

## DIALOGUING DIALECT

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*Dialoguing Dialect* investigates the notions of *Self* and *Other* within the context of language. The relevance of this theme in a contemporary multicultural South Africa relates to the frequent sense of connection yet disconnection, exacerbated by misunderstandings within the diversity of spoken languages and dialects.

Theorist and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud's claim that "artists are looking for a new modernity ... based on translation" (Dreyer 2010) resonates with me. His philosophy of Relational Aesthetics considers the aesthetic form of communicative acts.

My informal role as an art educator in the community of Ocean View<sup>1</sup> has allowed for conversational interaction with young adults from the area. With their help I attempt to decode slang used in this community, often resulting in misunderstanding through translation. Language diversity causes disconnects in interpersonal communications. This work explores the potential for the "retransmission" or reconnection of communication disrupted through misinterpretation.

My home language is English, and as a child I played with lettered blocks to learn the alphabet. In my artwork, the alphabet blocks are hybridized with a graffiti font. This alludes to inherent difficulties experienced by mainstream language speakers (Jambor 2007) when attempting to connect with the dialect of another language. The labour-intensive mark-making<sup>2</sup> required for cutting these wooden blocks indicates my own struggle to decode this vernacular language.

The idea of the 'block' has several metaphorical connotations. Building blocks of language are contained in words, and in the letters of the alphabet; a mental block refers to my inability to understand, translate or articulate thoughts and words in this unfamiliar vernacular, while a stumbling block implies an obstacle or impediment, like the difficulty of communicating through an unfamiliar dialect. *Blok* (in Afrikaans) translates as block, cram, or swot (learn) (*Tweetalige Skool-woordeboek 2003*). Coincidentally, the Ocean View young adults live in blocks of flats colloquially called *Die Blokke*.

The *Centre/Periphery* or *Self/Other*<sup>3</sup> relationship is understood in both a psychological and

philosophical sense and defines exclusion of *Others* within societies. In the language context of the Ocean View community, my position translates as peripheral – that of the *Other* - as can be heard on the sound installation *Converse* that connects the viewer to a conversation<sup>4</sup> about selected slang.

My installation *Relate/Translate* references dialogue and language. In its dominant position on the wall, a speech bubble signifies the primary language (the *Self*) as slang. A second speech bubble in a subordinate position on the floor consists of questions I frequently ask in my attempt to understand the slang. This bubble represents English, here the secondary language, the language of the *Other*. Between these speech bubbles, blocks descend in an arc in decreasing sizes, as if tumbling.

The imagery on these language blocks invokes further interpretation. From the excavation of hand cut wood, to collaged prints, and finally to the digitally rendered laser-engraved and vinyl cut letters, this visual ‘translation’ describes the act of language translation, namely the changing of words in form, shape or appearance. Graffiti-style letters with traces of luminous spray-paint on alphabet blocks allude to youth culture and the territory or site of this slang.

South African artist Willem Boshoff (b. 1951) works primarily with language and text. His *Blind Alphabet* (1993) is an installation of boxes concealing carved objects taken from “a subset of English terms” (Vladislavić 2005:54). The box tops have braille explanations intended for interpretation for the sighted by a blind person. Boshoff subverts the notion of the blind as marginalized/peripheral or *Other* and the sighted as central *Self*. My work evolved from a similar principle where my position becomes that of the disenfranchised English-speaking *Other*, thereby raising questions around the autonomy of the English language due to its universality (Jambor 2007). Like Boshoff’s *Blind Alphabet*, my *Suspended Translation* involves cooperative interpretation: this wall work depicts prints of graffiti-style words encrypted with laser text and tasks the viewer with deciphering the text, linking to a form of language block.

New York street artist Swoon works with a combination of print, drawing, spraypaint and collage ([www.the-artists.org/artist/swoon/](http://www.the-artists.org/artist/swoon/)). Her relief prints inspired my woodcuts of graffiti-style text; while her images on recycled newsprint informed my printing onto local community newspaper<sup>5</sup>, indicating the way people connect through language and communication.

Explorations into “creative interplay” between centre and periphery inspire “constant activity of contact and transformation” (Boisvert 2005:124) as is implied in the *Can Connect* installation.

My intention is to evoke a visual dialogue between viewer and artwork in an endeavour to make the unintelligible accessible. Playful subversion of the *Self* and *Other* translates positions through the engagement with perhaps unfamiliar language and cross-cultural connection.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The community of Ocean View is situated between Kommetjie and Fish Hoek on the Cape Peninsula and was established largely as a result of apartheid policy in the 1960's – 70's.

<sup>2</sup> While learning the vernacular language from Ricardo Monk and Justin Boois, I taught them the visual language of woodcutting.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of *Othering* was conceived by Emmanuel Levinas and later popularised by philosopher Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), and can be defined as the process of creating and maintaining a dichotomy between ones-self, as marked by a particular (Western identity, and the *Other(s)*). The *Self/Other* relationship is understood in both a psychological and philosophical sense. and defines exclusion of *Others* within societies.

<sup>4</sup> My voice haltingly pronounces the words and translates meaning of selected slang while Ricardo Monk and Justin Boois impart interpretation and clarify meaning for me.

<sup>5</sup> Berman & Coppes (2012:54) maintain that appropriate use of paper creates "a medium able to transcend differences across disciplines and between individuals".