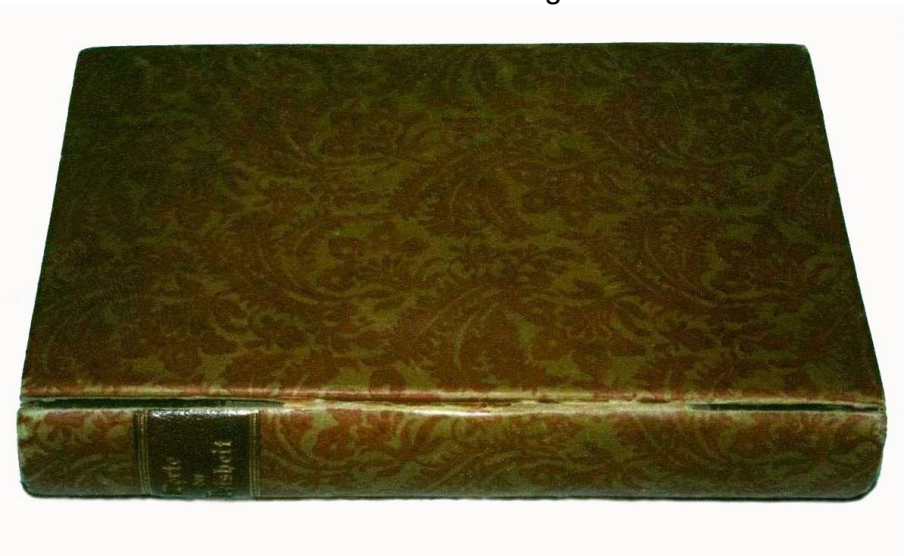
TOWARDS A HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS' BOOKS

In this chapter, I attempt to give substance to a history of artists' books in South Africa.

It is a given that no significant South African precursor can match the antiquity, innovation and magnitude of major examples in the international field. Yet it is no less important to establish our own history, no matter how tentatively and partially, in order to find congruence (or not) with the characteristics and themes already established.[1] In isolating the self-consciousness which an artist establishes on the pages of a book, I am looking for those qualities which allow the book to enunciate itself whether in structure or function. Self-reflexive elements such as visual punning[2] also enunciate and are often exploited by makers of artists' books.

I begin my exploration into South African books, which demonstrate in some way elements of self-consciousness and / or reflexivity, with Irma Stern's *Paradise* (*Worte der Weisheit* or *Words of Wisdom*). It was begun in Weimar and developed between the years 1919 and 1925 and written and illustrated in gouache with brush.



Dubow (1991:11) describes *Paradise* as *a "cross between a personal Book of Hours and a confessional"*. It contains fifty pages of mostly image and text, with only pages 1, 20, 30, 41, 44 and 50 containing pure imagery. A congruence of both style and medium is evident throughout the book.

[1] At this stage I would like to make clear that although a vast number of illustrated books have been published both in South Africa and in Britain pertaining to South Africa's Natural History, such examples of Africana fall outside the scope of my project. My decision to exclude such publications does not attempt to deny the importance of Africana artists who published their work in book form e.g. Kolb, Valetyn, Dapper, Alberti, Salt, Burchell, Cornwallis Harris, Heydt and others. Simply stated, it is clear to me that they form part of a field removed from even the fringes of my research, and are thus of no concern to my project.

[2] For example, the illustration of an open book containing text referring the viewer back to the very act of reading in which (s)he is engaged.

Paradise is, in part, a personal journal but, and most importantly for me, it lacks the spontaneity, editing and changes of style, medium and concept typical of such a document. What is clear is that over the six years taken to 'complete'[3] the work Stern made a calculated decision to work in the same medium and push for congruence in style and particularly in the relationship between the linearity of both graphic text and other linear pictorial detail. For me the work is a considered and sustained conceptual and narrative mediation for the self. I find this sustained activity interesting in that an artist's journal or visual diary more often than not contains disparate and diverse media, and thematic and stylistic elements. Notes, thoughts, collage, odds and ends, sketches and other personalised workings-out of formal and visual problems often for other (more important?) works seem typical of such objects. The term 'journal', I suggest, is inappropriate and I feel it necessary to explore this a little further.

On the first page Stern states that

> [t]his book would free me from everyday life – a free and happy playing about in the realm of colourful imagination – an enjoyable ball game with colours and thoughts.

Dubow (1991:11), however, states that *"the continuous linking theme of the artist as a mythical bringer of gifts to those bound by the mundane"* as well as the book's *"remarkable aesthetic quality"* prove it to be more than the 'game playing' Stern suggests. The book's ability to contain, and amplify Stern's artistic aspirations and reflect a spiritual purpose in the role of the artist is congruent with the utopian ideal present in the work of Blake, Morris, Mallarmé and others. In these terms then, Stern has not made a journal at all but a highly self-conscious book in which the passions and

[3] I am unsure regarding Stern's completion of *Paradise*. There are a number of blank pages at the end of the journal which suggest that the narrative could have continued. I am not convinced that the last few pages represent any form of specific closure, particularly with page 50 containing no text.

practice of the artist are rooted. Dubow (1999:12) argues that the book's content operates in *"metaphorical terms"* as a release from personal loneliness and alienation through the act of painting (1999:73).[4] I would argue that *Paradise* is also a peculiarly self-reflexive statement. The form of the book seems an appropriate vehicle through which to reveal passages of time. The six-year gestation of the work and Stern's unfolding artistic and spiritual processes are made manifest in the time needed for page turning. Allied to this is the book's structural ability to hide, reveal and close as a reflexive metaphor for the presentation of those very aspects of Stern's self. *Paradise* does not illustrate Stern's artistic and spiritual concerns but manifests and reveals them.

At this point I must caution that a book made by an artist does not automatically qualify it as an artist's book. Of importance here is that, although Stern at no time referred to her journal as such, her understanding of the book's reflexivity and her self-conscious decisions around uniformity of style, medium and linking theme suggest that she had, at least, something of a substantial and temporal work in mind. Despite publishing other personal books[5] Stern's *Paradise* exists as a pivotal book standing against the conventions of the large fine-press editions of Nineteenth to early Twentieth Century livres d'artiste published in Europe during the period of her stay there. I have also suggested that it is equally uncomfortable within the conventions of the artist's sketchbook or private journal.

Given this, I feel that *Paradise* is a significant precursor of South African artists' books showing substantial congruence with the important elements I have established in the international field. *Paradise* offers a unity of graphic text and image, a pantextuality[6] and synthesis. The text if left unread does not interfere, and is in no way incongruent, with the pictorial elements of the page. *Paradise* offers congruence on a second thematic level too in that the work strives for a personal utopian ideal. This idealism begins with the book's title and extends to the content which, in Stern's words (on p.1 of the book), *"would free me from everyday life"*.

There is further congruence between *Paradise* and the characteristics established in the international field which I isolate as:

- The artist being in control of the entire production as writer, illustrator, printer and binder with inexpensive materials and low production cost;
- Uniqueness as a one-of-a-kind book. The artist can hand-colour a page or make other singular or unique interventions;
- The irregular placement and absence of texts on certain pages, and the free placement of typographic and other visual elements which alters the conventional layout of text in columns and paragraph rows on a page;
- The conventional or expected methods of printing are changed. In this case there is no printing at all as the work is painted in gouache.

[4] Given the period in which Stern produced this work and the conditions under which she had to leave Weimar, loneliness and alienation are obvious themes which link *Paradise* with that of the European avant-guard working in Germany. Max Pechstein, her mentor, Kirchner and others explored similar themes.
[5] *Congo* (1943) and *Zanzibar* (1948) are two examples.
[6] I define the term as the unity of and simultaneity between reading a pattern as text and as pictorial element.

If Stern's book is a significant precursor of South African artists' books it seems appropriate for me to look further; into two examples which are fundamentally different from Stern's *Paradise* but which also demonstrate congruence with the themes and characteristics I have identified above.

I now attempt to show how the publishers of two avant-garde South African periodicals between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, explored some of the elements of significant precursors. I will also argue that the periodicals *Wurm* (from August 1966 to February 1970) and *Izwi* (from October 1971 to August 1974) contributed directly and in a clear and articulate manner to the rise of the artist's book in South Africa. *Wurm* is of particular importance to me in that it forms a foundation for two particular (but interrelated) aspects of my project.

Firstly, I will discuss the diverse reasons why *Wurm* was self-consciously unconventional in spirit and placed itself outside of the conservative literary circles of its day. I will argue that, in its final edition, it published the first example of an artist's book in South Africa. Secondly, as it positioned itself as a provocative publication, it forged links with the European avant-garde. This resulted in the publication of Concrete and Visual Poetry encouraging a climate of unified, intermedial pantextuality. This climate is evident in André Brink's *Orgie* (1965) which, I argue, forms one of the important sources of Willem Boshoff's *Kykafrikaans* (1980). I will explore both these aspects in some depth as my concerns in the next two chapters spring directly from them.

Although I place less emphasis on *Izwi*, I will show that certain elements of its publication and distribution are of importance to South African artists' books. *Wurm* occupies a unique place in my project as it is a precursor of South African artists' books, an ancestor of the work of Willem Boshoff, and it published perhaps the first artist's book in South Africa. I therefore feel it necessary to present a close reading of the publication's five-year output.

Wurm was essentially an Afrikaans publication which by the first half of 1967 (with the issue of *Wurm 5*) had become both bilingual and more encompassing in its vision.[7] In his editorial accompanying the second edition, August 1966:3, editor P.A. de Waal Venter states, *"[t]he first Wurm saw the light in a very stormy world. So stormy that advisors were stripped like leaves from a tree"*.This situation was due in part to the open-minded acceptance, on the part of the editors, of anything that came their way.

