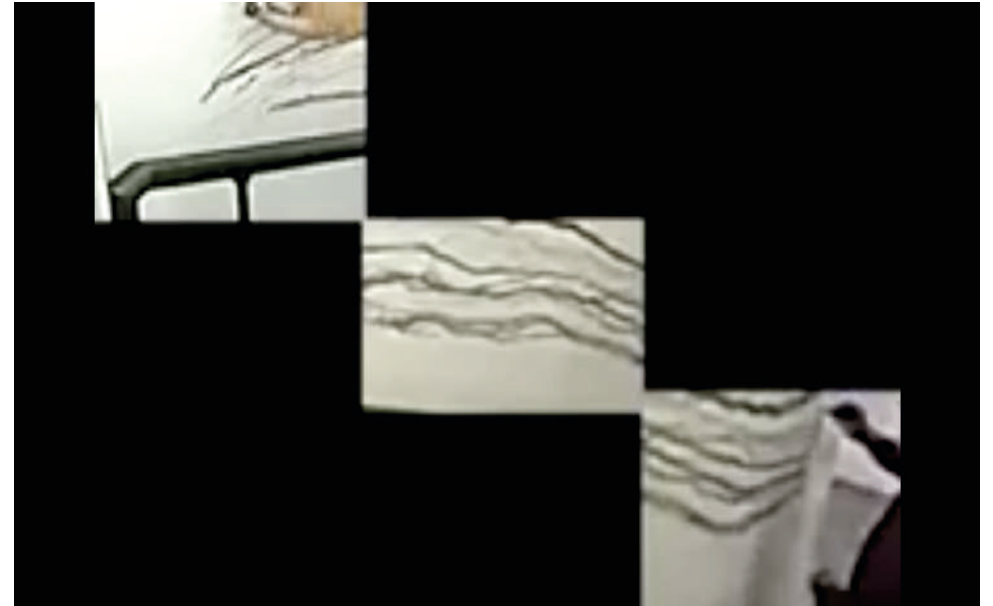


some months ago. überrest 287

Graphite, Hahnemühle hot pressed 300g paper,
wrapped on wooden frame, 2021
100cm x 80cm x 2cm



you have the clock but I have the time
Video, Edition of 3, 1 AP, 2021
90 second loop



demonstrating a drawing, again
Nerf and Ginsburg
Video, Edition of 5, 2 APs, 2021
3 minute loop



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