

**LERATO SHADI  
MAKHUBA. LIVE  
PERFORMANCE:  
9–16 DECEMBER**

**INSTALLATION  
UNTIL 4 JANUARY  
2015**

**iniva** ●



# LERATO SHADI MAKHUBA

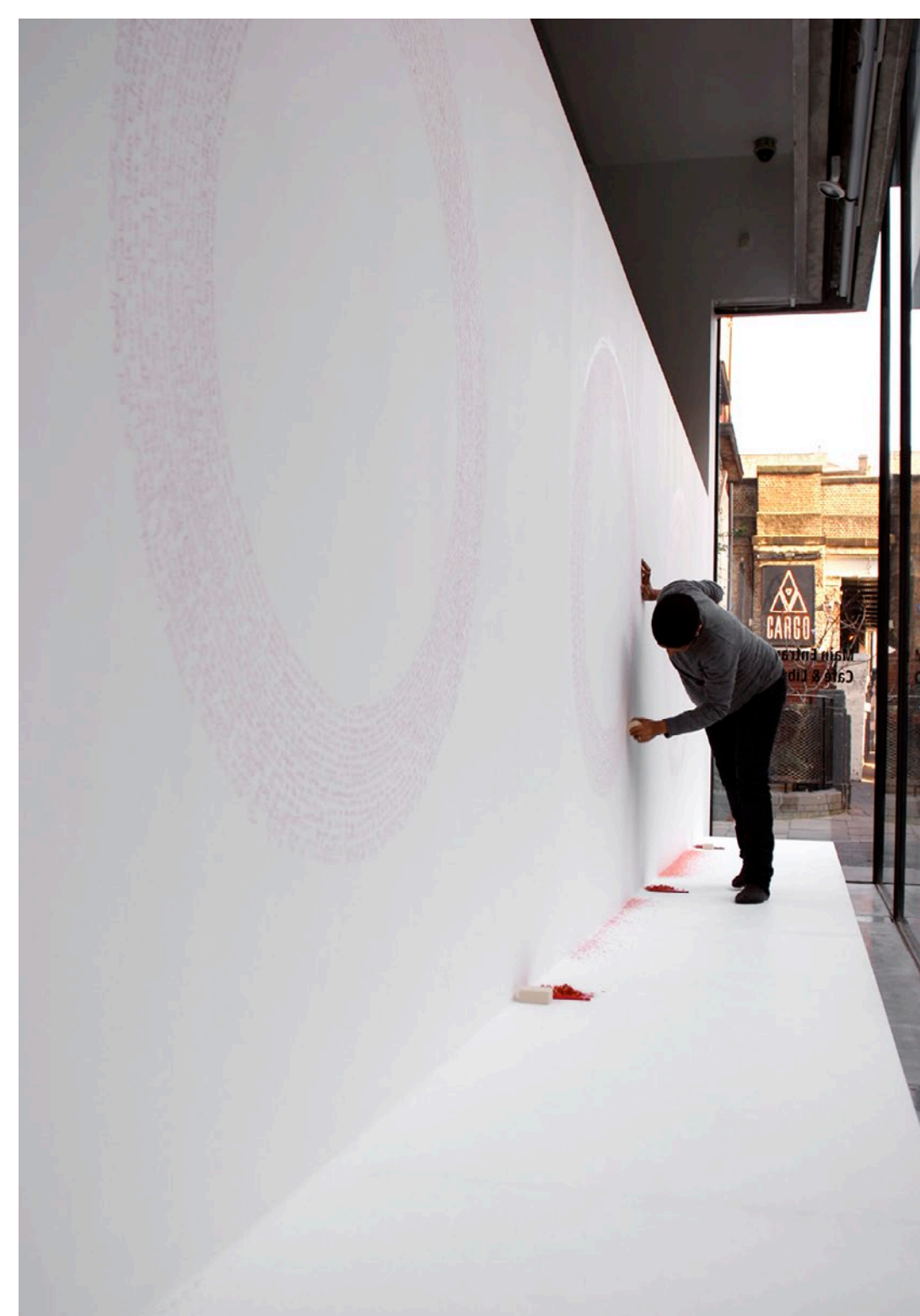