> It is the policy of the editors to publish the opinion of anyone who wishes to speak out on literature. There is a tendency on the part of literary magazines to publish only the kind of stuff that suits the particular taste of the editor. The editors wish to avoid this tendency and make Wurm a mouthpiece for anyone wishing to express himself on the South African literary world (*Wurm* August 1966:3).[8]

[7] It is important to note that the editors from the fifth publication onwards were Phil du Plessis and Marie Blomerus. They altered the scope and its vision to encompass interviews with visual artists, a much wider range of views, more poems and pieces of prose and the extension of shaped and what was referred to as 'visueël - konkrete poesie'.

[8] The open editorial policy would have appealed to young, free-thinking individuals - particularly Afrikaans speaking - who might be critical of the state and government policies. *Wurm* had a list of subscribers and a growing following

Later in the editorial, de Waal Venter opens *Wurm*'s doors to young visual artists believing art to be in as much of a battle for existence as literature ((*Wurm* August 1966:3). De Waal Venter gave some clear indications as to the positioning of *Wurm* in both the literary and the wider socio-political environment by stating, in December 1966:

> Wurm wishes to serve as an instrument to keep...necessary contact with life, an instrument at the service of all who would use it. Why then another instrument that cares if there are other instruments in existence? ...Is it not a dangerous tendency to simply fall back on what already exists and what is already established? (*Wurm* August 1966:8).

De Waal Venter's somewhat idealistic words express a desire to empower writers and artists who were becoming marginalised by the Apartheid government's increasing control of free expression. *Wurm* would attempt to provide space for a younger more socially critical generation of poets. These would include Ingrid Jonker, Wilhelm Knobel, and Adam Small rather than the "over-exposed" and "familiar" poets of the pre-1940s such as N.P. van Wyk Louw, Elizabeth Eybers and Uys Krige (*Wurm* December 1966:9). De Waal Venter illustrates his ideal South African literary image as a complicated and often indecipherable, vital and complex Baldinelli etching, a van Heerden painting or a Battiss drawing rather than as a restful Pierneef landscape.[9] De Waal Venter concludes by asking, *"Should a person with such a…challenge lean back on the safe and protective arms of established periodicals?"* (*Wurm* August 1966:11).[10] Du Plessis acknowledges the influence of Dada when describing *Wurm* as a self-conscious insult to the likes of the academic establishment, the Broederbond, B.J. Vorster (then the State President) and the activities of the Ossewa Brandwag.[11]

It is important to state that its links with the avant-garde European literary establishment and the publishing of Concrete Poetry was a manifestation of both its positioning and its provocation. Before analysing the operation of Concrete Poetry in *Wurm* I feel it necessary to briefly consider a broader view of Afrikaans writing within which *Wurm* positioned itself.

Ampie Coetzee (in Trump 1990:344) points to *"the contradictory facts"* that one has to be aware of when noting what was happening in Afrikaans literature and poetry between the crises of 1961 and 1976. He (1990:343) quotes Nadine Gordimer as saying that the *"lively and important group of black writers who burst into South African literature in the fifties and early sixties disappeared...as if through a trapdoor"*. Purposeful bannings and the resulting total silence of black writers; a post Sharpeville

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among the young Afrikaans intellectual and literary community. (From an interview. Phil Du Plessis, Kalk Bay, 23 August 1977).

[9] The use of visual art to personify the complexities of South Africa's literary world is more than simply interesting and convenient. It is the very closeness of the cultural debate and positioning of the artist in the mid 60s that forces De Waal Venter to consider the visual and written arts as a united front or protagonist for a new vision of South Africa's 'troubled landscape'. He uses the metaphor to promote an anti-Nationalist stance, which up to that point, had been symbolised by 'a restful Pierneef landscape' (*Wurm* December 1966:10).

[10] I suggest that by the term 'established' de Waal Venter not only means 'conservative' and 'outdated' but 'under the control of the government', at least in literary policy.

[11] Du Plessis also made reference to the conscious subversiveness of *Wurm* in the decision to include writing by schizophrenics.

economic boom and a renewal in Afrikaans literature (with van Wyk Louw and Peter Blum in prose and poetry respectively) created a time ripe for the birth of what Coetzee (in Trump 1990:344) calls *"modern Afrikaans literature"*. This, he believes, was achieved through the writing of the Sestigers.[12]

Of importance to the ideological placement of *Wurm* are the sources Coetzee claims for this renewal. He includes European modernist prose and drama, Joyce, Beckett, Sartre, Theatre of the Absurd, the Dutch writers Hermans and Wolkersand, the Frenchman Robbe-Grillet and the writings of Jung. This European ancestry, Coetzee claims (in Trump 1990:344), is first linked with the *"foreboding presence of Africa"* in the poetry of Blum, a European who wrote for a short while in Afrikaans and became a precursor of the Sestigers.

André Brink (1983:27-28) emphasises this European ancestry by stating that the

> cultural schizophrenia experienced by Sestigers who, in their early work, could not reconcile their cosmopolitan outlook with the laager mentality of Afrikanerdom, finally resolved the conflicts within themselves by 'coming home' to Africa in the fullest sense of the word.[13]

Brink 1983:26) links the European roots of Afrikaans avant-garde literature with its dissident South African forms in the 1960s. Like *Wurm*,[14] the 'movement' of the Sestigers

> started as a revolt against hackneyed themes and outworn structures in Afrikaans fiction. But because so much of it was European in inspiration - which appealed immensely to younger readers but came as a cultural shock to the Establishment and all its agencies - the iconoclastic ardour of these writers soon caused them to collide head-on with most of the established religious and moral values of 'traditional' Afrikanerdom.

This ideological collision caused the Sestigers numerous individual[15] and group[16] struggles but provided the climate, I would argue, out of which *Wurm* could emerge. *Wurm*'s attempts to subvert conservative sensibilities, its dissident nature and independence from the 'culturally schizophrenic' Sestigers, pushed it into the limelight of the Afrikaans literary debate. Du Plessis could now realise his vision for an Afrikaans publication which could acknowledge its (Northern) European heritage yet affirm its

[12] The Sestigers (writers of the sixties) consisted of Etienne Leroux and Chris Barnard, who championed the cause of art-for-art's-sake, Jan Rabie (the 'father' of the movement), Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink, who argued for a socio-political literature, and others including John Miles, Abraham de Vries, Karel Schoeman and Elsa Joubert.
[13] Brink cites Elsa Joubert's *Poppie Nongena*, Etienne Leroux's *Magersfontein, o Magersfontein* and John Miles' *In Donderdag of Woensdag* as examples of this 'coming home'.
[14] Similarities with *Wurm's* editorial policy, stated above, are clear.
[15] For Breyten Breytenbach, this collision forced him into exile (c.1965) and finally into prison on his return to South Africa. Brink himself spent time with Breytenbach in Paris in 1968 investigating the possibility of settling in France permanently (Brink 1983:34).
[16] Brink (1983:34) states, *"we were still wary of admitting, even to ourselves, that in a totally politicised society like South Africa, we had simply not gone far enough. Our very 'literariness' was beginning to turn into our own worst enemy."*

South Africanness in an aggressive and innovative way.[17]

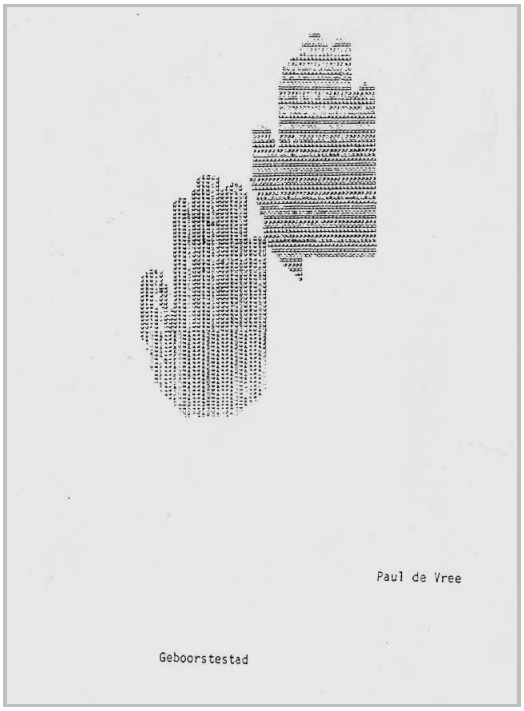
Wurm's undoubted importance lay in what the editors considered to be its subversiveness. Evidence for this contention has been stated above but it was also in its handmade physicality that subversiveness lay. *Wurm* was roneod on cheap stock, hand collated and stapled to a thin card cover. Glitches in printing, poor registration (and in some individual copies, poor quality of reproduction as seen in the illustrations included in this chapter) seemed purposeful. Its cheap physicality, according to du Plessis, reflected not only the need for cost effectiveness but also signified a lack of respect for anything smacking of the literary establishment. In this way, holding and paging through *Wurm* represented a challenge to the orthodox Afrikaans literati.[18]

If positioning was crucial to *Wurm*'s ideology then contact with the ideas and work of the international avant-garde was vital in supporting this editorial position.[19] In South Africa, links were established with Flemish (and other) journals of Concrete Poetry such as *Labris*, *Argo* and *Yang*. Elza Miles states that many Flemish and Dutch poets were influential for Afrikaans academics, writers and artists in that their influence set up a framework for the aesthetic and linguistic examination of a more recent (post 1950s) Afrikaans heritage.[20] Concrete Poetry[21] offered a route back into their 'northern' roots while suggesting a way forward towards a reworking of their ideas (via this refreshingly new visual-linguistic form) into a specifically South African (Afrikaans) context.[22]
I have briefly accounted for *Wurm's* position both in terms of its provocative challenge to the conservative South African literary world of the time, the European roots of its Concrete Poetry and Concrete Poetry's importance to *Wurm*. It is now time to concentrate on the content of the publication itself.

