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# Between the Pages: Human Fragility and the Patina of Time in Guy du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*

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## Abstract

Various contemporary artists have explored people's relationships with the natural world through artworks based on the book format, including artist's books and book sculptures. This study contributes to the discussion on the ways visual storytelling can work towards re-visualising narratives, making untold stories visible, with specific reference to *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* (2017) by contemporary South African artist Guy du Toit. The aim of this article is to explore narrative suggestions of stories that remain untold, as felt through the empty spaces between the book covers. I argue that Du Toit's book sculptures evoke experiences of loss and transience through his representation of the impact of the passage of time and the effects of the elements on the medium of bronze. Building on David Macauley's environmental philosophy (*Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas*. New York: SUNY Press, 2010), and specifically his suggestion to re-evaluate how to relate to the natural world by viewing ecological considerations as a form of "re-story-ation", I suggest that Du Toit's book sculptures offer a starting point for an exploration of our fragile relationship with the natural world.

**Keywords:** artist's books; Guy du Toit; narrativity; re-story-ation; relationality; temporality (in visual art); transience

## Introduction

Contemporary South African artist Guy du Toit is known for his evocative bronze sculptures of everyday objects and his technical proficiency in the bronze-casting process, as highlighted by Wilma Cruise (2003, 58) and Amanda du Preez (2017, 185). In Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* (2017), two rectangular bronze sheets with a green patina serve as the covers of a book (Figure 1). The textured surface appears to have been oxidised by the elements over time, as if it had been submerged in water, with the space between the book covers, where the pages should be, empty. The title *Book of Play* can refer to a playbook to live by, containing the scripts of plays or strategies to follow in life. The pages of the book-shaped objects, however, remain inaccessible. These artworks by Du Toit can be interpreted as book sculptures, evoking collective and more personal experiences of loss and transience.



**Figure 1:** *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, by Guy du Toit (2017). Bronze. *The Underword* exhibition, Priest Gallery, Johannesburg, August 3–31, 2017. (Photograph by the author, with permission of the artist)

The aim of this article is to explore narrative suggestions of absent stories or stories that remain untold, as felt through the gaps left between the book covers of Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*. I argue that Du Toit's book sculptures signify the fragility of people's lives through the transformation of the medium of bronze and the metaphoric associations recalled thereby. Du Toit's book sculptures offer a starting point for exploring the fragile relationship between humans and nature. This article builds on David Macauley's environmental philosophy, as discussed in his book *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (2010), and specifically his suggestion to re-evaluate how we relate to the natural world by viewing ecological considerations as a form of "re-story-ation". Macauley (2006, 190), building on Gary Nabhan (1997, 319), emphasises the need to historicise ideas around nature and relationships with material environments. Macauley (2010, 5) argues that people's conceptualisation of and relationship with nature should be viewed in terms of a story, with ecological healing or restoration also a form of re-story-ation.

This study contributes to the discussion on the ways visual storytelling can work towards making untold stories visible, with specific reference to selected sculptures by Du Toit. I suggest that despite the absence of pages, Du Toit's book sculptures *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* possess narrativity. The artworks depict changes brought about by the passage of time and echo the effects of the elements, such as the workings of water, oxidation by air, the effects of being buried in the earth, and even fire, as characterised by the transition from one state to another. The transformation of the bronze surfaces of the works hints at decay over time, suggesting that even these bronze objects will ultimately be reclaimed by nature.

Although Du Toit is an established South African artist, little academic research has been published on his work. The few exceptions include Pieter Swanepoel's (2005) discussion of the concept of craft and the importance of labour in Du Toit's work in the article "The Consolidation of Art and Craft through Self-Reflexivity: Considering Guy du Toit's (Bronze) Thumb(s)". The monograph *Guy du Toit: Discovering the Object* (2017), compiled by Carla Crafford and edited by Adèle Adendorff, includes articles such as "Taking Stock: The Value of a Human Skull" by Adèle Adendorff and "A Chair Is a Patient Object" by Amanda du Preez. These publications are indicative of the relevance of Du Toit's work. More recently, Du Toit has become known for his playful depictions of anthropomorphic rabbits or hares, as discussed by Ingrid Stevens (2012) and Crafford and Du Toit (2018), but this is not the focus of this discussion. An interpretation of selected sculptures by Du Toit can offer an important contribution to scholarship on the artist.