**CURATED BY TESSA JACKSON**

**INIVA** (*INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL VISUAL ARTS*)

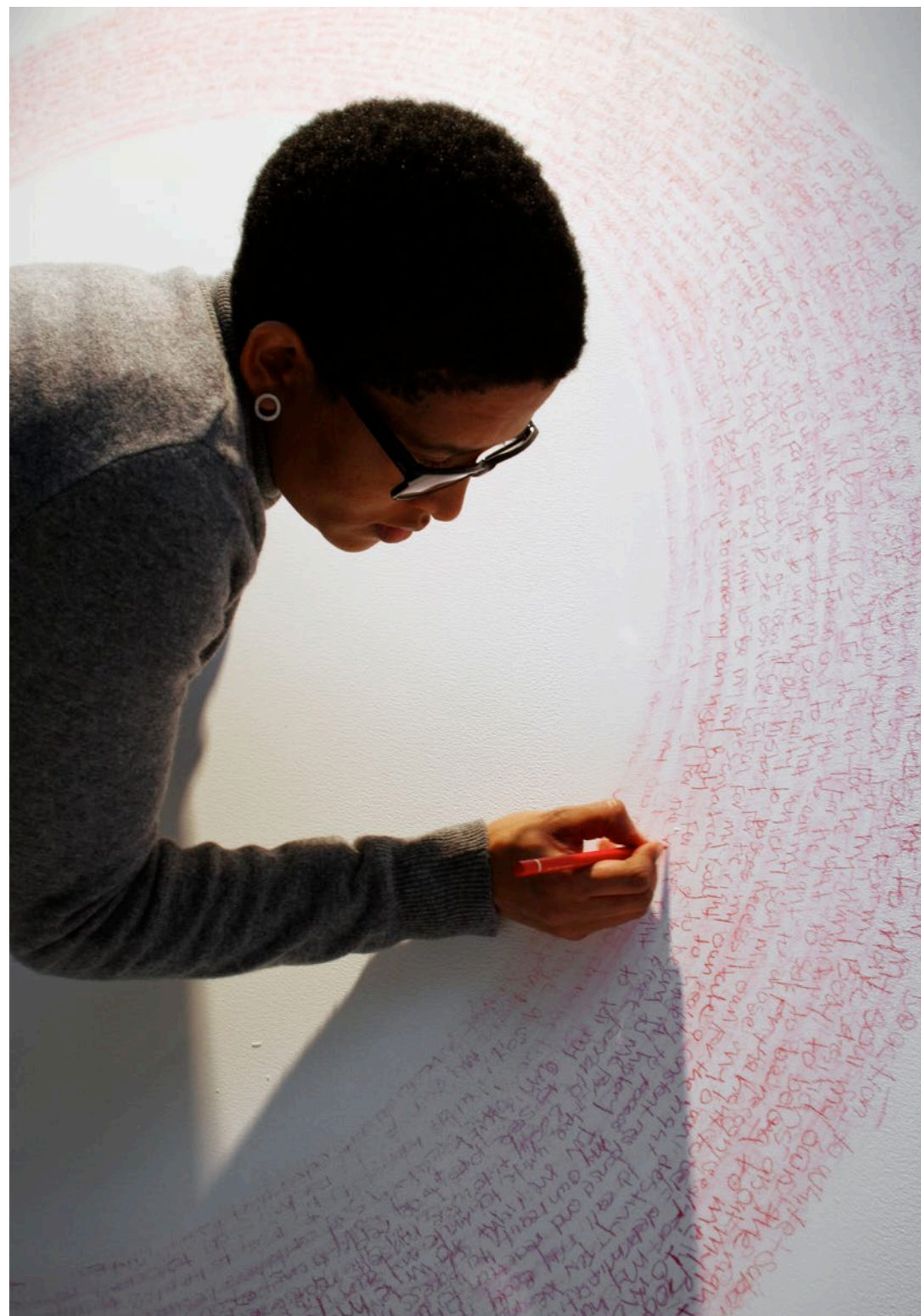
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*by Tessa Jackson*





