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Improvisations of intertexts, autobiography and fiction

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As one enters the *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* exhibition¹, the narrative interplay is striking: a collection of artists' books each confronting different characters, fictional and spatial relationships that pervade a sense of quiet contemplation and poise whilst simultaneously provoking a loud dialogue. The coexistence of these books, in the spatial context of the gallery, immediately calls forth a different approach to the viewing of the artists' book or, generally, art. The viewers are invited to approach the works as readers, whereas the artists become the writers and the storytellers of narratives. Henceforth the focus of the work is dualistically positioned on the creative individual vision of the artist as the protagonist and concurrently on the viewer as part of the final narrative. The artist's book as extension of individual creativity – embedded in the artists' own dualistic struggles and ideals – often becomes an autobiographical confession to the reader. This relationship offers an interesting spin on the mechanisms of subjectivity within a postmodern culture – including autobiographical, fictional and intertextual complexities.

¹ Specifically referring to the exhibition held at The Gallery of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus in May 2010.

Subjectivity can only exist through interpretation and when all interpretations, such as those of the artist, characters and viewer are taken into account, then no interpretation offers “truth” – thus declaring all narratives as fiction. The artist's book therefore becomes a playing field of interpretations – a constructed fictional narrative, containing various intertextual references, or as Barthes (1975:78) reminds us, a *chambre d'échos* (chamber of echoes).

Louisemarié Combrink's *Hidden narratives* assert this *chambre of echoes* very directly by addressing the pretext of narratives. By placing enamel-covered “books” in Perspex containers, she deconstructs the prototypical book design as tactile or personal, and instead creates a frozen compartment of narrative reverberations simultaneously referring to a personal intertext, as well as other intertextual references (such as Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, 1872 and Rutger Kopland's *Jonge Sla*, 1970), essentially trapped in a play of language-image. In addition, the spatial context of the gallery “constructs” a further box, provoking supplementary references. Gordon Froud's *The Holy Book*

of *Alice* also writes around the intertextual play of the language-image by “editing” a timeless Western narrative. By literally cutting holes in the book he comments on diverse intertexts ranging from sculpture, three-dimensionality and divinity. These, in turn, call forth the idea of absence opposed to the presence of intertextual clues that remain to tell the tale.

Richardt Strydom and Jaco Burger’s *Ad Hominem* writes around and comments on the mythology of a collective white Afrikaner narrative – inviting subjectivity as the sole truth. By exploring the construction of a cultural heritage from the artists’ personal points of view, they immediately call forth a reflective intertextual narrative play referring to what McHale (1987:166-175) calls a historical fantasy. Intertexts of a constructed fiction are exchanged for a new self-reflective fiction – creating while remembering. Marli Heunis’s *Hier zjin Duivelen* also explores the nature of a collective narrative, but from the perspective of a simulated intertext. Heunis reinterprets André P. Brink’s novel *Duiwelskloof* (1998) by constructing her own subjective visual interpretation to the narrative – essentially creating a new narrative far removed from the original. *Hier zjin Duivelen* becomes an intertext of *Duiwelskloof* that in turn contains intertexts of Afrikaner identity, stereotypes and prototypes – referencing a collective that never existed in the “real” world. In contrast, the Tambani community project’s *The greedy hippo* (in collaboration with Jaco Kruger with animations by Christiaan van der Westhuizen) transforms a collectively remembered Venda narrative into a pictorial “reality”, thereby emphasising a collective cultural myth based on a rich tradition of storytelling.

Leora Farber’s contribution *The futility of writing 24-page letters* draws on the narrative of Bertha Guttmann (wife of the Victorian entrepreneur Sammy Marks), directly referring to a biographical fiction within a collective narrative. She also addresses the mechanics of reading and writing and the complexity of telling one’s own story, claiming it as one’s own. Every letter written immediately implies an autobiographical “I” who tells and a “you” (real, fictive or ideal) who reads – approaching the narrative as a multidimensional intertextual space where the “I” and “you” become an intertext of the artist, the gallery, Bertha Guttmann, Sammy Marks or the exhibition visitor.

The artist’s book as autobiographical declaration can also be seen in Collette Lotz’s *Ons ‘Queen’* and Cashandra Willemse’s *Mary and child*. Both artists as mothers work with symbols of life, beauty, innocence, love, and family, in addition to complexities of death, fragility and apprehension – crafting an interpersonal narrative. *Ons ‘Queen’* and *Mary and child* take the viewer, as part of the narrative, on a journey of personal expression. In addition, *Potchefstroom: Impressions on a City* by Steven Bosch illustrates the changing face of the Potchefstroom landscape. The gravity of this pictorial narrative, as told by photographs, concerns issues of demolition in Potchefstroom. The play between the presence and absence of historical Potchefstroom buildings generates a narrative dialogue between the past, present, identity and memory challenging the viewer to once again become the protagonist in our own decomposing narratives.

The artist’s book becomes an improvisation of many embedded fictions, realities or ideals – giving the viewer and artist alike the possibility to reconcile an understanding of subjectivity. In that spirit I would like to conclude by saying that the *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* exhibition is designed to derail the narrative train, offering powerful novels by means of cross-media adventures.

Sources cited

- BARTHES, R. 1975. Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes. Paris: Seuil.
- McHALE, B. 1987. Postmodern fiction. London: Routledge.