After describing Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, the works are considered as artist's books that challenge the conventions of the book format. Then, Du Toit is considered as an artist exploring temporal aspects through the representation of the transformation of bronze in his artworks, with a specific focus on the artist's characteristic use of bronze and the temporal suggestions associated with patina, and a

brief discussion of narrativity as a useful concept to understand the visual artworks under discussion. The subsequent section focuses on narrative suggestions of the fragility of documentation, as recalled by Du Toit's bronze books. I argue that the artworks emphasise associations of human fragility through the theme of transience, which can be associated with the relationality of both human and non-human agents. I highlight environmental considerations through "re-story-ation" as relevant to these artworks, before offering a conclusion to the discussion of human fragility and temporal layers of patina in Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*.

### *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*

Although the adage urges us not to judge a book by its cover, *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* consist of book covers only, with the expected pages absent. The books are made of cast silica bronze with brass hinges. *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* are also informally referred to by Du Toit as *Charnière*, after the French translation for "hinge" (Crafford, email comm., March 6, 2022). A hinge or joint could figuratively indicate a turning point or pivotal moment. Crafford recalls that one of the reasons behind the adoption of this name was the difficulty the artist experienced while making the working brass hinges for these books. The bronze book covers appear to be very old, with a mottled, green-brown surface and uneven, torn edges (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, by Guy du Toit (2017). Bronze. (Photograph by Carla Crafford)

To create the surfaces of *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, Du Toit used a combination of ferric nitrate patina overlaid with a copper nitrate patina, before sealing the sculptures with Woodoc antique wax (email comm., March 7, 2022).<sup>1</sup> The deeply textured surfaces of *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*—with encrusted layers of patina reminiscent of scars; the surfaces scratched, even punctured—contrast with the shiny metallic bronze finishing on the surfaces of Du Toit’s characteristic depiction of anthropomorphic hares or rabbits in *Reclining Nude 4* and *Reclining Nude 5* (2016), shown in Figure 3.



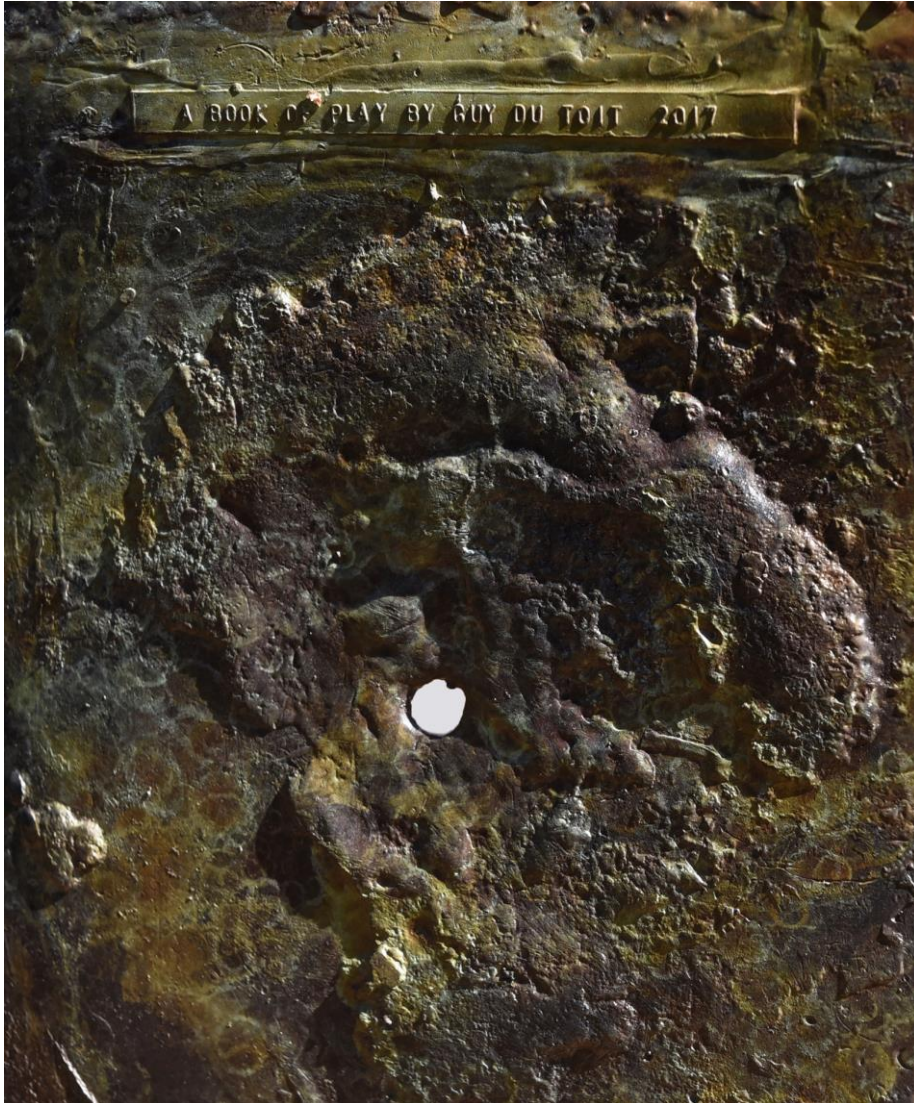
**Figure 3:** *Reclining Nude 4* and *Reclining Nude 5*, by Guy du Toit (2016). Bronze, 12 cm. *Hare There and Everywhere* solo exhibition, Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, November 3–26, 2016. (Photograph by the author, with permission of the artist)