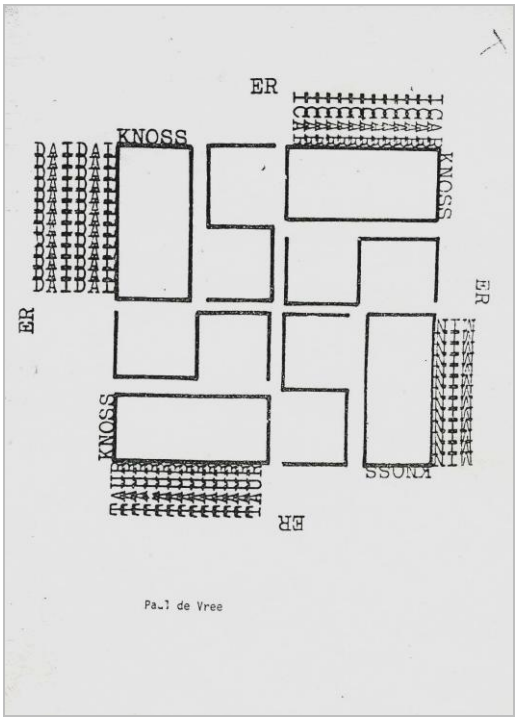
Central to its avant-garde standing was the publishing of work which explored the unity or synthesis between text and image (what I refer to throughout my research as pantextualism). This synthesis encourages the page to be read as a spatial arena and includes Shaped (or Visual) Poetry and Concrete Poetry. I will elaborate on these forms

[17] Du Plessis also states that feelings of freedom and anarchy in international cultural and political expression contributed to the establishment of *Wurm* as a beacon of dissent in a rather closed South African literary world. (From an interview. Du Plessis, P., Kalk Bay: 23-24 June 1997).
[18] Du Plessis, in discussing the name of the journal, makes reference to *"...the worm of Eugène Marais; something that will eat at the rotten apples in our literature; something that will gnaw at the walls of the establishment; something a little unpleasant for the majority of people."* (*Contrast 24*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 1970, p.33).
[19] Du Plessis cites important influences as Existentialism, particularly of Camus; of Op(tical) Art with its emphasis on movement (what du Plessis calls *"the gesture at the very basis of language"*) and the word-as-object experiments of Picasso, Duchamp and Magritte. (From an interview. Du Plessis, P., Kalk Bay: 24 June 1997).
[20] Hugo Neirinckx, who was the Flemish guest editor for *Wurm 9* (July 1968), included work by Eric Pijnaken, Eddy van Vliet, Fred de Swert, Loepold M. van den Brande and Dirk Christaens. Paul de Vree's work was published in *Wurm 4* (December 1966). (From an interview. Miles, E., Johannesburg Art Gallery: May 1997).
[21] In the interview Miles described Concrete Poetry as a non-Anglo Saxon construction.
[22] Du Plessis (in *Contrast 24*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 1970, pp.40-41) describes how with the editors of *Ophir*, Walter Saunders and Peter Horn, international contacts with writers and publishers of Concrete and avant-garde Poetry were established. Marie Blomerus made contact with Allen Ginsberg in America and David Botes established links with Hugo Neirinckx in Antwerp. The editors of *Wurm* published Weverbergh's resume of the activities of the Flemish avant-garde as early as the third edition (*Wurm* September 1966). By the ninth edition (July 1968), Neirinckx, as their Flemish guest editor, reciprocally published South African work in his publication *Argo*. Another Flemish publication, *Labris*, became an important contact for the editors of *Wurm*. Any work published in *Labris* became available for publication in *Wurm* and thus was formed the link with Ivo Vroom, Leon van Essche, Paul de Vree and other Flemish concrete poets. It is in this context that du Plessis acknowledges the influence of Marcel Bogaerts on his own work.

in the next chapter, when I examine specific important examples from various editions of *Wurm* in order to confirm links (via Brink and others) with the Visual Poetry of Willem Boshoff. This pantextual unity first appeared as a pair of shaped poems termed *visueel - konkrete poesie* by the Belgian Paul de Vree in *Wurm 4* (December 1966:53-54) entitled *Geboortestad*

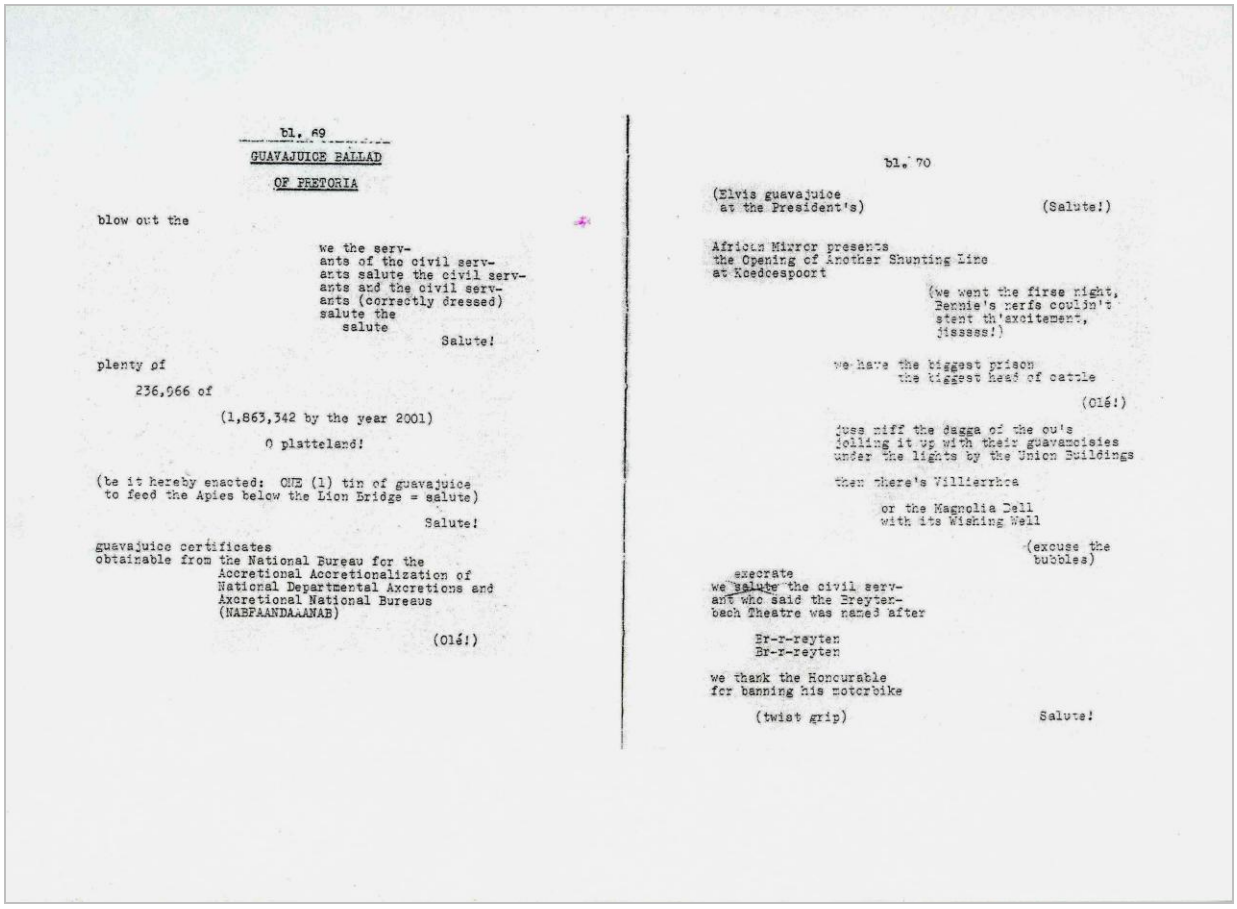


and *Untitled (Eros).*



Geboortestad consists of flattened hand images made up of rows of typed letters and introduces the notion that the letters of the alphabet carry meaning on multiple levels, particularly when those levels are combined. The sound made by the repeated letters when read; the title of the work; the image made by the placement of the typed letters and the mental images suggested by the printed image all work pantextually. These images and texts are 'written', so to speak, upon each other so as to make the dialogue between them legible in different ways, in Mitchell's (1994:112) terms, a *"linguistics of the image"*, and an *"iconology of the text"*.

Wurm 6 (August 1967) included rubber stamp images on two pages made by Walter Battiss. It also exploited the spatial aspect of the typed page in the Shaped Poetry of Walter Saunders entitled *Guavajuice Ballad of Pretoria* (August 1967:69-72)



bl. 69

GUAVAJUICE BALLAD

OF PRETORIA

blow out the

we the serv-
ants of the civil serv-
ants salute the civil serv-
ants and the civil serv-
ants (correctly dressed)
salute the
salute

Salute!

plenty of

236,966 of

(1,863,342 by the year 2001)

0 platteland!

(be it hereby enacted: ONE (1) tin of guavajuice
to feed the Apies below the Lion Bridge = salute)

Salute!

guavajuice certificates
obtainable from the National Bureau for the
Accretional Accretionalization of
National Departmental Axcretions and
Axcretional National Bureaus
(NABFAANDAAANAB)

(Olé!)

bl. 70

(Elvis guavajuice
at the President's)

(Salute!)