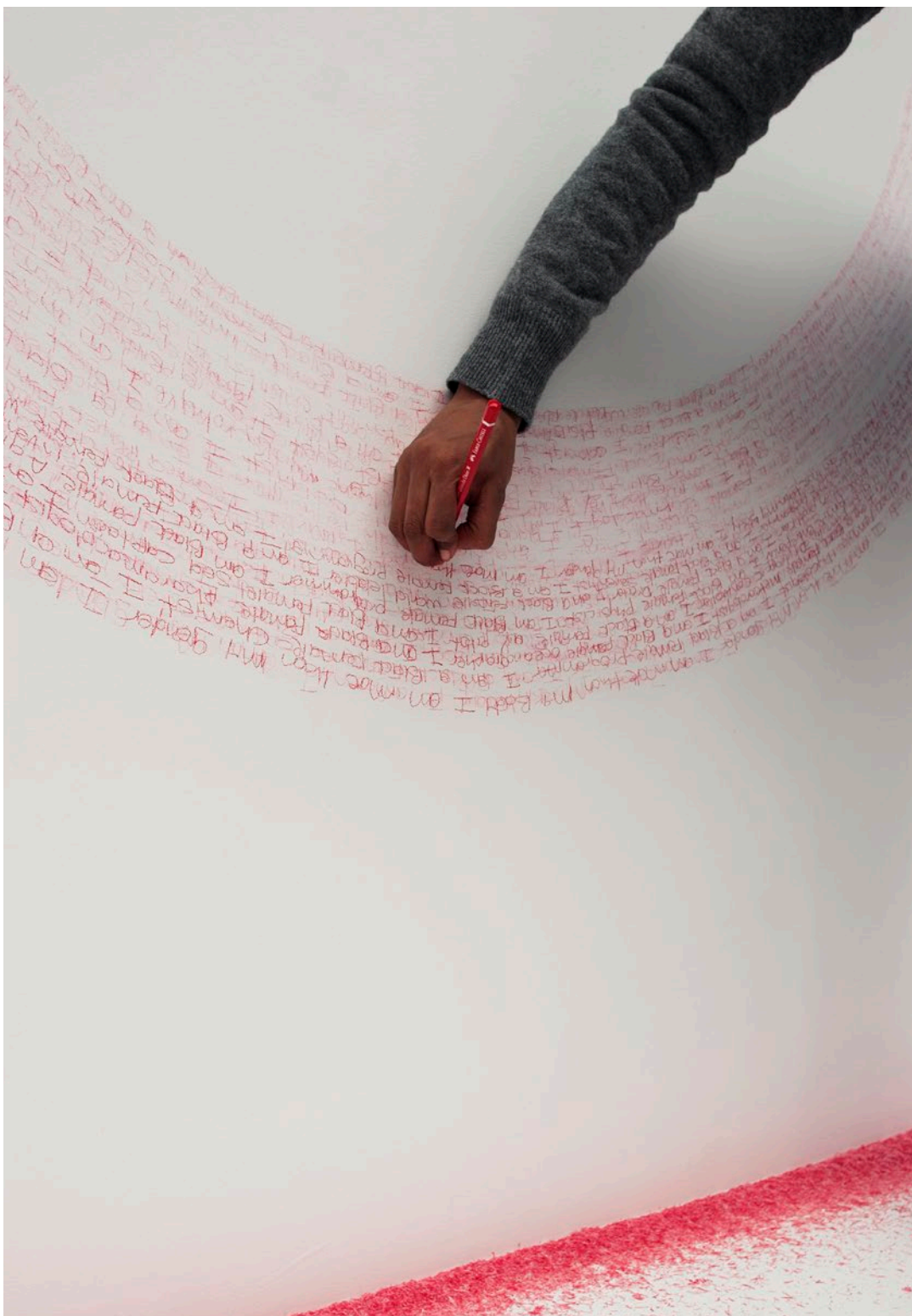


## INTRODUCTION

Lerato Shadi admits to using her own body to investigate 'the politics of transformation, or transition, from absence to presence, subject to object, inclusion, exclusion and vice versa'. In *Tlhogo* she crochets herself a brightly coloured cocoon of hand spun wool, climbs into it and lies on a plinth. As a spectator you are aware of her body, by its shape, its curves, but not its personality. Through its very stillness you know the subject is alive and breathing. This contradiction ends when at the close of the performance the artist pulls apart her self-made protective covering, and walks away.

Lerato Shadi has presented *Tlhogo* in a number of places including at Dak'Art 2012 (Senegal). Simultaneously Iniva was beginning to collaborate with Hospitalfield Arts, Scotland—a house, collection and estate where artists, curators and writers are supported through a range of creative residencies. Since 2000 they have worked in partnership with ROSL ARTS, offering annual visual arts scholarships and enabling Commonwealth artists to come to the UK to undertake a one-month residency and subsequently exhibit work in the UK. At the invitation of all three organisations Shadi spent September 2013 at Hospitalfield House, Arbroath developing new work.

