

## **Gardens of Words, Willem Boshoff remembering not to forget.**

### KENSINGTON HOME

Plants studied since 1984

*Acacia galpinii* Mimosaceae, *Monkey thorn*, South Africa.

*Acanthis mollis*, *Beer's Breeches*, Acanthaceae South-West Europe.

*Acer palmatum*, *Japanese Maple*, Aceraceae Japan.

*Agapanthus africana*, *Love Flower*, Amarillidaceae South Africa

*Agave americana*, *Century Plant*, Agavaceae Mexico.

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The Boshoffs moved into their new home in King Edward Street, Kensington in 1984. Willem started off on the task of getting to know the “population” of this plot of land by learning their phylum, genus and species in Latin, their common name in English and memorising their country of origin. The list of 376 plants in the Kensington garden is one of thirty such lists established in various gardens all over the world.

“Gardens of Words” is an artwork that took shape gradually. Boshoff traces his interest back to the 1960’s, and over the years has developed an established procedure. He takes every available opportunity to spend time in a garden, preferably a scientifically established garden, and looks at plants. Depending on the circumstances he will work for several days moving from one plant to the next, examining it and copying the accompanying label. At home the handwritten list is transferred to computer, arranged alphabetically and then “studied”, which means it is compared to the published scientific indexes of plants. Willem wants the entries on his list to be “correct” – the label provided at the botanical garden might be erroneous or outdated, the name of the plant might have been changed according to the latest scientific update or the location might be

unusual...And when everything else is “correct”, the country of origin might have changed the names of its provinces.

Boshoff will work and rework the list of all the species of plants he has ever seen. To date, September 2004, his list contains close to 15 000 entries. His list has grown more and more slowly the longer he has worked, since it is increasingly difficult to find a plant he has not seen before.. Willem’s list grows more and more slowly. Somewhere during this antlike working procedure, some of the plant names become part of Willem’s natural vocabulary. Once he has learnt them, he might ask, “when is remembering?”

Now and then Willem feels the need to “air” his plants. He makes an attempt to represent his list in physical form. The resulting installations that have become known under the title “Gardens of Words” I and II. Willem is currently working on his third Garden.

The first “Garden of Words” consisting of 3600 names won the Vita Art Now award in 1996. The same garden was later shown in Madrid, at the Reine Sophia Art Centre. The list adopted the form of a memorial garden. Each plant name was mounted on a small wooden block. The blocks were then laid out on the floor like a graveyard and covered with a sheet of glass, meant to resemble a hot-house. The spectator could consult the clipboards provided to find the actual location of a certain plant. This version of the garden derives its origin from Boshoff’s preceding works. During his 370 day project of 1982/1983, Willem had set himself the task of finding a new species of wood every day, thus 370 species, on which to inscribe the aims and achievements he had invented for that day. When he experienced difficulty in obtaining wood at such a pace, he joined the Dendrological Society, hoping that its members might be helpful in procuring the wood he needed. The ambition of the members of the society was to identify the plants in situ. On such field trips by the society, Boshoff found that his ability to remember specialised terminology placed him in the position of authority on such matters. The quest for the tangible object, wood, became replaced by the quest for the word, the Botanical name.

During the field trips of the Dendrological Society Boshoff took notes, but, not yet realising what their importance might be, often discarded them.

For “Garden of words II” the now 10 000 labels were printed onto acetate, cut into narrow strips (2cm x 21cm) rolled and inserted into a hole in a base, the translucent strips developed the tension of grass, they stood upright and moved with the air current. In 1999 the flowerbeds of “Gardens of words II” travelled to Nantes to the annual horticultural show, the Florales and in 2002 also to Silkeborg to an exhibition of contemporary art on the theme of water.

Boshoff has reformulated his “philosophical” justification of this work a number of times. One essential thought however is repeated at every publication. *“Gardens of Words is born out of the romantic fascination with the use of language in various creation myths. It tracks down the enchantment Adam had with the names of living things in Genesis, and it identifies with Hermes Trimegestus and his texts of creation spells in Egyptian cosmogony”*.

This “romantic fascination” gives birth to most of Boshoff’s work, be it his dictionaries or his large installations. Thus, whenever he is solicited to talk about his work, Boshoff explains his version of the origin of language. In formulating his theory, Boshoff ranges across a wide spectrum of philosophers, critics and texts, including Plato, Kant, Genesis, Hermes, Linnaeus but also Wittgenstein and Derrida to name but a few. The linguist will look sceptically upon Boshoff’s theory. It seems to simplify the problem of language origin and make bold connections between myths that are approached with much more caution by specialist scholars. Although individual writings by researchers on the origins of language would oppose Boshoff’s theory in several essential details, they might ultimately point out that the understanding of creation myths is necessarily subjective, and, that therefore, Boshoff is entitled to his personal account of “how it comes about that plants have names”.

