## Susan Woolf: Taxi Hand Signs South African Jewish Museum Cape Town, South Africa July 10–September 5, 2016

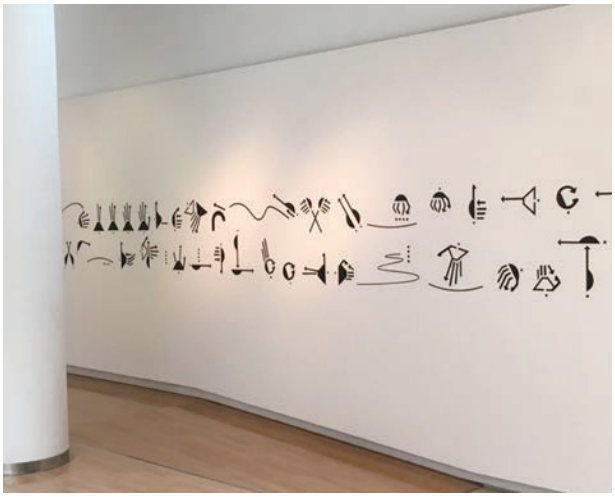
reviewed by Pamela Allara

Under the new administration of Director Gavin Morris, the South African Jewish Museum has expanded its cultural and historical installations to include temporary exhibitions by contemporary artists. For 2016, the museum hosted an ambitious, multimedia exhibition by Johannesburg-based artist Susan Woolf titled "Taxi Hand Signs and a New Shape Language for People Who Are Blind" that presented artworks based on the gestural language used to signal minibus taxi drivers. Because until recently South Africa's public bus and train services have been inadequate, over the past half century a largely unregulated taxi/minibus transport sector has developed that operates extensive commuter routes between the townships and inner cities. According to Woolf and J.W Joubert, "apartheid, poverty, and … deficient transport in and around cities, fashioned the explosion that is the taxi industry today" (Woolf and Joubert 2013:284). Simply put, the taxis that clog the city streets are visible evidence of an ongoing economic gap between rich and poor that the advent of democracy in South Africa has yet to close. But taxi hand signs, which commuters use to signal their desired destinations, are also evidence of the resilience and resourcefulness of South African commuters.

Woolf, whose work has addressed South Africa's fraught history in both her masters and doctoral work, began in 2004 to systematically catalogue the taxi hand signs she observed during her commute by car between her suburban home and her downtown Johannesburg studio. As a white person—an *umlungu*—it took some determination as well as faith in the goodwill of the citizenry to go into the townships, the taxi ranks, and Johannesburg's streets to interview drivers, queue marshals, and passengers and to record the individual gestures they were using. By 2007, she used the information she had gathered as the basis of a series of twenty-six brightly-colored gouaches of gloved hands making the individual signs (Fig. 1); that same year, the paintings were reproduced in a "Taxi Hand Signs booklet" that could serve as a reference for those who were unfamiliar with the sign needed for a specific route.[1] By the time she completed her doctoral dissertation in 2013, Woolf had identified and documented a total

1 Susan Woolf
First Taxi Hand Signs (2008)
Lithograph, ed. 40; 49.5 cm x 61 cm

all photos courtesy Susan Woolf



2 Susan Woolf
Blind Shape Language (2013)
Black textured vinyl, 8 m x 1 m
South African Jewish Museum.

3 Susan Woolf's Blind Shape Language experienced by blind visitors at the South African Jewish Museum, July, 2016.

4 Susan Woolf
ArtBOOK: The Other Side, (detail), (2016).
Dot matrix printing paper, each image 31 cm x 28 cm.; 54 pages total; opens out to 15 meters. Colophon in Braille.

of fifty signs. (The more recent gouaches were shown in the exhibition under review.) As Dr. Molefe Tsele wrote in the forward to the "Taxi Hand Signs" booklet: "South Africa has eleven official languages, but in reality there are twelve. The twelfth is a sign language … the language of commuters" Woolf 2007:n.p.)

