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Hidden narratives: an overview of its conceptualisation and execution

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Hidden narratives consists of a series of six black Perspex boxes with softcover books in five of these (and blood-stained toilet paper in the sixth). The books have been covered with white enamel paint and seem to be “frozen” – some are open as if blown by the wind. On the transparent covers of the Perspex boxes text appears that has been engraved by means of laser and on the front sides of the boxes the title of each work is similarly engraved. The works look like labelled artefacts that have been stored and put away and need to be regarded as objects.

The poet-novelist Anne Michaels writes the following about the process of translation in her book *Fugitive Pieces* (1996):

Translation is a kind of transubstantiation; one poem becomes another. You can choose your philosophy of translation just as you choose how to live: the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning, the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude (p. 109).

I aligned myself with the first type of translation, specifically because my interest is

in the place where words and images meet and breathe life into one another. Michaels (1996:109) further says that:

The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life; both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what’s between the lines, the mysterious implications.

The name of my book project, *Hidden narratives*, is obviously derived from this view; the notion of an invisible mediator in the space between worlds. The image is an immigrant in the world of words and the word, in a similar fashion, visits the sphere of the image. For me, the question was therefore how to make the word and the image play in each others’ arenas. If an image does not have a name – if the word and image do not play along on the way towards meaning, a vacuum comes into being, and this is where one has to start looking. Michaels speaks of “a heavy black outline around things separated from their names”. This “heavy black outline” veils meaning; I wanted to play with this idea by thinking of a book as a thing (an image) but also as a text (the

word). How does the “heavy black outline” look around a book that does not have a name? The essence of a book is not only that it contains text; it is also an object with its own body language that carries with it the history of how it was handled: thrown down, curled up next to the bath, forgotten on the back seat of a car, next to another book as if in conversation, left open at a lovely part I want to read again. It became clear to me that I had to give the book a physical character but that I had to show it without giving it a name; and also that the “heavy black outline” had to be given a form because it suggests the relationship between word and image. In this way the white painted books in black Perspex boxes became the solution within which I could further explore the “between the lines” idea.

From here a further step was to pinpoint idea of words and the way in which they are transformed when they are translated into different languages, but also their translation into visual images as the between-the-lines leitmotif. These words had to work with the visual appearance of the book.

Nuances of meaning fascinate me – something like “I could tell by the way it fell” and “I could tell by the way she fell” (in *Opacities*) both suggest violence or someone/something that is thrown down, although it is not said *what* the spectator can “tell”. The book lying face down in the box in this work suggests this deference of meaning – even if the spectator can sneak a look inside the box through the half open pages of the book, the book turned his or her back to you and faces the bottom of the case. It guards all possible meanings, yet it communicates.

The absence of fixed meanings that come into play due to the “heavy black outline” made me think about the way in which a *roman à clef* offers the suggestion of fixed meaning: once you have found the key to the mystery, you understand the story. However, it is also true that the *absence* of this key is frustrating but the desire to find remains: absence therefore directs the reading of such a novel. In this work, a real key has been placed inside the book, but the viewer/reader cannot touch it and remains isolated from it, hence the title of the work that refers to the *roman à clef*: *An absence can keep you alive*. This idea also resonates more widely in terms of the way in which we think of people and things.

The absence of determinable meaning becomes potently obvious if one thinks of literary translation. Here I like to think of translation more in terms of looking for essences than a translation of detail, but determining this essence is a highly subjective process. The work *Language surrenders* illustrates this dilemma by placing C.S. Lewis’s *Jabberwocky* together with two translations of the poem that are more or less “accessible” to the Afrikaans reader:

Linette Retief’s *Flabberjak* and Nicolaas Matsier’s *Koeterwaal*. One derives a sense of pleasure when reading another version of *Jabberwocky* – in itself one of the more elusive poems ever written – and yet one realises that meaning, especially here, slips and writhes constantly; language surrenders to the “heavy black outline around things separated from their names”.

