

PROCEEDINGS

of

Booknesses:

Taking Stock of the Book Arts in South Africa

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| 1 KEYNOTE SPEAKERS | |
| Sarah Bodman, UK | 5 |
| Robbin Ami Silverberg, USA | 18 |
| 2 COLLOQUIUM PAPERS* | |
| Inge Bruggeman, USA | 38 |
| Katja Gentric, FR | 52 |
| Jonah Sack, ZA | 65 |
| Sue-Pam Grant, ZA | 76 |
| Cheryl Penn, ZA | 84 |
| Fabian Saptouw, ZA | 91 |
| Keith Dietrich, ZA | 101 |
| Ilka van Schalkwyk, ZA | 115 |
| Jane Taylor, ZA | 124 |
| Ann Thurmann-Jajes, GER | 145 |
| David Paton, ZA | 154 |
| Mary Austin, USA | 164 |
| Mark Attwood, ZA | 172 |
| Mandy Conidaris and Malcolm Christian, ZA | 177 |
| Heléne van Aswegen, ZA | 185 |
| John Roome, ZA | 193 |
| Jo-Ann Chan, ZA | 217 |
| Franci Greyling and Wildrich Fourie, ZA | 228 |
| Terence Fenn, ZA | 238 |
| Mary Minicka, ZA | 249 |
| Riette Zaaiman, ZA | 271 |
| Julia Charlton, ZA | 279 |
| Elizabeth James, UK | 288 |
| Paul van Capelleveen, NED | 297 |

3 ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| Kim Berman, ZA | 310 |
| Mark Attwood, ZA | 313 |
| Nonkululeko Chabalala, ZA | 317 |
| Siya Masuku, ZA | 321 |

* These 24 papers are a selection of the 44 papers which were presented at the colloquium

Artistic Texts

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is artistic practices that cite books as their source/inspiration, but would not traditionally be included in a list of artist's books or book arts. The primary reason being their 'bookishness' is often overshadowed by their aesthetic qualities that do not conform to the traditional materiality associated with the artist's book. These works would not have been generated without the originary textual referent. The artists that will be referred to in this paper are Pierre Fouché, Benjamin Stanwix and myself, Fabian Saptouw.

The element that links all three works is the rematerialisation of text, often in ways that renders the originary content inaccessible. The artwork draws the reader's attention to the visual possibilities of text¹, without reverting to a sequence of characters that can be 'read' or a narrative that can be understood in the traditional sense. All three artists present a cautious engagement with the nature of language and the reader's assumptions about its presumed ease of access. In Fouché's work the text is encoded into the stitches of a textile, in Stanwix's a biblical text becomes progressively illegible and in my own production the transcription and erasure of the text shifts the materiality of Derrida's publication.

The Artist's Book

Thoughts become liquid, words are like things. Texts get broken down into sentences, or even words or letters, floating in a sea of repetition. (Philippi, 1999:161)

The artist's book is a complex concept with a lengthy historical tradition and a wide range of contemporary manifestations. Chappell Duncan lists various book-related manifestations that are linked to the concept of the artist book: the altered book, the anti-book, the artist's publication,

¹ These artists are not working in a vacuum and are working within the context of other South African artists that have strong ties to the notion of the artist's book. Relevant artists are individuals like Colin Richards, Willem Boshoff and Wim Botha who have worked with the link between text, image and objecthood for decades.

bookwork, book objects, the artist's book and the fine press artist's book (2003). Each term has a list of elements that validate its classification and these elements often include and exclude specific objects produced under the umbrella term of the 'Artist's book'. This attempt to draw clearer lines between the various cultural products viewed, discussed and collected as artist's books featured in the *2007 Action/Interaction: Book/Arts Conference* and Joanna Drucker's *The century of artists' books*. What is clear at this stage is that there are multiple definitions and opinions of what constitutes an artist's book, but also that the term allows for some ambiguity and experimentation.

