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Art

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By Mehita Iqani and Francois Knoetze

Cape Mongo is a multimedia installation that focuses on consumer waste as medium and subject. It is a complex artwork, comprising sculpture using found materials (mostly what viewers would consider waste or trash), performance, and video work. The main narrative feature of the work is a series of fantastical-looking creatures made from either glass, cardboard, tin cans, plastic, VHS tapes or discarded cellphones, all called 'Mongo', which is slang for an object thrown away and then recovered, who interact with different urban landscapes and places in various ways. In the installation for the 2015 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, each of the "creatures" – essentially elaborate hand constructed suits that were worn by the artist in performative engagements with public space – were installed in the gallery as sculptures. The creature suits are human-sized and they were positioned on raised plinths that made them seem even larger than life. The various iterations of Mongo were carefully lit, which gave them an imposing air. The video work was screened on one of the gallery walls.

The video component of the artwork is extremely important. A short film was made "for" each of the Mongo characters. These films serve both as a documentation of the performance aspect of the work – Knoetze donning one of the suits and interacting with urban space and people reacting to the character – and as a multimedia commentary on each character and performance. The latter function was achieved by interlacing and editing a variety of popular culture references and found footage texts into the footage of "Mongo" exploring some section of Cape Town. The short films were screened together in large projection on to a white wall, while viewers stood or sat on the floor. The video element of the artwork was especially powerful in the setting in which the actual sculptural outfits were present. Viewers could see how the now-still, now-silent, sculptures turned into a kind of living character once they were worn and moved in, and in turn a number of fascinating reference points were introduced into the texture of the work through video editing, adding sometimes odd, sometimes surprising elements: a 1990s game of cricket here, a snippet of animation there.

We spoke for almost an hour one autumn afternoon over Skype. We

weren't able to record the interview, so Mehita made notes while we spoke. This short "conversation" is reconstructed from those notes, which Francois reviewed and contributed to before publication.

MI: Where did you source the material that you made the creatures from? Did you collect your own trash, or find it elsewhere?

FK: Even though I'm not very good at recycling, I do hoard some items. I sometimes kept a certain tin can or bottle aside to help finish off a piece. But I sourced most of the materials that I used to make the creatures from a place on Landsdowne Road in Cape Town, called Oasis Recycling. It's where the opening scene of *Cape Mongo: Glass* was shot. There is a huge recycling operation there. They wash and sort a lot of materials, and I could just call them up to let them know what I needed, and then I would be able to buy it from them for a very reasonable price. A lot of my work stems from finding items in what often feels like a treasure hunt, in markets or second hand stores, or recycling centres. I'm interested in thinking about where a thing comes from, what system it formed a part of, and what it can be turned in to. I am interested in how objects relate to human systems and cultures. I am interested in the links between materials and humanity. Mongo is a slang word that I came across; I think it was used in 1960s New York to describe reclaimed or reused materials. So I reclaimed that word to describe the things that I was making out of found materials.



