

## curators' comment

mandy conidaris and kevin sneider

**current exhibitions open Tuesday 06 May 2014** *Alliances*: two curated exhibitions

runs till August 2014 then the exhibitions go into the outoftheCUBE archive

*A torrent in the sandpit* curated by Emma Willemse

*Assemblage Studios – an experiment* curated by Anthea Pokroy and Louise Van der Bijl

### exhibiting artists

*A torrent in the sandpit*

Hanne-Lize Delpont and Christel Liebenberg.

*Assemblage Studios – an experiment*

Audrey Anderson, Bev Butkow, Michael Cheesman, Mandy Coppes-Martin, Yael Feldman, Rebecca Haysom, Renee Johannes, Mandy Johnston, Claire Jorgensen, Zwelethu Machepha, Lehlogonolo Mashaba, Minenkulu Ngoyi, Bongani Njalo, Phumulani Ntuli, **Leanne Shakenovsky**, Ross Passmoor, Anthea Pokroy, Louise Ross, Susan White and Isaac Zavale.

for more details on the curators and artists, please read the texts on each exhibition page.

### key words and phrases

artist run community (ARC); Assemblage Studios; assemblage technique; community; Anthea Pokroy; stop frame animation; the absurd; the curating process; Louise Van Der Bijl; Emma Willemse;

## Alliances – the intimate and the inclusive

### background

So much has been written over the last decade around curating as a discipline in its own right that our curators' comment for the outoftheCUBE *Alliances* exhibitions could hardly be considered even a kernel of popcorn in the back row of the amphitheater of this discourse. Within this arena of debate, many opinions are negative and many positive, and a taste of these arguments is presented here.

But firstly, what do we mean by curating? It is put simply here and relates well to *Alliances* since all three curators are also artists:

*The role of a curator is vast and varied and has changed a lot over the years. The primary role of a curator is to assemble or select collections of works of art, or art projects grouped around an idea or theme ... often a curatorial project is launched in response to events or concerns in the artists' community or with regards to the ideas investigated in the artist's practice. Many artists curate shows as a way of gathering various artistic voices together ... to make connections with other artists, to expand ideas about your own work, to create a dialogue within a particular community, or to give an idea a public face.*

And around this seemingly clear-cut practice, what of the different perspectives of those involved? Well!

Firstly, artist Julia Scher comments on the benefits in having an experienced artist as a curator, one whose processes of thinking and engaging with other artists extend beyond his/her own career:

*The ideal artist-as-curator is an artist who has deeply mined a certain vein of artistic practice, and has reached a reflective, introspective point in his or her career. Already established, s/he is able to disengage from the day-to-day struggles of art practice, and take a longer view toward the history of his or her medium, and an insider's view of what really matters. The ideal artist-as-curator appreciates the complementary nature of the three increasingly merging aspects of today's art world: artist, critic, and curator.*

However, Darryl Bank warns that some curators act as 'authors' of their own meaning, and gather up artworks that merely accommodate their vision:

*As the role of the curator [has] shifted towards further participation in the production of meaning, curatorial work could be seen [now] as creative ... This increased potential for creativity led to the rise of ... the curator as a visionary, and the exhibition as their medium. ... [This way of curating] has often been the target of criticism, particularly in terms of the subsuming of artists and artworks within the curator's authorial vision.*

In this regard, artist John Baldessari reflects:

*What disturbs me is a growing tendency for artists to be used as art materials, like paint, canvas, etc. I am uneasy about being used as an ingredient for an exhibition recipe, i.e., to illustrate a curator's thesis. A logical extreme of this point of view would be for me to be included in an exhibition entitled "Artists Over 6 Feet 6 Inches", since I am 6'7". Does this have anything to do with the work I do? It's sandpapering the edges off of art to make it fit a recipe.*

### **curatorial decisions**

But beyond all this, the curatorial process can have a fluid and magical quality. Despite being an online platform working out of a table and two chairs in Johannesburg, at outoftheCUBE we try to build relationships with our exhibiting artists by engaging with them through phone calls and emails, as much

as possible meeting them for discussion, and at least one of our team will have seen the physical work by the time it is exhibited. What this does for certainly the early-career artists is to give them the priceless boost that someone somewhere has enough faith in their artwork to take the time to offer them a stepping stone forward.

Joseph Grigley affirms this need: “The etymology of the word ‘curate’ is an intriguing one. Skeat ...suggests a late Latin source, *curatus*, a priest or curate, or more succinctly: ‘one who has the cure of souls.’” as does Erinn Roos-Brown: “Curators create the soul that people connect to and invest in by sharing their knowledge ...”