An opening is visible in the cover of *Book of Play I* (Figure 4), with a hole on the one side of the solid bronze surface that the viewer can look through when the book is open. In *Book of Play I*, the title of the work appears stamped on the cover of the book. Du Toit is known for emphasising the process and labour involved in the production of his sculptures through leaving traces of the casting process on the finished works (Cruise 2003, 57). Retaining the traces of these processes contributes to the damaged, weathered appearance of the books, lending an archaeological quality to the works, which resemble

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1 . The artist also gives credit to his patinator, Shaun Bettlinger.

ancient artefacts. Du Toit (2019) has stated that he enjoys it when his sculptures look like ancient artefacts. The bronze books have a similar colour to ancient Greek bronze sculptures excavated from the soil or salvaged from shipwrecks and now exhibited in museums. The encrusted layers of green patina recall an abstract landscape and point to the transformation of bronze objects, corroded over time by the elements, such as through the effect of saltwater. I suggest that Du Toit's deliberate ageing of the material metaphorically represents the passage of time and, by extension, processes of decay, which contrast with the concepts of permanence, monumentality, and preciousness often associated with a medium such as bronze.



**Figure 4:** Detail of *Book of Play I*, Guy du Toit (2017). Bronze. (Photograph by Carla Crafford)

## Unhinging Artist's Books

Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* utilise the book or codex form,<sup>2</sup> challenging concepts of what information systems can be. Du Toit's work consists of two book covers, bound by two hinges each. The books were exhibited half-open, placed back to front, recalling the zigzag pattern of an accordion book (Figure 5). However, the books can be opened to lie flat, such as in the later *Bronze Book Inside Open* (2020), as seen in Figure 6 (Dot the Eye 2021). *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* formed part of *The Underword*, a group exhibition of artist's books and book-shaped objects at the now-closed Priest Gallery in Johannesburg (see Priest Post Production 2017). These two bronze books were also exhibited at the 2017 Aardklop National Arts Festival in Potchefstroom at the exhibition of the Johannesburg-based artist collective Dead Bunny Society (see Hello Art 2017).



**Figure 5:** *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, by Guy du Toit (2017). Bronze. Installation view, *The Underword* exhibition, Priest Gallery, Johannesburg, August 3–31, 2017. (Photograph by the author, with permission of the artist)

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2 “Codex” is the formal name for what is commonly called a book, with pages bound on one side.





**Figure 6:** *Bronze Book Inside Open*, by Guy du Toit (2020). Bronze. Dot the Eye Online Gallery. (Photograph by Carla Crafford. Copyright Guy du Toit)

Du Toit's *Book of Play II* was further exhibited in 2019 as part of the *Samplings: South African Artists' Books* exhibition, which formed part of the opening exhibition of the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts (JGCBA) at the Wits Art Museum (WAM), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. In the exhibition, curated by David Paton, Rosalind Cleaver, and Jack Ginsberg, *Book of Play II* was described as a book-shaped object (BSO) and specifically a book sculpture in cast bronze (JGCBA n.d.).