Willem Boshoff relates his version of the origin of language to three ancient sources. The Egyptian god Toth found a way whereby words that he designed and then uttered, could be turned into matter and form. This terrible knowledge is one of secrecy and guardianship, while the knowledge of the Greek Hermes is to reveal. The Roman equivalent of Hermes was Mercury, the conveyor of messages. In the book of Genesis Adam receives the order to name the living beings before him. When Adam names the animals, he is alone. The creation of Eve was to break Adam's monologue. Boshoff will add that our own advantage in naming is that we have all of history *to name from* as well as a present linguistically alive context *to name into*.

Boshoff's pattern of thought is essentially that of the maker of lists and writer of dictionaries. He will identify those words and myths that explain the transition from thought to name and use these concepts like puzzle pieces. Rearranging the fragments, he invents his version of the creation myth and creates a subjective reason for the necessity of his exercise in memory.

When the question for the reason of the "Gardens of Words" is put differently, Willem Boshoff will point out the link with the ecological debate. Most contemporary botanical literature and for that matter botanical art enters the ecological rhetoric. Boshoff points out that there are 25 000 names on the "Red Data List", meaning that 25 000 species of plants are considered dangerously close to extinction by the World Conservation Union. By inscribing the names of living plants, Boshoff believes to be perpetuating their memory. As long as their names are remembered, he argues, these plants have not ceased to exist. Boshoff thus considers each installation as a rescue operation, even though the plant names he carries in his head, and thus the names he conjures up in a spectator's mind, are not specifically the names of plants on the "Red Data list". They are names of any plant he has seen, even such superficially inconsequential plants as weeds, which he makes a special effort to record.

Tending his 'mental garden' pervades every aspect of Boshoff's everyday life. While taking a walk, Boshoff will interrupt his progress at every garden and repeat the

names of those plants he is already acquainted with while making mental notes of the plants whose names still escape him. At every moment of the day (and this includes the moment before falling asleep or waking up in the middle of the night) whenever Boshoff realizes that he cannot remember a certain name, he obliges himself to get up and review this plant (or word) straight away. His obsessive memorization is fuelled by the conviction that if he neglects this duty the plant is in acute danger of extinction, for it survives only as long as someone remembers its name. Boshoff meticulously keeps count of the more than 15 000 plants on his list, remembering where he met them, what the members of their families are called and which of them have already disappeared. It is as a continuation of this thought that Boshoff has created the metaphor of the hothouse-graveyard of plants. He claims that ‘“*Gardens of Words I*” *prematurely recognizes the shades of expired life, a futile hothouse at the end of time*’.

We can see the same urgency for remembering in other recent works, such as the *Prison Sentences*. For the prisoner it is vital to keep count of every single day, so that he does not lose touch with reality and might as well cease to exist. In other cases like *Far far Away* Boshoff uses the names of deceased children to remind us of events of the past or, as in the *Bread and Pebble Roadmap*, the Arab names take the place of a people that needs to be accounted for.

Let us recapitulate. Addressing Willem Boshoff's plant projects I have contained firstly that his version of the creation myth is an invention and secondly that Boshoff invents a reason for his obsessive memorization of plant names. In literary cycles this practice would be referred to as fiction.

The practice of creating a fiction and then organizing daily life according to this fiction as a form of art is paralleled by other contemporary artists working within the botanical metaphor. Wolfgang Laib for example spends his time collecting pollen on specific sites from specific species of plants. It may take him weeks to collect one small jar full of dandelion pollen. The pollen collected is used in an installation, generally spilt quite freely on the floor. Pollen immediately fills the enclosing space and thus creates an

environment that encompasses the entire exhibition venue. The moment of “artistic creation” happens in the field where Laib collects the pollen. The Belgian artist Thierry de Cordier, having decided to exclude himself from the commercial art scene lives his life as a fiction in his own garden. He constructs implements adapted to the task he has set himself, for example his *écritoire*, a writing stand. De Cordier has decided to limit his artistic production to writing.

I would like to extend Boshoff’s reasoning to an analogy within purely literary fiction. The literary sources I refer to can be found in Boshoff’s library. One short story from the collection “Fictions” by Jorge Louis Borges confronts the reader with several possible forms of memory. The characters in the story are the fictive narrator and Irénée Funes, a young man from Fray Bentos. The narrator, who nevertheless refers to himself as Borges, recalls that he has met Funes three times in his life and invites those who might have known Funes, presumably the reader, to contribute their memories of Funes to the intended fictive publication. The first memory the narrator chooses to share with his reader is that of the young man with a flower in his hand, “seeing this flower as no-one has ever seen it before even if they would see it from the early morning light until night-fall or an entire life”.