Figure 1: Cape Mongo, Metal. Francois Knoetze, 2015

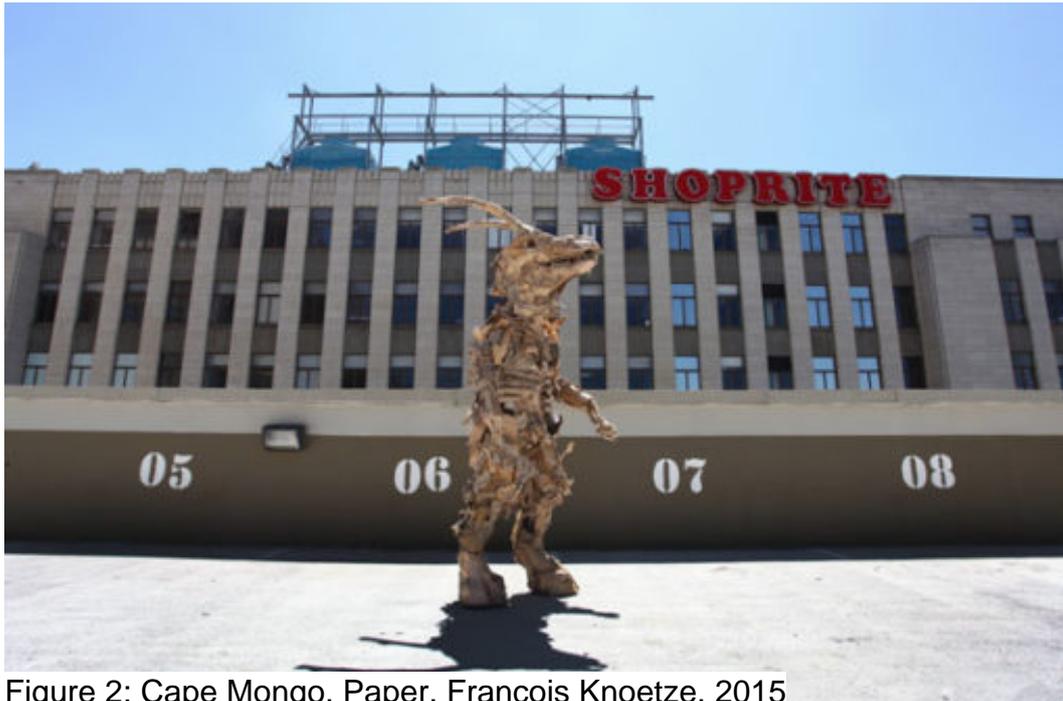


Figure 2: Cape Mongo, Paper. Francois Knoetze, 2015

MI: You're right. One person's trash is another's treasure. Once our "garbage" is taken to a recycling centre, and washed and sorted, it actually becomes a commodity again. Something with value that can be bought and sold. The recycling industry is interesting because it re-creates value in materials that others have decided no longer have value. Can we talk a little more about the links between the material and the human that you're exploring?

FK: Plastic is an interesting example. It's even becoming incorporated into human DNA. I don't know the exact science of it, but the narrative is like this: there is all this microplastic waste that is discarded in the ocean, and a lot of it ends up in the bellies of fish and other sea creatures... Then humans catch those fish and consume plastic-associated chemicals, and by eating it those microscopic traces of plastic become a part of our own being. So plastic is becoming part of the human condition in a very bodily, material way, its no longer just material for packaging our lives and lifestyles.

MI: How interesting. Plastic is the most "man-made" of all the substances that you work with. Glass, paper, and tin can all be traced back to some kind of extraction from the earth. But plastic is produced through chemical processes, it is made in a lab, it was invented by us rather than extracted and processed by us. It is quite compelling to imagine it now shaping us, at the molecular level, in turn through a long process of waste and ingestion. Can we talk a bit more about the plastic Mongo? I found this character – the colorful "big bird" – the most friendly, almost cheerful of

the five. Can you tell me more about your experiences in creating it?

FK: So as you know each of the characters was an “outfit” that I specially made with the intention of wearing it and interacting with a specific part of Cape Town. Even though the plastic one looked the most cheerful and friendly, it was the most uncomfortable one to wear. It was constructed with all the plastic items, bottles and bottle tops, around a frame of chicken wire, and the wire would pinch and scratch me with every flap of my wings. It was really unpleasant to wear and move in.

MI: It’s like there was this dark awkwardness at the heart of this cheerful friendly-seeming creature. Can you tell me about the location that you chose for filming that performance?