David Paton's (2010, 4–5) exploration of the self-conscious, reflective nature of artist's books as challenging the structural, narrative, material, and visual conventions of the book format—or “bookness”—is insightful. Paton (2020, 521, 525) explores what constitutes an artist's book within the contested space of the “book arts” as an umbrella term, with a focus on identifying gaps and fostering further dialogues in the contemporary field of South African artist's books. According to Paton (2010, 12), building on Johanna Drucker's (1995, 9, 162; 2005, 7) phenomenological understanding, the artist's book can be contextualised as a book in which formal, structural, and aesthetic conventions have been interrogated and manipulated by artists in order to draw attention to the object's “bookness”, such as how the book operates and communicates. Expanding on these definitions, Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen (2009) describes an artist's book as any book made or altered by an artist, including through collaboration, and that functions as, or resembles, a book. She points out that an artist's

book can be a single, unique work or an edition of multiples, with the concept of the work realised in book format. These can range from single sheets, folded books, concertina pages, tunnel books, pop-up books, and hardcover books to sculptures and installations and even diverse digital formats (Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2009). Liebenberg-Barkhuizen (2009, 70) highlights the strong conceptual basis of many artist's books, achieved through intersecting relationships between form and content, art and literature, seeing and reading. This resonates with the description by Paton (2010, 4) of an artist's book as a "container" of a story and a means to evoke the physical and emotional aspects of a narrative, of and through time, involving the reader in the process of discovering meaning and, in the process, opening up or "unhinging" a space for dialogue.



**Figure 7:** *The Palindrome and the Journey*, by Guy du Toit (2021). Bronze. (Photograph by Carla Crafford)

*Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* can be contrasted with other book-related artworks by Du Toit. The artist has made another book called *The Palindrome and the Journey* (2021), in a similar format and with a surface visually similar to *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* (email comm., March 7, 2022). *The Palindrome and the Journey* (Figure 7) consists of three attached bronze sheets in an accordion-fold, with the title embossed in large raised capital letters on one page and the Afrikaans word *rasionaliserend* ("rationalisation") faintly stamped on another. A palindrome is a word, phrase, or sequence that reads the same backwards as it does forwards, implying here

that the meaning of this book artwork is the same whether the work is “read” from left to right or right to left. At first glance, Du Toit’s book sculptures appear to be simple or obvious, but I contend that this is not the case, as the possible meanings are not immediately apparent.

## Time and Narrativity

Through the treatment of the surface of the works, Du Toit’s *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* evoke a sense of the passing of time. Stevens (2003, 14) highlights transformation and change caused by the passage of time as central themes in Du Toit’s work. The passage of time is also alluded to through the implied duration of time spent engaging with *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*. Michelle Stover (2005, 46–47) describes the need to spend time with books in order to experience the materials and explore the possible storylines of the works. The artist’s use of bronze as medium, with specific reference to the representation of temporal aspects through the treatment of the surface, is emphasised by Elizabeth Rankin (2017, 23). The layers of added patina are used to represent the ageing process and add an archaeological quality to Du Toit’s *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* (cf. Van der Watt 2005, 32). The way the bronze surface has been treated, albeit artificially, to appear old and weathered speaks to the impact of the passage of time on the material and to processes of decay. However, the processes of decay have been arrested by the artist, suggesting perhaps that time has been slowed down or even that time has stopped completely.

For Paul Ricœur (1984, 52), working from a phenomenological perspective, time is made human through a narrative approach and narrative is given full meaning as a condition of time. Ricœur (2006, 38) describes a process wherein the narrative and the action of storytelling are interwoven with time, with time being understood as subjective. These insights can be made relevant to visual art, given Mieke Bal’s (2001, 25) view that the first encounter with an artwork can involve a narrative approach, such as that suggested by time-based mediums. Bal (2011, 211) refers to the manipulation of time in “multi-layered ways”, including the possible temporal associations of the material used in the artwork, the time period in which the artwork was created, the stylistic period associated with the artwork, and the time that the artwork is viewed in the present. The passage of time is suggested by the layers of patina in Du Toit’s *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* because the act of layering the patinas took place over time. These suggestions of time in turn evoke associations with the inevitability of death and the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures. I argue that the aged, damaged appearance of the finished artworks can be considered a sort of *memento mori*, or reminder of the inevitability of death, in the same way as painted skulls and dead flowers served as reminders of the transience and fragility of life in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *vanitas* still-life tradition.