African Mirror presents
the Opening of Another Shunting Line
at Koedoespoort

(we went the first night,
Bennie's nerfs couldn't
stent th'excitement,
jissssss!)

we have the biggest prison
the biggest head of cattle

(Olé!)

juss niff the dagga of the ou's
lolling it up with their guavamoisies
under the lights by the Union Buildings

then there's Willierrhea

or the Magnolia Dell
with its Wishing Well

(excuse the
bubbles)

execrate
we salute the civil serv-
ant who said the Breyten-
bach Theatre was named after

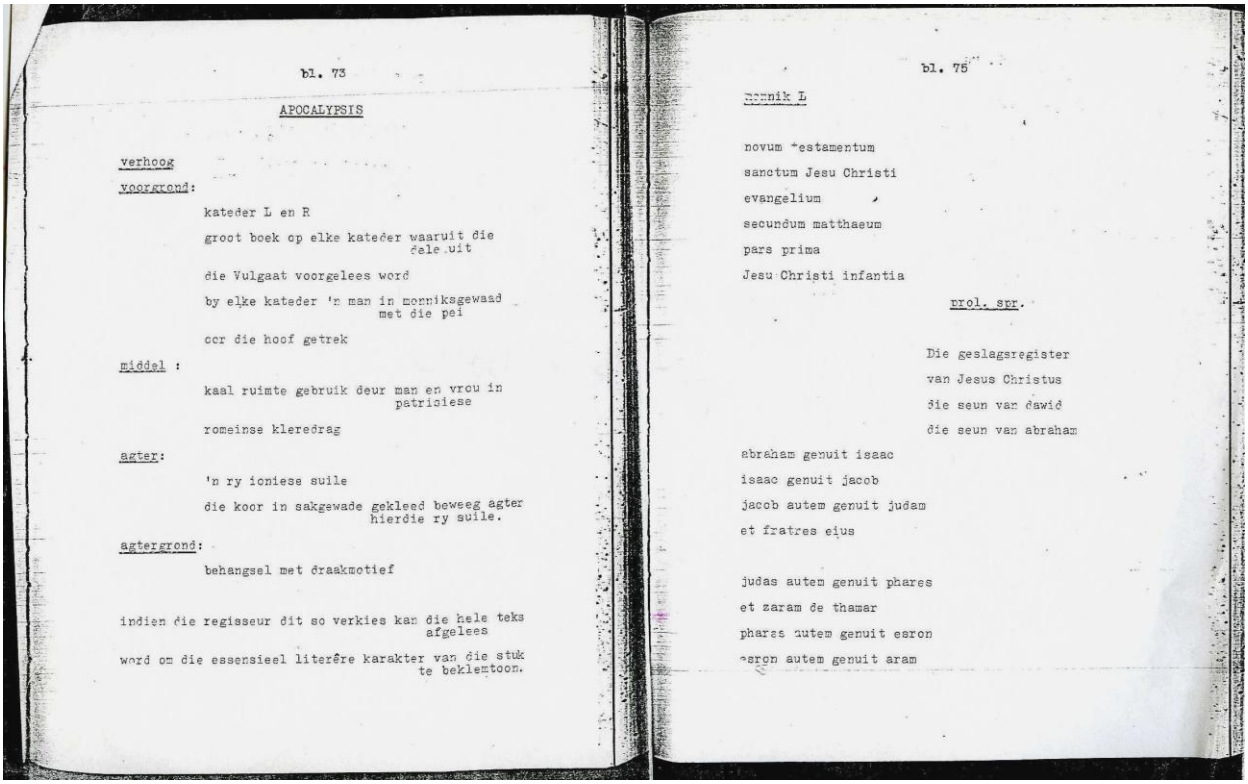
Br-r-reyten
Br-r-reyten

we thank the Honcurable
for banning his motorbike

(twist grip)

Salute!

and Phil du Plessis' play *Apocalypsis 'n Teks vir Verhoog* (August 1967:73-92).



bl. 73

APOCALYPSIS

verhoog

voorgrond:

kateder L en R

groot boek op elke kateder waaruit die dele uit

die Vulgaat voorgelees word

by elke kateder 'n man in monniksgewaad met die pei

oor die hoof getrek

middel :

kaal ruimte gebruik deur man en vrou in patriciese

romeinse kleredrag

agter:

'n ry ioniese suile

die koor in sakgewade gekleed beweeg agter hierdie ry suile.

agtergrond:

behangsel met draakmotief

indien die regisseur dit so verkies kan die hele teks afgelees

word om die essensieel literêre karakter van die stuk te beklemtoon.

bl. 75

monnik L

novum testamentum

sanctum Jesu Christi

evangelium

secundum matthaeum

pars prima

Jesu Christi infantia

prol. spr.

Die geslagsregister

van Jesus Christus

die seun van dawid

die seun van abraham

abraham genuit isaac

isaac genuit jacob

jacob autem genuit judam

et fratres eius

judas autem genuit phares

et zaram de thamar

phares autem genuit esron

esron autem genuit aram

Saunders uses the page as a dynamic spatial field. Around the names of recognisable geographic locations are threaded monologues, which construct, through their placement on the page, a sense of movement and displacement within this geography. As the typographic text blocks swerve from location to location on the page, so the ideas and their associative meanings veer precariously within the framework of a dislocated world. The use of phonetic spelling adds to the precariousness of the (con)text which confronts the reader.

Du Plessis' *Apocalypsis* is divided into registers representing, at the start of the work, spatial planes into depth on a fictitious stage. The text is further divided between the narrators: a monk, a man, a woman and a choir. The apocalyptic play unfolds from the page into the conceptual space in the mind of the reader. The schematic layout of the paper page becomes infused not only with the spatial placement of a particular narrator (from left through centre to right) but with concern for their placement within this fictitious (conceptual) depth in the mind of the reader. Du Plessis, like Stéphane Mallarmé, suggests this through the dislocation of the conventional layout of blocks of text on a page.

Like Iliazd's Dada / Futurist *Ledentu Le Phare* (1923), *Apocalypsis* was meant to be performed.[23] Acknowledging this Concrete and Shaped Poetry calls attention to the way

[23] Concerning performance, du Plessis relates that, on one occasion, it was attempted by Father Bonaventura Hinwood's Literary Circle in the seminary in Pretoria. The play was aborted in chaos. (Du Plessis, P., Kalk Bay: 23 June 1997.) Du Plessis and others were influenced by international literary and artistic performances. In the light of the performance aspects of *Apocalypsis* it is of note that Williams (1967:n.p.) writes of his concrete poem, *Cellar Song for Five Voices* (date uncertain):

in which the page attempts to transcend its flatness and become (at least conceptually) the space which the narrator and performers occupy.

I have stated that Concrete Poetry represents a vital position for the publishers of *Wurm* and have shown how South African poets began to exploit the pantextuality of Visual Poetry. I repeat my contention that the Concrete and Visual Poetry published in *Wurm* helped form a climate out of which Brink, too, could exploit the pantextual qualities of his subject. I further argue that Brink's *Orgie* became one of the influences for Boshoff's Visual and Shaped Poetry, and I need to develop this contention further.

According to Emmett Williams (1967:vi)

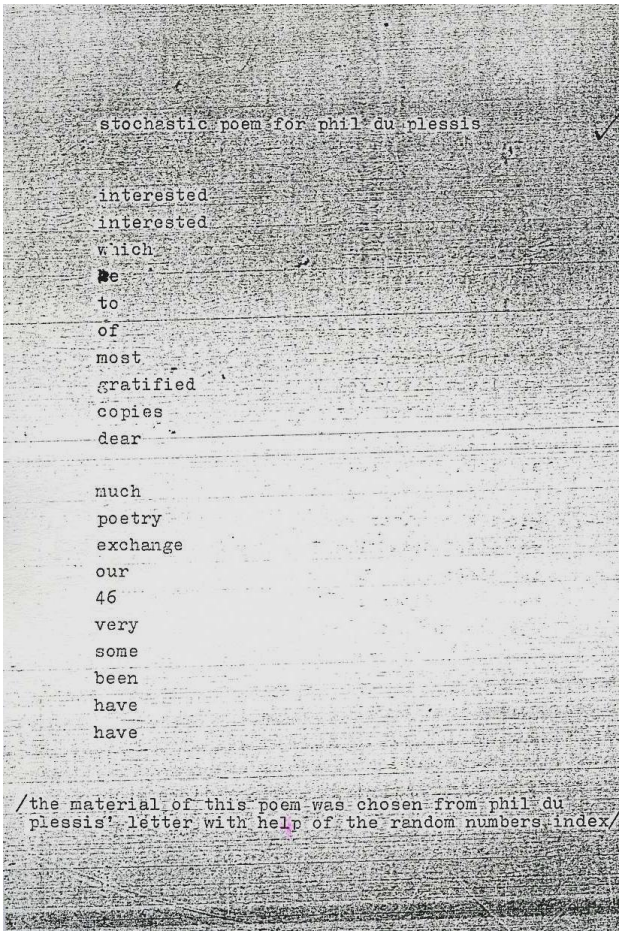
> [t]he confused geography of (Concrete Poetry's) beginnings reflects the universality of its roots. Eugen Gomringer, a Bolivian-born Swiss, was the acknowledged father of Concrete Poetry...Carlo Belloti, protégé of F.T. Marinetti, founder of Futurism, published in 1948. When Gomringer and the Noigandres poets of São Paulo, Brazil, agreed upon the name 'concrete' to describe the new poetry in 1956, they were mutually unaware that Öyvind Fahlström...had published the first manifesto of Concrete Poetry - manifest for konkret poesii - three years earlier in Stockholm.[24]

By the mid-1960s Concrete Poetry was being published in *Wurm*. Paul de Vree's *Geboorstestad* and *Untitled* were published in *Wurm 4* (December 1966) and Ivo Vroom's *Classic in Triplo* and *Hommage à Malevitch* in *Wurm 7* (November 1967) and *Wurm 8* (March 1968) respectively. Eight texts by the Czech Juri Valoch were published in *Wurm 9* (July 1968). Of interest here is the fact that the material for the second poem, *Stochastic Poem for Phil du Plessis*, was chosen from a letter to Valoch by du Plessis with the help of a random numbers index.

> It was first performed at the now defunct Living Theatre in New York in 1962...I have been told that the performers got all mixed up half way along and started giggling, and that Jackson (Mac Low) had to pull down the curtain...and start them off again.