The specific grouping of artist's books relevant to this paper's focus area is altered books; which are usually visually or structurally reminiscent of traditional bindings. Sometimes an actual book is altered or alluded to through a material or symbolic reference. Two highlights of this tradition are *A Humument: A treated Victorian novel* (1970)², created by Tom Phillips and Marcel Broodthaers *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance)* (1969). The first is an altered book created by reworking the W H Mallock's 1892 novel *A Human Document*. The latter is a republication of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé's text *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1914), with all textual content replaced by black stripes. While these examples may seem dated, they have set the tone for decades of reimagined texts within the framework of the artist's book³. Both artist's books interact in a very direct manner with the original content of the primary source. Phillips adds layers of colour, tone, line and shape to create a new narrative from the existing text. Broodthaers creates a book that responds to the visual quality of Mallarmé's typographically complex text. Each work responds to the specific characteristics of the primary reference and are in dialogue with that source. This element is what Paton, citing Bakhtin, refers to as artist's books broad dialogism that operates across time and space (Paton, 2012). This allows a double discourse in a novel between author and character, and in the context of this paper the author and an artist.

In 'Towards a theoretical underpinning of the book arts' Paton presents a critical framework that accounts for the intellectual value of artist's books. Paton argues that the "self-consciousness", "discursive perceptivity" and the "self-reflexivity" of the utterance should be gauged in relation to

² During November 2010 a digital version, A Humument App for the iPad, was released by Phillips

³ The artist's book also has a specific place within the context of collections, as there are connoisseurs and book collectors alike that keenly collect the wide range of items produced as artist's books.

the theoretical underpinning of the notion of the book (2012:2). This text by Paton provides an excellent entry point into the discussion of an expanded definition of the artist's book.

This is especially valuable because the artworks briefly mentioned earlier in the text, admittedly do not present their 'Booknesses' when encountered in an exhibition space. These texts materialize as eraser shavings, cotton lace or progressively illegible text. My argument is that the book, acts as a source material, and that the artwork should be regarded as a re-materialisation of that text. This is because the artworks would lack their current conceptual base were it not for the textual reference. To gain a better understanding of this is it important to engage each artwork in more detail, but first it is important to clarify the type of relationship I am presenting as the author/artist coupling.

At this stage it is useful to refer to Desa Philippi's discussion of the links between words & images by referencing Bohumil Hrabal's novel *Prilis hlucna samota (Too loud a solitude)*. Hant'a, the main character, has a fascinating relationship with the cultural artifacts that surrounds him. In the novel his primary function is compacting waste paper and censored books, he regards his true calling as being an artist and a custodian of the past. His bales of waste paper conceals items we would regard as culturally valuable. When he creates a bale, he secretly inserts an open text, a fragment of a poem or frames the bale with a critically acclaimed historical painting. He claims with some sense of triumphant failure:

"Besides, I'm the only one on earth who knows that deep in the heart of each bale there's a wide open *Faust* or *Don Carlos* . . . I am the only one on earth who knows which bale has Goethe, which Schiller, which Hölderlin, which Nietzsche. In a sense, I am both artist and audience, but the daily pressure does me in, tires me out . . . (Hrabal in Philippi, 1999: 160)

Each bale processed through the hydraulic press is unique in some capacity. When considering his own retirement, he thinks fondly of having his own hydraulic press and continuing his life's work. (Philippi, 1999) Given his 35 years of service it is understandable that he has developed an intimate relationship to these texts, images and secrets hidden in many of the bales of waste paper.

Conceptually this links with the idea that the artist's that is inside that process has a particular relationship to the text and that is materialized through these works. The reader might not access

to the physical text, but what we have is the artist's reading of the text. Joanna Drucker links this kind of slippage between the "telling and the told" to the "literal presentation of information on the plane of discourse and the production of a story through a process of enunciation" (Drucker, 2008: 2). In viewing these works we witness the artist's translation of the primary source as a fragment of the originary textual referent.

The interventions by Fouche, Stanwix and myself are enunciations that run parallel to the source material. When we engage these artworks, we do so by virtue of a self-reflexive process of crafting that speaks back to the source material. The reference echoes in the viewers thought patterns when we read through, or cannot read through the artworks. When we engage these artworks there is thus a dual narrative that is activated during our interaction. It is crucial to note that if the artist had selected another text the content of that narrative would have been different but the mechanism of interaction would remain similar.

Artistic Texts

His Foam White Arms (2012-15) [Fig.1] by Pierre Fouché is a 6,4m cotton braid lace scroll. According to Fouché there is a "queered fragment of Crosbie Garstin's epic poem 'The Ballad of the Royal Ann' [is] encoded in the design of the pattern. The text fragment relates a sailor's seduction by the sea as personified by an alluring young man" (Fouché, 2015:Online). In both the original and Fouché's version of the tale, the seduction leads to death by drowning.