Shannon Lee Dawdy (2016, 143) explores the connection between the social and material aspects of patina, with the accumulation of patina over time forming part of a

broader aesthetic engagement with temporality. According to Hilkka Hiiop (2008, 155), “patina” can be defined as natural ageing that causes physical and chemical changes in the material of an artwork, as well as all the traces left through the life of the artwork, from the moment of its creation to the present day. Dawdy (2016, 11) suggests that such surface changes give an object the appearance of being very old, standing in for layers of time, although this appearance can also be created artificially. The patina reveals traces of the relationships between humans and objects, but these experiences are not always accessible (Dawdy 2016, 143).

According to Bal (1999, 168–70), the temporal dimension, in both the making and viewing of artworks, often gives a sense of narrativity to visual artworks. Narrativity is the extent to which a text tells a story, an account of an event or a sequence of events leading to a transition from an initial state to a later state or outcome. According to David Herman (2002, 90–91), the concept of narrativity refers to the characteristics of something “more or less prototypically storylike”, rather than a specific, identifiable narrative or storyline. Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, 10–11) makes a distinction between “being a narrative” and “possessing narrativity”. Objects, including visual artworks, can “have narrativity”, according to Ryan (2004, 9). In the case of artworks that have narrativity, typical narrative expectations, such as a specific sequence of events, are less important than the characteristics that make the work “storylike”, in Herman’s (2002) terms. In postclassical narratology the concept of narrativity is often used to suggest that a narrative response is evoked, without the need for a complete narrative (Abbott 2014). Bal (1999, 252) suggests that an unknown story or even the absence of a story can be suggested by an artwork. Relevant to this discussion, Monika Fludernik (1996, 12) defines narrativity based on experientiality, or humanity’s embodiedness in the world; she claims that incomprehensible texts can be made more readable by attempting to narrativise them. Fludernik (in Minami 1998, 467) proposes that narrative is “natural” in the sense that it is anchored in everyday human experience, including spontaneous forms of storytelling.

In his book *The Act of Reading*, the German literary scholar Wolfgang Iser (1978, 34) suggests that a text contains gaps in the narrative that are deliberately left unexplained and can only be filled in through the participation of an active reader. Iser implies that a text—including a visual text—can have multiple interpretations, with the reader and, by extension, the viewer playing an active role in creating meaning. Extending this idea to artworks that are storylike, viewers are involved as co-creators, as viewers make meaning by navigating through the traces or clues embedded in artworks that invite further contemplation (Bal 2010, 34). Although concepts of narrative are implied by the word “book” in the titles of the works considered as artist’s books, I suggest that Du Toit’s book sculptures possess an additional narrativity through the treatment of the bronze to evoke the passage of time and the effects of the elements, which alludes to the transition from one state to another—from past to present, life to death. The books contain no pages, leaving the stories associated with *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* open to interpretation. Viewers are thus invited to become co-creators who might

imagine stories that could fill in the gaps left by the absent pages. In these artworks, the absence of pages is a narratological strategy that points to the embodied viewer, who is here invited to complete the untold stories.

### Narrative Suggestions of the Fragility of Documentation

Some of the narrative suggestions that are recalled by Du Toit's work include the association of the bronze books with ancient texts. The bronze sheets recall clay or wax tablets, such as the *tabula rasa* or clean slate, which stands in for the epistemological perspective that individuals are born without built-in mental content. Different letters are, however, already imprinted on the surface of the works (Figure 8). Du Toit often includes small, half-hidden letters in his works.



**Figure 8:** Detail of *Book of Play II*, by Guy du Toit (2017). Bronze. (Photograph by Carla Crafford)

The decayed appearance of the book sculptures (Figure 9) recall ancient texts such as the Rosetta stone. This broken black basalt stone is celebrated as a key that contributed to the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphs (Miller et al. 2000, 128). The term “Rosetta stone” has also been used to denote the first crucial key in the process of deciphering encoded information, representing the intellectual work of solving the mysteries of the past (Baker and Cooley 2018).



**Figure 9:** *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, by Guy du Toit (2017). Bronze. *The Underworld* exhibition, Priest Gallery, Johannesburg, August 3–31, 2017. (Photograph by the author, with permission of the artist)

Another narrative suggestion recalled is the fragile nature of physical books and information in general. This was made clear by the destruction wrought by the mountain fire that spread to the University of Cape Town in April 2021, and specifically by the damage done to the Jagger Reading Room and the significant loss of material from the African Studies Collection. Sandra Swart (2021, 2) emphasises the shock of the fire at the University of Cape Town as combining the displacement of people, the death of wildlife, and the burning down of buildings, with several historical collections destroyed. The destruction of the Plant Conservation Unit is vividly recalled by Hedley

Twidle (2021, 201). The vulnerability of libraries was made clear, but the fire also highlighted resilience through the recovery process that followed and the ongoing process of preservation.

