

in conversation

This email interview was held between Emma Willemse and Mandy Conidaris in April 2014 following several telephonic conversations.

MC - Emma, thank you so much for agreeing to curate an exhibition for outoftheCUBE. As one of our team members, you know that part of outoftheCUBE's vision is to provide a platform for early-career artists, and as an art educator you have long been involved with such artists. Included in your career as an educator, for 6 years you have been the Cape Town-based lecturer for the UNISA Visual Arts Department. The two artists you have selected as participants in this exhibition are final year BVA (Bachelor of Visual Arts) students.

This curated exhibition represents the 'intimate' aspect of the current outoftheCUBE curatorial statement, and features the works of two young multimedia/video artists. In addition, they are your students. By definition, you have worked intimately with them in terms of their conceptualization processes and the development of their visual imagery. In what way(s) did this insight into their thinking help you to identify the links between their works for exhibiting purposes?

EW - The two works on the *Torrent in a sandpit* exhibition were executed in 2013 as part of the year-end exhibition of the third level BVA studies for both of the artists. However, I have been working with Christel and Hanne-Lizé since their first year studies and have been keen to see their development as artists.

I am always humbled by the experience of working with students and am continuously aware of the need to listen, to not impose and infer, but rather to facilitate the natural flow of creativity of each individual. In the beginning of 2013, it became evident that both Hanne-Lizé and Christel are grappling with concepts and ideas around the construction of meaning, although from different angles. During our monthly contact sessions, workshops and crits, the students' ideas are sound-boarded intensely, which gives me the privilege of gaining insight in each person's background, life experiences, and ways of thinking and doing.

Although the initial spark for identifying the links between the works was the overlapping in the conceptual interest, Hanne-Lizé and Christel are both very much their own person and my insight into their thinking was accompanied by a curiosity at how these unique qualities will play out in the eventual end products.

MC - Once identified, how did this insight into their works affect your curatorial choices/process?

EW - Due to the many differences in Christel and Hanne-Lizé's angles and approaches to the concept, and the different conceptualizing and art-making methodologies and processes

(for instance, Christel's process seems to be fed by rigorous academic research, while Hanne-Lizé's creative process seems to be fed by obsessive making), my curatorial process was marked by asking questions about how an overlapping conceptual interest could render some kind of similarity in spite of the differences.

The construction of meaning is a universal human endeavor. How will this age-old quest be dealt with in a contemporary way, by such diverse artists? Is there a set of formal devices that is best suited for this type of concept?

It was extremely interesting to me to observe how the eventual artworks delivered certain formal parallels, such as alluding to the notion of absurdity through collage and montage techniques, or employing fragmentation, distortion or juxtaposition of images. My curatorial process was a navigation of the tension between similarities and differences, highlighting two possible ways of dealing with the notion of meaning construction.

MC - The surreal nature of the title of your curated exhibition – *A torrent in the sandpit* - raises questions about its meaning, which in turn reflects the concerns of these two artists, namely the construction or destruction of meaning in contemporary society. What is your own interest in the notion of absurdity, or in meaning-making within an overwhelming society?

EW - When selecting the title, an image of a chaotic scene of sand blowing in all directions due to a violent storm popped up in my head – and the thought that this event has the power to blur and distort all imagery.

The title *A torrent in the sandpit* is a combination of the titles of the two artists' works, and it also alludes subtly to some kind of underlying disaster, some kind of trauma in a specific place, namely the sandpit. The sandpit is usually a place where children play and build imaginary worlds. So, in a way the title suggests the link between the disaster and the imaginary place of *making*. How do we make meaning of absurd events?

This is a question that we are all confronted with on a daily basis. By only reading the daily headlines in the newspaper we have no option than to agree that the truth is often times more absurd than fiction.

I believe that art-making is one of the ways to navigate meaning-making, but that it will not provide precise conclusive answers. Rather the process could alleviate some kind anxiety by making friends with the inevitability of absurdity. It is then that a wonderful wicked sense of humour kicks in, as in the work of Hanné-Lize.

MC - The artists both use stop-frame animation. Would you say that this technique is well suited for a visual exploration of ideas around absurdity, and in particular for the individual concepts of these two artists?

EW - As a technique that employs time as an element, stop-frame has the possibility to construct a narrative, a progression of events which does not necessarily have to make any sense and plays into the notion of absurdity. In addition, stop-frame lends itself ideally to the cut-and-paste techniques that both artists use, although in different ways. These collage and montage techniques can easily be translated into absurd imagery because the possibilities of strange combinations are endless.

MC - Another aspect of intimacy in terms of this exhibition is that it features only two artists. Do you feel that this decision on your part encourages the viewer to engage more deeply with the work of each than in a larger group show?

EW - By selecting only two artists dealing with aspects of the same idea, the viewer can consider two diverse ways of making. The artists are in contrast with each other, yet they also have overlapping concerns. This strategy is geared towards considering each artist's work in-depth and weighing up the unique aspects of each work.

MC - A frequent criticism of curated shows is that the artworks are used as objects to illustrate the curator's vision. Would you say that your decisions have served to highlight the artists and their work, and draw attention away from your profile as curator, thereby challenging this criticism?

EW - I sincerely hope that my decision to include only two artists does exactly that. Hanne-Lizé and Christel are both highly talented individuals with exciting careers ahead of them. Their works are dealing with age-old issues in a contemporary, challenging and fresh way – watch their space!

MC - Expanding on the previous question, how has your work as an educator influenced your role here as curator? Or in other words, how does your role as an educator - that is, that your concern is for the students and their work rather than underscoring the part you play in its production - reflect your role here as curator?

EW - My role as educator is to facilitate development, not to control or to impose. Part of this process is to allow each individual's creative process to enfold in its own way. In addition, the highlighting of their incredible talent through this exhibition will hopefully speed up the process of taking their rightful places as professional artists in the art world.

MC - Finally, there has been much discussion around categorization of the curatorial role. You are a practicing artist who creates two-dimensional works with a strong narrative, or suspended sculptures. These works require substantial input from you during the installation process, so at one level you could be called an artist-curator. At the same time, in your role as educator, you assist students in the installation of their own work, looking for ways to help them enhance the work's meaning by creating the correct

context. In this way you could be called a curator-artist. In our curators' comment, we quoted Polish artist Paulina Olowska – could you respond to her statement given below?

To me, it doesn't matter who's who – if an artist is an artist, if a curator is a curator, if a curator is an artist, or the other way round – this is an old and very constraining narrative. I opt for a new narrative, one that sees such categories loosely. It is my experience that the most rewarding practice is one that involves collaboration switching traditionally ascribed roles in order to navigate exhibition territory seamlessly, and charting the borders that are reached in the process of development. I hope that this is the future of art and exhibition-making.

EW - In the art world there are many hats to wear and they all are exciting accessories to our core pursuit: to play a role in making!

Thank you Emma!