



David Paton

Ideologies and Identities in Digital Artists' Books: Parallels between Charles Sandison's *Carmina Figurata* and Willem Boshoff's *Kykafrikaans*

BIOGRAPHY

David Paton is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Visual Art at the University of Johannesburg. He is an artist and academic with a particular interest in the Artist's Book. Paton has curated the *Artists' Books in the Ginsberg Collection*, which was exhibited at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1996, and *Navigating the Bookscape: Artists' Books and the Digital Interface*, which was exhibited at the Aardklop Arts Festival and the FADA Gallery in 2006.

→ **The field** of artist's book production and the discourse around it is a peripheral one in South Africa, notwithstanding the number of established local artists having produced such objects. As a mode of visual production which has historically challenged conventional understandings of production, display and sale, artists' books have an interesting, albeit fringe, status in the country.

As the artist's book slowly gains an understanding, awareness and acceptance in South Africa as a physical object that operates within the conventions of the bound codex, the intervention of the digital within the field signals a need to expand and explode our existing definitions of what an artist's book has become.

At a juncture in South Africa, when the conventional codex form of the artist's book has yet to gain full stature, these digital interventions seem to add to the complexity of an already problematic and under-defined field.

The purpose of this paper is to establish an identity for the digital artist's book in South Africa within an ideological paradigm which struggles to define or establish the field.

To do this, I explore an important precedent for this ideological struggle in the United Kingdom, through reference to the precarious position of Charles Sandison's digital work *Carmina Figurata* on the recent *Blood on Paper – the Art of the Book* exhibition. In this exploration I attempt to account for its seeming fringe billing, its absence from the formal catalogue, its difference from the rest of the exhibition and therefore its status as a signifier of 'otherness'. I explore this 'otherness' based upon an assumption that, being a digital work, it seems to have been considered lacking a required status to be fully included in all

aspects of the exhibition. Ironically, this 'otherness' also helps it escape some of the exhibition's more troubling curatorial decisions.

This ideological precariousness, I argue, has parallels with a recent installation of Willem Boshoff's *Kykafrikaans* (Michael Stevenson, November 2007). Here, the imagery was digitally projected, accompanied by a soundtrack of voices reading/performing the pages of *Kykafrikaans*. Yet in expanding our modes of reception of this work, Boshoff, I argue, cuts ties with the original and constructs a totally new work. Ironically, the very precariousness of Sandison's work on the *Blood on Paper* exhibition signals that the digital intervention into *Kykafrikaans* is equally problematic in a South African context.

By exploring the position of the digital in relation to the codex in both instances, I attempt to account for the ideological identity of the digital Artist's Book in contemporary South African visual culture.

Introduction

Despite the number of established local artists having produced artists'¹ books,² the field of artists' book production, and the discourse around it, is a peripheral one when compared with writings currently available on art history and contemporary visual culture in South Africa. As a mode of visual production that has, historically, challenged conventional understandings of production, display and sale, artists' books have an interesting, albeit fringe, status that is slowly gaining acceptance in South Africa. As a physical object that operates within the conventions of the bound codex, the intervention of the digital within the field signals a need to expand and explode the existing definitions of artists' books. However, at a juncture in South Africa when the conventional codex form of the artist's book has yet to gain full stature, these digital interventions seem to complexify an already problematic and under-defined field.

The purpose of this paper is to establish an identity for the digital artist's book in South Africa within an ideological

paradigm that struggles to define or establish the field. I explore an important precedent for this ideological struggle: the precarious position of Charles Sandison's digital work *Carmina Figurata* exhibited on the recent *Blood on Paper* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.³ In this exploration I attempt to account for *Carmina Figurata*'s seeming fringe billing, its absence from the formal catalogue, its difference from the rest of the exhibition and therefore its status as a signifier of 'otherness'. I explore this 'otherness' based upon an assumption that, being a digital work, it seems to have been considered lacking a required status to be fully included in all aspects of the exhibition. Ironically, this 'otherness' also helps the work escape some of the exhibition's more troubling curatorial decisions.

This ideological precariousness, I argue, has parallels with an earlier installation of a digital artist's book, Willem Boshoff's *Kykafrikaans*, at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.⁴ *Kykafrikaans* was originally conceived and developed around a number of tight modes of presentation and reception: as a series of unique typed scripto-visual pages;⁵

as an edition of screenprints directly processed from the originals⁶ and as a book or “anthology of concrete poetry” (Boshoff 2007:54) published by Uitgewery Panevis in 1980. At Michael Stevenson, Boshoff’s original printed images were digitally projected and accompanied by a soundtrack of voices reading/performing the pages of *Kykafrikaans*. Yet, in expanding the audience’s modes of reception of this work (combining the textual with the auditory), Boshoff, I argue, cuts ties with the original screenprinted and artist’s book forms of *Kykafrikaans* and constructs a totally new work. I argue that the precariousness of Sandison’s work on *Blood on Paper* signals that the digital intervention into *Kykafrikaans* may be equally problematic within a South African context.

By exploring the position of the digital in relation to the codex in both Sandison’s and Boshoff’s works I attempt to account for the ideological identity of digital artists’ books in contemporary South African visual culture.

Bloody definitions of the artist’s book

It is necessary to briefly examine two contexts within the discourse of the book-arts within which an analysis of Sandison’s and Boshoff’s digital works might be more coherently argued and understood in relation to more familiar codex forms. The first context requires an acknowledgement of what I term the ‘de-definition’ of the artist’s book as an ideological given. The closest the field of artist’s book production and critical writing allows itself to come to a definition of what an artist’s book is, is to unpack the concept of ‘bookness’ and by which artists’ books may be more fully understood. Angela Lorenz (2002:[sp]), an internationally respected maker of artists’ books, asks: “Who am I to try to define artist’s books? Just one person in a long succession ...”. Lorenz mentions the contentious placement of the apostrophe or lack thereof in the term (note her use, which differs from others) and seems more at home with stating what artists’ books *are not*.⁷

Yale librarian Jae Jennifer Rossman (2008) writes:

The term artists’ books is difficult to define. The debate over the ‘true’ definition of the term has lasted for almost 25 years. The general consensus is that there is no one definition. Many other terms are also used to suggest the same concept: book art, book as artwork, bookwork, artists’ bookworks, book objects, artists books (no apostrophe) and there are likely more. While none of the terms is incorrect (as there is no one definition for any of them either), the term artists’ books seems to predominate.

In Johanna Drucker’s (1995:1) seminal book, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, she observes that:

A single definition of the ... term ‘an artist’s book’ continues to be highly elusive in spite of its general currency and the proliferation of work which goes by this name. Its increased popularity can probably be attributed to the flexibility and variation of the book form, rather than to any single aesthetic or material factor. Rather than attempt a rigid or definitive characterization of artists’ books, I ... sketch out a zone of activity which I think of as ‘artists’ books.’ It is a zone made at the space at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields, and ideas – rather than at their limits.