The importance of digitalisation is widely acknowledged, but so is the importance of preserving physical books. In Du Toit's artworks, emphasis is placed on the tactility of the book-shaped object, in contrast to the virtual nature of most documents encountered in daily life. A narrative suggestion is that physical books are no longer the first format thought of when thinking of documents, with digital technology changing the way we share and save information, processes that are not without challenges.

Books and libraries have been targeted by violence for thousands of years, sometimes intentionally and sometimes as a side-effect of war; for example, the contents of the Library of Alexandria was destroyed by fire several times. Perhaps the most infamous deliberate book burnings in the twentieth century were those staged by the Nazis. In South Africa, from at least the 1970s, government offices routinely destroyed records in an attempt to hide incriminating evidence (see Harris 1999). In this article, I maintain that Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* explore the complex status of documentation during times of transition, attempting to depict the ephemerality of information that is discarded or lost. The book sculptures could refer to either records of significant events or ordinary people's lives. There are, however, no direct references to the now absent people whose stories might have been recorded on the pages between the book covers.

## Narrative Suggestions of Human Fragility and Transience

I argue that Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* recall themes of loss and transience, continuing the artist's exploration of the theme of transience, as previously discussed by Adendorff (2017, 242). The book covers appear to be very old, covered in deliberately applied layers of green patina, recalling processes of decay and destruction. Through these works a reconsideration of the relationship between life and death is suggested, giving a narrative dimension to the work through the different layers of possible meaning recalled by the works and the representation of the effects of time on bronze—a material normally associated with permanence. The surfaces of the book sculptures appear to be scratched, with marks reminiscent of healing wounds or scars.

Life and death are memorialised by these book sculptures, with the possibility of a future still to be written suggested by the empty book covers. For Du Toit (2017), everyday objects, including books, serve as signs of the connection between life and death, emphasising the fragility of human life. The appearance of these book sculptures, however, is not reminiscent of ordinary books. The edges are rough and apparently torn and the bronze surfaces of the book covers look damaged and even punctured. The books appear to have been battered or even metaphorically wounded through life.

The sculptures give concrete form to the fragile but urgent and inescapable border between life and death. I argue that these sculptures are *memento mori*, recalling our own mortality and the transience of all things. The use of materials in Du Toit's work emphasises the temporary, transient nature of both the materials used and the events and lives recalled. The materials recall the passage of time, the stories of the lives of ordinary people, and the objects that serve as records of their lives. The processes of transformation of and interaction with the past, present, and future are complex, with only traces left behind of the lives of people now absent. These traces are figuratively made visible in Du Toit's work. The exploration of the themes of transience and mortality in Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* can be considered within the broader *vanitas* still-life tradition, specifically associated with the still-life paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Flanders and the Netherlands. A *vanitas* painting usually represents a collection of objects that are symbolic of the inevitability of death and the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures. Viewers are confronted with their own mortality through the emphasis on the effects of time and the processes of decay.

There is an increasing awareness that the inescapability of death is something that all living beings are subject to, as conceptualised by the American art historian and film critic Kaja Silverman in her 2009 book *Flesh of My Flesh*. Silverman (2009, 54) discusses relationality as the way in which people are connected by "an invisible thread" of life and the inevitability of death. A radical re-evaluation of the relationship between life and death is suggested. An ontological equality between people is created by this awareness of our own mortality, and also by an awareness that this fate is shared by all living beings, as discussed by Adele Nel (2012, 61). This awareness can lead to a discussion of human relationality or the acknowledgement of the relationship connecting all people through transience, a reminder of mortality expanded through the aesthetic experience. Fiona Robinson (2020, 11), building on the work of the feminist thinker and psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982), argues for an ethics of care that resists all hierarchies that divide people from others and even themselves. Authors such as Robinson (2020, 14) emphasise the connections between all living and non-living beings in the context of re-focusing on relationality.