Fouché's choice to take the text, and encode it through an extremely complex process into a series of stitches to create a lace scroll is an evocative strategy to render text in formats that are familiar but dissonant with our preconceived notions of narrative. The choice to render the text into a lace pattern speaks to Fouché's competency with the craft, but also a long-standing tradition of that craft. It is an extremely time consuming process that requires precision and focus in order to create the correct pattern sequences.

The work also refers to the context of the original text by basing the pattern for the continuous edging on the shape and configuration of the frill shark's teeth. In addition the work also links back to the history of the written word by taking the form of a scroll. There is thus a dual process at play in linking the artwork to dated methods of making meaning and making material.

Another work that features the act of transcription, although without the complexities of encoding is my project, *On Writing and Difference - Jacques Derrida* (2015-16) [Fig. 2]. This is a transcription of the textual content of Jacques Derrida's text *On Writing and Difference* using HB pencils, Steadler Mars Plastic erasers and A4 examination pads. Pages were transcribed and erased in sequence and the residue was carefully collected for presentation in the gallery space. The erased text is reworked with an eraser and combined with the contents of the rest of the pages to create thicker tendrils of eraser shavings. The eraser shavings are presented as either a pile or as irregular block consisting of the arranged eraser shavings in varying widths on a flat surface.

The transcription process duplicates the textual component of the source material, but the erasure of the text counters that process. The strips of moulded eraser shavings contain the carefully transcribed text, but it simultaneously renders the text inaccessible.

Given the labour intense nature of transcribing the text, its subsequent erasure has been critiqued as a futile gesture. To my mind this is similar to the compacting of the waste paper in Hrabal's novel, it's primarily about the intimacy of the individualized experience of the text through the process of writing.

The focus of the production process is the duplication of a pre-existing item or idea that is rearticulated through a time and labour intense process. The intensity of my process doesn't quite match Fouché's 470 hours of labour, but the joy of process is indeed shared. In addition the dedication to crafting artworks in this manner, engages the way time is perceived and experienced by the artist/viewer. The compression and expansion of time through this interaction is crucial to engaging the work. The final work to be discussed deals with the transformation of one specific section of text, although it reads mostly as a compression, or a more accurately a distortion.

White. But First, The Weather (2016) [Fig. 3] is the result of the consecutive google translations of the Babel story in 103 languages. The first page features a few paragraphs of text, but after the progressive translations of the text the project ends with only a handful of words. The work was presented in the gallery space as a wall based installation of 105 Inkjet prints. The first and last panels are printed in English: the remaining 103 prints each feature a different language. The project utilizes all 103 languages supported by Google translate and includes Arabic,

Chinese, Indonesian, Nepali, Russian, Tajik, Xhosa, Zulu and many more. Each print lists the language at the top and the translation in the text below. The final print reads:

English:

White

But first the weather

There is a fascinating link between the artwork as a communicative gesture and the Biblical narrative that revolves around language, power and communication. The shift from a single language to multiple languages in the famed biblical narrative is echoed by the method Stanwix has utilized to render the work. The 103 languages also divide the viewers according to their proficiency in each language, and some readers remain reliant on the flawed translation technology to gain access to the text.

While the text does not fully articulate the entirety of the biblical tome it was sourced from, it does materialize the selected text in a unique way. It is an embodiment of the narrative, and it communicates the most essential part of the narrative by visually manifesting the text in a way that echoes the content of the text. This clearly links to Drucker's discussion of the slippages that occurs between the telling and the told.

Stanwix states:

“Any process of translation reveals the inevitable failure of attempts to accurately reconstruct a foreign text or idea, but also the potential productivity of this failure – the mistranslation. This tension is replicated in the work of creating images, where there is often a great distance between the image intended, the image made, and the image apprehended by the viewer.” (2016:2)

Thus there are many things that are lost in translation and not just in this text. There are many slippages between the various languages, but also between the text and the textile and the codex and the eraser shavings.

Conclusion

The paper has explored the value of engaging artistic practices through the framework of the artist's book. This provides the opportunity to critically engage the discourse surrounding the nature of the book and to create a platform for engaging artworks operating in this expanded definition of artist's books.

This is an invaluable tool for engaging artworks that function at the periphery of the field, and draws on an already established theoretical frameworks to further that discussion. The text has argued for the re-examination of the boundaries between art and artist's books, by thinking critically how we present each for discussion.