As a sometime translator myself, I frequently note things that cannot be translated, or do not want to be. In *Die onvertaalbares / Accidentally burnt as rubbish* the title suggests that when something is barely translatable, one may tend to discard it; in this way beautiful Afrikaans words such as *lieplapper*, *ondeug*, *maaifoedie* and *ploert* are threatened by possible extinction. Of course, this is also true of Afrikaans as a language; Afrikaans is indeed regarded as the threatened *booswig* (or a villain or a thug, to give an inadequate English translation – another word in the lid of this work) in South Africa because of historical advantaging and enforcement of this language.

Will our children still understand Afrikaans, or will it be burnt as rubbish? My son, who was two years old at the time, one day toppled a large dustbin which then fell onto him, and his nose started bleeding. My grandmother’s advice in such instances was always to take a piece of paper and to make “bloedblomme” (blood flowers) from the droplets and smears, which I then proceeded to do. This turns a traumatic event into something to be proud of, something “beautiful”. The blood-stained toilet paper in the case contains that same blood. Blood flowers are wonderful things because it translates the shock of seeing blood immediately

into something less traumatic: a flower painted in blood. The vulnerability of children who make these blood flowers – as it were, still “limp” or “slap nog” in the words of Rutger Kopland’s *Jonge sla* (in the work *bloedblomme*) presented an appropriate text for suggesting the idea of transforming the shock of blood in the context of the child’s vulnerability.

The idea of blood flowers also suggest associations with the flower of darkness, with what is usually veiled: Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* comes to mind. For *Different ways of dying* I juxtaposed the title of Baudelaire’s anthology with Totius’ *Passieblomme* with books inside the case that seem to “converse” with one another”. *Passieblomme* as a form of moribund literature in this way becomes an old-worldish Afrikaanse version of *Fleurs*.

It is difficult to separate the concept development of the series of works from the physical execution thereof, because the one supplements the other – new possibilities announce themselves during the course of the process. A very brief version of the execution can be set out as follows: books were found, transformed, painted; cases were produced at the fablab (a much longer process that I initially anticipated because black Perspex was not readily available at the time and the suppliers time and again delivered the wrong colour Perspex); and the books were fixed onto the bottom of the cases by means of silicone, after which the lids were added. Something I did not anticipate and which contributed to further levels of suggestion are the reflections of the white books on the black inner walls of the cases. I did suspect that the effect of shadows caused by the text (engraved onto the lids), but

this effect was also much more interesting than I originally thought it would be. The cases were displayed lying down (on a table) but once also against a wall – these variations of display also made the work look different each time.

Texts that were used in the sequence discussed about are listed below:

Work 1: *Opacities*

I could tell by the way it fell
I could tell by the way she fell

Work 2: *Roman à clef*

An absence can keep you alive

Work 3: *Language surrenders*

Jabberwocky

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.
“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”

- Lewis Carroll

Die Flabberjak

Dis gonker en die vore garings
Fruip en gronkel in die bloof;
Ja, grimvol was die kilderboom,
En die ploert wil kroof.
‘O wee die Flabberjak, my seun!
Die kaak wat kou, die klou wat klap!
O wee die Flikflokvoël, en flak
Die frose Blakkerdap!’

- Linette Retief

Koeterwaal

Het schiewert en de glappe muik
Graffelt zich in de vijchten
Maar heel sloef was de rontelguik,
En strave woelen krijgten.
‘Hoed voor de Koeterwaal je, zoon!
Zijn scherp gebit, zijn reuzenzwaai!
Vermijd het Dubdubdier, verschoon
De glurieuze Beffesnaai!’

- Nicolaas Matsier

Work 4: *Die onvertaalbares /*

Accidentally burnt as rubbish

maaifoedie
skobbejak
boef
skurk

karnallie
kwajong
vent
kalant
ondeug
niksnuts
deugniet
booswig
ploert
lieplapper

Work 5: *bloedblomme*

Jonge Sla

Alles kan ik verdragen,
het verdorren van bonen,
stervende bloemen, het hoekje
aardappelen, kan ik met droge ogen
zien rooien, daar ben ik
werkelijk hard in.
Maar jonge sla in september,
net geplant, slap nog,
in vochtige bedjes, nee.

- Rutger Kopland

Work 6: *Different ways of dying*

Les Fleurs du Mal // Passieblomme