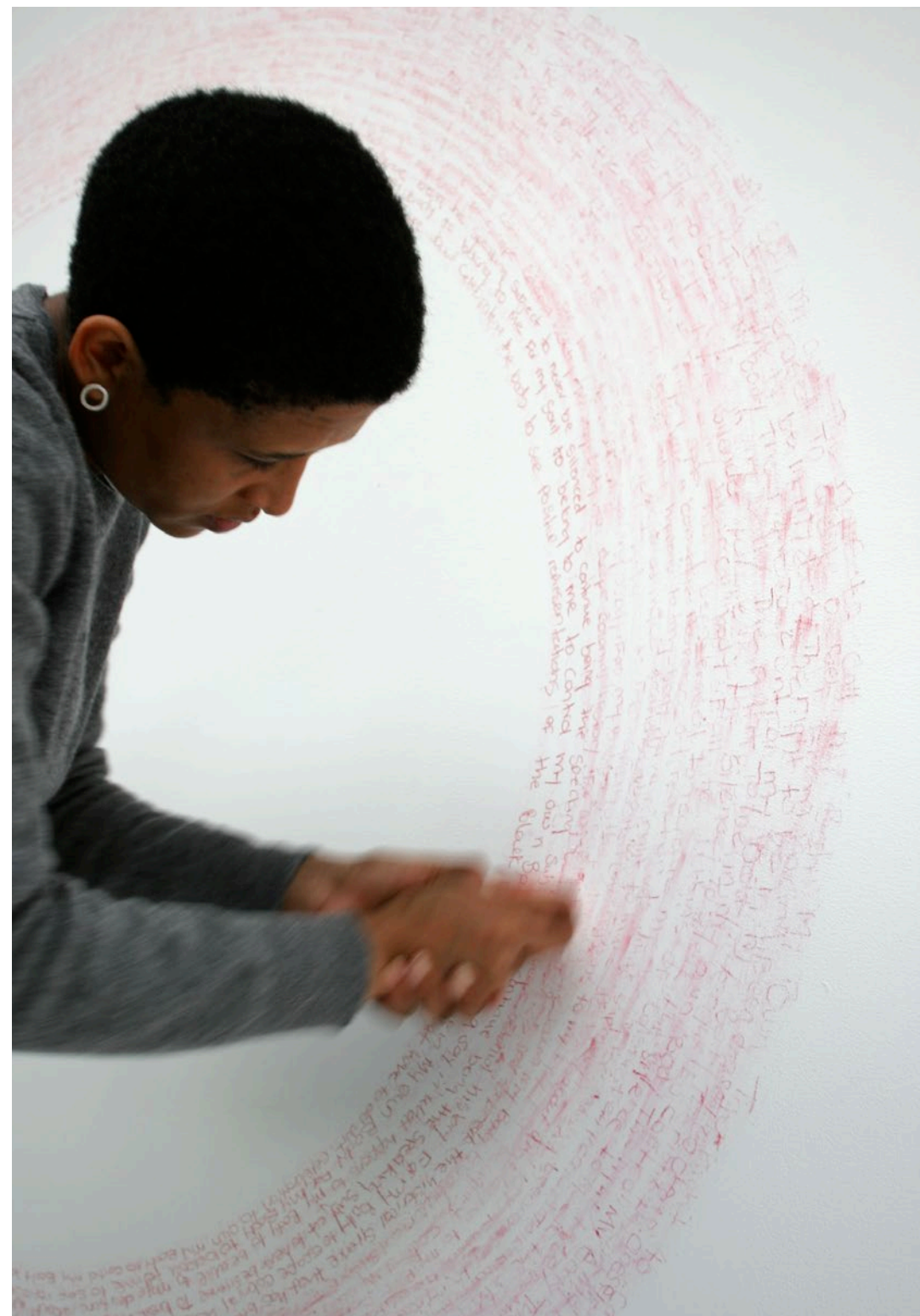
Over the years Iniva has invited artists in December / early January to 'speak to the street', using the large street facing window at Rivington Place for particular commissions and presentations. It seemed an ideal marriage and Lerato Shadi responded enthusiastically when the opportunity was offered. *Makhuba* is her first presentation in London and the UK, a new



work which continues her exploration of performance and the stage through which she makes the body both visible and invisible. She performs over six days from 9–16 December, writing and erasing on alternate days, thereafter leaving a trace of her daily actions.

*Makhuba* is a physical reverie on the future, the artist imagining a future for herself, connected to society and placing herself in the world. *Makhuba* questions whether one can project a different future for oneself and how in our imaginations we seek to live different lives.

What do you imagine as you look through the window?