For my purposes, Willem Boshoff relates that many of the shaped poems in *Kykafrikaans* are meant to be performed, e.g. *SS* (p.28) which is intended for performance in a church. The connection between shaped or concrete poetry and performance is important in the reading of many works published in *Wurm* and, on this level alone, suggests *Wurm*'s importance to Boshoff's work explored in the next chapter.

[24] Williams (1963) continues to relate Concrete Poetry's broad international roots mentioning German-born and Swiss-bred Dieter Rot's, 'ideograms' in Iceland, and Carlfriedrich Claus's *Klang-gebilden* and *Phasen* in East Germany. He also cites the work of composer, Gerhard Rühm, the architect, Friedrich Achleitner, jazz musician, Oswald Wiener, and the poets H.C. Artmann and Konrad Bayer (vi).



stochastic poem for phil du plessis

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very
some
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have

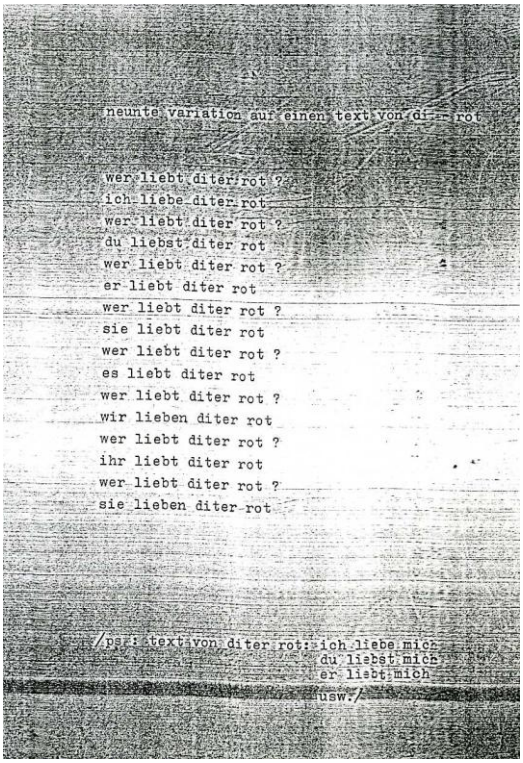
/the material of this poem was chosen from phil du plessis' letter with help of the random numbers index/

The third poem, *Neunte Variation auf Einen Text von Diter Rot* reworks a text by the artist's bookmaker Dieter Rot.[25]

[25] In *Wurm 9* (July 1968) on an unpaginated blue-paper addendum at the start of the volume, the following appears:

ich liebe mich
du liebst mich
er liebt mich
usw./

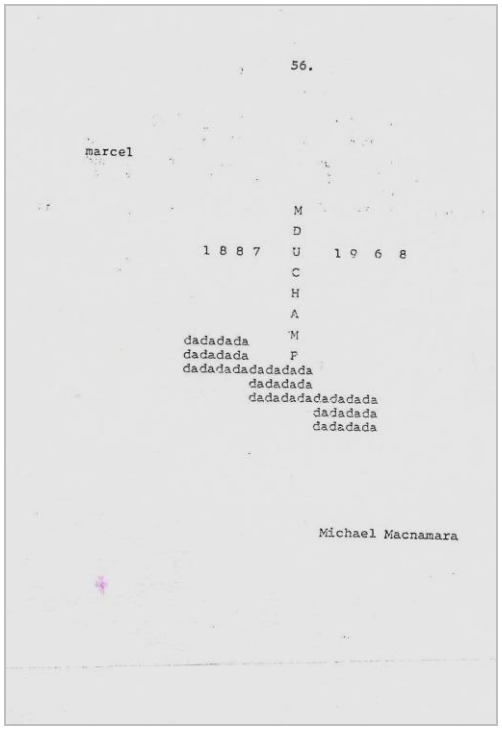
Wurm's link with the work of Artist's Bookmakers is important to me as in the next edition, *Wurm 10*, (November 1968), du Plessis creates a concrete poem *Hommage à Marcel Duchamp* based upon the work *Please Touch* Duchamp's cover for the catalogue of the 1947 exhibition *'Le Surrealisme en 1947'* held in Paris. The front cover is a hand-coloured foam-rubber breast showing through a piece of irregularly shaped black velvet. The back cover bears the request, 'Prierè de Touche' (Please Touch). This catalogue as well as many other bound editions (*Opposition and Sister Squares...*of 1932) and boxed ephemera (*The Green Box* of 1934; *Box in a Valise* of 1941 and *In the Infinitive [The White Box]* of 1967) are considered important sources for the Fluxus Movement, Dieter Rot and many other artists working in the 1950s and 1960s. Cf. Hendricks, J. *Fluxus Codex* (1988). This catalogue as well as many other bound editions such as *Opposition and Sister Squares* (1932) and boxed ephemera, *The Green Box* (1934); *Box in a Valise* (1941) and *In the Infinitive [The White Box]* (1967), are considered important sources for the Fluxus Movement, Dieter Rot and many other artists working in the 1950s and 60s. Cf. Hendricks, J. *Fluxus Codex* (1988).


neunte variation auf einen text von di- - rot

wer liebt diter rot ?
ich liebe diter rot
wer liebt diter rot ?
du liebst diter rot
wer liebt diter rot ?
er liebt diter rot
wer liebt diter rot ?
sie liebt diter rot
wer liebt diter rot ?
es liebt diter rot
wer liebt diter rot ?
wir lieben diter rot
wer liebt diter rot ?
ihr liebt diter rot
wer liebt diter rot ?
sie lieben diter rot

/ps: text von diter rot: ich liebe mich
du liebst mich
er liebt mich
usw./

Thus the link with the international avant-garde is strongly foregrounded in these editions of *Wurm*. Both the Concrete Poetry of de Vree, du Plessis, Vroom, Valoch (in: *Wurm 9*) and the accompanying *Marcel* by Michael Macnamara as well as the references to international artist's bookmakers such at Dieter Rot are vital springboards for me.


56.

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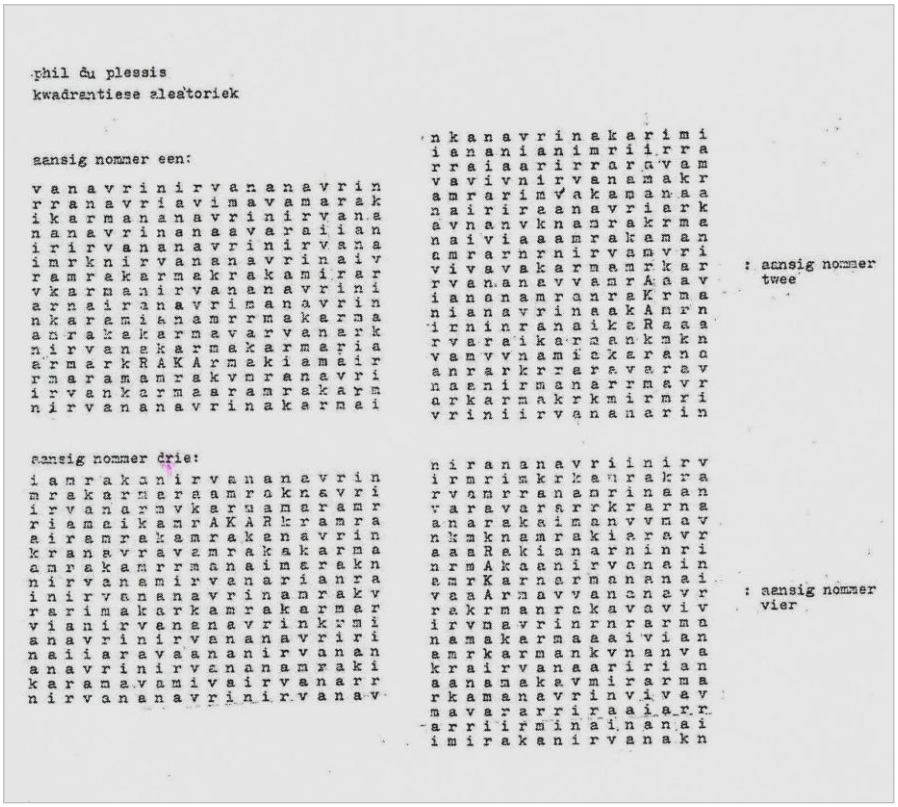
Michael Macnamara

They are important as they facilitate the meeting of the visual and oral / verbal within the South African artistic avant-garde, as well as constructing, within a developing conceptual climate, the independent Visual Poetry of Willem Boshoff's *Kykafrikaans*. I thus consider the Concrete Poetry published in *Wurm* as Boshoff's visual and conceptual forebear. Boshoff states[26] that he was unaware of *Wurm* and its publication of Concrete Poetry at the time he was making *Kykafrikaans*. He did, however, have a copy of Brink's *Orgie* and it was Boshoff who first drew my attention to Brink's pantextualism.

It is of interest to me that du Plessis' *Apocalypsis 'n Teks vir Verhoog* (in *Wurm 6*, August 1967:73-92) is a self-conscious send-up of the very spatiality of Brink's *Orgie*, which du Plessis found impossible to read.[27] *Orgie*'s visual complexity and difficulty are the very characteristics which made this work attractive to Boshoff. That the spatial aspects of Boshoff's works bear a striking resemblance to the spatial layout of du Plessis' *Apocalypsis* suggests *Orgie*'s importance as a mediatory text between du Plessis and Boshoff.

I will develop the relationship between *Wurm*, Brink and Boshoff further in the next chapter as I need to dwell on the visuality of an important example of South African Concrete Poetry, du Plessis' *Kwadrantiese Aleatoriek* (*Wurm 9*, July 1968).


phil du plessis
kwadrantiese aleatoriek

aansig nommer een:

aansig nommer twee

aansig nommer drie:

aansig nommer vier

[26] From an interview with the artist. (Boshoff, W., Kensington, Johannesburg: July 1997).
[27] Acknowledged in an interview (du Plessis, P., Kalk Bay: 23 August 1997).

