

# Body, light, interaction, sound: A critical reading of a recent installation of Willem Boshoff's *Kykafrikaans*

## Introduction

In this article, I explore the use of digital presentation strategies in a recent installation<sup>1</sup> of *Kykafrikaans* by Willem Boshoff. In relation to a dominant metaphor of our time, the notion that digital<sup>2</sup> information is disembodied,<sup>3</sup> I take a critical stance on two key elements of the installation, namely, the digital projection of images and the broadcast of recorded sounds. I discuss these framing elements both in relation to themes of disembodiment, as may be found in the installation and in terms of the conventional reception of this work in print and book forms as embodied.

I argue that, in this digital format, the potential for a totally disembodied experience by the viewer exists and as such, the installation raises a number of issues regarding the visual and aural relationship of its components. By threading a reading of *Kykafrikaans* as a conventional and embodied scripto-visual phenomenon through this relationship, I attempt to unpack the operational elements of disembodiment and conclude by suggesting ways in which this disembodiment continues a tradition of denial and obfuscation in Boshoff's work. I explore, through a close visual analysis, the elements of the digital projections in relation to the presentation of these elements in printed form.

It may, however, be considered crass to make direct comparisons between the two forms of *Kykafrikaans* in which assumptions of the printed form as embodied, authoritative and 'positive' against the digital form as disembodied, fragmented and 'something less positive' may abound. My intention is not to make a 'definitive' comparison to establish differences (which are, in any case, self-evident), but to explore spaces of difference between our *experiences* of the two forms of the work; between its tactile, concrete and non-tactile, digital presentations.

Using William Mitchell's notion of the post-photographic decentred subject, I argue that the digital projection of *Kykafrikaans* may well be experienced as disembodied, highly fragmented and, as a new evocation, fundamentally different from the embodied haptically appreciated

content and scripto-visual power of the original work. Yet in acknowledging Mark Hansen's critique of selected digital media works as embodied and by unpacking the implications of the aural soundscape in Boshoff's installation, I argue that sound may become a means of framing issues of both embodiment and disembodiment. I conclude by suggesting that, in the work as a whole, Boshoff's long held desire for distancing and denying his viewers access to meaning is re-established while, at the same time, empowering blind listeners with an embodied experience.

### **The context of *Kykafrikaans***

*Kykafrikaans* was originally conceived and developed around a number of tight modes of presentation and reception: as a series of unique typed scripto-visual pages;<sup>4</sup> as an edition of screenprints directly processed from the originals<sup>5</sup> and as a book or 'anthology of concrete poetry' (Boshoff 2007:54), published by Uitgewery Panevis in 1980 (Figures 1–3).

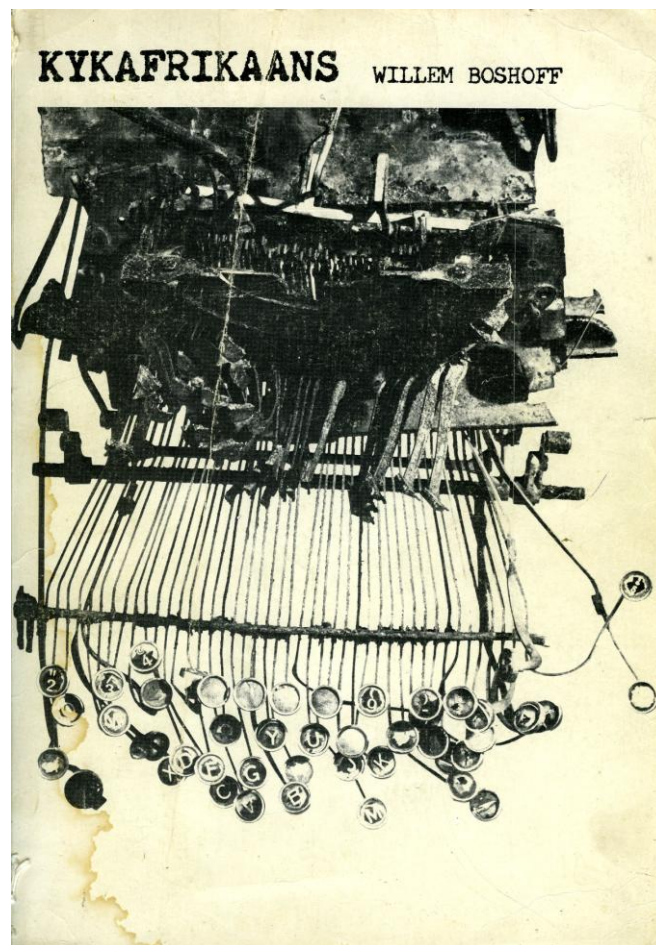


Figure 1: Willem Boshoff. 1980. *Kykafrikaans*, Cover Page. Johannesburg: Uitgewery Panevis. This book is in the collection of the author.

verklum brand  
 Te na en te ver - vuur  
 Te veel en te min - verdrink  
 dorsdood

Ps 42.  
 h Prent v. d.(H)

Vra : Die water v. v. 2 (strome)  
 hulle : Die water v. v. 4, 8 (vloed, gedruis) (golwe)  
 moet : Die water v. v. 4, 8 (vloed, gedruis) (golwe)  
 waters : Die rots v. 10  
 in B. : Joh. 4. Ek sal gee - lewende wa/ter (nooit dors)  
 noem. : Ps. 23:5 Na waters waar rus is...

h Prent v.d. mens  
 h Hert - dors. v. 2.  
 Water - v. 4 trane (ook die rou v.)  
 Water v. 5. siel uitstort. (woorddruppels)  
 Boom - Buig neer - verwek v. 6, 7, 12

Die lied v. G. in die nag. v. 9.  
 (spoel oor die klippe v. my gedagtes)

Dou - v. 9. Oordag (oggendgoedertierenheid)

Figure 2: Willem Boshoff. *Kyafrikaans*. PS 42, P12 (Detail)

vlooi byt vlieë sit kakerlakke skuil uise kr  
 eteknaamuggies vlieg vis motte vreet by soe  
 rakeradsmoedreig springkane krapkewers  
 waqparasieteer krapkewers vir rus besoe  
 bewagmielblypapieesgroeislangepikpoeder  
 tasspookwespe skarrelneteklouborkruiper  
 ndigpesswandel besiesgongshohtotsgette  
 kruiersvreetbalbytersbeweegknaadriereve  
 teslingerruspe skruil vlooi byt vlieë sit k  
 etermeteknaamuggies vlieg vis motte vree  
 krioelkriekeradsmoedreig springkane kra  
 sulerswaqparasieteer krapkewers vir rus  
 nnekeparasieteer krapkewers vir rus besoe  
 ngedier tasspookwespe skarrelnetekloubor  
 nder sondigpesswandel besiesgongshohtots  
 loerni kruiersvreetbalbytersbeweegknaa  
 uisendpoteslingerruspe skruil vlooi byt v  
 knuisepleptermiete TER KLE IN AF  
 ote vreet by soemro A L L E W E L D A D  
 ervuilwurmskrioelk B E O O G D I E N U  
 rinkane krapkewers ssk M E T D I E G E L U  
 ootekrieteroedsu D I E E E N V O U D  
 appeknyvirrusbeso S A K D I E V E E L  
 ladderinsektepi n S T I G T E N D E  
 piesgroeislangepik n S T I G T E N D E  
 eversamelposuiseh M E T D I E G E L U  
 espe skarrelnetekio D I E E E N V O U D  
 erpioenloererdwurm D I E E E N V O U D  
 estewandel besiesgong S A K D I E V E E L  
 berdebytepieladaaso S A K D I E V E E L  
 kruiersvreetbalbyte S A K D I E V E E L  
 rvuilnaaldekokerssw I N D I E A R G E L  
 ndpoteslingerruspe I N D I E A R G E L  
 tkakerlakkeskruil u B Y A F G E S T O M  
 eknuisepleptermiete B Y A F G E S T O M  
 motte vreet by soemro H I E R D I E S K A  
 evervuilwurmskrioel H I E R D I E S K A  
 springkane krapkewer T U I T D I E G E O  
 gvlouekieliebiwoes D I E L E E H U L P  
 erkrappoknyvirrusse D I E L E E H U L P  
 ttefladderinsektepi D I E L E E H U L P  
 lypapieesgroeislang NA D E U R W E E K  
 terieeversamelposu NA D E U R W E E K  
 okwespe skarrelnetek DA A R D I E V L E  
 sskerploenloerrow DA A R D I E V L E  
 igpesswandel besies DA A R D I E V L E