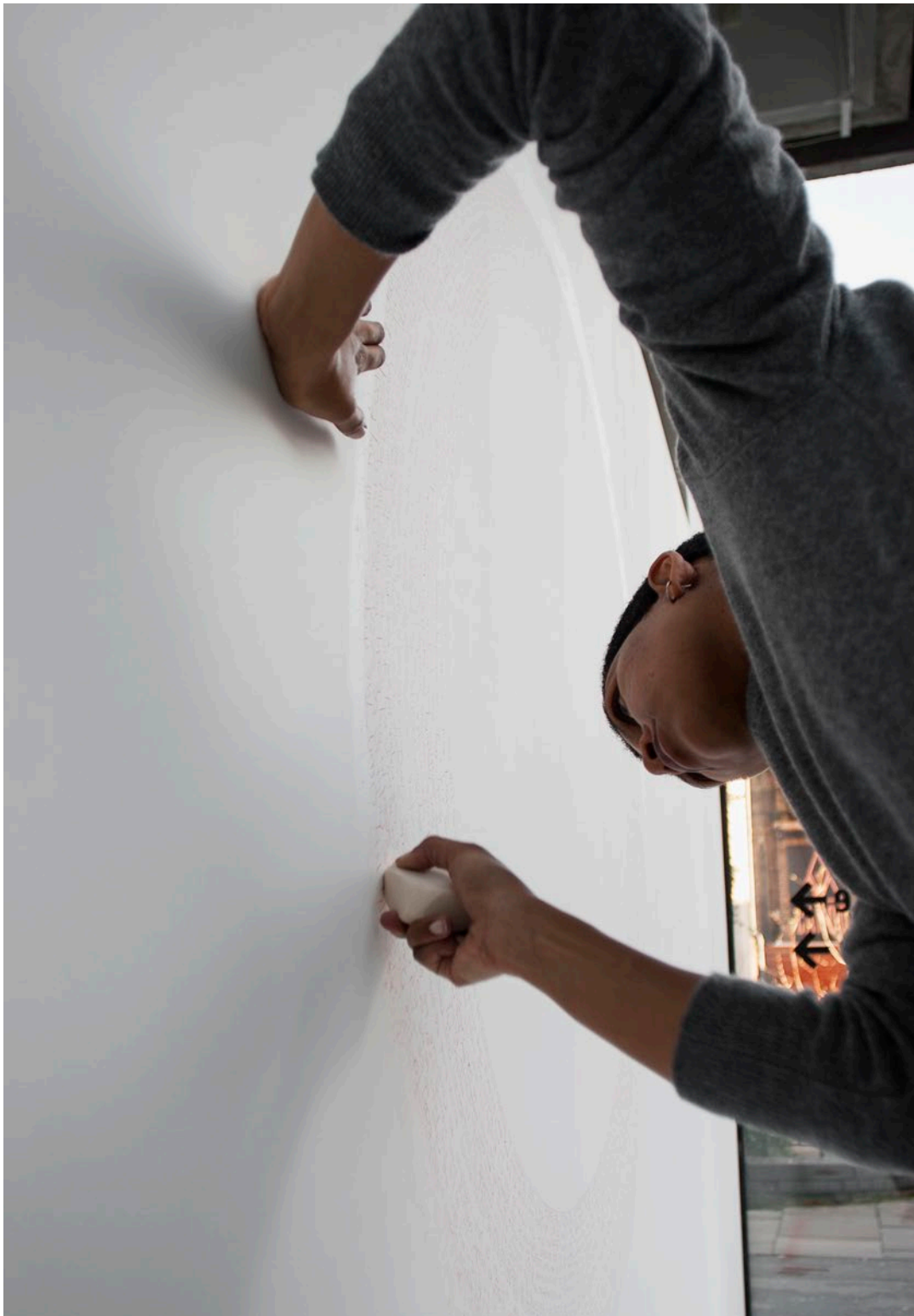


# PERFORMATIVE SPACE— PERSONAL AND PUBLIC

BY TESSA JACKSON  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, INIVA

Lerato Shadi is interested in the nature of performance, her work posits the question: what is a performance? She recognises from time to time performance in everyday life: people moving unconsciously in ways that make the body slip between being invisible and then visible. In her own practice she places herself in a performative space and by doing so, her body gains agency, disrupting history, stereotyping and assumption. Peggy Phelan, one of the founders of Performance Studies International, has put it another way that “performance art usually occurs in the suspension between the *real* physical matter of *the performing body* and the psychic experience of what it is to be embodied”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Phelan, Peggy, *Unmarked, the Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.





Shadi uses her own body as her medium, employing time and repetitive actions to create work that is both beautiful and compelling, yet alluding to the complexities of the world and man's inhumanity to man. Her performances are a way of placing herself in the world—as a woman, as a black woman, as a South African. She feels acute responsibility for how she portrays the black female body, reflecting on the ways it has been presented in the past, from Saartjie Baartman<sup>2</sup> to endless other examples of exploitation and humiliation. The juxtaposition between past and present becomes a leitmotif in her work.

*Seipone* (2012) is a companion piece to *Makhuba*, and was originally exhibited in Johannesburg and Berlin, where the artist moved back and forth on a long low plinth, in order to write her past onto a wall. Her actions were word by word, four hours of writing were followed by four hours of erasing. This process of creating and destroying continued for three, eight hour sessions over two days of the performance. She admits that the piece “was born out of a realisation that I am not in control of the archive of my own history and thinking how to reconcile the separation I felt from what was on record. I was doing this with the clear understanding that whoever is in control of the archive is the one that affects the perception and reality of the future. I aspire to continually subvert this by putting up new images and to think about ‘How does one

<sup>2</sup> Saartjie Baartman (before 1790–1815) was a Khoikhoi woman who was brought to Britain and France and exhibited in freak show attractions under the name of the ‘Hottentot Venus’. Hottentot was the name

for the Khoikhoi people at that time and is now considered an offensive term.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation between the artist and Laura Simpson of *Hospitalfields Arts*, 2014.



*Seipone*, performance at “alpha nova-kulturwerkstatt & Galerie futura”, Berlin, June, 2012

create oneself”.<sup>3</sup> Lerato Shadi is fully aware that one can never erase completely what has been written and so an attempt at expunging one’s biography becomes a pointless exercise. Yet she repeats the process of writing her biography three times, each time in the erasing, leaving some vestigial trace—whether in the outline of words on the wall or shaving of pencil and erasure below on the plinth.

Initially *Seipone* was a performance in front of a camera; her actions took the form of a private confession. Shadi wanted to be alone to be as honest as she could about herself. Afterwards audiences were invited to witness the evidence of her endeavours. Her purpose in exhibiting the trace was to encourage others to think about how they would write about



*Seipone*, performance at “alpha nova-kulturwerkstatt & Galerie futura”, Berlin, June, 2012

themselves. She admits her actions were a futile attempt to “erase scars”, to create the starting point for a different future for herself as much as others. “In thinking about my own history and creating images within a near future and I am re-imagining a new future”. She is aware that she writes within a pre-existing context, so she wants to reimagine the present as the future.