Each artwork has a very specific relationship with the original source material, in this paper that relationship is not framed as a copy/original, but rather a dialogue with the original text. This dialogue is what these specific artists have utilized to engage the existing books in order to create new artist's books.

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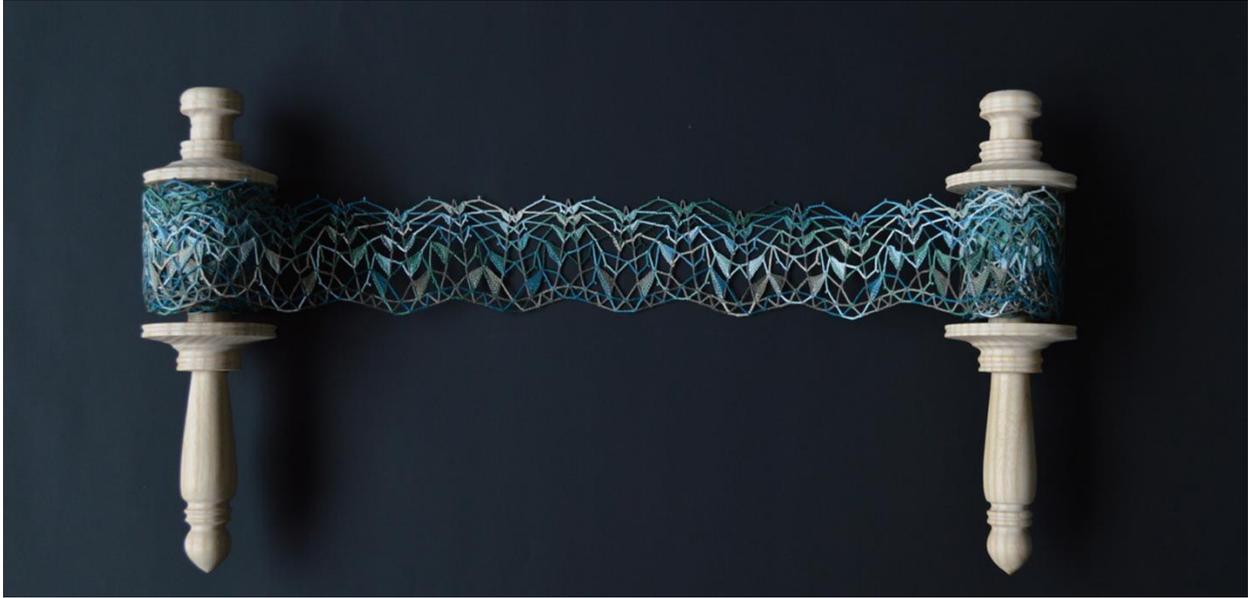