Figure 3: Willem Boshoff. *Kyafrikaans*. *Pesbeheer*, P24 (Detail)

Boshoff also intended that the work have a performative and thus affective element in which the acoustic potential of the work would be given scope. Until 2006, this aspect of *Kyafrikaans* remained largely informal.<sup>6</sup> The professional recording of the soundtrack was done between 2006 and 2007 at the Wounded Buffalo studios in Johannesburg. The nearly 30 recordings deployed the voices of Marcel van Heerden, Jane Rademeyer, Lochner de Kock, Hermien de Vos and Boshoff.

On 25 July 2007, Boshoff presented some of the recorded soundscapes of *Kyafrikaans* at a public lecture in the Faculty of Art Design and Architecture (FADA) Auditorium, University of Johannesburg (UJ). At the FADA lecture, Boshoff presented and discussed a number of scripto-visual pages from *Kyafrikaans* in the form of digital projections and accompanying sound recordings. Boshoff contextualised the new aural relationship with the original scripto-visual work and it seemed that the work had, at last, fulfilled its vast and varied potential as Boshoff had originally conceived it.

Later in the year, Boshoff constructed an installation of *Kyafrikaans*, as part of his exhibition *Épat* at Michael Stevenson Contemporary, Cape Town. The installation space is set apart from the rest of the *Épat* exhibition. On entering the sparse white space, one perceives the scripto-visual images of *Kyafrikaans* projected on to a screen. The appropriate recording accompanies each image becoming a soundscape within the installation space. At the end of

each recording, the image fades and the next image and recording are presented. The viewers/listeners can either stay for the full presentation or leave whenever they choose.

On viewing the recontextualised digital installation of the work in Cape Town, I was disturbed by what I perceived to be the work's fragmentary and disembodied new form. This perception was prompted by both the digital projection and the recorded aural soundscape of the installation of *Kykafrikaans*. I will unpack these in order to understand the relationship between the digital presentation and the viewer's experience as one of disembodiment.

### **Analogue and digital forms**

In *New philosophy for new media*, Mark Hansen (2004:51) writes insightfully on the embodied aesthetic of the new media works of Jeffrey Shaw,<sup>7</sup> describing it as 'making technology a supplement to the body and thus a means of expanding both the body's function as a centre of indetermination and its capacity to filter images', and agrees with the view of others that Shaw's work is 'a "user manual" for the world itself'. Yet despite Hansen's conviction, he still feels it necessary to defend the work against the determinism of those such as Friedrich Kittler who argue that:

[i]f the digital image can be said to replace photographic, cinematic, and televisual images with a wholly new technical image, that is because it fundamentally reconfigures the very concept of 'image', stripping it of a correlation-by-analogy with the human body and thus rendering it a purely arbitrary construct ... Unlike any analogue image, the computer or digital image does not comprise a static cut into the flux of the real; instead it captures a virtual block of information ... Following its digitalization, the image becomes akin to a text composed of individual letters, one that is, strictly speaking, unreadable. (In: Hansen 2004:72-73)

I will return to this later as the metaphor of *unreadability* may ironically prove useful in rereading the installation of *Kykafrikaans* for the blind, but it is also important to note here Hansen's (2004:71) need to defend his reading of Shaw's work from Kittler's insistence that:

the general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface. Sense and senses turn into eyewash.

Mitchell, (1998:57) too, asserts that images in the post-photographic era, 'can no longer be guaranteed as visual truth – or even as signifiers with stable meaning and value'. According to Mitchell (1998:85), a 'worldwide network of digital imaging systems is swiftly, silently constituting itself as the decentered subject's reconfigured eye'. In his foreword to Hansen's book and elsewhere (2002a:215), Tim Lenoir (In: Hansen 2004:xiii) points to Mitchell's (and others') determinist view, stating that:

... for Mitchell, in the shift to digitality the embodied human observer with her repertoire of techniques for decoding sensations is displaced by a new abstract regime of computer code where standards of vision are set by machinic processes of pattern recognition and statistical sampling.

Lenoir (In: Hansen 2004:xiii) states that determined views such as these direct attention to the power of manipulation inherent in new visualisation technologies. He argues that these views assume the tendency of digital imaging to detach the viewer from an embodied, haptic sense of physical location and 'being there'. And so Hansen builds his reading of Shaw's digital works on the basis of the viewer's interactive, haptic and affective relationship with the work's elements.<sup>8</sup>

With Kittler's 'eyewash' and Mitchell's 'decentered subject' as powerful arguments, it is easy to read Boshoff's installation as disembodied, especially given the viewer's passive role. In order to see how this reading occurs, three critical framing elements of Boshoff's work require attention: the representation of the image in ink (analogue) and light (digital); the role of the viewer as interactive and lastly, the soundscape. These three frames often overlap and inform one another and as such cannot always be discussed as separate or discreet.

### **Representation of the image**

In the early forms of the work (the typed originals, the screenprinted edition and the offset litho reproductions in book form) the physical relationship between ink and substrate remain coherent and similar, notwithstanding subtle differences between their optophonetic qualities.<sup>9</sup> The original typed pages have very rarely been shown by Boshoff in a public context,<sup>10</sup> but the screenprints and the book have been more publicly exhibited, viewed and collected. In print and book forms, however, the integrity of the original type has been acknowledged and visually replicated and are therefore, as optical phenomena, light-absorbing. I need to stress,



here, certain essential qualities of the type: the physicality of the black ink in relation to the white paper substrate which has been forced, rapidly, into its place on the page. This force, depresses the ink into the paper which, in turn, becomes embossed, textured almost, through the force of the hammer blow. If the substrate is thin, it will carry the embossing as indexical 'scars' of its making. 'In a literal sense', writes Katherine Hales (1999:26)

[t]echnologies of inscription are media when they are perceived as mediating, inserting themselves into the chain of textual production ... The emphasis on spatially fixed and geometrically arranged letters is significant, for it points to the physicality of the process involved. Typewriter keys are directly proportionate to the script they produce. One keystroke yields one letter, and striking the key harder produces a darker letter. The system lends itself to a signification model that links signifier to signified in direct correspondence, for there is a one-on-one relation between the key and the letter it produces. Moreover, the signifier itself is spatially discreet, durably inscribed, and flat.