## Re-story-ing Ecological Considerations

The concept of viewers creating their own varied narratives to fill in the gaps left by the absent pages in *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* can be compared to processes of "re-story-ation" as suggested by the agricultural ecologist, ethnobotanist, and activist Gary Nabhan (1997) and elaborated on by David Macauley (2010). Environmental issues are increasingly a central concern in contemporary art, as discussed by Alan Braddock and Renée Ater (2014, 4–5). Building on the work of Suzi Gablik (1993), Braddock and Christoph Irscher (2009) define ecologically oriented criticism, or "ecocriticism", as a form of inquiry that emphasises environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and environmental justice in cultural interpretation. Such "ecocritical" considerations can



broaden art-historical inquiry into even seemingly familiar works, revealing previously unnoticed complexities and connecting us through shared environmental concerns (Braddock 2009, 26). Bert Olivier (2007, 24) emphasises communication and collaboration as central to ecological art, suggesting that through storytelling, other, less harmful, relationships with the natural environment can be imagined.

Nabhan (1997, 319) invites the creation of new stories where old ones have been erased or forgotten, in order to move towards deeper ecological connections. Macauley (2006, 190), building on Nabhan (1997, 319), emphasises the need to historicise ideas around nature and relationships with material environments. This discussion attempts to reconcile a growing awareness of our own mortality and our fragile relationship with the natural world. According to Macauley (2006, 194), in order to understand environmental relationships, there is a need to be continually affected by and to experience the elements and, where possible, to share such experiences with others, including through stories. Similarly, Giovanna Di Chiro (2021, 823) has used the concept of re-story-ation in ecological criticism, by inviting participants to engage in “re-imagining and re-creating *new* stories of social and ecological restoration”. The process of re-story-ation, as further discussed by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, 336), enables a critical optimism when considering ecological issues; this could start to facilitate a coming to terms with anthropocentric<sup>3</sup> oppression and the imagining of new stories grounded in reciprocity or—to use a concept introduced by Donna Haraway (2016, 110)—“response-ability”. In line with Nabhan’s approach, for Macauley (2010, 5), an ecologically aware approach should be adopted towards “ecological restoration as a narrative and form of *re-story-ation*”, with people’s conceptualisation of and relationship with nature viewed in terms of a story in order to work towards the process of healing, even if that story is still unknown or even unknowable.

The role of storytelling in addressing the climate crisis is gaining attention (Bracke 2017, 5). Du Toit’s artworks take on added significance when interpreted from an ecocritical point of view. The weathered and damaged appearance of *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, together with the absence of pages, can be understood as a warning of the destruction of the environment that is taking place as a result of the Anthropocene. Damaged covers and the books’ aged appearance are visual metaphors for the destruction of the environment. The weathered appearance of the artworks could be an allusion to the fragility of human life in the wake of climate change caused by human disregard for the planet and its ecosystems. Referring to the theme of human fragility as explored in an artist’s book, Paton (2010, 8, 14) discusses the ephemeral characteristics

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3 The “Anthropocene” is a term introduced by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer ([2000] 2013) to refer to the geological epoch marked by the impact of human activities on the planet. Recent discussions of the Anthropocene recognise that the effects of the environmental crisis remain unevenly distributed (see, for example, Estok and Sivaramakrishnan 2014, 1). Swart (2021, 3) criticises the erasing of issues of race, class, and gender, and Haraway (2015, 159) suggests “Plantationocene”, “Capitalocene”, or “Chthulucene” as alternative terms.