As Woolf was able to document, the hand signs are not arbitrary, but rather have specific meanings that she categorized into imitative, indicative, and ordinal signs. Perhaps the simplest example of an imitative sign is the gesture for "Orange Farm," (center gesture in Fig. 1), which consists of a hand cupped as if holding an orange. However, many of the signs have more extended narrative meanings; the specific cultural or historical narratives are in some cases widely shared, in others less so.

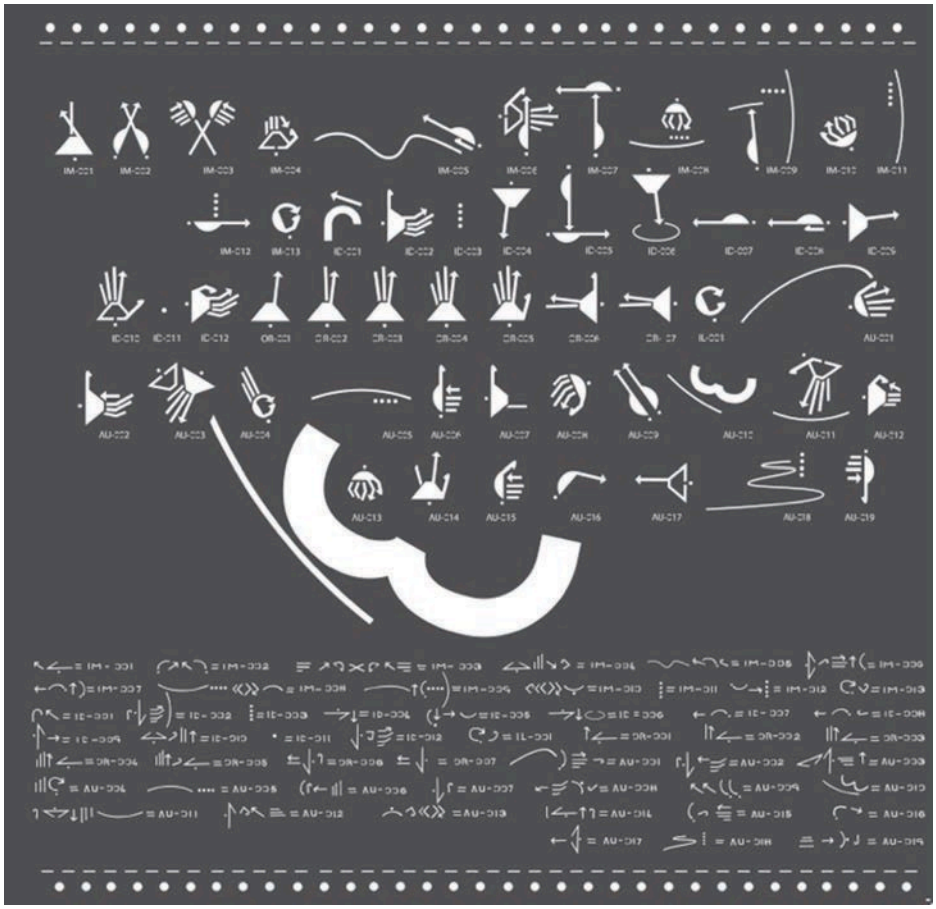
While undergoing the challenging project of researching the taxi hand signs, their routes, and their associated narratives, Woolf observed that blind people, who also commuted by taxis, had little access to the signs sighted people learned through imitation or consultation. She therefore devised a tactile language consisting of fourteen puzzle-like shapes that, when combined to form the taxi hand signs, could be easily learned by the blind.

Since 2013, Woolf has continued to investigate the implications of signing as a complex, evolving language system: "the hieroglyphics of a new speech" (to borrow a phrase coined in the early twentieth century).[2] In this creative endeavor, she has followed the precedent of South African artists who have invented personal languages, most notably Walter Battiss and Willem Boshoff. Unlike the latter, however, Woolf's signs are intended to be accessible to a broader audience. At the Jewish Museum, the fifty blind taxi signs were printed in graphically arresting black vinyl, which spanned 8 meters on one gallery wall (Fig. 2). This installation drew both sighted and blind visitors together in an interactive experience involving both the visual and the haptic senses. Art became a "matter" of both sight and touch (Fig. 3). Just as commuters learn the taxi hand signs primarily by asking other people in the ranks, so the element of dialogue became central to the experience of the museum exhibition, which was, after all, about communication—and community.