Yet in Boshoff's early forms, he defies the 'spatially discreet and flat' conventions of the text. In examples such as in Figure 4 *Verdwaalkaart* (detail) and Figure 5 *Verskanste Openbaring* (detail), the images are also suggestive, or perhaps even signifiers, of landscapes, maps or terrain and as self-reflexive codes, they are indexical of obsessive construction, obfuscation and the very processes of denying this spatially discreet flatness.

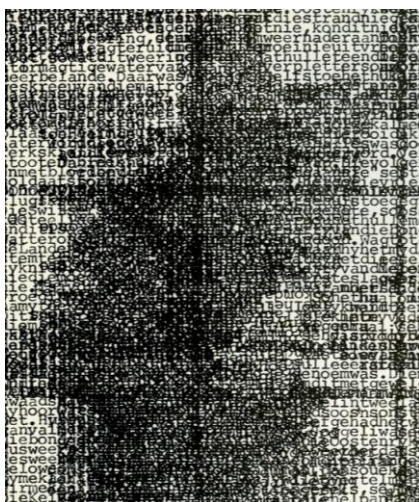


Figure 4: Willem Boshoff. Kykafrikaans. *Verdwaalkaart*, P87 (Detail)

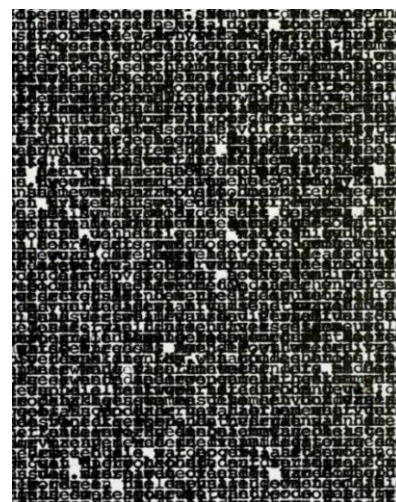


Figure 5: Willem Boshoff. Kykafrikaans. *Verskanste Openbaring*, P82 (Detail)

Thus the early forms of *Kykafrikaans* acknowledge and embody the integrity of the original act of typing. The light-absorbing nature of ink on paper, as an index of the act of typing the conventions of text blocks into scripto visual images, along with their very obfuscation, are critical for the construction of meaning in the work. The offset litho book form and even the screenprints, which through photo-mechanical reproduction of the original typed pages enlarges the type up to four times its original size, reproduce, with relative fidelity, the visual and tactile qualities<sup>11</sup> of the original.

The projected texts in the *Épat* installation, on the other hand, are light emitting and thus behave fundamentally differently and would be received and read differently.<sup>12</sup> Hayles (1999:26) describes this difference:

The relation between striking a key and producing a text with a computer is very different from the relation achieved with a typewriter. Display brightness is unrelated to keystroke pressure, and striking a single key can effect massive changes in the entire text. The computer restores and heightens the sense of word as image – an image drawn in a medium as fluid as water. Interacting with electronic images rather than materially resistant text, I absorb through my fingers as well as my mind a model of signification in which no simple one-to-one correspondence exists between signifier and signified. I know kinaesthetically as well as conceptually that the text can be manipulated in ways that would be impossible if it existed as a material object rather than a visual display. As I work with the text-as-flickering-image, I instantiate within my body the habitual patterns of movement that make pattern and randomness more real, more relevant, and more powerful than presence and absence.

Yet we must acknowledge that the projected texts have been neither typed<sup>13</sup> nor experienced as such by the viewer. The nature of digital projections, and in particular the projection of texts as images, become a product of a number of external and intrinsic factors which have very little to do with the conventions of the original typed texts: firstly, digital projections of texts – as images – are light-emitting as opposed to printed text which is light-absorbing. The optical reception of the text, as projected, is therefore fundamentally different from the original in form, density and particularly scale. Secondly, texts printed in ink are physical layers of opaque black ink on the paper substrate (Figure 6). Light emitting digital texts lack physicality, or better, permanence (Hayles' 'as fluid as water' simile is most apt) and are a composite of overlapping red, green and blue pixels (Figure 7).

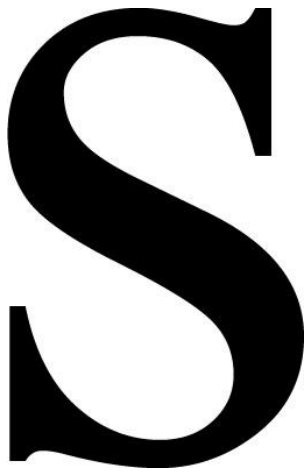


Figure 6: Reproduction of the letter 'S'. Black ink on paper.



Figure 7: Reproduction of the letter 'S', represented as light projected in dots of red, green and blue.

Thirdly, the crisp-edged font of the offset litho plate (for image production in book form) or the fine-meshed screenprint (for the print series – Figure 8) emulate the physical edge of the typewriter hammer font (Figure 9). As the projection of the text as an image enlarges the font many hundreds of times, the resulting pixilation of the digital image fuzzes the edges of texts. In digital form, the integrity of the original crisp-edged font is impossible to replicate (Figure 10) as Mitchell's (1998:5,61and 68) persuasive examples graphically demonstrate.

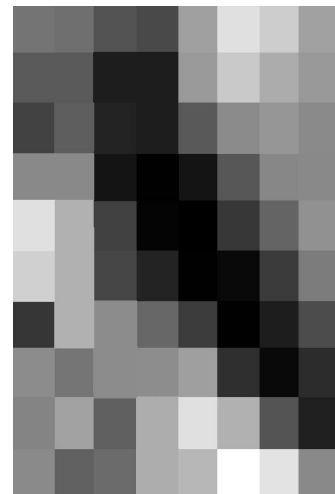
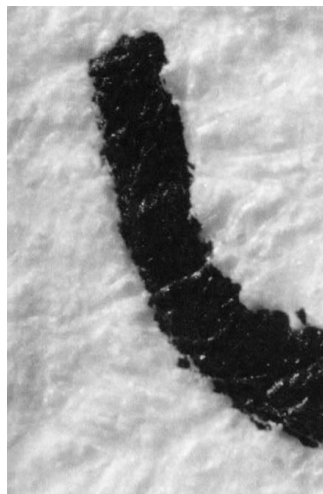
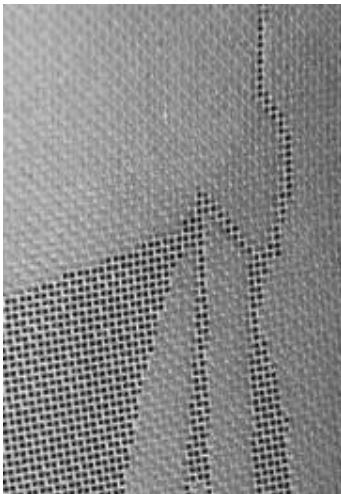


Figure 8: A macro photo of a photomechanically produced screenprint stencil. The ink will be printed where the stencil does not cover the mesh substrate. Source of original image: [www.answers.com/topic/screen-printing](http://www.answers.com/topic/screen-printing) reproduced with permission: Photo by J-E Nyström, Helsinki, Finland.

Figure 9: Paper with typed text onto Strathmore 20% cotton fiber typewriter stock with text applied by a Brother Ax-22 electronic typewriter from a Brother correctable cartridge. Source of original image, reproduced with permission: <http://aic.stanford.edu/sq/bpg/annual/v11/bp11-01a.jpg>

Figure10: Reproduction of pixels forming part of a letter reproduced in fig. 9. Monochromatic ink on paper.