Drucker (1995:9) goes on to unpack and analyse a number of works using this methodology and describes an examination of ‘bookness’ in terms such as ‘intermedial’, ‘highly malleable’ as well as ‘formal conceptions’ and ‘metaphysical spaces’. Perhaps her most succinct description of the artist’s book is “... a form to interrogate, not merely as a vehicle for reproduction”. Elsewhere Drucker (2003:[sp]) describes artists’ books as “‘phenomenal’ books, which mark the shift from books as artifacts, documents, vehicles for delivery of content, and instead demonstrate the living, dynamic nature of work as produced by interpretive acts”.

Implicit in these descriptions is the mutability of form, something that could, and indeed must, incorporate an expansive understanding of the tactile, haptic conventions of the codex and an ideology that accepts a crossing from the book as physically embodied to its seemingly disembodied digital form. This ideological shift, its acceptance, or lack thereof, constitutes my second context of production and discourse.

Any acceptance of a change in ideological stance within and towards the artist’s book is not easily gained. Philip Smith (1996:[sp]) in an article revealingly titled *The Whatness of Bookness or What is a Book?* states that ‘bookness’ is being

stretched to include forms which carry a digitalized or electronic text such as a CD, a hard disk or a microchip, or miscellaneous forms such as spirals of paper with continuous text, or pyramids, dodecahedrons and other geometric multiplanar forms. I would not describe all these things as having the quality of bookness or being strictly covered by the definition. A blank book is still a book, but a blank dodecahedron or unmarked spiral of paper is not a book, it is a dodecahedron etc. ... The book is not the text, although it is traditionally associated with it, and these two elements appear often to be mistaken for the same thing. The book is the hinged multi-planar vehicle or substrate on which texts, verbal, or tactile (the latter would include braille [sic] and other relief or embossed effects, found objects, pop-ups) maybe written, drawn, reproduced, printed or assembled.

Smith’s position evinces an ideological unwillingness to let go of a number of seemingly immutable and thus ‘defining’ elements of the book: the tactile nature of the object, its hinged and thus codex form, its separation or

independence from both text and image. This view is not something that takes us any closer to understanding the artist's book; it is nothing more than the re-stating of the conventions of the codex as signifiers of bookness, and consequently, by extension, anything else is 'other'.

Drucker (1995:1) on the other hand, would have us explode this ideological position; her survey of the field of artist's book-making as a "zone made at the space at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields, and ideas" helps us make this shift. Drucker describes and examines books that interrogate the very conventions of bookness, exploiting tropes of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity in terms of the structural, literary, literal, narrative and material conventions of the page and book format. In these terms, book artists exploit technical and graphic conceits in order to call attention to the conventions by which, through constant exposure, a book neutralises or effaces its identity. Drucker (1995:161) describes this as a book's theoretical operation of "enunciation" by which attention is called to its own processes and structure. David Gunkel (2003:290-291) describes this effacement in another way; with regard to a physical book's relationship with its subject matter or referent

... the book is understood as a surrogate for something else from which it is originally derived and to which it ultimately refers. The printed signifier, therefore, is considered to be both secondary and provisional in relation to the primacy of its signified. And for this reason, the tension between the book's material and its subject matter is rendered effectively immaterial.

In Drucker's terms then, an artist's book might re-render this tension through enunciation, becoming 'phenomenal' through the agency of 'interpretive acts'. These acts might include both the making and reception of digital forms.⁸

Joseph Esposito (2003:[sp]) describes the product of a "primal" book's appropriation within an electronic medium and form as "the processed book". Such a book, argues Esposito, with Drucker seemingly looking over his shoulder, "has the potential to make the contents of a book actionable, not merely readable". Thus, an argument might be forged for the artist's book as an interrogator of conventional bookness, but for which the move from embodied object to disembodied digital programme might prove, for many who work in the field, to be a step too far.

Both Sandison's and Boshoff's projected digital books, to which I now turn, enunciate themselves as actioning an ideological shift. This shift moves from the conventions of embodied bookness – and in which a history of originary

experience is imbricated – to a disembodied digital form that alienates, in very specific ways, an originary experience of the book and in which form they may seem 'othered'. In Sandison's case, the work is alien from the weight of printed history in the glass cases below it (and thus from the official, printed catalogue), as it is presented as a series of projected white and red texts that move about on the walls above the visitors' heads (Fig. 1). In Boshoff's case, the work is alien (visually and aurally) from the form in which it was originally encountered: screenprinted images and the artist's book (Figs. 2a & 2b). It seems telling that Boshoff's exhibition catalogue reproduces images of *Kyafrikaans* similar to their original typed form (in print) rather than views of the digital work as it was projected within the white cube of Michael Stevenson. In order to explore what I term 'the ideological shift' from the conventions of embodied bookness, I provide a context for and description of the modes of display for both Sandison's and Boshoff's work.

Carmina Figurata

Upon entering *Blood on Paper*, one is confronted with Anselm Kiefer's *The Secret Life of Plants* (2008). For a moment the work seems to be made from granite, resembling a monumental book carved in stone. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the book is made from thick card wrapped with thin sheets of lead, with imagery painted in oil on the lead sheets. The cover boards and pages of the structure measure 190cm high. As the first book one encounters, its material physicality underscores its unequivocally embodied presence in the room (Fig. 3). Thereafter, one becomes more aware of curatorial decisions and physical layout. Around the edges of the exhibition space are display cases and vitrines containing the majority of the books on the exhibition. Visitors move from case to case and into side spaces that suggest 'chapels' for the contemplation of the almost religiously fetishized works. The exhibition consists of a host of historic icons⁹ of the book arts of the early to mid-twentieth century, along with more contemporary works, most of which have been printed by, or associated with, Ivorypress Ltd.

Above these physical icons to printing and early book arts excellence floats a somewhat incongruous work: Charles Sandison's *Carmina Figurata*. It is the one book which is neither in codex or portfolio form, nor potentially haptically manipulable.¹⁰ Positioned high above the visitors' heads, the book consists of six digital projections of white and red words which move arbitrarily across the walls of an exhibition space, forming fleeting connections.



Fig 1: *Blood on Paper*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. View of entrance section with Charles Sandison's *Carmina Figurata*. Photograph by David Paton, 2008.

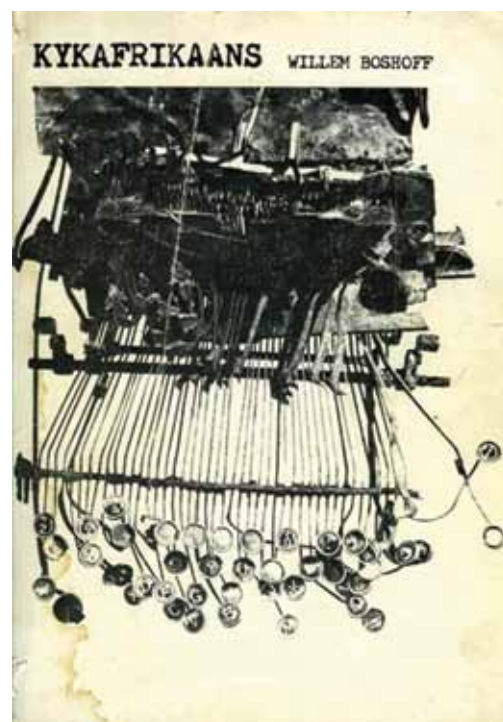


Fig 3: Kiefer, A. *The Secret Life of Plants*. 2008. *Blood on Paper*. 18 pages in oil on lead on cardboard. 190cm x 140cm x 16cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London. 15 April to 29 June 2008. Courtesy of Ivorypress Ltd.

