

WILLEM BOSHOFF

THE BLIND ALPHABET ABC

an installation at the Johannesburg Art Gallery
from the group exhibition OUTSIDE INSIDE

(Information to be placed in box somewhere in the article)

Willem Boshoff's BLIND ALPHABET PROJECT forms part of the group exhibition OUTSIDE INSIDE at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, where invited artists critically engage with the gallery. The exhibition is part of the Africus Biennale which is happening throughout Johannesburg from 28 February to 30 April 1995.

An art exhibition where normal vision is a disadvantage? As incredible as it may seem, this is Willem Boshoff's aim. His Africus Biennale installation consists of 338 boxes concealing one or more carved wooden objects. It can only be viewed by sighted people with the aid of a visually impaired guide, who can interpret the Braille signs on top of the concealing boxes, lift the lids and give access to the objects inside. The blind are allowed to touch the display, the sighted are not.

Boshoff aims to invert the space in an art museum where blind people are traditionally disadvantaged because visitors are allowed to look but not touch (thus denying access to the blind who can only 'see' through touch). In this exhibition, the sighted are the disadvantaged. Touch is the primary method of access to the objects on display, and the blind are only visitors allowed to touch. The sighted have to experience the displays through intervention from the blind. This is the first aspect of what Boshoff calls his "blind language". The second is the hidden aspect of language itself - words that are so obscure that they probably only appear in the comprehensive Oxford English Dictionary (the one that the sighted require a magnifying glass to consult): words like *calceolate*, *bothrenchymatous*, *apopetalous* which describe form, structure and texture. The Braille labels and the objects themselves explain these words, and the people who can learn and transmit their meaning within the exhibition are the non-sighted.

A blind person's highly developed sense of touch is the key to understanding what is on display. The blind are now empowered within the space of the art museum, they become critics of the tactile arts. To reflect this status of the blind as expert art interpreters, Boshoff suggests a new word for describing blind people, *chirosophist*. This means hand-wise or hand thinker, and tells us what such people *are*, and not, as in the case of the word *blind*, what they *are not*.

Boshoff's Blind Alphabet Project is a tangible morphological (or word-form) dictionary which, in time, will be complemented by a printed dictionary. The words in this dictionary are chosen according to four cardinal rules: they must deal with definitions for appearance, form, structure and texture; they must be recondite, arcane or abstruse; they must not be made up, that is, they must be recognised in the disciplines of science or culture; and the shapes designated by these words must be recorded in sculpted form. Boshoff carried out extensive background research identifying the

words, and the method of producing (or explaining) them in three-dimensional form displays a similar obsessive work ethic. He began sculpting the project 1 January 1993 and committed himself to making one piece a day out of different types of wood, allowing Sundays and twelve holidays off. On the last day of 1993 he had completed 300 pieces representing words from A to C. By the beginning of 1995 he had completed 340 pieces.

In the Johannesburg Art Gallery installation 340 pieces are concealed within 338 black mesh boxes on top of metal bases. The boxes are displayed in symmetrical groups, allowing easy access between each group. To the sighted, the effect is of an impersonal military cemetery with rows of graves. The *chirosofist*, unlikely to have that negative perception, would probably appreciate the display more as a well-ordered reference library than a graveyard.

The bleak cemetery aspect is shocking to the sighted. It is uncomfortable to feel excluded and unwelcome in a space where one usually feels at home. The discomfort is exacerbated because the sighted are denied the means to engage with the display in order to understand it. The sighted may have similar initial reactions to other pieces designed to shock, such as Steven Cohen's lounge suite fabric with mortuary photographs or Kendell Geers' sinister suitcase. (These are both in the Gallery's permanent-collection installation "New, Used and Improved".) But that is the extent of the similarity. In the Cohen and Geers, one is seduced into looking before being shocked and challenged, and ultimately led to understanding. In the Boshoff, the shock is one of exclusion. We, the sighted, are excluded because we do not have the skills to appreciate Boshoff's display. We have become blind.

Boshoff's aim in this installation is to engage with the space of the Johannesburg Art Gallery in such a way that new aesthetic values are established. He makes the aesthetic of touch as special an activity as viewing has become in the appreciation of any prized painting or precious artifact. In his own words, the sighted "are placed at the mercy of the blind touch-experts". This is an unusual and challenging experience for both sighted and *chirosofist*.

Jillian Carman
Johannesburg Art Gallery