Notwithstanding Manovich's (2001:52-53) call to the contrary in which he states that, with scanner resolutions of 2 400 pixels per inch, the difference between an image in analogue and digital form 'does not matter', Mitchell (1998:6) states that '[the] continuous spatial and tonal variation of analogue pictures is not exactly replicable, so such images cannot be transmitted or copied without degradation'. In the case of Boshoff's installation, the enlarged projections, coupled with the lumens and resolution limitations of the data projector used by the gallery,<sup>14</sup> expose the projected texts as struggling for optical coherence, losing clarity, crispness, blackness/density and legibility. As images, the projections result in fuzzy, somewhat colour-tinged grey-blues (Figure 11) in which the integrity of the parts are so compromised as units of visual construction that the images begin to collapse and are, in relation to the original marks-as-meaning, disembodied.

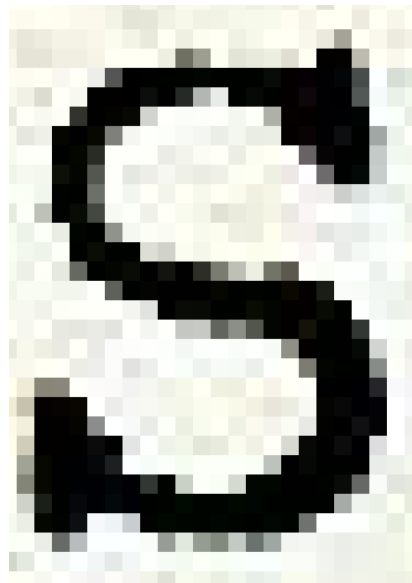


Figure11: Pixilated image of a letter 'S', derived from enlarging a scan of the letter X100, from a text generated by the author.

## **Interactivity**

The second critical frame of the original work is the viewer's ability to move between the prints or pages and thus interact with the work; by paging, flipping, touching, avoiding or moving back and/or stepping forward to view from closer proximity. These kinds of interactions with the work implicate a haptic, bodily experience. This element of interactivity is removed from the digital installation of the work. Implicit here is a passivity which may engender feelings of impatience while waiting for those poems which are of particular interest to a visitor who also

enters the installation at a stage in the programme and at a particular place in the sequence over which they have no control.

Lenoir (In: Hansen 2004:xx) acknowledges that when affection is reduced to a formal process of technical framing, located outside the subject in the world of technically assembled images, affect becomes disembodied. He continues by stating, '[i]n this account the body becomes relatively passive, a site of technical inscription of movement images instead of the active source framing otherwise formless information'. For Lenoir, if the key notion is that of the frame, (In: Hansen 2004:xix) and if interactivity, as I will show, is not a central feature of the installation, then this has resonance for the viewers' *experience* of both the imagery as well as the soundscape and thus their position within the whole as disembodied.

*Kykafrikaans*, in both its print and book formats, allows for an indeterminate number of ways in which the work might be displayed and received. The scripto-visual element of the book format encourages both a reading and viewing of each page. In some instances, the text blocks are more easily read, as for example in Figure 12 *Pro Patria* (detail). Others, while able to be read, make direct reference to the onomatopoeic nature of the words-as-sounds rather than text-as-prose as seen in Figure 13 *SS* (detail).

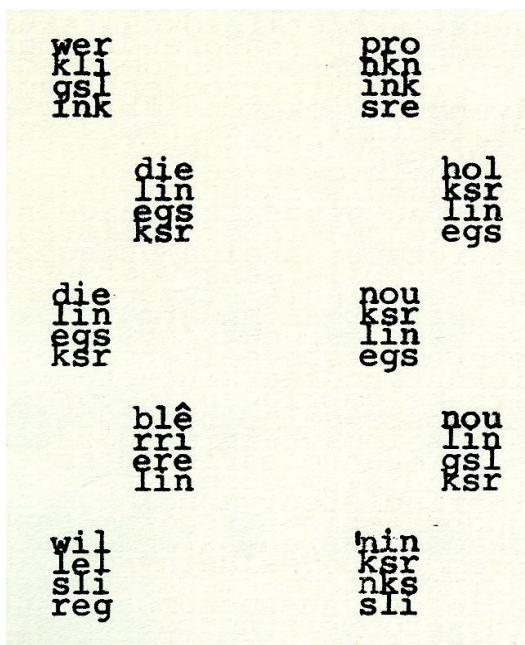


Figure 12: Willem Boshoff. *Kykafrikaans*. "Pro Patria". P1 (Detail)

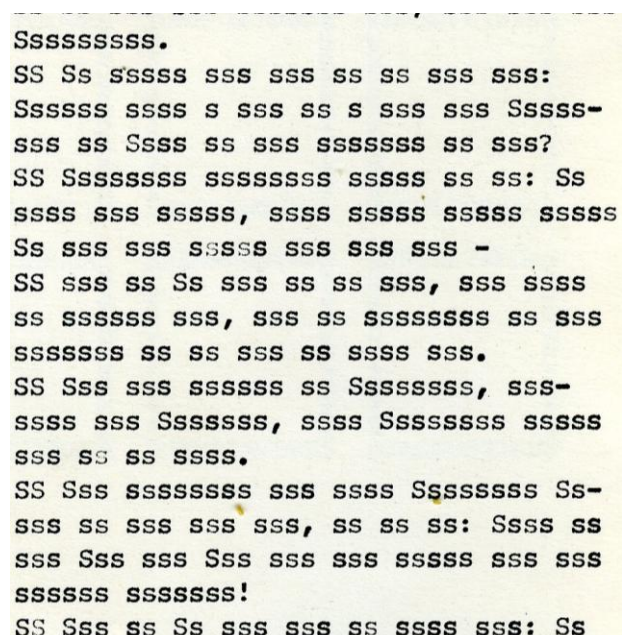


Figure 13: Willem Boshoff. *Kykafrikaans*. "SS". P28 (Detail)

A reader<sup>15</sup>, in these examples, becomes an active participant in the battle for the construction of meaning. He/she is prompted to unpack the text block's position on the page as a conventional spatial-linguistic device in order to read the text block and to become aware of the possible sounds the text facilitates.<sup>16</sup> A reader might then attempt to sound out the poems.

On either uttering these sounds or imagining what they might sound like, quietly and privately in the mind, the reader may then choose to tackle, now as a viewer, the other scripto-visually complex pages Boshoff offers.

These other pages (Figures 4 and 5) are extremely visually dense, obfuscatory in meaning and difficult to read, with only hints and clues remaining for deciphering and conventional reading. These scripto-visual poems unhinge the symbolic<sup>17</sup> relationship of text (and particularly typed text) to the conventions of reading for narrative meaning. In the digital installation of the work, both the light-emitted imagery and lack of viewer interactivity act to fragment and remove the body from the tactile, haptic and proprioceptive experience of the original work's structure and content.

In the form of individual prints, whether framed or hand-held, the viewers have some measure of determining their own pace and route through the body of work. In the form of a book, this becomes self-evident. Yet in the digital projections of the pages of *Kykafrikaans*, the determined order and sequence of the pages presupposes a passive audience. Critical here is Boshoff's almost legendary strategy of purposeful denial of access and obfuscation of meaning in his work. Through this new and determined viewing structure and sequencing, Boshoff cuts off the reader/viewer from any previous strategies of access and navigation they may have had. The soundscape, as I will show, does not attempt to replace these strategies as it reinforces the determined structure and sequence as much as it reinforces passivity.<sup>18</sup>

The digital presentation of *Kykafrikaans* seems to want to belong to a body of works which exposes 'the myth of interactivity' and which, as is the case with video and indeed cinema, denies any logical or necessary link between the digital as a mode of presentation and the expectation of a haptic or tangible media-viewer interface. Manovich (2001:57) reminds us that in 'interactive media'

... there is a danger that we will interpret 'interaction' literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body), at the expense of psychological interaction. The psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all, are mistakenly identified with an objectively existing structure of interactive links.