Fig 2a: Boshoff, W. *Min of Meer. Kykafrikaans*. 1980. Screenprint on paper. 91cm x 89cm. Edition 6/10. Photograph by David Paton, 2009.



Fig 2b: Boshoff, W. Cover of *Kykafrikaans*. 1980. Johannesburg: Uitgewery Panevis. This book is in the collection of the author. Photograph by David Paton, 2007.



Sandison's work is the only digital work on the exhibition and perhaps due to its disembodied form is not under the control of Ivorypress Ltd., joint sponsors of the exhibition, and therefore does not appear in the impressive catalogue (Figs. 4a & 4b). Besides the small handout at the entrance to the exhibition, *Carmina Figurata* does not seem to exist outside of the exhibition. As a digital book, it is neither tactile nor does it conform to the conventions of a book as a codex (such as binding, paper material, handheldness). Of further importance is the specific placement of the work's projections. Within the exhibition space as a whole, the curators ensured that the projections filled a 'polite space' above the zone of the books, cases and visitors' heads. A clear curatorial division was thus created between the 'iconic' embodied works and this 'other' disembodied piece. Sandison's works often fill the spaces in which they are projected, covering ceilings, walls and floors becoming truly immersive when the images are imprinted upon the bodies of visitors as they walk through these spaces.¹¹ In *Blood on Paper*, however, Sandison's work is clearly separated and aloof from the other exhibits and the potential for an immersive experience is lost. *Carmina Figurata* is placed in intriguing territory in relation to the rest of the exhibition, as curatorially, physically and catalogically 'othered'.

Kyafrikaans

Boshoff (2007:54) intended that *Kyafrikaans* in its original forms – the series of unique typed scripto-visual pages, the edition of screenprints and the anthology of concrete poetry that are essentially poems – should be performed in order to give affective scope to the acoustic potential of the original work. Until 2006, this aspect of *Kyafrikaans* remained largely informal.¹² Professional recordings of the readings of selected poems from *Kyafrikaans* were produced between 2006 and 2007 at the Wounded Buffalo studios in Johannesburg (Boshoff 2007:54). The nearly 30 recordings deploy the voices of Marcel van Heerden, Jane Rademeyer, Lochner de Kock, Hermien de Vos and Boshoff himself.

On entering the sparse white space of the installation, one sees the scripto-visual images of *Kyafrikaans* projected onto a screen. The appropriate recording accompanies each image, becoming a soundscape within the installation space. At the end of each recording, the image fades and the next image and recording begin. The viewers/listeners can either stay for the full presentation or leave whenever they choose. However, in relation to the visitor's possible originary experience of the embodied forms of *Kyafrikaans*, this sound-driven and disembodied form of the work may prove alienating and distant.

Having established contexts for production and display for both examples, I now turn my attention to the manner in which the digital facilitates the ideological shift from the conventions of embodied bookness.

Analogue and digital forms

With dim disquiet he senses the inexplicable emptiness that results from his body becoming a withdrawal symptom, from its dissipating and being robbed of its reality, its life, its voice, and the sounds it makes by moving around, reduced to a mute image that flickers on the screen for an instant, then disappears into thin air. Walter Benjamin (2008:19)

In the context of this study, Benjamin's somewhat prescient words, written as they were in 1936 in relation to the screen actor's exile from an audience through the mediation of the camera, present themes that I apply to this study. These themes are: disquiet, emptiness, the withdrawn body, dissipation, robbing of the real, reduction, muteness and disappearance. Brought up to date within the complex multimedia and digital world, Benjamin's focus upon notions of a disquieting reduction toward nothingness seems to characterise Sandison's *Carmina Figurata*. As the work consists of 'digital nothingness' it cannot be printed or 'owned', in the conventional sense, by Ivorypress Ltd. Thus, unlike the other books on display, *Carmina Figurata* presents itself as disturbingly disembodied; the very antithesis of the haptically manipulable artist's book.

This seemingly discomforting lack of reality, of embodiment, in digital work such as *Carmina Figurata* is described by Friedrich Kittler (cited in Hansen 2004:71) who states that "the general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface. Sense and senses turn into eyewash".

Kittler (cited in Hansen 2004:72-73) continues:

If the digital image can be said to replace photographic, cinematic, and televisual images with a wholly new technical image, that is because it fundamentally reconfigures the very concept of 'image,' stripping it of a correlation-by-analogy with the human body and thus rendering it a purely arbitrary construct ... Unlike any analogue image, the computer or digital image does not comprise a static cut into the flux of the real; instead it captures a virtual block of information ... Following its digitalization, the image becomes akin to a text composed of individual letters, one that is, strictly speaking, unreadable.

Tim Lenoir (2004:xiii) states that determined views such as Kittler's direct attention to the power of manipulation inherent in new visualisation technologies. He argues that these views assume the tendency of digital imaging to detach the viewer from an embodied, haptic sense of physical

Fig 4a: Catalogue publication of *Blood on Paper*. Co-published by The Victoria & Albert Museum, London and Ivorypress Ltd. Courtesy of Ivorypress Ltd.



Fig 4b: Catalogue publication of *Blood on Paper*. Co-published by The Victoria & Albert Museum, London and Ivorypress Ltd. Courtesy of Ivorypress Ltd.



location and 'being there'. It seems easy, then, to read Sandison's and Boshoff's installation work as disembodied, especially given the viewer's passive role.

In order to see how this reading occurs, critical framing elements of Sandison's and Boshoff's work require attention. For the purposes of this paper, I employ the following as framing elements: a 'cut into the flux of the real' and the 'unreadable', in order to analyse Sandison's and Boshoff's disembodied book forms.

A cut into the flux of the real: unpacking Sandison's work

Elena Foster and Rowan Watson employ a quasi-religious theme in curating *Blood on Paper*: a cruciform ground plan creates alcoves for quiet contemplation of printed icons of the book arts reminiscent of altarpieces in the side chapels of medieval cathedrals. The title of the exhibition, *Blood on Paper*, refers directly to a religious yet bodily experience in which books are seen as the literal body and the artists' labours are measured in blood: the exhibition title refers to the books on exhibit that deal, literally, with blood as a medium (Ed Ruscha and Anselm Kiefer), as wounds (Anish Kapoor) or torture (Damien Hirst). The title also refers to the book arts as a field of regeneration (new blood), youthfulness (young blood) and particularly obsessive passion (blood boils), which is evoked in Ambroise Vollard's *Parallèlement* (1900) where Paul Verlaine's poetry is printed in relation to Pierre Bonnard's blood-red lithographs.