Fig. 1. Pierre Fouché, 2012-15. *His Foam White Arms*. Cotton, 57 x 640 cm

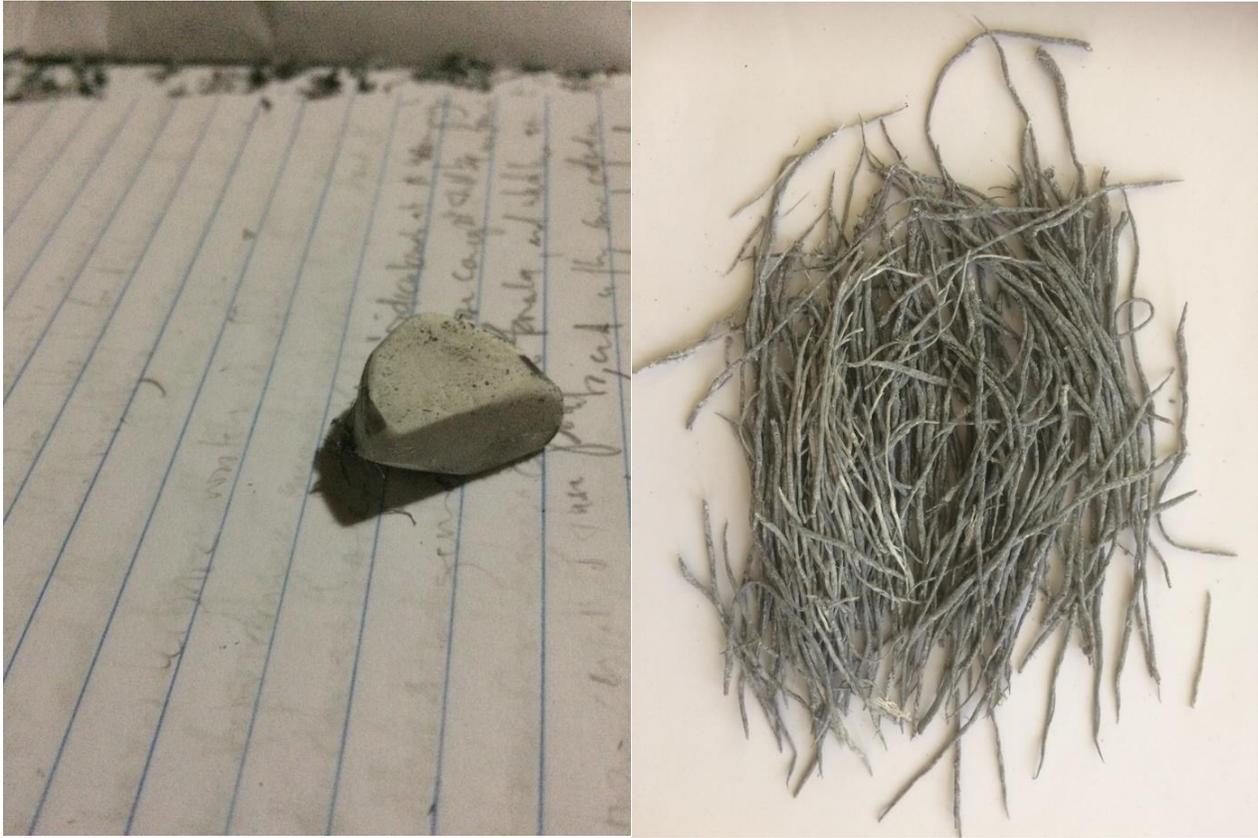


Fig 2. Fabian Saptouw, (2015-current). *On Writing and Difference*. Pencil, Eraser shavings, examination pad. Dimensions Variable.

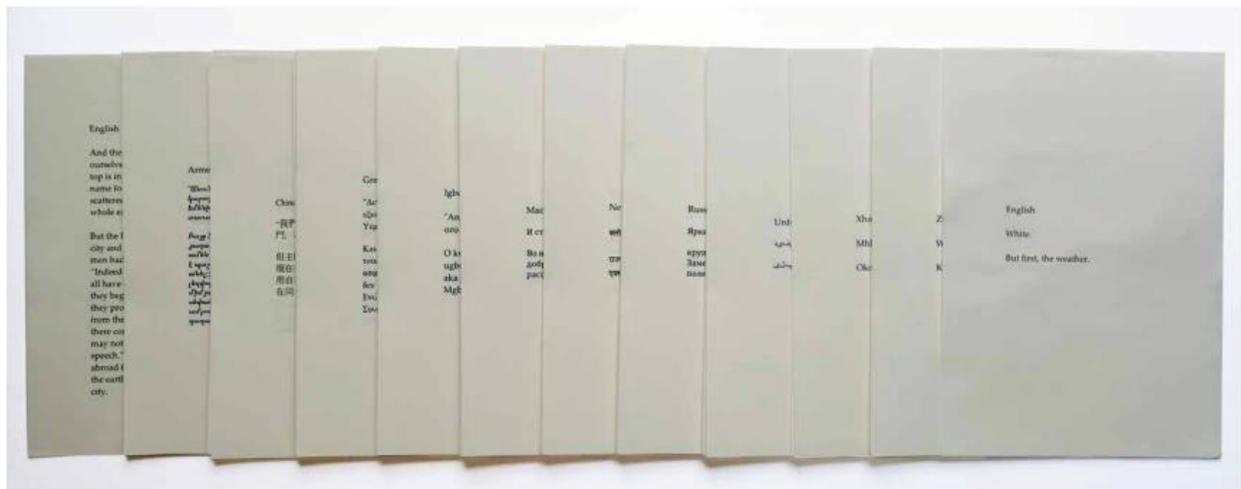


Fig.3. Benjamin Stanwix, 2016. *White. But First, The Weather.* Consecutive google translations of the Babel story 103 languages, 105 pages. Inkjet print. Dimensions variable.