Is it then really necessary for this digital installation of *Kykafrikaans* to be physically interactive? Inasmuch as *Kykafrikaans* has entered the public sphere as a set of prints and, more importantly, as a book, and within which the turning of pages and particularly the onomatopoeic soundings which the reader constructs as an imaginative narrative-equivalent for the imagery on each page, the expected answer would be 'yes'. It is very unlikely that any reader navigates *Kykafrikaans* as a conventional narrative from beginning to end. The reader/viewer breaks this conventional sequencing by approaching the book as a set of visual phenomena which promote a haphazard and non-linear reading through page turning, returning and jumping between pages. In these terms, an enforced lack of interaction affects the reader/viewer's navigation strategies through reordering the sequence of pages and may deny the potential sounds which the reader may construct in order to make headway into the work.

In purely comparative terms then, there is also the possibility that, in this digital projection, the scripto-visual vitality of *Kykafrikaans* may become denuded and lost to the role of the illustrative within this determined and increasingly one-sided image-sound relationship. This leaves the readers/viewers without any interactive or participative recourse to the construction of meaning on their own terms. Yet this is *not* the printed and read *Kykafrikaans* with which we are familiar; this is something new, framed by its very lack of the concrete. Here, Boshoff seems to be creating another space of metaphoric play, a game at the expense of his viewers' continued but fraught attempts to 'make sense'. Instead, we are confronted with a new playing field and new rules, a field in which lack of interactivity is not a 'lack' but a ploy.

If Boshoff has disqualified digital imagery and interaction as embodied *experiences* of the installation, what, then of Monovich's 'psychological interaction'? Lenoir (2002b:376) points out Hansen's recognition of 'a deep seated ambivalence about material agency' in literary and

media studies. Hansen (2004:xxii-iii) encourages us to see vision as 'haptic spatiality', arguing for the primacy of affective and interoceptive sensory processes; an internally grounded image of the body as an affective channel that wants materially to link the flow of information in the digital image and the body as frame, in order to 'foreground the shift from the visual to the affective, haptic, and proprioceptive' (2004:xxiii).

Yet when Hansen's study focuses on the interactive and participative viewer of new media artworks (Shaw and Viola, for example), the affective, haptic and proprioceptive favour *vision*. Notwithstanding acknowledgement of the presence of sound in his analyses,<sup>19</sup> Hansen's focus upon the frame of vision and his sidelining of the role of the aural prompts me to explore sound as a more useful framing device for the exploration of possible haptic embodiment in Boshoff's installation. As new media theorist Sean Cubitt (1998:107) reminds us, 'today, art must be implicated in the acoustic world, or, if it is silent, it enters as a silent thing in a world of sound'.

### **The soundscape of *Kykafrikaans***

If visual denudation of the image may be argued to occur in the digital translation and technological intervention of the mechanisms described in Boshoff's imagery thus far, then disembodiment seems critical to the experience of the viewer in the installation. And now the soundscape, so strategically a part of the new installation of *Kykafrikaans*, requires some focus and analysis. The soundscape becomes, in part, through its new interrelationship with the older and more familiar form of the work and, in part, due to its environmental and recontextualising power, the overwhelming and most important part of the installation.

On one hand, the power of the soundscape, acting as it does, temporally as well as spatially seems to remove any act of imaginative interpretation which the viewer might bring to the onomatopoeic potential of the imagery. The reader/viewer is no longer entreated to sound out the text, to read out loud, to enact the sounds of the image and thus make headway in working out the meaning in the obfuscatory texts: texts which have also now lost their link with the body. Instead, the complex, multi-channelled, multi-vocal and digitally mastered recordings are ushered into the space. Boshoff has achieved his desire of performing *Kykafrikaans* and we are confronted with a soundscape which seems to overwhelmingly

'concretise aurally' what we see visually (at least partially) and might know about the texts. The sounds are clearly those of human voices, but at points, the link with voice is attenuated and abstracted. The voices read, for instance, the word 'tikreen' over and upon each other, as a continuous and seamlessly complex, imaginative envisioning of the sound of rain; the sound of the word 'tikreen' being typed and the onomatopoeic visuality of the typed word as it rains down the page of *Tikreen*, Figure 14 (detail). This complex imaginative envisioning imposes a fascinating fracturing upon the already disembodied projected image. Such is the dominance of the soundscape in the installation that there is, for those who demand the original textual referent to be signified by the projection, a danger that the image has become almost redundant.

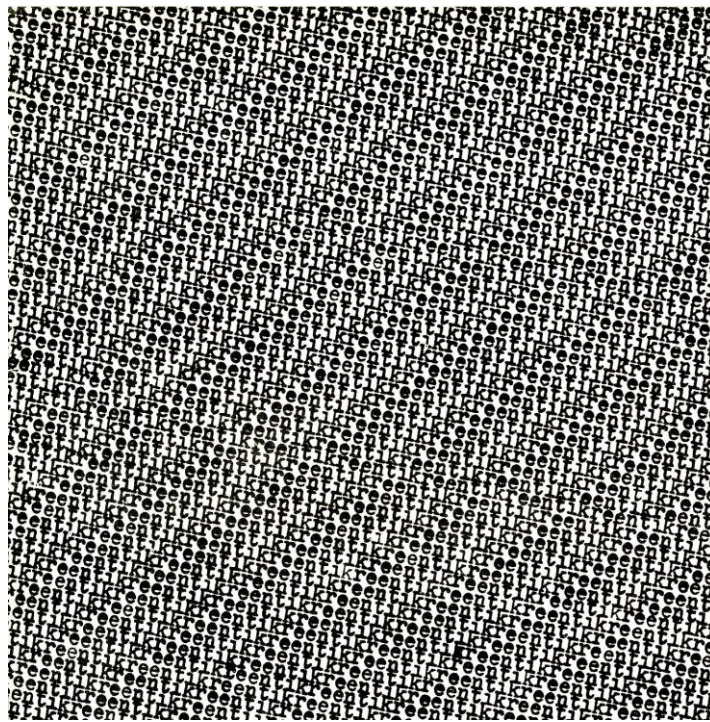


Figure14: Willem Boshoff. *Kyafrikaans. Tikreen*, P49 (Detail)

Yet if we accept, as we must, the image as disembodied, then this demand for an 'original textual referent' is a false one as the soundscape has, in any effect, effaced any formal or embodied reference to the text as an original experience, or even as a reference from the projections. The soundscape is thus utterly independent of any reference save from a faltering and incomplete memory of an attempt within ourselves to 'sound out' the texts. Let me explain this a little further. If, as Kittler and Mitchell would have us accept, the digital image no longer acts as an index of the original texts, but becomes a disembodied 'wash' of



new data, information without physical referent, then the new relationship forged between image, text and sound in this digital installation not only favours but also frees the aural.