Kapoor's work, *Wound* (2005), contains a laser-cut into the flesh of the paper,¹³ in which the internal fore-edges of the cut denote the embodiment of the book arts as physical, tactile and living, and as a *tour de force* in printing, book construction and binding, of which Ivorypress Ltd. is justifiably proud (Fig. 5). Yet this literal cut, as a way of reading the book as flesh-like, and forever deeply vulnerable, is undercut by the opposite conditions set by Sandison's *Carmina Figurata*. Kittler's (cited in Hansen 2004:72-73) reminder that "... the computer or digital image does not comprise a static cut into the flux of the real" as its virtual block of information, of unreadable 0s and 1s, renders *Carmina Figurata* both unprintable – and therefore outside of the scope and authority of the catalogue – and in direct conflict with the very embodiment the book arts claims for itself. After all, in what art form can the reader/viewer control the pace and the order of viewing, or the temporal/spatial conditions in which such viewing can take place, other than in the physical, codex form of the book arts?

Yet *Blood on Paper* denies such access; the vitrines and roped-off spaces attest to this distancing of the bodily,

the haptic, element of reading/viewing a book. Here, the illusion of tactility is supreme and the horror of Kittler's 'eyewash' seems to come true; in the confrontation between book icon, iconic artist and disembodied viewer, visual stasis rather than the dynamic tactility of the book defines our experience.

Book artist and academic Sarah Bodman (2008) notes the following about the exhibition and the position of *Carmina Figurata* within it:

I would say that those were not examples of artists' publishing in terms of democratic works. Yes, the books were impressive, large and attention grabbing, and were obviously of their time, but for me, they were not what artists' books are about. The show comprised mostly of very well known ... artists, some of whom had produced only one artist's book ('produced' in the loosest term, as these books were mostly printed and bound by a studio publisher not by the artist) ... Charles Sandison's *Carmina Figurata*, high up and out of reach, was perhaps the most accessible piece in the show; it wasn't behind glass, just floating above, with words moving like tiny creatures under a microscope as they formed fleeting connections with their neighbours. Physically untouchable, yet actually asking the viewer to spend time with it (Fig. 6).

Bodman (2008) notes the irony of a situation where the least tactile work, the one most self-consciously disembodied and the one that digitally denies any 'cut into the flux of the real' (as Kapoor would have us appreciate) remains "the most accessible piece in the show." In fact, *Carmina Figurata* seems, from its vantage point, its birds-eye view so to speak, to embody a succinct commentary upon the distance and the disembodiment of the encased objects below. Without any recourse to their self-conscious reflexivity as books-made-by-artists – their awareness of their being books – these objects no longer are able to lay claim to their operationalisation; their enunciation.

Arts critic Michael Kownacky (2008:[sp]), too, notes this lack of enunciation in relation to the works on the *Blood on Paper* exhibition. He states:

The best part of the display are [sic] the projections hovering near the ceiling of the first room as one enters. Words and phrases hover in random patterns, sometimes coming close to each other, but often avoiding contact as if they have escaped from the printed page and are living creatures ... this was done by Charles Sandison and is called '*Carmina Figurata*.' This one piece seemed to truly have life and soul.

The term '*Carmina Figurata*' is more conventionally used to describe poems in which certain letters or words are contained within patterns or compositions to form independent phrases or verses within regular lines of continuous printed text (Grove 2009:[sp]). The term is



Fig 5: Kapoor, A. *Wound*. 2005. *Blood on Paper*. Victoria & Albert Museum, London. 15 April to 29 June 2008. 50 sheets of laser cut Heritage 100% cotton paper with aluminium base. 77cm x 56cm x 28cm. Edition of 25 with 1 Artist's proof. Produced by Ivorypress Ltd. Courtesy of Ivorypress Ltd.

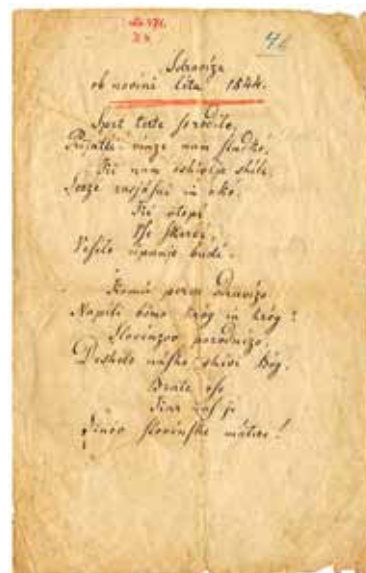
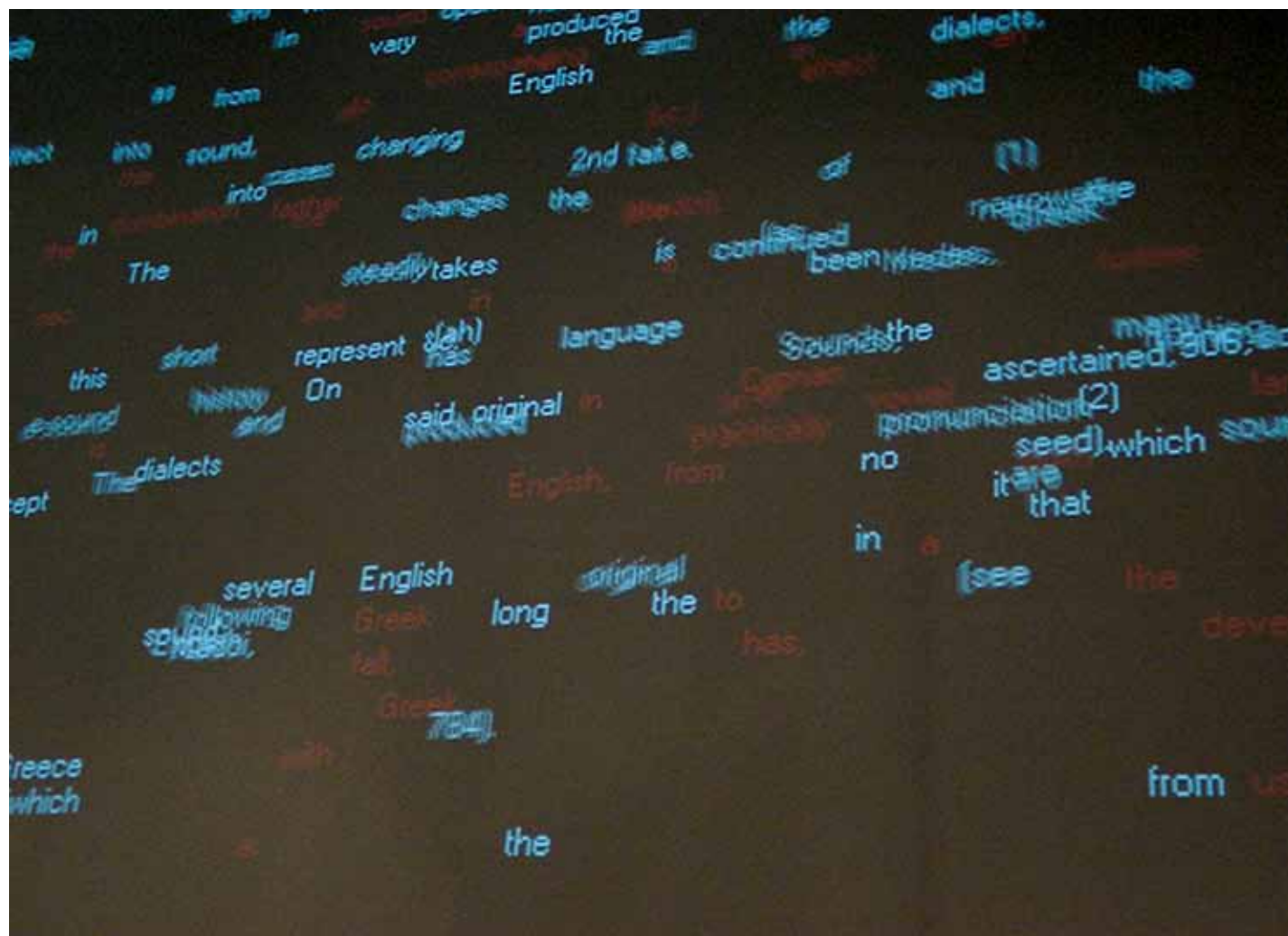