Although two very different curatorial ways of working are present in the two exhibitions that make up *Alliances*, they share in common the reality of a care for their artists. They are the intimate and the inclusive, and both challenge the notion of the curator as author, relating more to an understanding of the curator as an insider with a deeper understanding of artists’ concerns and challenges.

In a way, *Alliances* represents ‘curating within curating’. outoftheCUBE identified two groups of artist/curators that we wished to work with, both of whom we saw as assisting early-career artists down their creative paths in a spirit of generosity – Emma Willemse, an experienced and committed Cape Town-based art educator, and Louise Van Der Bijl and Anthea Pokroy, co-founders of Assemblage, a fresh and dynamic artists’ community organization in Johannesburg. We offered them the opportunity to curate an exhibition each, giving them *carte blanche*, waiting with open minds for our own curatorial theme to emerge.

Once their curating was under way, and during our on-going communications with them, we realised that the outoftheCUBE curatorial theme was developing along two lines: exploring aspects of relationship-building between the curators and their artists; and the evolving of two very different curatorial approaches. One was small-scale and intimate; the other, large-scale and inclusive. They combined into our conceptual linking of them together under the title *Alliances*.

### ***A torrent in the sandpit***

Emma has embraced the intimate curatorial approach with her exhibition featuring the work of just two young artists, Hanne-Lize Delpont and Christel Liebenberg. As their lecturer throughout their undergraduate studies, and witnessing their making and thinking processes, Emma developed an intimate understanding of their work. She recognized the merit in each and picked up a common link that may not have been immediately obvious to one less involved with the artists.

Having identified their common theoretical issue as being the individual’s struggle to deal with meaning, with the way the individual has become overwhelmed in contemporary society – by mega-organisations and corporations in Hanne-Lize’s video, and in Christel’s, by information and media overload – Emma chose to pick up from both the sub-theme of absurdity. She asks, “How do we navigate a path where the tension between a quest for meaning and an inherent meaningless world is a daily obstacle?” (‘in conversation’).

By inviting these two young artists to exhibit work that had been created for their third-year final exams, and by guiding them through the processes of exhibiting professionally, Emma further validated their work by sharing her knowledge, but more importantly, her time.

### ***Assemblage Studios – an experiment***

This exhibition features at least one work by each of twenty artists who have studio space at the Assemblage premises, including work by Anthea and Louise. Although these artists have diverse influences and experiences, as well as making use of a large variety of mediums and techniques, their common ground is an appreciation of the vibrancy of the community spirit within this collective space.

Louise's and Anthea's curatorial approach was inclusive in that there is at least one work by every Assemblage artist, including the curators themselves. Their aim was to show a cross-section of work being made in this community, and this was achieved in a democratic way by putting out a Call for Artists within the Studios and considering all submissions before making a selection. They identified two dominant themes in the submitted work – the figure and identity, and the navigation of space, in particular the city space, both important topics addressed by many South African artists, and especially significant to those working within a studio space in heterogeneous central Johannesburg. Louise asks: "As a people, are we trying to understand how we each fit into the largely fragmented and divided society within which we exist?" ('in conversation').

The artists responded to a Call for Artists by submitting work that was resolved and professional, representing a desire not only to present their own work to best advantage, but also to show that they share pride in and commitment to their Assemblage community. Anyone who has ever tried to gather twenty artists together will know that Louise, in particular, invested much of her time in organizing this exhibition.

### **the alchemy of assemblage and absurd associations**

And the alchemy between these two exhibitions? The titles provide one link.

The community name Assemblage was drawn from the art-making technique which consists of placing together different fragments of found images/objects in such a way as to create a new form, thereby shifting the individual meaning of each original element due to its new set of visual relationships. One could liken this to the artists at Assemblage: that once all placed together in this different context, forming new relationships, their own sense of meaning or perspective shifts.

Emma formed the title of her exhibition by selecting parts of both of her artists' titles and placing these fragments of text in juxtaposition to create yet new meaning. The two individual works speak of fragmentation: Hanne-Lize's more overtly with her surreal juxtapositions of images; and Christel's more subtly by the way she superimposes sound, text, and media imagery over her video's protagonists.

But a further link is the hard work and commitment these three curators show towards their artists: a special form of soul-making.

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*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

Margaret Mead

SOURCES (accessed between 14 April and 06 May 2014)

(in order of quotes)

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