Boshoff, in the foreword to *Kykafrikaans* entreats us that '*Jy kan met oë hoor maar nie met ore kyk nie*'.<sup>20</sup> Boshoff (2007:54) states:

Many of the poems are optophonetic ...The ingredient of sound functions on two levels in poetry. On the one hand, the sound may be absent in that no actual vocal experience is forthcoming, but one might look at poems and imagine one can hear sounds emanating from their graphic templates. These sounds are visualised only. On the other hand, in many poems, the sound may be imagined but they can also be recited audibly. Format, composition and redering [sic] give diagrammatic clues as to how actual performing voices might interact with the visual aspect of the poems.

And within the context of the installation, Boshoff seems to challenge us with a new configuration of seeing and hearing. With such a pixelated and disembodied text, projected as (at best) merely denotative information – Boshoff's 'diagrammatic clues' – and therefore no contextualising reference to the new soundscape of *Kykafrikaans*, we have now been presented with an aural 'key' of sorts. But this key does not help us understand the complex visuality or the textual veracity of the original work any better – we still cannot see with our ears!

In our experience of the original texts of *Kykafrikaans*, it has been in negotiating and voicing the possible interpretative sounds – out loud or silently to oneself, inside one's head – that the critical element of reading and sound generation has been seen as an integral part of appreciating the original work over the last thirty years. In the installation, however, gone are these imaginative attempts, no matter how fraught or partial they may have been, as a strategy for unlocking meaning in the work. The readers/viewers have, within the context of our experience of the textual *Kykafrikaans*, lost their agency. Our personalised aural renditions of the pages of *Kykafrikaans* are now threatened with silence behind the systemic authority of what, for some, may be viewed as the 'correct' and 'official' version; something which one alone cannot reproduce and in this fracturing of image from sound, seeing from sounding out, Boshoff's metaphoric play seems to delight.

Luce Irigaray (1993:153-165) writing from a feminist, psychoanalytical standpoint draws our attention to the fact that the speed of sound and of light are not at all the same and that light is made to serve sound by subordinating the faster of the two to the slower. Thus all phenomena of light have to pass by sound's articulation (153). Her implication is (and in the world of visual art this is doubly so) that sound takes on a role and an authority which it may not always deserve. She continues (156) by describing certain rhythms as 'noisy', consequently they risk destroying or effacing the visual or what she refers to as the 'color properties of matter'. Of particular significance here is her view that these noisy rhythms 'threaten to make light and looking submit to sound and listening' (156).

If sound has the power to upset the order of visual phenomena, and in this instance Boshoff seems to have done so most powerfully (noisily!), it is appropriate to now unpack some of its structural elements. I do this in order to understand how sound operates, as one framing device among others, in order to determine how it might operate in the installation in terms of embodiment.

I problematise the notion of voice, utterance and hearing within one's body as opposed to hearing the voices of others. I then acknowledge the problematic of vagaries in sound reproduction, broadcast and acceptance of digitally altered or disembodied sounds. I do this in relation to the iconicity of onomatopoeic sounds, the closest relationship which the aural can forge with the visual, and conclude by presenting a reading of the soundscape as embodied in the reception of the work by the blind.

Cubitt (1998:93), in his extensive analysis of the use of sound and silence in relation to digital, visual and the filmic arts, explores the notion of 'pure hearing' in subject/object relations.

So instead of hearing what it is in itself, we 'recognise' the sound, after which we can identify what is making it and say to ourselves, 'Now I understand'. When this happens – for example when you hear a creak and say, 'That's that loose floorboard' – you displace the content of perception from ear to the floorboard, and the act of perception from air/ear vibration to a verbal acknowledgement.

This act of displacement has important implications for our reception of the soundscape of *Kyafrikaans*. Our 'floorboard' may be visualised in works such as *Min of Meer* (Figure 15:

detail) where a direct relationship between the spoken word and its meaning might be discerned.

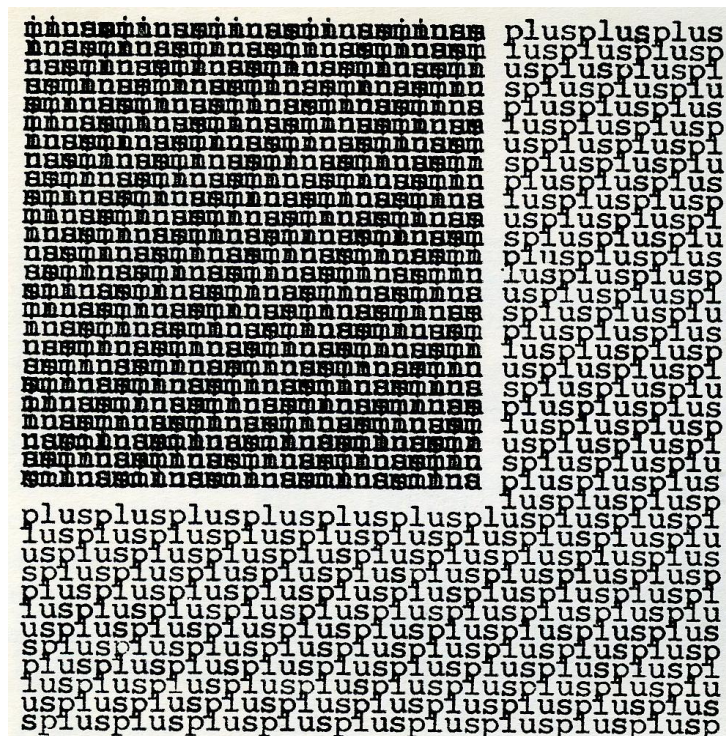


Figure 15: Willem Boshoff. *Kykafrikaans. Min of Meer*, P14 (Detail)

But in the works which Boshoff (2007:54) describes as optophonetic, Cubitt's displacement of the content and act of perception, to the object and listener respectively, is far more difficult to negotiate. Boshoff's soundscape challenges the viewers/listeners to enter and negotiate that aural space as either subject (the listeners can decide to participate and acknowledge their interaction) or object (by remaining mute and still). In either instance, Boshoff is offering the viewers/listeners more content-laden information than ever before.

What we hear are the masculine and feminine voices of van Heerden, Rademeyer, de Kock and de Vos who either read the texts or engage with onomatopoeic sound-forms which attempt to construct a symbolic relationship with the optophonetic poems.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962:227) asserts that both the sound and the colour of an object 'are received into my body, and it becomes difficult to limit my experience to a single sensory

department', perhaps helping to conflate, somewhat, what Cubitt terms the acousmatic as opposed to the coded aspects of the social nature of hearing.<sup>21</sup>

Through the perception of a sound – through the physiological solidity of hearing – expressing its objecthood, a listener is able to become familiar with its proximity or distance, its direction, and name it appropriately, through encoding it with what Douglas Kahn (in Cubitt 1998:96) calls 'the contaminating effects of the world'.

Sensorial and encoded sounds enter the body, as utterly temporal changes in pressure and vibration:

The times of sound are also the elements of its geography. It is in the nature of sound, whether it is conveying information about a world already known, acting as a vehicle for pattern and structure independent of its voicings, or merely doubling up the pre-existing certainties of a verbal metacode, to be redundant. That is precisely what allows the possibility of sound's autonomy, but also that which returns it to us as a human environment, and, in changing it from mere vehicle to material meditation, resituates it in the distance between – and within – people. (Cubitt 1998:99)

And so we grapple with the subject/object relations of hearing *Kykafrikaans* for the first time. On one hand, we might understand the implications for hearing and perceiving utterances which are culturally encoded with meaning, while on the other we might acknowledge the technological impact of sound reproduction and broadcast on the manner in which its reception might colour our experience of it.<sup>22</sup> As my concern here lies in the framing of the installation by the introduction of the authoritative soundscape, which can as easily be experienced as objective, distant and disembodied as it can, for others, resonate with affective embodiment, I must continue to grapple with the potential duality of its reception.