The reason for this dwelling on visuality, is that the seemingly random (aleatoric) placement of letters at first encourages the reader to view the work in graphic or pictorial terms. On closer inspection and with an encouragement to read one's way into the blocks via clues in the language, the literary element of the work unfolds. This is what I refer to as pantextuality throughout my project; the unity of and simultaneity between reading a pattern as text and as pictorial element. This pantextuality is crucial to the work of Boshoff and thus I need to explore the work as it encourages one to be both reader and viewer.

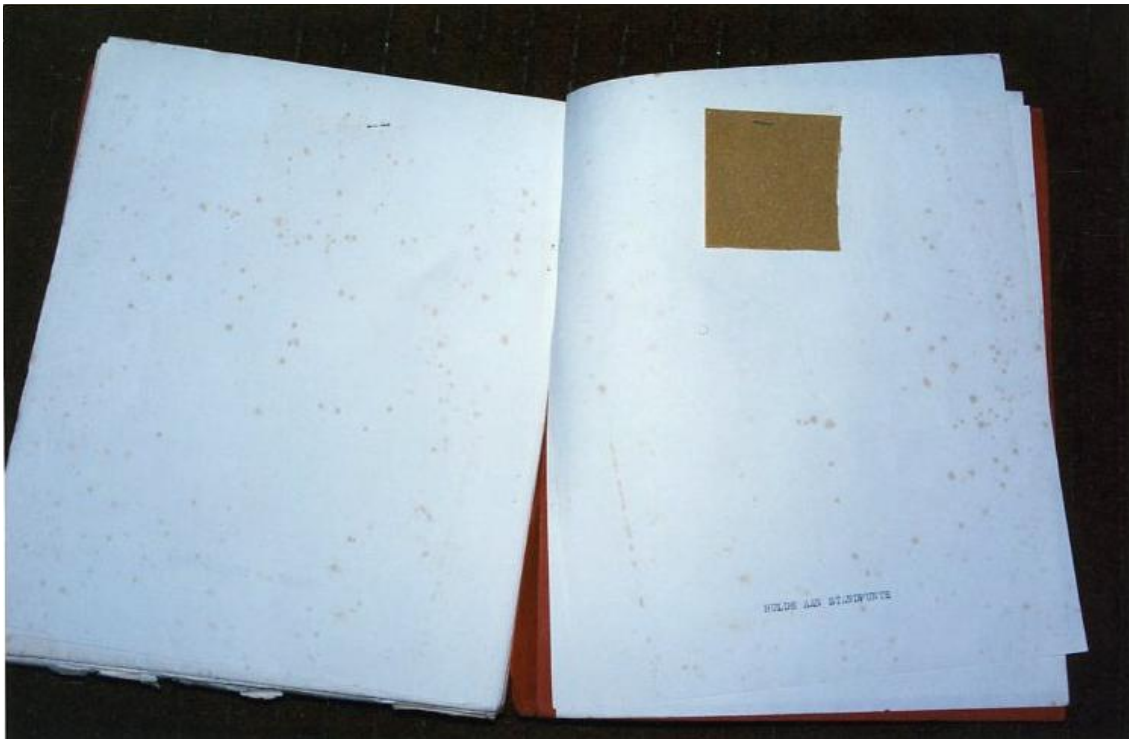
In *Kwadrantiese Aleatoriek* the use of letters of the alphabet in seemingly random combinations, hint at words, meaningful semantic associations, and names. The aleatoric or random placement of the letters *v, a, n, r, i, k* and *m* according to the laws of chance (via the use of a dice) creates this poem. In the four quadrants, examples 2 (twee) and 4 (vier) are inverted forms of examples 1(een) and 3 (drie). The first column (read from top to bottom) in example 1 becomes the last row (read from left to right) in example 2 etc. These letters - derived from the words *RAKA*, from N.P. van Wyk Louw's play and *NIRVANA*, du Plessis' constructed existentialist opposite (an inversion of the earthly, animalistic associations of van Wyk Louw's *Raka* (1962)) - are the poem's 'alphabet'.[28]

Knowledge of van Wyk Louw's text gives impetus to this work. Once the clue (the word AKAR) is found in the second quadrant, the overarching theme of inversion is exposed. Du Plessis' poem thus constructs itself as a dialogue between opposite forces, personified in the concepts of earthiness (Raka) and transcendence (nirvana). This pantextual unity is exploited to the full by Boshoff and is discussed in the next chapter.

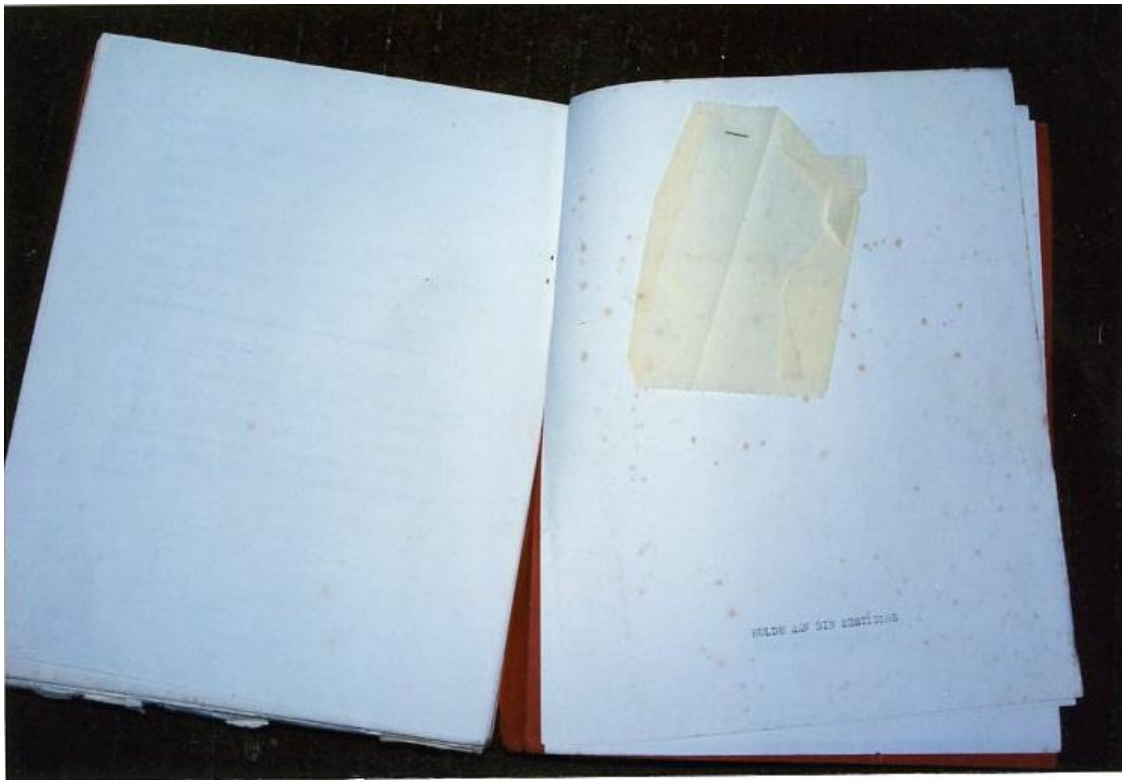
But there is another aspect to *Wurm* which, as I have stated, presents us directly with an artist's book. Of all the elements *Wurm* exhibits which contribute to the heritage of South African artists' books, perhaps the most resonating is the last and most remarkable work the periodical ever published. I argue that *Wurm*, in its final edition transcended from significant precursor to artist's book. Phil du Plessis' addendum to the final edition, *Wurm 12* (February 1970) was entitled *Hulde Uit 1970* and consists of four pages.

The first, *Hulde aan Standpunte*, (a reference to Afrikaans writers of the 1930s loosely referred to as 'die Dertiges') contains a small square of sandpaper stapled to the top of the page with the text typed lower down towards the bottom.

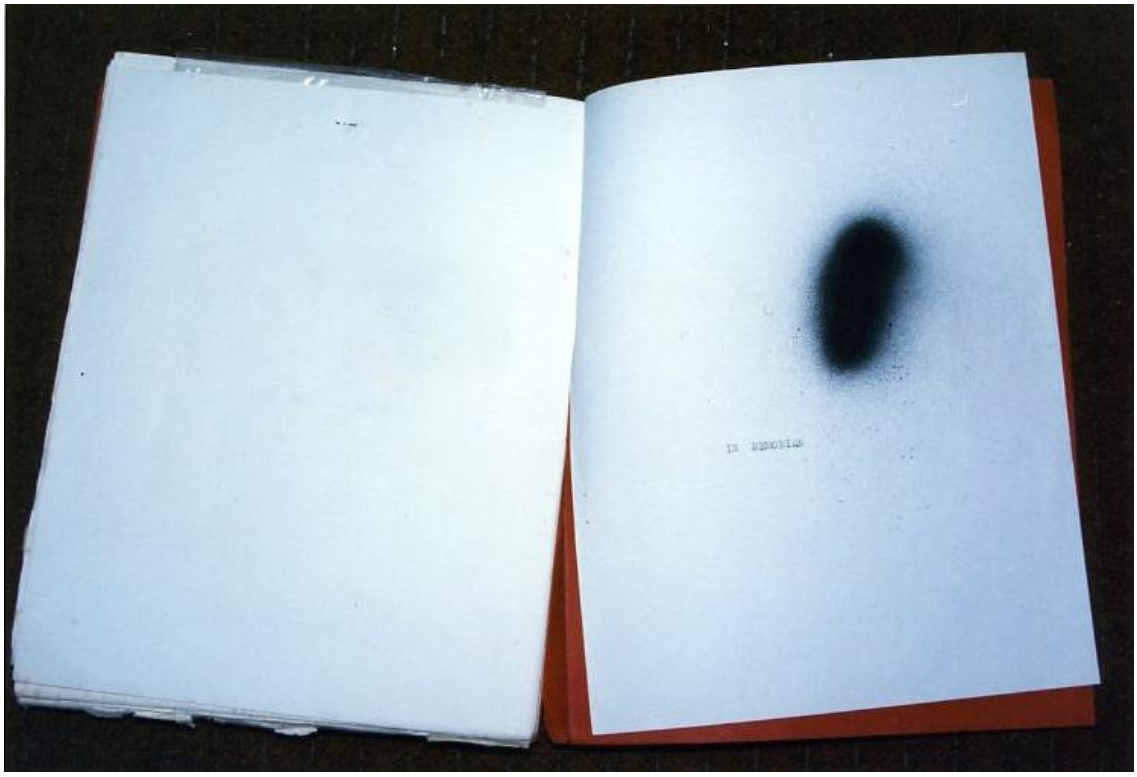
[28] In quadrant one the word *RAKA* is given prominence by capitalisation, thereafter the reader uncovers the word *nirvana* in various places (sometimes in inverted form) within the quadrant.



