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Finding a sense of place in artists' books

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As part of each person's identity, we hold what is called a 'sense of place'. To a certain extent, the sense of place describes the distinctness of spaces in our communities. We could even say that it is the place where the cultural dimension of our existence meets the environment in which we live.

Kent Ryden (1993:38) describes this in the following manner: "A sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing history within its confines."

The idea of a sense of place could thus be linked to the sentiment of a community, but also to that of an individual towards his environment. Importantly, it signifies both a geographic and psychological idea.

A sense of place refers not so much to one's residence in a certain locale, but to one's feeling of belonging to a certain area. For instance, each of us holds a special bond with the house we grew up in – and often the ultimate sense of place is felt to be the home.

Obviously, if one considers this concept in other contexts, it could also become problematic. For instance, from a feminist perspective, the home becomes the 'central site of the oppression of women' or a site of exploitation, and not necessary a place where a woman can feel that she belongs.

In *Transgression and boundaries of the page*, there are various artists' books that address the environment, place and one's sense thereof.

In the work of Steven Bosch, *Potchefstroom: Impressions on a City*, the artist documents disregard for heritage and the changes in Potchefstroom's sense of place in terms of various houses that were demolished in the town over the past few years. Many houses, which also constitute personal histories of people, are irreverently demolished and replaced by characterless buildings that add to a sense of alienation to the broader community.

Although the book explores the destruction of specific buildings, it also captures a different place which few people ever see, or care to acknowledge – that of the ruin.

The moments of destruction in the demolition of buildings become new places which are captured in the photographic stopping of time – these places bear the signs of hurt and become monuments to change (and to that which is lost of our identity in the process).

Kabous and Hannes Meiring's book, *Nommer 14, Daaikantstraat*, deals with a similar issue, but instead of referring to a specific place, the book illustrates how we do not necessarily realise the bond we feel to certain places until they are no longer there.

Although a dining room table is not a specific place, the generalised memories surrounding a dining room table become a sense of place which each viewer interprets from their own memories. Some would remember Sunday lunches, or special occasions spent at such a table. Thus Roela Hattingh's *As die Gode by ons kom eet (When the Gods come to dine)* utilises each of our sense of place as a basis to set her dialogue surrounding a meal with the Gods. Within this context, the viewers are forced to revisit their psychological sense of place to compare certain beliefs with their own as the story unfolds.

Verneukpan / Bitterputs, which is a collaborative book between Strijdom van der Merwe and Jo-Marie Rabe, deals with Rabe's return to the region in which she grew up after a period of 27 years. In this book it is illustrated how one's sense of place can change over time. For the author, the revisiting of this area is a direct confrontation of the sense of a place far removed in time. The memories of growing up in the area are changed by revisiting it, and thereby the sense of place will also change. A place a child couldn't wait to leave, becomes a place of wonder, of 'how-could-I-have-missed-this'.

Marli Heunis uses André P. Brink's novel *Duiwelskloof* as a basis for *Hier zijn Dui-elen*. This book creates a simulated reality using maps and illustrations to create a place where the viewer is able to interpret clues on identity. The book transports the viewer to a fictionalised place – one that is uncomfortable, yet familiar.

In *Hard Pressed* Rosalind Cleaver explores the environmental state of the Elandsberg region in the Eastern Cape. In this book the sense of place (or destruction thereof) is transported into a concept where the viewer is confronted with the destruction of the habitat of Hewitt's Ghost Frog. And in a sense, the frog is placed into a new place – the press which constitutes the book itself. The displacement of the frogs is typified by a changing habitat and a physical loss of their place in nature. Once again, the book looks at how society can change the space we live in, affecting the places we know.

Sense of place also links to the ideas of memory, remembrance and nostalgia. Franci Greyling's *Tinboektoe toe* takes the

experiences of a 'middle daughter' and how she deals with her memories of home whilst being on a journey on her way to the unfamiliar place of Tinboektoe. On the one hand this is an exploration of a place of wonder, but on the other one of uncertainty, which is contrasted to the home (her place of belonging) to where she sends postcards detailing her travels.

Lastly, Leora Farber addresses the issue of displacement through diaspora in her work *The futility of writing 24-page letters*. In this artwork Farber addresses the colonial Englishwoman Bertha Marks's frustration at losing her sense of place through her relocation to South Africa. Marks, as an outsider, used the writing of letters to her husband as a vehicle to express her own longing for that which is familiar – resulting in him dismissing her for her gender and thereby further displacing her psychologically.

In both Farber's and Greyling's works, the idea of letter (or postcard) writing becomes a link to the sense of place of each character. Each is reaching out to the familiar and the comforting belonging, from a place which is unfamiliar.

Sources cited

RYDEN, K.C. 1993. Mapping the invisible landscape. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.