*Makhuba* then is her present—future. “It will be part manifesto and part flow of consciousness... It will be a narrative about the future... It’s something I often dwell on; the different lives you give your thoughts to when you speak, write or perform”. Lerato Shadi is someone who has experienced life in very different places. In doing so she is aware that you carry

yourself differently in these different environments. She grew up with her grand parents in Mahikeng, South Africa. In her late teens she moved to be with her mother in Jouberton, the township adjacent to Klerksdorp. Currently she lives in Berlin and is completing her Master of Fine Arts at the *Kunsthochschule Berlin Weissensee*. She instils her work with the sense of interrogation into self, belonging and positioning. She performs in gallery environments—excluding places, unwelcoming territory for a black body. Shadi plays with the concept of entitlement and privilege; her performances evidence that she has as much right to be there, to occupy space there, as anyone else.

Asked why and how she started devising performances, she describes her time as an undergraduate in Fine Art. In one assignment she was given a brief, through the medium of drawing, to express and interact with space. Her response was to draw three dimensionally with tape: she barricaded the entrance to the college library with barrier tape. Having had no experience of learning about art at school, and now being asked to express herself through drawing, she realised she had no confidence in her drawing skills and so was forced to find another way to express herself. The work in all its simplicity symbolised the obstacle course she had experienced in order to attend college; she intuitively found a way of representing her emotions in relation to space; the simple use of barrier tape was transformed into a loaded metaphor.

*Mmitlwa* (2010), a performance shot for video, uses tape again. The artist appears seated on top of a plinth and begins to wrap her left hand with masking tape. Rhythmically she continues to extend the tape across her body, covering, wrap-



*Mmitlwa*, video still, 2010. Director of photography: Gareth Fradgley

ping and restricting. Her free hand imprisons the rest of her body. When complete, she pauses before unwinding the tape, setting herself free amidst sounds of ripping and tearing. Over almost twenty six minutes Lerato Shadi binds our attention to her body, we are captured by her self-administered movements of binding and liberation. Beautifully shot but almost violent in its execution, *Mmitlwa* is more than symbolic of the ties that bind or the physical restrictions experienced; the work reflects the full complexity of society's limitations and distortions—culturally, socially and politically.

In *Tlhogo* (2010), presented during a residency in Bern, Switzerland, the artist takes these ideas further. She pre-prepares herself a crocheted cocoon of richly coloured wool,



*Tlhogo*, performance at Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, April, 2011

made to fit her body snugly. Again the performance takes place on a white plinth and once she is within her sheath, she proceeds to sew herself in. Trapped, invisible and vulnerable she becomes an object in the gallery. For more than several hours and for many visitors the artist is absent, she is a sculptural form. She comes alive only to those who take time to detect her breathing. The work draws to a close as she unravels enough of her body bag so she can release herself; the cocoon is left abandoned and on display.

*Tlhogo* means *head* in Setswana; all Shadi's works are titled in her mother tongue. The translation does not immediately seem to connect to the work, begging the question as to how she conceives her work. She explains her process is



*Tlhogo*, performance at Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, April, 2011

similar to that of an egg and a bird. You do not immediately make the connection between the shelled object and the feathered vertebrate, but there is a process where intellectual thought and questioning are given visual representation rather than literal translation. The naming in Setswana encourages some of the meaning to be lost in translation; she plays on the idea of inclusion and exclusion. Again she brings her cultural specificity into the gallery space, rural meets urban, black meets white, invisible becomes visible.

She also likens her working process to “watching paint dry”. The transformation from abstract thought to object takes time, for artist and audience alike. She urges us not to expect easy translations. *Tlhogo* started as a work where she invited seven people to spend time together, bound and covered by a pre-tensile fabric. Without knowing each other, all found it a difficult prospect. How do we live side by side with our different backgrounds? *Tlhogo* as a work emerged exploring how she felt foreign in a gallery space, how spaces have social and political associations, how environments can exclude and include. In order to negotiate such connotations, she gives herself a layer of protection, a covering in order to make herself feel safe. Yet she realises as a black woman she is unused to feeling safe in white spaces. The foreignness of the space is more psychological and ideological.

Shadi’s work while reflecting the self also deals with an outside reality. Although currently studying in Berlin, it is South Africa that is imbued in her work. She cites Melissa V. Harris Perry’s and World War II cognitive psychology field dependence research. Referred to as the Crooked Room, these

studies show “how individuals locate the upright in a space. In one study, subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically. Some perceived themselves straight only in relation to their surroundings. To the researchers’ surprise some could be tilted by as much as 35 degrees and report that they were perfectly straight, simply because they were aligned with images that were equally tilted”.<sup>4</sup> In contrast some were able to stand upright however titled the images around them were. Harris Perry uses the analogy in respect of black women in America, where she feels they have to try to stand upright amidst the race and gender stereotyping of society. “Bombarded by the warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion”.<sup>5</sup> Lerato Shadi regularly reflects on the angle of her standing, and what for her is upright. As a black woman, she often feels an outsider in her own country. The political shaping of society from well before 1948 to 1994 is still present, and still distorts the environment that Shadi regards as *home*. Her work is an exploration of this condition, of the lived experience through the body; she is trying to identify the vertical in the room.