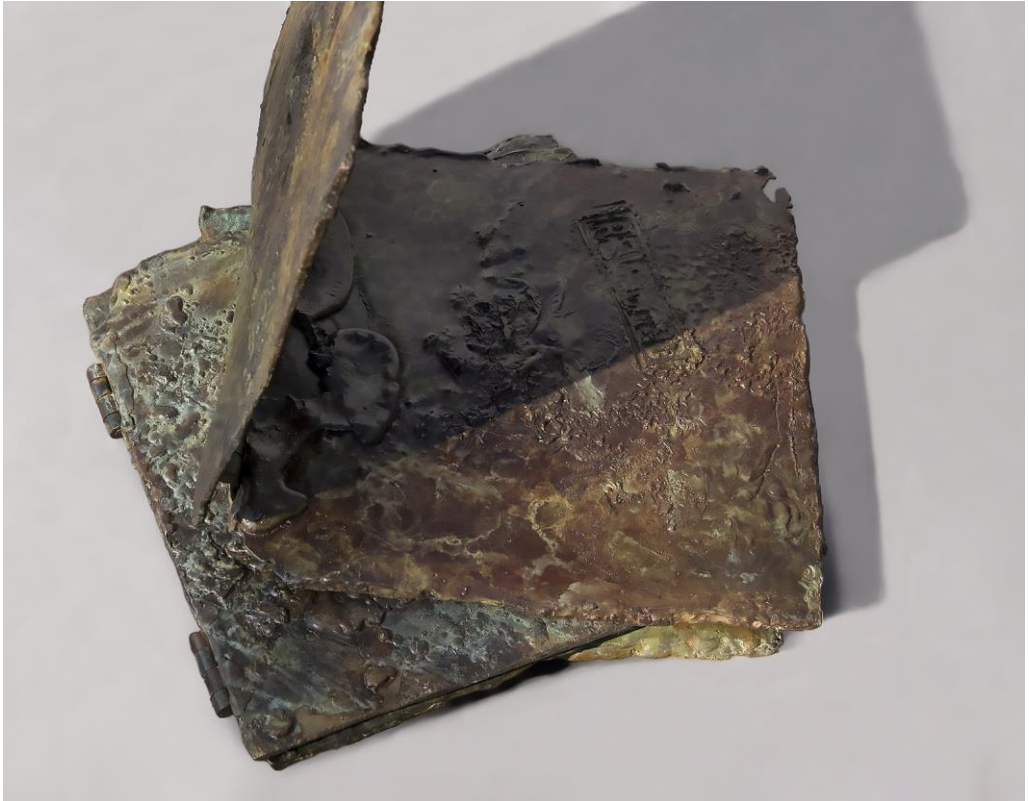
of artist's books and associations with decay as reminders of the individual experience of living as a precarious affair. In Du Toit's work, empty books become coded signifiers for something potentially ominous, despite their apparent banality.

Through a heightened awareness of transience, as created by Du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, the connection between people's experience of life as fragile and the destructive effects of human actions on the environment is highlighted. The destruction of nature is highlighted through ecological issues, such as pollution and the exploitative destruction of natural resources. Through the transformation of physical materials and the conceptual echoing thereof, Du Toit's artworks speak to both very personal and more general environmental narrative associations. Building on Macauley's (2010) suggestion of re-evaluating our relationship with nature through a process of re-story-ation, I propose that Du Toit's book sculptures offer a starting point for exploring our fragile relationship with the natural world. Through engagement with the artworks, viewers are urged to consider their own impact on nature, suggesting alternative narratives.

## Conclusion: A Playbook for Life

In this article I argued that Guy du Toit's *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II* (Figure 10) possess narrativity, depicting changes brought about by the passage of time and the workings of the elements, as characterised by the transition from one state to another—from past to present, life to death. This article draws inspiration from Macauley's (2006, 190) proposal that we consider narrative suggestions as a form of re-story-ation in order to reconsider ecological concerns more generally, and in this case the artworks under discussion specifically. This study contributes to the discussion on the ways visual storytelling can work towards re-visualising narratives, making untold stories visible, with specific reference to selected sculptures by Du Toit, an established South African sculptor known for his use of bronze, to explore temporal associations in those works. Unfinished narratives of transience and loss are constructed through the interaction between layered temporal and spatial associations embedded in the material of the sculptures and the in-between time and space created by the missing pages in these bronze books.

I contend that one of the narrative suggestions created by the works is the complex status of documentation during times of transition, including a heightened awareness of access to information in the current digital age; the works suggest the ephemerality of information that is discarded or lost. The book sculptures appear to be transformed, as if through the workings of the elements, with the patina on the surface of the bronze books opening narratives of life and death, renewal and mortality. In order to attempt to complete these narrative suggestions of what could have happened, the active viewer becomes a participant in the artworks. The anthropocentric perspective is challenged by confronting the relationships between both human and non-human agents, recalled through shared, if diverse, experiences of transience.



**Figure 10:** *Book of Play I* and *Book of Play II*, by Guy du Toit (2017). Bronze. (Photograph by Carla Crafford. Courtesy of the photographer and artist)

Although the works can be interpreted as playbooks, the pages on which one would expect to find the instructions are missing. Only scarred, scratched, and even punctured book covers are presented. As in life, the best instructions to follow are often uncertain or unknown. Although stories remain untold and people have been battered and bruised by the passage of time, there is a need to continue to survive and find better ways to interact in life and with the natural environment.

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