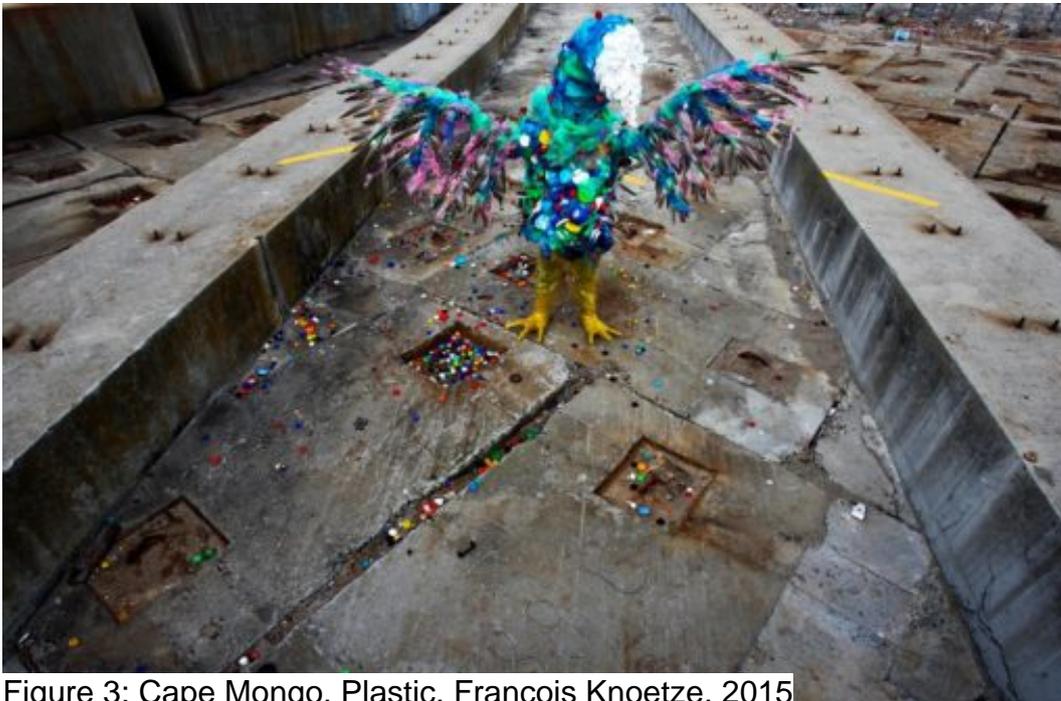


Figure 3: Cape Mongo, Plastic. Francois Knoetze, 2015

FK: For all the performances, I wanted to show the creatures interacting with spaces that were somehow relevant to the objects or materials that they were made from, and to the themes explored in the films. I wanted the viewer to see the creatures from different perspectives, and also to see how people in those spaces sometimes interacted with the creatures. I also wanted the creatures to reveal or expose different vantage points on the city. The plastic Mongo video was filmed at the V&A Waterfront, at one of the piers right at the edge of the complex. The Waterfront is the piece of coastline closest to Robben Island, and so it has a particular kind of resonance in post-apartheid, being the place from which Nelson Mandela came when he was released. There was something powerful for me in thinking about the movement from the sea to the land as a passage of

freedom. In the video I edited in a clip of Mandela reading one of Ingrid Jonker's poems. It was important to me that the plastic Mongo was shown interacting at a coastal space. The oceanic aspect was important for the plastic creature. Although a lot of trash ends up in the ocean, plastic is most visible because it floats. Paper gets soaked and disintegrates and sinks, metal rusts, and glass could break into pieces on rocks. But plastic just floats, and it disintegrates much more slowly than any other substance.

MI: There is something interesting in how you are linking the movement from the sea to the land, Mandela's return – as symbolic of a particular moment of rainbow nationhood – to the move from the land to the sea, human waste – as symbolic of a particular kind of influence that humanity is having on the environment. It's not really a fair trade, is it? Mandela comes "from" the sea, and a ton of trash goes "back". I'm learning that there are many more layers to your work, a lot of which are hinted at in the videos, than merely the politics of trash. Though some people looking at the work would read it as an environmental piece. Some are currently writing about [the evocative relationship between waste and the ocean](#) as well [the beach as a complex cultural site of detritus](#). How would you respond?

FK: I get that many people will see the work as a commentary on the environment and how people are messing up the planet, and I am happy to let that be. People will read into the work whatever they wish. It's important for there to be a space for interpretation. In *Cape Mongo* I wanted to explore a number of themes. One of them was thinking about the city of Cape Town and its spatial politics, both historical and contemporary. So yes, the work is about the environment but I interpret the environmental broadly, it doesn't stop at the edge of the city, it includes human systems of production and consumption in general. I see the city as a biosphere, where human processes and natural processes are deeply interconnected. The ways humans interact with nature are also closely related to historical systems of oppression. There are different hierarchies at play, and different environmental issues are linked with colonial capitalist expansion. Subsistence and the sharing of land were violently replaced with capitalism and a culture of producing excess. So yes, my work is about the environment and ecology but I really wanted to link it also with the politics and history of colonialism and capitalism, which is why it was so important that these Mongo creatures were shown interacting with various politically important geographical spaces in Cape Town.

MI: Yes, that is precisely why I was interested in your artwork, because of the commentary that it made on capitalism and consumer culture. I've written about the links between consumer culture and the media, and the

complex meanings of consumption in the global south. I think an important area of future research, to which I hope to contribute in the years ahead, will be studies that continue to politicize consumption by turning attention to what is left behind after consumption has taken place. In the context of rapidly dwindling natural resources, growing populations and the many ways in which consumption has been centred in narratives of development and the “good life”, it is increasingly important to consider the “other” side of consumption: the material formations of waste, garbage and trash that accrue once human actors have accessed, enjoyed and disposed of the many commodities that they want and need in their lives. Cape Mongo was one of the references points that has gotten me started on thinking about these issues. Waste interjects not only into our material spaces and experiences, but also into our mediated lives and representational space. Waste comes into the public imagination through a number of media forms and genres, usually closely linked with particularly moralizing discussions about ethical consumption and the sustainability of the planet. And all of these issues require further critical analysis and thinking.

[Mehita Iqani](#) is Associate Professor in Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. She is the author of *Consumption, Media and the Global South* (2016) and *Consumer Culture and the Media* (2012) and an Associate Editor of the journal *Consumption, Markets & Culture*.

Born in Cape Town in 1989, [Francois Knoetze](#) is a performance artist, sculptor and filmmaker. He holds a BA Fine Arts degree from Rhodes University and an MFA from Michaelis School of Fine Art, UCT. Knoetze retraces the life cycles of discarded objects and explores junctures between material and social histories. In his *Mongo** sculptural suits, the synthetic is welded to the human – bringing focus to the objectification of persons, through the personification of objects. In 2015 Knoetze featured as one of *Mail & Guardian's* ‘Top 200 Young South Africans’. His series *Cape Mongo* formed part of the *Grahamstown National Arts Festival Main Programme* in 2015 and the *Global Graduate Programme at Design Indaba 2016*. He has participated in group exhibitions, such as *U/Tropia* at the *Wiener Festwochen* in Germany (2015), *Slow Violence* at the *University of Stellenbosch Art Gallery* (2015) and *Designing Futures* at the *Lagos Photo Festival* (2015).

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