*Se Sa Feleng* (2010) is a 3 hour performance where the artist uses her body to weave an infinity sign ( $\infty$ ) through a cage. The cage is made up of twelve blocks, each 45 cm by

<sup>4</sup> Harris Perry, Melissa V, *Sister Citizen, Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.



*Se Sa Feleng*, performance at “GoetheonMain”, Johannesburg, 2010. Photo: Philip Schedler

45 cm, just big enough to slide her body through. Dressed in white, a flash of colour is provided by a red taper that comes out of her back. This crocheted umbilical cord gradually becomes wound around the centre of the structure, by Shadi’s rhythmical movements of moving through the cage. The wool becomes the visible centre and heart of the space and its soft organic nature contrasts with the hard rigidity of its container. The performance evidences movement and expression, but her body has to negotiate relentlessly its way through, and around, her environment. The simple but dramatic aesthetics of the work is this artist’s signature, the symbolism is rendered more powerful. Her work is not agitprop but a fine distillation of lived experience, of dealing with an outside reality.

Shadi hopes for a mental response to a physical act. Her audience for a more recent work *Mosako Wa Nako*, (2014), performed at the *Neue Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.)*, had to interact with her work. Her preparation commenced some ten days before and at the opening of the exhibition Shadi presented herself on a plinth in the middle of the gallery. She sat and continued to work on a width of crocheted material. This long red fabric scroll is an act of labour, of daily toil. It stretches out before the artist, forcing the public into divided groups, making them decide to cross the crafted line if they wish to move on unimpeded. Shadi describes the crocheting as a “scroll” of indecipherable writing, a representation of silent narratives. It

is to be walked upon, it is to be felt; “the performance explores how history and time project their own subjective narrative on an object”. Her thin red carpet, full of subjective projections, becomes an exploration of “how context and its presence or absence in the form of the performing body, transforms meaning”. The dramatic nature of colour—black, white and red, once again distils the complex readings of the piece. The involvement of the audience is a new departure, an act of wanting to share her thinking, her constant questioning of an object in space, of the body occupying a place, and so changing itself and its surroundings.



*Mosako Wa Nako*, performance and installation at “n.b.k.”, Berlin, Mai, 2014

Lerato Shadi, apart from her activity prior to making *Tlhogo*, has not yet embarked upon working with other performers. For the moment she is content to interact with her audience. Some works are made in front of a camera and then presented, some are performed live and then left as a trace. As with performance work in general, documentation becomes part of the work—it ends up representing the performance. Currently she is studying *public space, space strategy* and her course is interdisciplinary as she wanted to put herself in the way of other influences; she works alongside architects, activists, artists rather than studying performance. This is part of her preoccupation with herself in the world and how she visually represents herself. In *Matsogo* (2013), a 5 minute video work, we only see her hands. She crumbles a slice of chocolate cake, her hands breaking it down and then pressing it back together again with her fingers until she has reshaped the material back into a triangular slice. The backdrop to her working hands is a page of a financial newspaper, stocks and shares are juxtaposed with manual labour. Two songs from different Setswana folk tales act as the soundtrack—the words are mingled, subverting their original narratives and offering a number of stories bound up with “belief and disbelief, trust and betrayal”. As she moves from destruction to reconstruction, Shadi transforms desirable food into material and object. Nothing is added or taken away, but its very materiality is altered, same but different. Its consumability is undermined, its function as cake is lost. Once again the notion of transformation, the idea that material and objects are mutable, reoccurs. Once again Shadi employs simple materials to reflect upon society's influence on



*Matsogo*, video still, 2013



*Sugar & Salt*, video still, 2013

who we are, and how it can change our character. The symbolic use of “let them eat cake”, financial power and the simplicity of manual labour allows so many readings and returns the work to the viewer.

Shadi’s exploration of reality in relation to self is progressed work by work. One work often leads to another. *Sugar & Salt* (2013) is perhaps the most directly personal as unusually she involves another person, her mother. It is a 6 minute HD video and features mother and daughter licking sugar and salt respectively from each other’s tongues. Behind them is a large cloth with an ornamental pattern, giving the scene perspective and framing the two generations together. The work is both poignant and humorous as they respond to the grains