Fig 7: Prešeren, F. *Zdravljica (A Toast) or Zdravica, 1844*. The poem is a *carmen figuratum* because the shape of each stanza resembles a wine cup. Reproduced from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carmen_figuratum.

Fig 6: Sandison, C. *Carmina Figurata*. 2008. Digital projection. Dimensions variable. *Blood on Paper*. Victoria & Albert Museum, London. 15 April to 29 June 2008. Photograph by David Paton, 2008.



also used in literary criticism to describe poems that have a certain shape or pattern formed either by all the words they contain or just by certain words in the printed text.¹⁴

Sandison's title *Carmina Figurata* references the convention of creatively printed text, yet, being digital, the work is unstable, not static as the printed forms of *Carmina Figurata* appear (Fig. 7). The irony here lies in the fact that the title signifies, in very real terms, the actions of looking at and reading texts as images and images as texts in a dynamic temporal/spatial relationship, where semiotic differences are broken down: these are the mechanisms of negotiating one's way through books, especially the complexities of books made by artists. Sandison, however, in place of the interrelationship of image and text about a given theme, explodes the work into a myriad of temporal, spatial and fleeting relationships, where chance meetings of words and their conventional meanings coalesce into new meanings that fade equally rapidly in search of more chance encounters.

Of this negotiation of the mechanisms of looking and reading, *The Independent's* Charles Darwent (2008:[sp]) states:

[T]he mooted death of the book at the hands of computers might be expected to fill artists with glee, and Charles Sandison's does feel quietly gleeful. A flickering dado of Powerpoint words, the work takes its title from concrete poetry – one of those rare moments where images shape literature rather than the other way round. Freed from bindings and covers, Sandison's 'book' changes shape and meaning with equal alacrity. It suggests a time when words and images may be friends again, when neither will threaten the other.

It seems telling that, the one piece not purporting to be an artist's book; not bound by the conventions of 'bookness'; not under the production dictates of Ivorypress Ltd. and thus not included in the catalogue, is the one piece which book art academics and arts commentators alike have singled out as the exhibition's most critical work. Why is this the case? Perhaps the answer lies in the curatorial decision to fill the cases with 'names', many of whom, as Bodman states, have very little to do with the book arts beyond the piece exhibited. Perhaps it has to do with the alienating experience of disembodiment, by being separated from work that has to be handled in order to make sense, in order for the viewer to experience a sense of 'being there'. It seems that Sandison, in acknowledging the exhibition's limitations, produces a work that sums up an experience of artists' books as an undermining of the conventional separation of image and text. Sandison does this through exploring the temporal/spatial relationship of the reader's/viewers' relationship with books; through the material and

conceptual agency that artists bring to the form of the book. In unpacking the lived experience of reading/viewing artists' books and laying out the parts, silently yet powerfully, high above the mute arrogance of the tomes in their vitrines, Sandison's work helps define our embodied experience of the book through the agency of the digital. After all, as Lev Manovich (2001:57) reminds us, in interactive media, which in our case might also include the haptic manipulation of the book by the reader/viewer,

... there is a danger that we will interpret 'interaction' literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button ... moving the body), at the expense of psychological interaction. The psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all, are mistakenly identified with an objectively existing structure of interactive links.

In avoiding the pitfalls of the conventions of bookness, as Smith (1996:[sp]) describes them, *Carmina Figurata* is able to embody those qualities of the phenomenal book that Drucker seeks. He does this by marking a shift from books as artefacts, documents, vehicles for delivery of content, and instead demonstrates the living, dynamic nature of book-work, produced by interpretive acts.

The second framing element: the 'unreadable', helps to unpack and reposition Boshoff's work within the context of disembodied book forms.

Readability and unreadability in Boshoff's work

Kyafrikaans, in both its earlier screenprinted and artist's book formats, allows for an indeterminate number of ways in which the work might be displayed and received. The scripto-visual element of the book format encourages both a reading and viewing of each page. In some instances, the text blocks of the poems are easily read, as for example in "Pro Patria" (Fig. 8). Other text blocks, while able to be read, make direct reference to the onomatopoeic nature of words-as-sounds rather than text-as-prose as seen in SS (Fig. 9).

A reader, in these examples, becomes an active participant in the battle for the construction of meaning.¹⁵ He/she is prompted to unpack the text block's position on the page as a conventional spatial-linguistic device in order to read the text block and to become aware of the possible sounds the text facilitates.¹⁶ A reader might then attempt to sound out the poems. On either uttering these sounds or imagining what they might sound like, quietly and privately in the mind, the reader may then choose to tackle, now as a viewer, the other scripto-visually complex pages Boshoff offers.

Fig 8: Boshoff, W. *"Pro Patria"*. Kykafrikaans. 1980. Commercial offset litho reproductions of the original hand-typed A4 paper sheets bound into a book. 29,7cm x 21cm. Photograph by David Paton, 2007. Courtesy of Willem Boshoff.

These other pages (for example, *Verdwaalkaard* (Fig.10)) are visually dense, obfuscatory in meaning and difficult to read, offering only hints and clues for deciphering and conventional reading. These scripto-visual poems unhinge the symbolic relationship of text (and particularly typed text) from the conventions of reading for narrative meaning. In the digital installation of the work, however, lack of viewer interactivity fragments and removes the body from the tactile, haptic and proprioceptive experience of the original work's structure and content.¹⁷

A critical element of reading/viewing the original work (in book and print forms) is the viewer's ability to move between the prints or pages and thus interact with the work; by paging, flipping, touching, avoiding or moving back and/or stepping forward to view from a closer proximity. These kinds of interactions with the work implicate a haptic, bodily experience. This element of interactivity is removed from the digital installation of the work. Implicit here is a passivity that may engender feelings of impatience while waiting for those poems that are of particular interest to a visitor who also enters the installation at a stage in the programme, and at a particular place in the sequence, over which they have no control.