To return for a moment to framing one's aural experience of the original *Kykafrikaans*, Kahn (2001:7) describes the embodied process of active hearing and thus helps us define its potential<sup>23</sup> aurality:

When one speaks, the act of hearing one's own voice is the most widespread private act of performance in public and the most common public act experienced within the comfortable confines of one's own body. Hearing one's

own voice almost passes unnoticed, but once acknowledged it presents itself as a closed system remaining within the experience of the individual. The immateriality of speech itself ensures that everything will not escape the voracity of time as both voice and moment precipitously disappear. It also ensures that the voice will thus elude unwanted appropriations by others ...

Kahn (2001:7) takes this duality further by arguing, via the phenomenological stance of Merleau-Ponty, for a centring versus decentering of human utterances – voice as ephemeral or disembodied when heard, as opposed to material and embodied when spoken. In terms of the physicality of the body

[w]hile other people hear a person's voice carried through vibrations in the ear, the person speaking also hears her or his own voice as it is conducted from the throat and mouth through bone to the inner regions of the ear. Thus, the voice in its production in various regions of the body is propelled through the body, its resonance is sensed intracranially. A fuller sense of presence is experienced as the body becomes attached to thought as much as the generation of speech is attached to thought. Yet at the same time that the speaker hears the voice full with the immediacy of the body, others will hear the speaker's voice infused with lesser distribution of body because it will be a voice heard without bone conduction: a deboned voice.

Thus the soundscape of *Kykafrikaans* is presented, in Kahn's terms, without the 'bone' of our own voice, without the 'infusion' of the fuller body of our own aural attempts to perform and thus make richer, our appreciation of the visuality of the work, a soundscape which, like the projected imagery, has become disembodied.

Another factor which acts to alienate the aural from the body is what Clifford Nass and Scott Brave (2005:33-34) refer to 'markers of personality' associated with voice and vocal sounds in digital and computerised environments. They isolate four fundamental aspects of voices which indicate personality, namely *volume*, *pitch*, *pitch range* and *speech rate* and conclude that these aspects, coupled with gender and similarity or dissimilarity to stereotypes about the listener's vocal self, affect ways in which recipients will respond. The manner in which the soundscape is broadcast into the room through stereophonic placement of loudspeakers, and thus the 'position' of the speaker him/herself/themselves in the space in relation to the viewers/listeners, all have a bearing on how the work will be received and appreciated.

Of critical relevance to the *Épat* installation is the inability of the viewers/listeners to exercise any control over the reproduction of the soundscape. Size and the acoustic properties of the space, broadcast equipment, speakers, volume, as well as the vagaries of, and inability to fully control, ambient sounds (telephones ringing, the voices of gallery visitors in adjacent spaces) all affect the reception and appreciation of the soundscape's 'likability' and 'trustworthiness'. (Nass & Brave 2005:36).<sup>24</sup>

In the installation of *Kykafrikaans*, the soundscape's 'personality' shifts the viewer/listener's focus even further away from the visual elements presented, towards questions of authenticity, 'likability' and 'trustworthiness'. Perhaps the reader/viewer's sense of the trustworthiness of the soundscape will help to determine if the installation, and indeed *Kykafrikaans*, is accepted as an embodied experience or dismissed as disembodied and alien from some form of ordinary experience. Key to sound as a framing device, in this instance, is the onomatopoeic basis of many of the tracks of the soundscape. Olga Fischer and Christina Ljungberg, (2008) describe onomatopoeic sound as 'imagic' iconicity<sup>25</sup> stating

[c]ontrary to the Saussurean idea that language is fundamentally if not exclusively arbitrary (or in semiotic terms, 'symbolic'), considerable linguistic research in the twentieth century has shown that iconicity operates at every level of language (phonology, morphology, syntax) and in practically every known language. Recent literary criticism has confirmed that iconicity is also pervasive in the literary text, from its prosody and rhyme, its lineation, stanzaic ordering, its textual and narrative structure to its typographic layout on the page.

Onomatopoeic sound as 'imagic icon' thus helps us find a possible relationship between what we are viewing – the projected images – and what we are hearing in the new presentation of *Kykafrikaans*. Yet Cubitt, and I suspect Kittler and Mitchell too, do not allow us to accept this iconic relationship quite so readily. Cubitt, (1998:102) states

[r]ecorded sound ... doubles the sound of place with an art of dissemination. This is the source of that sense we sometimes get of music as insubstantial, not because it cannot be preserved, but because it is not anchored in things, in the way any representational forms are.

If Boshoff's soundscape is not 'anchored in things' because there are no representational forms in the optophonetic pages of *Kykafrikaans*, then they are iconic only of what Boshoff



(2007:54) describes as the diagrammatic clues of format, composition and rendering for how actual performing voices *might* interact with the visual aspect of the poems. Unlike Hansen's reading of Shaw's embodied, interactive and haptic work as a 'user manual for the world itself', Boshoff makes no such claims, providing seemingly purposefully disembodied experiences for his readers/viewers. In presenting the 'authoritative' soundscape, Boshoff succeeds in alienating and distancing his audience from the meaning of *Kykafrikaans* and indeed an embodied *experience* of it. Once again we seem left only with frustrating 'clues' and with an 'authoritative' soundscape broadcast tantalisingly on to and into our bodies, the fragmentation of the installation of *Kykafrikaans* seems to take us no closer to understanding the work.

We have experienced this distancing in Boshoff's work before: *Bangboek* (1978–1981) (Figure 16: detail) as a conceptual book, presents every page open at the same time to be read and appreciated in its entirety, immediately. Yet this expansive non-temporal expression of the conventions of a book is undermined by the text's illegibility as the text has been written in code. Boshoff (2007:3) states his desire for *Kykafrikaans*, in the context of this exhibition, to be accessed by the blind. In this form, his desire has been achieved. Only the blind have no ordinary experience and thus no 'contaminating' memory of/from the original texts and only they have the freedom to experience the soundscape as embodied and ultimately full of meaning. Gone are the issues of disembodiment, fragmentation, muteness, pixelation and a soundscape without 'personality', without 'bone', which the reader/viewer of Boshoff's installation might experience.

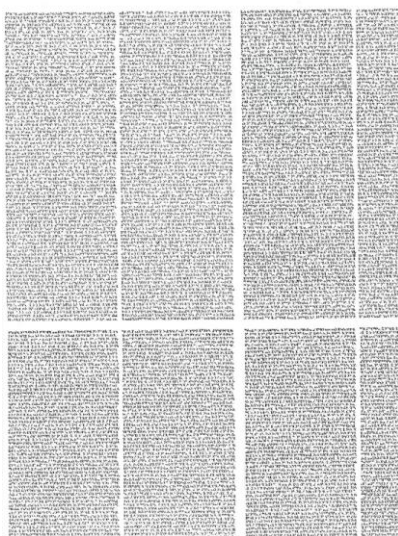


Figure 16: Willem Boshoff. *Bangboek* (Detail). 1978-81. Ink, paper and Masonite. Collection: Gencor. Image: Vladislavic, I (2005:41)