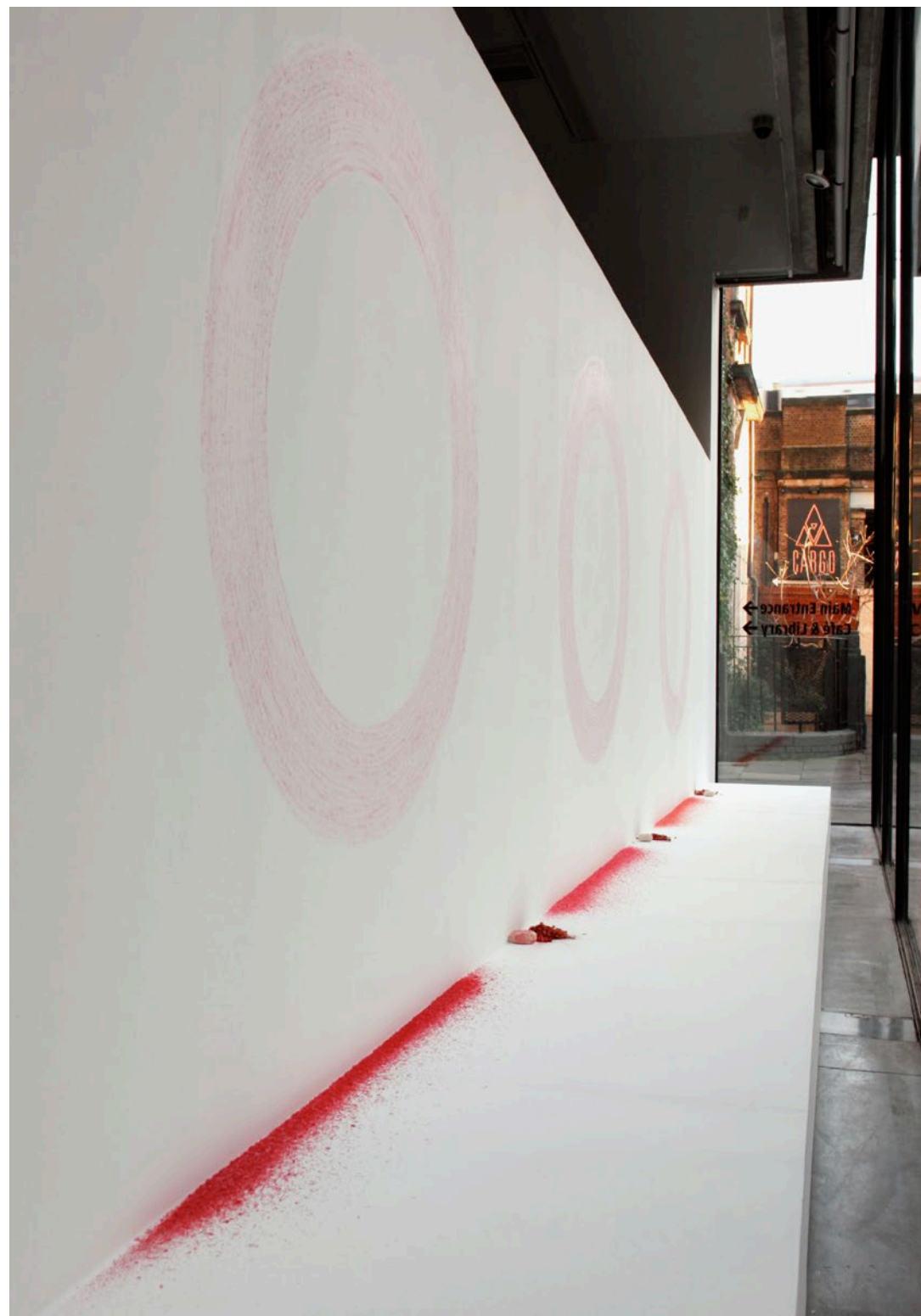
on their muscular hydrostats, a structure used to move and masticate food with its own hydraulic action. The allusion to wagging tongues is replaced by notions of unconditional love, irrespective of the effect of one upon another. The fabric is a family item, an object passed down; the chemical reaction of the salt and sugar is also something being passed from one to the other. This questions the chemistry between family blood. Here as viewer, the audience becomes spectator and observer. They must reflect on their own relationship and wonder about the artist’s.

Lerato Shadi, throughout her work, questions what performance is. Some pieces are presented live, others are re-presented publically. Sometimes the camera is her only audience. Her method of presentation is always intrinsic to its meaning. She moves between notions of the past (recorded) and the present (live) and orchestrates carefully where the audience fits in. She makes work for herself but sometimes as in *Tlho-go*, *Se Sa Feleng* or *Mosako Wa Nako* an audience completes it. She is clearly aware of the debates around performance and audiences, but physically as well as intellectually her approach is aligned to that of Peter Brook where he describes theatre as “one in which there is only a practical difference between actor and audience, not a fundamental one”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space*, 1968.







## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## STUART HALL LIBRARY

The *Stuart Hall Library* provides an extensive bibliography of reference materials and resources relating to this exhibition. The bibliography is available in print as well as through the Library website, and a display of these materials will be available in the Library throughout the exhibition. The *Stuart Hall Library* is open: Tue–Fri, 10am–1pm, 2–5pm.

To make an appointment phone +44 (0)20 7749 1255 or email: [library@iniva.org](mailto:library@iniva.org). You can also plan your visit by accessing the Library catalogue online at [www.iniva.org](http://www.iniva.org)

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