Lenoir (in Hansen 2004:xx) acknowledges that when the affective is reduced to a formal process of technical framing, located outside the subject in the world of technically assembled images, affect becomes disembodied. He continues by stating that, "In this account the body becomes relatively passive, a site of technical inscription of movement images instead of the active source framing otherwise formless information". Lenoir's notion of 'affect becoming disembodied' is key to both Sandison's and Boshoff's installations. If the interactivity with which we associate our relationship with books in general, and with artists' books in particular, is no longer a critical framing device in appreciating the installations, then this implies that disembodiment, far from being the limiting and diminishing agent as Benjamin (2008:19) describes, becomes implicated in a discourse of rereading the *experience* of negotiation critical to the appreciation of artists', or to use Drucker's term, 'phenomenal' books.

I have shown how Sandison constructs this rereading as a visual critique upon the manner in which *Blood on Paper* (and for that matter, most exhibitions of artists' books) denies any haptic, interactive and proprioceptive experience. However, in Boshoff's work, I argue, the 'affect becoming disembodied' is achieved in another way. In purely comparative terms, the digital projection of immaterial, light emitting, somewhat fuzzy and pixelated data of Boshoff's installation becomes denuded in comparison

with the fixity of ink on paper in the original prints and book.¹⁸ With the dominance of the soundscape in the installation, and the fact that the projected, disembodied texts play an illustrative role within this determined and one-sided image-sound relationship, the reader/viewer is left without any interactive or participative recourse to the construction of meaning on their own terms. Yet this is *not* the printed and read *Kykafrikaans* with which one might be familiar; this is something new. Framed by its lack of the concrete, Boshoff seems to be creating another space of metaphoric play, a game at the expense of his viewers' continued but fraught attempts to 'make sense' of Boshoff's content; a field in which lack of interactivity is not a 'lack' but a ploy.

In presenting a disembodied text surrounded by a new, unfamiliar yet authoritatively immersive soundscape,¹⁹ Boshoff succeeds in alienating and distancing his audience from accessing *Kykafrikaans* as a unified *experience*. Once again the reader/viewer seems left only with frustrating 'clues'.²⁰

Boshoff's reader/viewers might often have experienced this distancing and obfuscation. Yet in the context of this installation, Boshoff (2007:3) states his desire for *Kykafrikaans* to be accessed by the blind. In this form of the work, his desire has been achieved as only the blind have no originary experience and thus no 'contaminating' memory of, or from, the original texts of *Kykafrikaans*; they have the freedom to experience the soundscape as immersive and thus embodied and imbued with meaning. Benjamin's (2008:19) image: "... robbed of its reality, its life, its voice, and the sounds it makes by moving around, reduced to a mute image that flickers on the screen for an instant, then disappears into thin air" easily describes the reader/viewer's contaminated memory of the originary experience of *Kykafrikaans* when confronted with its disembodied digital form. Yet, for the blind listener, gone are the issues of disembodiment, fragmentation, muteness, pixelation and an overtly authoritative soundscape. In their place is an immersive, embodied and most accessible work in which Boshoff dismantles the scripto-visual in favour of the optophonetic.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how the disembodied digital presentation of the works *Carmina Figurata* and *Kykafrikaans*, which are both related directly to artists' books or to exhibitions of artists' books, have succeeded in transcending their disembodied, and 'othered' status. They succeed in unpacking qualities unique to the enunciation of artists' books and become succinct statements upon

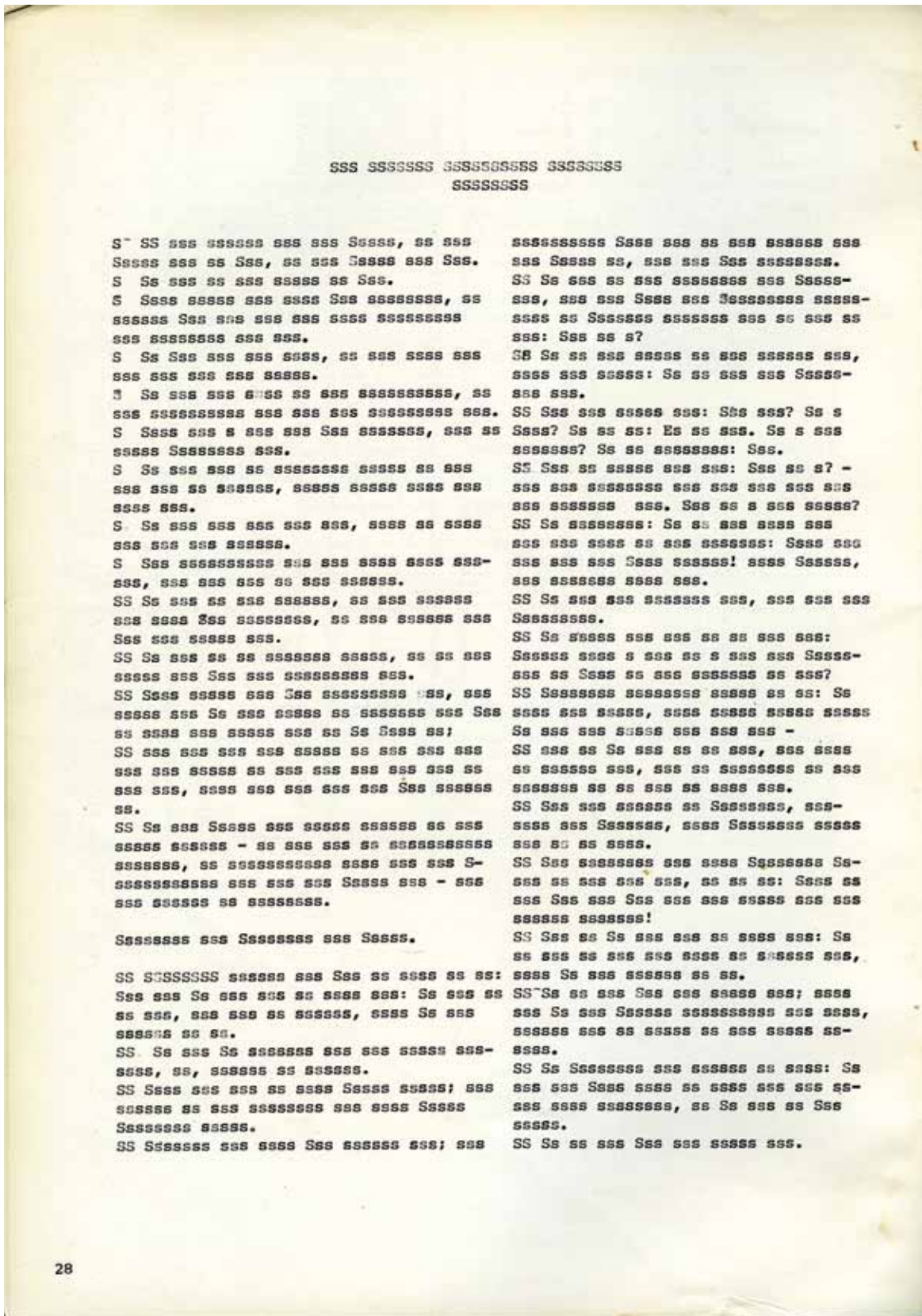


Fig 9: Boshoff, W.
SS. *Kyafrikaans*. 1980.
Commercial offset litho
reproductions of the
original hand-typed A4
paper sheets bound into
a book. 29,7cm x 21cm.
Photograph by David
Paton, 2007. Courtesy of
Willem Boshoff.