The second, *Hulde aan die Sestigers*, contains a piece of yellow tissue with the title typed below.



The third page, *In Memoriam*, consists of a large black dot of spray paint with the typed text just below. This caustic and satirical work ends not only the publication but all publications of *Wurm* with an emphatic statement of discontent and dissatisfaction with the literary expressions and personalities of the period from 1930 to the 1960s.



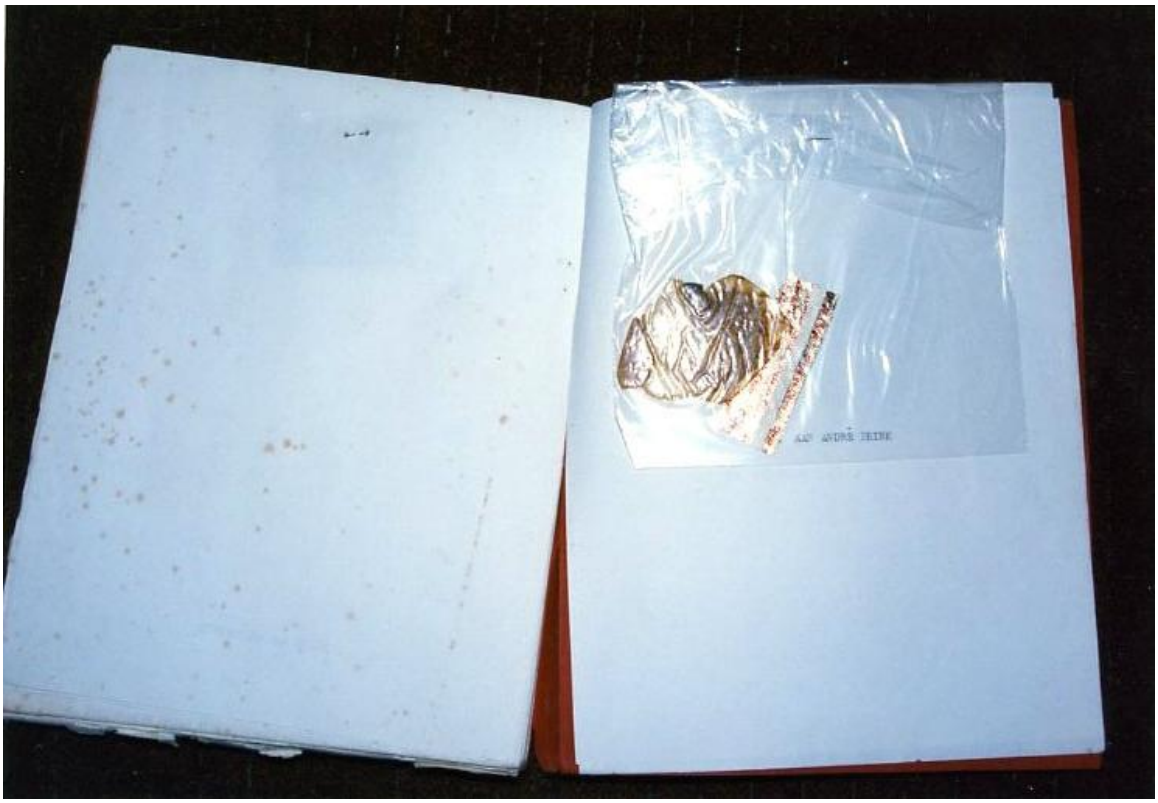
In the page *Hulde aan Standpunte*, the sandpaper makes reference to the chafing of dearly held opinions. Du Plessis[29] found this group of writers *'hard arsed'* and therefore in need of sandpapering. In like vein on the page entitled *Hulde aan die Sestigers*, the tissue and its colour refers to the mock tears the author sheds at the end of the decade of the 'Sestiges'. He presents their work as 'yellow', cowardly and reflective of a group of literati clearly becoming the 'second establishment' something which du Plessis could neither advocate nor support. The tissue is in fact a piece of toilet paper and the point is thus more forcibly made.

In *In Memoriam*, du Plessis makes reference to the journal *Kol* (Bull's Eye)[30] as no more than a 'spot' on the literary landscape and an utter disappointment (to him) as a journal to follow *Wurm*. Du Plessis agrees that the black spray paint could also refer to the defacement of precious monuments by graffiti artists by means of their subversive quick-drying medium. Du Plessis clearly attempts to deface and cover over his own cultural memories of that which constituted writing and art in the 1960s.[31] In few other

[29] These interpretations were acknowledged in an interview (du Plessis, P., Kalk Bay: 23 August 1997).
[30] *Kol* first appeared in September/October 1968 and ended in December 1969. Its editors were Chris Barnard, P.G. du Plessis, Louis Eksteen, John Miles, Bartho Smit and, later, Marthinus van Schoor. It was primarily a journal of poetry, prose, essays, criticism and reader response.
[31] It is interesting to see that the spray paint has also been used to create the title *Wurm 12* on the front cover of the edition, thus suggesting - in the very medium used to open and close the volume - the editorial attitude

places has so poignant a work been made as these pithy and succinct dialogues between equally minimal images and texts.

The fourth page entitled *Hulde Aan André Brink* consists of a self-sealing plastic bag housing a condom (commonly called a French Letter).



Du Plessis' own copy of the addendum of *Wurm 12* consisted of the self-sealing plastic bag containing a condom, semen and the condom's wrapper. Du Plessis' final blow had been made.[32] The containment of semen symbolised the prevention of what he saw as the malignant literary culture of the 1960s (represented by Brink) giving birth to offspring (legitimate or not) which might corrupt the literary culture of 1970s. That the semen was du Plessis' own is a wry comment upon his involvement in the literary and artistic life of the 1960s. This unique work presents itself as a possible starting point for future artists' books in all its structural, material and subversive ingenuity and, in the next chapter, I examine a large body of South African artists' books which developed after *Hulde* and the broader history provided by *Wurm*.

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du Plessis will employ within this final edition.

[32] Du Plessis is sure that his is the only example of the semen-filled fourth page made and that the standard French Letter page was made in a limited edition of 20 and distributed to friends. One was sent to Brink (who in du Plessis' eyes *"had no spunk"*). Although the French Letter page (page four) was *not* part of the final distribution to subscribers, the page made its mark rather indelibly. Stephen Gray, in his essay on the demise of *Izwi*, entitled *Death of a Little Magazine* (in: *Contrast 42*, Vol. 11, No. 2, April 1974, p.43) makes reference to this final page of *Wurm* in his very first paragraph!

There is another publication to which I must briefly refer. In analysing *Izwi/Stem/Voice* (October 1971 to August 1974) it is clear that the shift from *Wurm* (late 1960s) to *Izwi* (early 1970s) signaled a shift in emphasis. From the position of an almost literary counter-culture through the publishing of Concrete and other 'difficult' new forms of Visual Poetry, issues from a more serious socio-political position were expressed. I see in *Izwi* a definite move away from the innovative forms of Concrete Poetry and their (in part) 'northern European' roots to a specifically southern African socio-political commentary, prose and poetry.[33]

Izwi [34] was edited by Phil du Plessis and Stephen Gray and for varying publications by Wessel Pretorius, Wilma Stockenström, Sheila Roberts and others. It was a periodical devoted to poetry, prose and commentary accompanied by illustrations, graphic work and posters by artists. Its major contribution to the literary world was that it attempted to unite local writers by encouraging and accepting contributions of literary quality from throughout southern Africa. Certain editions were devoted to writers from Mozambique and Namibia (then South West Africa). The publication attempted, in the words of Stockenström, to 'breathe in' by embracing the literary vision of these southern African writers and poets.[35]

Like *Wurm*, *Izwi* set itself up as a self-conscious change in direction from earlier literary publications such as *Standpunte* and *Voorslag* (from the 1930s and 1940s) and the *Sestigers* (of the 1960s). As the latter (with the exception of Jan Rabe and Uys Krige) wished to have little to do with both *Izwi* (and *Wurm* as its predecessor), the *Sestigers* became, in the minds of the editors of *Izwi*, almost a 'second establishment' with whom they could not align themselves. Emphasis was again placed, this time by Stockenström, on the 'handmade' look of *Izwi*. This was considered important in that, not only was each edition typed, roneod, collated, stapled and distributed by the editors, but its visual quality underscored its independence as a non-subsidised, non-governmental and anti-establishment publication. This editorial attitude cannot be taken lightly considering that *Izwi* appeared in a decade of political upheaval and the tightening of Apartheid's grip on all forms of cultural expression. The full title of the publication *Izwi/Stem/Voice* clearly broadcast the embracing cultural and literary vision of the editors.[36]

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[33] A similar change is clearly evident in the publication *Ophir*. Edited by Walter Saunders and Peter Horn, it began in May 1967 (9 months after *Wurm*) and ended, after 23 editions, in the Spring of 1976 (some 18 months after *Izwi*). Ophir demonstrated this shift from avant-garde experimentalism to an awareness of pressing socio political commentary. In this regard it is possible to see that *Ophir*'s publication of visual and concrete poetry in the early editions (Vol. 3, Nov. 1967; Vol. 4, Feb. 1968; Vol. 5, April 1968 and Vol. 6, Sept 1968) rapidly gave way to poetry of social consciousness. When it did reappear it did so in boldly political terms; e.g. Rita Benzan's *Student Protest* (Vol. 19, June 1974) and Wopco Jensma's *Veiligheid Eerste* (Vol. 23, Spring 1976).