In addition to the *Blind Shape Language on Wall*, the individual pages from her book *Taxi Hand Signs for the Blind* (2009) and from the pages from *ArtBOOK* were mounted on the walls of a constructed "Darkroom." Navigating the space while passing their fingers across the embossed signs, sighted visitors gained an understanding of the experience of being blind and of having to learn a different language system in order to become literate. Here again, the precedent is that of her friend from student days, Willem Boshoff, whose sculptures in *Blind Alphabet ABC* (1991–2000) are housed in metal boxes whose Braille labels can be accessed only by a blind guide. As activists, both artists have a fundamental concern with allowing museum access to communities who might generally be or feel excluded.

In a globalizing and multilingual culture it is perhaps significant that Woolf is not alone in using hand signs as a means of cross-cultural communication. For example, in *Abstinencia (politica)* (2011), the Cuban artist Yoan Capote assembled the casts he created from the hand gestures of eight different people so that together they spelled the word "politics" in Braille, a commentary on Cuban citizens' lack of a voice. Indian artist Nalini Malani has also used Braille hand signs in her multimedia work *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012).

The most recent prints in the exhibition explored the ways in which a gestural or



5 Susan Woolf
Short Hands Black: Body Sign to Dudza (2015)
Hand printed on Hahnemühle paper from laser cut plate, ed. 20; 45 cm x 38 cm

6 Susan Woolf
Signification: Textarea (2013)
Oil paint on four panels; 1 m x 7 m
Installation view, South African Jewish Museum

spoken language, once coded as image or text, becomes increasingly subtle and complex. In *ArtBOOK: The Other Side* (2016; Fig. 4), the fifty blind signs were printed with a Tiger Pro Braille Graphics Embosser printer, resulting in an ethereal yet monumental concertina book. In two embossed prints from laser cut plates, *Short Hands White: Mamelodi to Lusaka* and *Short Hands Black: Body Sign to Duduza* (2015; Fig. 5), the blind language shapes were labeled with the reference system she devised, while in the lower register a new system descriptive of the components of the hand gestures extended the language system further. These complex hieroglyphics are unlikely to be mastered by the average viewer, but the experience of them is similar to looking at any text in an unfamiliar script. Absent our ability to read the words, the beauty of the formal system becomes paramount. Moreover, the spacing of the elements in the *Short Hands* series references the rhythmic "beats" of the hand gestures in the ranks.

Just as the taxi hand signs have continued to evolve in practice, so Woolf's fascination with visual and textual systems has included a shift from the individual signs to the nature of communication itself. For example, the painting *SIGNIFICATION: Textarea* (2013; Fig. 6) initially appears abstract, but as the stacked squares begin to suggest "city" and the curved bands to suggest "roads," the smudges and marks in turn read as signals sent across urban spaces. As Woolf wrote in the exhibition catalogue, "As much as taxi hand sign narratives are shaped by the city environment … so also are the spaces in the city altered by the presence of these shared and observable performances."

Unfortunately, the unique South African gestural language that has sustained commuters for many decades may now be in decline. The Johannesburg city government's Bus Rapid Transit project, Rea Vaya, instituted in 2009, will over time replace individually-owned minibus taxis with new, standardized vehicles and routes. Fortunately, the visual language will not be entirely lost; Woolf's artworks will remain as recollection objects that will continue to honor the creativity of South Africa's citizens.

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***Notes***

1 Unfortunately, because the Taxi Association decided not to fund free distribution, the books have not gone into general circulation, but are available for consultation in libraries and taxi association headquarters. The Taxi Association purchased the core group of gouaches, which are displayed in their main office.

2 The phrase is attributed to American critic Egmont Arens, and is the title of a study of early American modernist art and literature by Bram Dijkstra (Princeton University Press, 1969).

***References cited***

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