the ironic distancing that such haptically appreciated and embodied objects have undergone in either their display or in the memories of their readers/viewers. In Sandison's case, this is achieved in a freeing of image/text relationships from both their confinement within the display vitrines as well as their necessary requirement of embodiment in order to be fully appreciated. In this way, Sandison's work – which in conventional terms must seem the least book-like – succeeds in freeing itself from a number of imposed imitations and 'otherings', not least of which is its complete absence from the exhibition's definitive catalogue. In doing so, the work has received acclaim from a diverse audience and especially from book-art academics such as Bodman.

In Boshoff's case, the digital presentation of *Kykafrikaans* succeeds in, once again, keeping meaning at bay, through obfuscation. Boshoff does this by deploying a text that disembodies the physicality so critical to the meaning of the original work in screenprinted and artist's book

formats. Likewise, Boshoff deploys a new and authoritative soundscape that denies the reader/viewer access to their own attempts to sound-out the poems and make headway in the construction of meaning.

I have argued that, despite being 'othered', digitally disembodied and lacking in the conventional bookness which audience need to negotiate them, these works succeed in reconstructing the manner in which artists' books operate. In Drucker's (2003:[sp]) terms, they succeed in becoming 'phenomenal books', which mark that critical shift towards dynamic interpretive acts. Benjamin's image of emptiness, which results from a body in withdrawal, dissipating and being robbed of its reality and reduced to a mute image that disappears into thin air, seems truer of the physical books in the vitrines in *Blood on Paper* or the original text of *Kykafrikaans*. While that which should flicker and disappear due to its disembodied digital nature, seems to have embodied what artists' books desire to communicate.

Endnotes

1. The placement of the apostrophe is a contentious one within the field of artists' books. I use the apostrophe after the term *artists'* when referring to the collective field of 'books' and the term *artist's* when referring to a single example or book.
2. Giulio Tambellini and Pippa Skotnes, amongst many others, have consistently produced fine examples of artists' books in South Africa.
3. Charles Sandison was born in 1969, Northumberland, Scotland. He lives and works in Tampere, Finland. He is a digital artist working with language and rhetoric whose work often consists of projected words which move across the walls and floor of an exhibition space, forming fleeting connections. The work that concerns me in this paper is *Carmina Figurata* (2008). This work was part of the exhibition *Blood on Paper*, a major exhibition of book arts held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London from 15 April to 29 June 2008. The exhibition, which consists mainly of works produced by Ivorypress Ltd. publications, was curated by Rowan Watson and Elna Voster as part of the national museum's remit which needed to draw in a public audience. Sponsored by Deutsche Bank, the exhibition featured, *inter alia*, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Anselm Kiefer, Anish Kapoor, Georg Baselitz, Louise Bourgeois, Daniel Buren, Anthony Caro, Eduardo Chillida, Francesco Clemente, Damien Hirst, Sol Lewitt, Richard Long, Robert Motherwell and Robert Rauschenberg.
4. The second work that concerns this paper, South African artist Willem Boshoff's *Kykafrikaans*, formed part of his exhibition *Épat*, which was held at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town from 25 October to 24 November 2007.
5. The originals form part of the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Miami, Florida, United States of America.
6. The original screenprints were printed in 1981 in an edition of ten. In 2003, Sanlam commissioned Hard Ground Printmakers who selected 12 of the poems for printing in an edition of 20. Sanlam donated one portfolio to the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town with a small portion of the edition reserved for sale (Hundt 2004:[sp]).
7. Lorenz (2002:[sp]) lists what she thinks artists' books are not. This category includes children's books, sketch books, diaries, blank books, exhibition catalogues, reproductions of a body of an artist's work, and art books (a common misnomer). She states: However, they may parody or play with any of the above, as well as all other standard categories such as novels, self-help books, non-fiction, cookbooks, operating manuals, manifestos, travel guides, essays, etc. Artist's books function in the same way as contemporary art: as an expression of someone's creativity, often with social commentary, but sometimes in a purely abstract way, in absence of words or recognizable image.