[34] Wilma Stockenström acknowledges the incorrect spelling of the word *Izwe* as *Izwi*, stating that it seemed typographically and visually balanced with the 'i' at the end and thus the editors decided to leave the error. (From an interview. Stockenström, W., Cape Town: 22 August 1997). See also Stephen Gray's comments in *Contrast 42* (April 1977, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp.43-49).

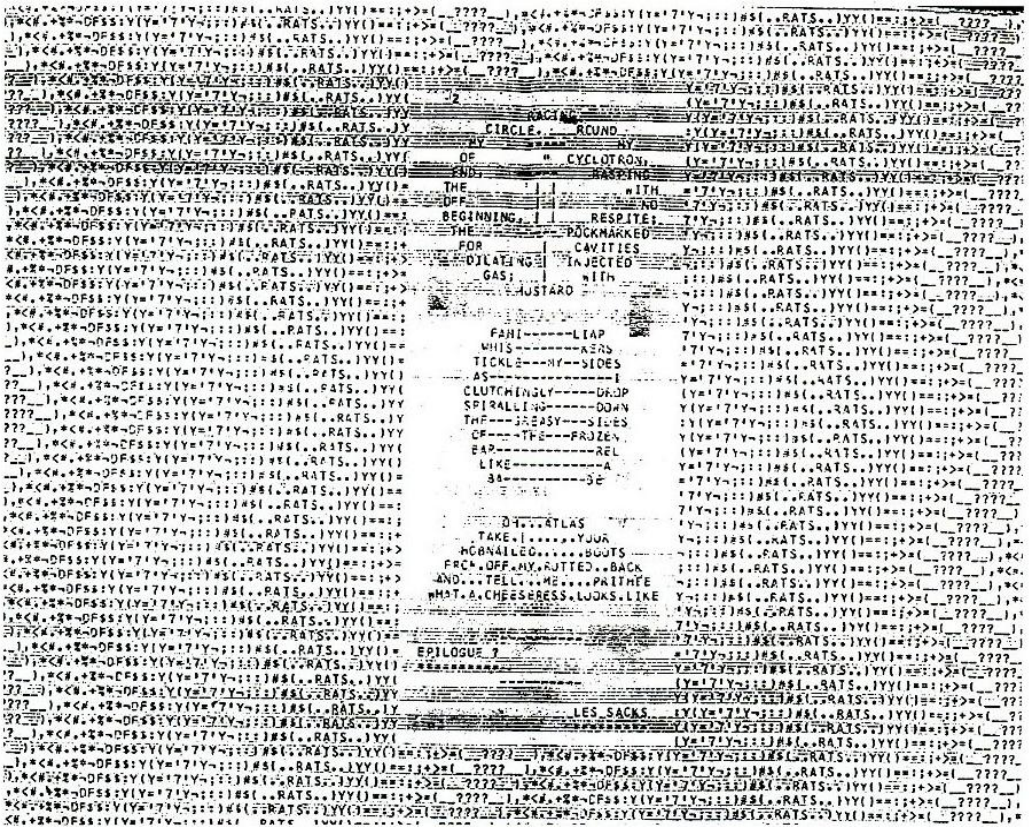
[35] Apart from European languages, *Izwi* translated Shona, Ovambo, Mozambican Portuguese and Zulu into English.

[36] Brink (1983:28) notes*: "Censorship and various forms of harassment during the 1970s have so intimidated writers that almost no new Afrikaans novelist of any importance has appeared on the scene in the past decade"*. In the editorial of the first *Izwi* (Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1971, pp.4-5) the editors, in encouraging participation, state:

My inclusion of *Izwi* highlights the fact that it published work in the form of Visual / Shaped Poetry in order to present a socio-political content in as visual and dynamic a way as possible. By these means its agenda could reach a literate and informed readership. I also tentatively suggest that the pantextuality of the work might have been used to camouflage and layer the (textual) content under the visuality of shape and other graphic devices. As the publication reached its readership via the post this might have been done to confuse anyone interested in intercepting and censoring material of any nature not aligned with the government. Vol. 3 No. 11, June 1973 specifically exploited the postal system as a democratic multiple.

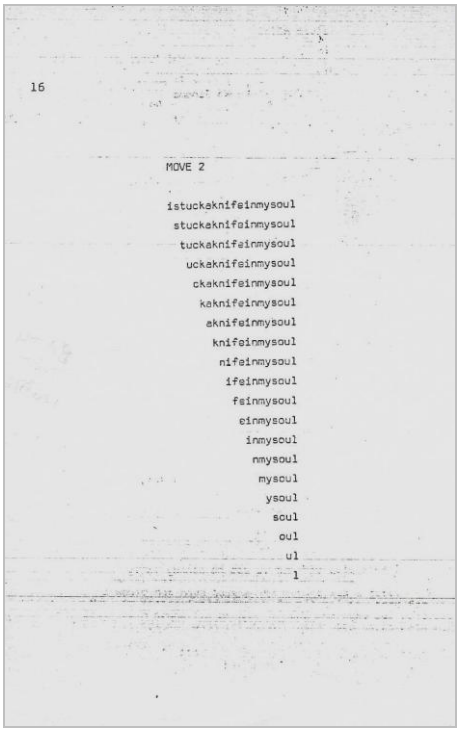
One of the literary elements which *Izwi* learned from *Wurm* was the use of an innovative visual form for the projection of a literary content. Pantextualism utilised both the visual and verbal skills of the reader in order to present a socio-political content in as innovative a way as possible. The editors thus exploited this pantextuality for its power to present textual information in a pictorial way.

Some of the most important works which exploited this pantextuality include: Les Sacks' four computer generated visual poems entitled *Prologue*, *Untitled*, G*arden of Delight* and *Mother* (Vol. 1, No. 6, October 1972).



Censorship or politically inspired confiscation will…ruin nobody's finances. There are frequent groans about censorship by playwrights and writers about how their work is seldom performed or published as they wrote it. They are the ones who should join Izwi.

Hulde aan Don Mattera and *Hulde aan Ahmed Dangor* were shaped poems which constituted the Editorial of Vol. 3 No. 13, December 1973 while Wopko Jensma's Shaped Poems *Move 1* and *Move 2* (Vol. 3, No. 14, February 1974)


16

MOVE 2

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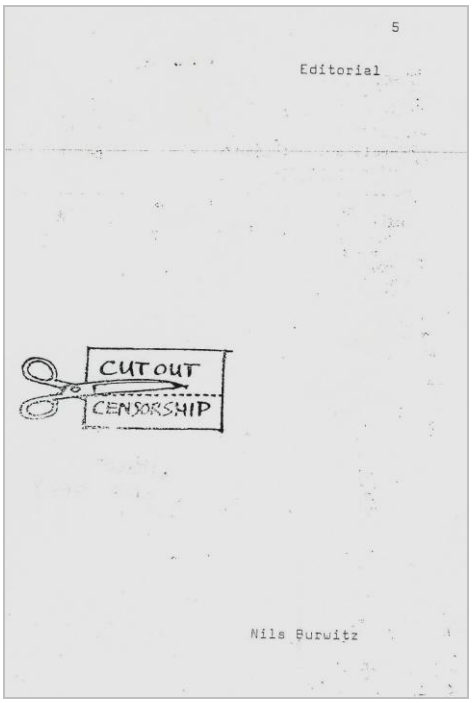
and the rubber stamp image *Cut Out Censorship* by Nils Burwitz constituted the editorial of Vol. 3, No. 17, August 1974.



Perhaps the most remembered *Izwi* was Vol. 3, No. 11, June 1973. Walter Battiss and Norman Catherine produced the *Fook Island Edition* in which each subscriber received their copy in a brown paper Fook Island wrapper with Fook Island stamps, franked by Catherine.

This self-reflexive publication positioned itself at the intersection between artists' books[37] and the developing international practice of Mail Art. After du Plessis' *Hulde Uit 1970* this was one of the most innovative precursors of South African artists' books of the first half of the 1970s. As significant precursors to South African Artists' Books, both *Wurm* and *Izwi* contributed important characteristics. Some of these characteristics correspond with the significant precursors discussed earlier in Stern's *Paradise*. *Wurm* and *Izwi*, however, demonstrate a body of characteristics which I would like to add to those already stated. I believe that by doing this our understanding of the characteristic of Artists' Books is developed. These seem to be:

- The exploitation of the work as a democratic multiple including cheap means of production and a hand-made feel to the publication. Distribution is often via the postal system and not the gallery for distribution;
- The inclusion of unusually printed (e.g. rubber stamps) and non printed materials and objects;
- A move from a utopian ideal to include consciously subversive activity.

In this chapter I have attempted to map a tentative and limited history of significant precursors to South African artists' books. I have established a number of links and characteristics which I will take forward into the next chapter: *Willem Boshoff and the Book*, where I will argue for the importance of Willem Boshoff's book-objects

[37] Note that Battiss produced Artists' Books such as *Male Fook Book 1* in 1973 in London.