## Conclusion

If, as Boshoff states in the foreword to *Kykafrikaans* that, *we can hear with our eyes but not see with our ears*, then the new soundscape disqualifies our ability to visualise the complexity of the original visual work. Instead, and acting upon the projected texts' digital disembodiment from their original printed forms, the soundscape sidelines the visual to a further level of disembodiment: illustrative referent. In this way the soundscape appears to frame a new visualisation and appreciation of the original texts. Yet in finding the 'authority' of the soundscape just as alienating of our attempts to understand *Kykafrikaans*, the readers/viewers seem to be caught in a disembodied experience of the work which succeeds in distancing us even more from attempts to construct meaning. Within a new digital space of metaphoric play, Boshoff seems to have taken obfuscation of his classic work to a new level of distance by exploiting a dominant metaphor of our time: that digital information is (at least in Boshoff's hands) indeed disembodied. Yet this experience is true only for those who privilege sight; as those who are blind (those for whom Boshoff has privileged access to his work in the past) and thus with no 'contaminating' visual referent to and from the original work, have the only real access to the work as a startlingly new, original and uniquely embodied experience.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The work formed part of the exhibition, *Épat*, Michael Stevenson Contemporary, Cape Town. 25 October–24 November 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Lev Manovich (2001:52) draws attention to the term 'digital' as an umbrella for three unrelated concepts, analog-to-digital conversion (digitisation), a common representational code, and numerical representation. In this article I use the term as the first of the three concepts.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Lenoir, (2002a & b) in his introductory essays, addresses the notion that digital information is disembodied as a 'dominant metaphor of our time'. He positions the diverse views of major thinkers around the metaphor in order to show that this dominance may indeed be questioned.

<sup>4</sup> The originals form part of the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Miami, USA.

<sup>5</sup> The original screenprints were printed in 1981 in an edition of 10. In 2003, Sanlam commissioned Hard Ground Printmakers who selected 12 of the poems for printing in an edition of 20. Sanlam donated one portfolio to the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, with a small portion of the edition reserved for sale.

<sup>6</sup> Boshoff's (2007:54) desire to execute the performative potential of *Kykatfrikaans* has been realised in diverse environments. In informal terms: teaching classes with students, workshops, etc. and in formal environments: the KKNK Arts Festival, Oudtshoorn and the White Box Gallery, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Shaw is an Australian-born new media artist and director of the Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany.

<sup>8</sup> Shaw's work involves the viewer's direct manipulation of hardware such as a joystick. Shaw's 35-year-long critical-creative engagement with the nexus of space, image and body, argues Hansen, (2004:50) shifts the task of reconciling the conflicting demands of these conventions from the body's kinesthetic movement within the image space alone to the body-brain's capacity for "transpatial" synthesis. Shaw's later work foregrounds what Hansen calls the virtual dimension of embodied human life. For a South African example I suggest viewing Paul Emmanuel's *The Lost Men Project: Grahamstown*, an interactive digital book which requires the reader to engage haptically with the touch-screen monitor in order to turn the digital pages and activate both the narrative and the healing process of the work's implicit content.

<sup>9</sup> By the term 'optophonetic qualities' I refer to the dual operations of the typeface as something to be both read visually as a conventional text and viewed as an image. As such, Boshoff has used the type as a 'brush' in which densities of black ink read as optical phenomena familiar to the conventions of painting. When text blocks are piled upon each other in such a way that conventional reading becomes difficult or impossible, the optical qualities, in these instances, flag meaning, as obfuscation, cancellation or purposeful hiding. Such self-reflexive indexicality operates optically as a function of how the eye facilitates the construction of meaning in the work.

<sup>10</sup> The original pages were sold to the Sackner Archive in c1994. Boshoff states, however, that one of the original pages is missing.

<sup>11</sup> Such enlargement facilitates an appreciation for the graphic-mechanical qualities of type on paper. The raised typeface of the typewriter hammer results in a crisp-edged, embossed and clearly defined letter on the paper, irrespective of the density of the ink across the entire surface of the letter. The screenprints enlarge and reproduce the physical manifestation of the typeface particular to Boshoff's machine and in no way alter the visual and physiological factualness of the original manifestation of type on paper. The visual qualities inherent in an embodied translation from type to print manifest the physicality of ink on a paper substrate intrinsic to both.

<sup>12</sup> There is, however, something else at play here: in the digital world, the original typed pages of *Kykatfrikaans* seem quaint, antiquated, a document of a bygone era of outdated and redundant technologies. The prints and book seem to reference these old technologies, celebrated in the original typed pages; a hand-crafted document, something a little at odds with our digital world. For a similar reading of this dichotomy between assumed visual conventions of digital screen and physical book see Hayles in Lunenfeld 2000:81.

<sup>13</sup> The images have been scanned from one of the existing print forms and certainly not retyped.

<sup>14</sup> This condition of loss is compounded by a number of other extrinsic factors such as ambient lighting conditions and the reflectivity (or not) of the screen surface.

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout the rest of the article I use the term ‘readers/viewers’ to imply both the optophonetic qualities of the work and the dual roles which the audience needs to take up in negotiating the scripto-visual qualities of this work. Here, however, and when I use the term ‘reader/s’ alone, I refer to the audience’s response primarily within the convention of reading texts and from which ‘viewing’ may later flow.

<sup>16</sup> Contextualising phrases accompany the titles at the end of the book. These phrases may be used as clues or as a foundation for the way in which we may read and interpret the texts.

<sup>17</sup> At this stage I refer to the Saussurean notion of language as symbolic (arbitrary) sign. Later in the article, however, I question this convention.

<sup>18</sup> As interactive strategies are clearly denied in this presentation of the work, Boshoff seems interested in the possibilities of exploiting the ‘dominant metaphor’ of the digital being disembodied. Arguments around uncritical curatorial management, a disinterest in the critical reception of the imagery in digital form – and thus its ‘neutral’ denotative role – along with the installation’s focus on merely presenting the recordings to the gallery visitor, seem out of step with Boshoff’s carefully managed work in the rest of *Épat* and, indeed, his *oeuvre*. It seems unhelpful, here, to suggest ways in which *Kyafrikaans*’ digital and interactive possibilities may be developed.

<sup>19</sup> An especial instance of which is Hansen’s analysis of Shaw’s *Continuous Sound and Image Moments* (1966) in which the visual is discussed in depth and the aural component ignored.

<sup>20</sup> Translated: ‘One can hear with one’s eyes but cannot see with one’s ears’.

<sup>21</sup> By ‘acousmatic’, Cubitt (1998:96) means what is common in any perception of a sound or the physiological solidity of hearing. By ‘coded’ he refers to the semantic and instrumental separation of sound object and the subject of hearing effected through semiotic and social codes of language and naming.

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell (1998:52) reminds us that text fragments manipulated by word processors and digital sound samples manipulated by computer music systems have a similar character. Citing Walter Benjamin’s claim that if mechanical image reproduction substituted exhibition value for cult value, digital imaging (and here one can read ‘sound’) further substitutes a new kind of use value, input value – manipulation by computer – for exhibition value.

<sup>23</sup> I use the term ‘potential’ as each reader/viewer has a unique experience of the linguistic possibilities of the work, from the differences in interpretation of the text to the differences in timbre, intonation and soundings of each individual voice whether vocalised externally (for others to hear) or internally and privately.

<sup>24</sup> Of equal importance is the use of colour, i.e., white walls as opposed to black walls, which have a psychological impact on how we respond to a space and thus the information presented in that space.

<sup>25</sup> Onomatopoeia may be seen to possess iconicity as it is a word or a grouping of words that imitates the sound it is describing, suggesting its source object, such as ‘cuckoo’, ‘click’, ‘clang’, ‘buzz’.

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