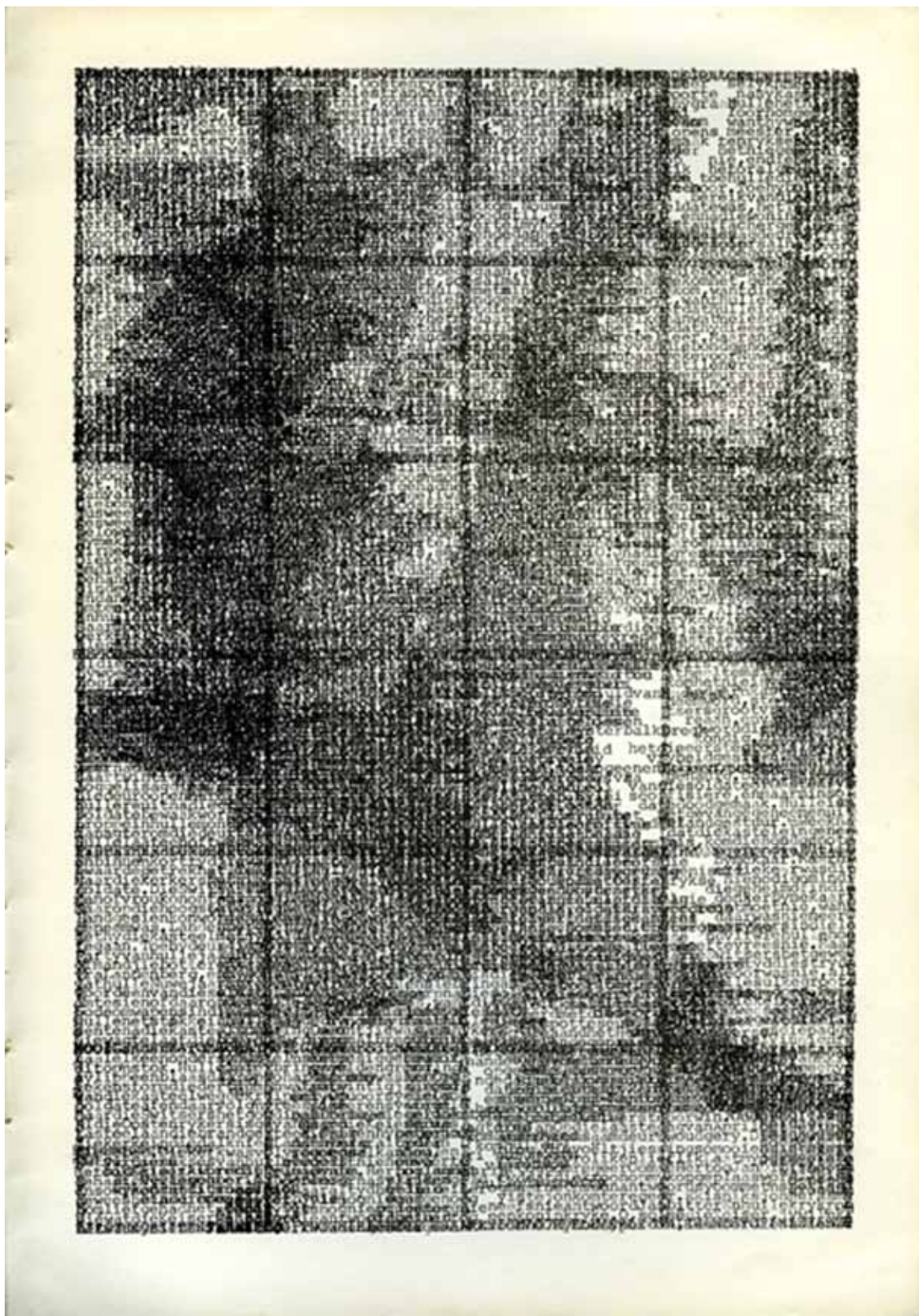


Fig 10: Boshoff, W.
Verdwaalkaard. Kykafrikaans.
1980. Commercial offset litho
reproductions of the original
hand-typed A4 paper sheets
bound into a book. 29.7cm x
21cm. Photograph by David
Paton, 2007. Courtesy of
Willem Boshoff.

8. Drucker (2003:[sp]) provides a carefully reasoned set of arguments for how “the traditional codex is also, in an important and suggestive way, already virtual” by suggesting “that many principles useful for the design of electronic information spaces – and the ‘virtual’ book – can be extracted from traditional codex works”.
9. Such ‘historic icons’ include Picasso’s *Deux Contes*, Matisse’s *Jazz*, and Iliadz’s *Poésie de Mots Inconnus*. More recent publications include Sam Francis’s *1 ¢ Life*, Paula Rego’s *Jane Eyre*, Richard Tuttle’s *Not the Point* and the controversial posthumous reconstruction of Francis Bacon’s studio material entitled *Detritus*.
10. I state ‘potentially’, as none of the books can be handled or read. All books that were not in vitrines or cases were distanced from the viewer with taped-off limits on the floor. A case in point is Keifer’s work, while Damien Hurst’s *Saint Phillip* – consisting of cabinets 79cm (h) x 160cm (w) x 110cm (d) containing eight drawers housing the prints and books of *New Religion* and compartments for sculpture and painting – were placed upon a substantial pedestal in such a way that most viewers would struggle even to look into the cabinet.
11. In earlier works, such as *Rage Love Hope Despair at Confluences*, *Villette Numérique* (2004), the projected texts reached the floor and were therefore projected onto the visitors’ bodies.
12. Boshoff’s (2007:54) desire to execute the performative potential of *Kykafrikaans* has been realised in diverse environments. In informal terms, these include teaching classes with students and workshops, and in formal environments, these include the Klein Karoo Nationale Kunsfees (KKNK Arts Festival), Oudtshoorn and the White Box Gallery, New York in 2000.
13. A cut also appears on the cover page of the catalogue.
14. An example is Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Il pleut / It Rains* (1916).
15. Throughout the rest of the article I use the term ‘reader/viewer’ to imply both the optophonetic qualities of the work and the dual roles that the audience needs to take up in negotiating the scripto-visual qualities of this work. Here, however, and when I use the term ‘reader’ alone, I refer to the audience’s response primarily within the convention of reading texts and from which ‘viewing’ may later flow.
16. Contextualising phrases accompany the titles at the end of the book. These phrases may be used as clues or as a foundation for the way in which we may read and interpret the texts.
17. Johanna Drucker (2003) expands upon the dynamic/interactive relationship between reader and book:
We should also keep in mind that the traditional codex is as fully engaged with this ‘virtual’ space as electronic works are. For instance, think of the contrast between the literal book – that familiar icon of bound pages in finite, fixed sequence – and the phenomenal book – the complex production of meaning and effect that arises from dynamic interaction with the literal work ... A book (whether thought of as a text or a physical object), is not an inert thing that exists in advance of interaction, rather it is produced new by the activity of each reading. This idea comports well with the critical legacy of post-structuralism’s emphasis on a performative concept of interpretation. We make a work through our interaction with it, we don’t ‘receive’ a book as a formal structure. Post-structuralist performativity is distinguished from its more constrained meaning ... Performativity in a contemporary sense borrows from cognitive science and systems theory in which entities and actions have co-dependent relations, rather than existing as discrete entities. Performance invokes constitutive action within a field of constrained possibilities, not only the use of fixed terms to achieve particular ends. Thus in thinking of a book, whether literal or virtual, we should paraphrase Heinz von Foerster, one of the founding figures of cognitive science, and ask ‘how’ a book ‘does’ its particular actions, rather than ‘what’ a book ‘is’.
18. I have discussed this matter at length elsewhere: see my article (Paton 2008) on a critical reading of Willem Boshoff’s digital installation of *Kykafrikaans*.
19. In experiencing the original texts of *Kykafrikaans*, it might be that in negotiating and voicing the possible interpretative sounds – out loud or silently to oneself or inside one’s head – that the critical element of reading and sound generation has been seen as an integral part of appreciating the original work over the last thirty years. In the installation, however, gone are these imaginative attempts, no matter how fraught or partial they may have been, as a strategy for unlocking meaning in the work. The reader/viewer has, within the context of their experience of the textual *Kykafrikaans*, lost his/her agency. If the audience’s challenge in the scripto-visual forms of *Kykafrikaans* has been a linguistic one, the sounds have nonetheless been their own interpretations. These personalised aural renditions of the pages of *Kykafrikaans* are now threatened with silence behind the systemic authority of what, for some, may be viewed as the ‘correct’ and ‘official’ version.
20. Boshoff (2007:54) states:
Many of the poems are optophonetic. ... The ingredient of sound functions on two levels in poetry. On the one hand the sound may be absent in that no actual vocal experience is forthcoming, but one might look at poems and imagine one can hear sounds emanating from their graphic templates. These sounds are visualised only. On the other hand, in many poems, the sound may be imagined but they can also be recited audibly. Format, composition and rednering [sic] give diagrammatic clues as to how actual performing voices might interact with the visual aspect of the poems.

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