The memory most relevant to this discussion is Funes’ perfect recall of everything he has ever encountered. EVERYTHING: every second of his childhood, every form the clouds have taken during an entire day many years ago, the exact silhouette of a tree at every secluded moment of its motion in the wind...Funes can now reconstruct any given day of his life, except that it takes him an entire day to do so. Further he learns languages by reading dictionaries and he has devised an original system of proper nouns for every number from one to 24 000, no need to write it down, because he would never forget it. Borges and Funes spend an entire night talking about the nature of memory. Funes can enumerate of all the “cases” of memory. But he will admit that his memory is a rubbish dump, it is a useless mental catalogue of all his souvenirs. Borges comes to the conclusion that Funes, while remembering everything is unable to think. This story takes to the extreme the notion of memory as a storage bank where data and knowledge may be

deposited and retrieved at will. In this case memory would be a universal function of the mind. Willem Boshoff uses this understanding of memory in other earlier works, for example his *Trees of Knowledge*.

Another “case” of such detailed, even obsessive, memorization can be identified in Ivan Vladislavic’s *Aubrey Tearle*. The main character and narrator of the novel *The restless Supermarket* spends all his efforts “proofreading” his surroundings according to the standards he believes in. He uses every possible occasion to consult his several versions of the Oxford English Dictionary, in order to identify the exact word for every situation. In the course of the narration the reader can observe the world around Tearle changing and the relentless proofreader finds his references system, his standards, his knowledge, even himself irrelevant, a fossil, an anachronism.

Both fictions are aware of the futility of memory conceived as data bank. This notion is opposed by modern proposition to understand memory as a collective view of the past or as stereotyped and mythologized experience. The term ‘memory’ has with some success been applied towards understanding the notion of history in so-called oral traditions. Memory is necessarily always in the present while history is a legend, an invention of the present. These interpretations insist on the fact that memory is active, not only for the sake of repeating in order to remember more “correctly” but rather of reinventing for the present.

“Oral tradition” may point out another aspect of Boshoff’s ritual. In a society that has always avoided freezing its memory into writing, it is vital that someone will remember. In such societies one individual is singled out and trained as the preserver of this knowledge. In the Zulu tradition, for instance, this person would have carried the name “sanusi”. Were this individual to die before he can pass on his knowledge, memory and for this matter history would die with him. The urgency of this responsibility of remembrance seems frightening. In Celtic tradition there is a belief that may remind us of the same concern. The great bard, magician and prophet Merlin is said to still be sleeping in a cave “somewhere”. As long as this belief still lives in someone, Merlin is still alive.

Asked whether this claim can be extended to the dodo, the dinosaur, the mammoth we would probably defer the answer to the department of science fiction.

Willem's exercise in memory does not serve the purposes of science. His list is very subjective; it is established according to chance meetings with members of the plant order. Quite besides the fact that computers would be better suited to record the names of all the plants, the absurdity of Boshoff's attempt to learn the Latin names of all plants becomes apparent once juxtaposed with scientific exasperation in the face of the ecological crisis. Botanists helplessly watch plants disappear that neither they nor Carl von Linne have had the time to name. Morell in the *National Geographic Millennium Supplement on Biodiversity* quotes Sir Gillean Prance (present director of Kew) who points out that the loss of species advances "faster than we can catalogue them". Only a fraction of all plants have been named and classified.

Willem Boshoff is very aware of the futility of his endeavors. He knows that his enemy is not tangible, and that his chosen weapon is powerless. He lives in the tension between knowing that attacking windmills does not lead anywhere and the urgency to answer the battle call. Don Quichotte is yet another invention staggering endlessly between fiction and reality, aware of the futility of his quest yet still pursuing it. The most beautiful moment in the "Gardens of Words" occurs when Willem cum Don Quichotte stands armed with his note-pad between the stands of the other participants at the Florilies Horticultural Show, taking notes. When installing his follower beds in Nantes, Boshoff had met with aggressive incomprehension by the delegates from Australia who saw him as an intruder since he did not display any flowers but only printed matter. Yet in the middle of this controversy, during his time at the week-long show he furthered his quest, copying the very rare scientific labels supplied with the plants on exhibit.

Boshoff has made many maps to get lost by. They have the same aim as the jungle of his dictionaries, translations, collections and lists: "To understand why we do not understand" The transition from "knowing" to "not knowing", "understanding" to "not understanding", must be followed in a very subtle way, and more often than not, we



get lost. In his "Gardens of Words", Boshoff knows he is like a child, enthusiastically learning one new word after the other, with no idea that the entire horizon is covered with more and more words to be learnt. Meanwhile, the *Acacia galpii Mimosacae* in Willems garden in Kensington would long since have died had it not been for the secretive interventions of the waterer Rudolph and the watchful eye of Anèl cum Sancho Pansa.