

in conversation

***This email interview was held between Noeleen Kleve and Mandy Conidaris in February 2013.***

**MC \_ Why did *Dialoguing Dialect* come into existence? What were the ideas or concerns that prompted you to embark on this creative journey?**

**NK** - This particular creative journey began with my informal role as art educator in the community of Ocean View. The opportunity to work together with a group of 'at-risk' youths from a neighbouring community during a series of 'Expression Session' classes I was facilitating, allowed for conversational interaction and dialogue. A desire to be involved in cross-cultural community interaction, something that necessitated translation and transformation, fueled my progress. Moreover, my inherent sense of the *Self* (myself) as privileged and the *Other* (previously disadvantaged) as needing support – a perception that was duly subverted as the comprehension of myself as the *Other* was realized.

**MC - Do you remember any specific trigger?**

**NK** - During the Expression Sessions we would have easy discussions and conversations – mostly in English, which is my home language, and some Afrikaans, which I understand but don't speak too well. However, after the classes we would all get into my Combi and I would drive the group back to their homes in Ocean View. It was during this short journey, that these guys would revert to conversing in their community slang. I was suddenly excluded from the interaction and felt like an outsider. Like the *Other*. After a few of these trips I began asking them to teach me a few words from their dialect. It was at this point that I saw the potential for expressing what I see as a need for cross-cultural conversation and understanding often prevented by prejudice and preconceived *misunderstanding*. By positioning myself as the *Other*, this became possible.

**MC - Did you have any creative influences, such as the concepts or techniques of other artists?**

**NK** - The South African artist Willem Boshoff, whose work I have always admired, works primarily with language and text. His *Blind Alphabet* encompasses a similar theme. It comprises an installation of boxes concealing carved objects taken from a "subset of English terms" (Vladvasic). There are explanations written on the top of the boxes, describing what is inside and giving the dictionary definition of the objects' names. These explanations, are, however, written in Braille – and so automatically empower the blind person, thereby subverting the notion of the blind as marginalized or the *Other* and the sighted as central *Self*.

In my installation *Relate/Translate* I also make use of a cube or box form manifested in alphabet blocks of varying sizes. However, where Boshoff uses Braille, the information

'written' on these blocks is in the form of graffiti. Similarly, this can be seen as a language or text of the *Other*.

Like Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet*, my work necessitates co-operative interpretation.

**MC - What role did your technical process play in your image creation?**

**NK** - In creating the giant alphabet blocks, my choice of technique was woodblock cutting, which I taught to Ricardo Monk and Justin Boois – two young adults from the Ocean View group. This set up a type of dialogue between *Centre* and *Periphery*: while I taught them this visual language, they taught me their verbal language. The labour-intensive mark-making process of excavating the letters out of wood alludes to my struggle to decode and understand this vernacular language.

**MC - How did your conceptual process inform the specifics of your image creation?**

**NK** - In striving to comprehend the slang of the young adults with whom I was interacting, I saw a connection between their spoken language and the written texts of graffiti. Graffiti can also be considered a form of 'hidden' or coded language and is to be found in their local area. The graffiti text therefore, became a symbol of the slang and references the site of this particular vernacular language.

**MC - Is there a particular metaphor underlying your choice of imagery?**

**NK** - The primary metaphor I have used is the alphabet block, which for me relates to the building blocks of language. In order to make meaningful connections and relate to one another across the language barrier, this metaphor alludes to building relationships through language, one block at a time. The images I have selected for this exhibition focus primarily on text – both negative and positive forms; cropped sections of the whole, emphasizing and centering attention on interaction through words and inviting co-operative interpretation.

**MC - Do you remember why that visual metaphor developed?**

**NK** - As a child I played with lettered blocks to learn the alphabet. Building blocks evoke positive notions of progress and making links. In my work, this concept was expressed in the printing of words, letter by letter, from the slang I had learned. These were printed from the woodblock images that Ricardo, Justin and I had carved. In this way, we made new connections through language and process. In taking this further, a recording of one of our conversations was made of my attempts to understand the meaning of these words. I transcribed this conversation and translated it into laser-cut sentences which appear as intertextual imagery in the woodcut prints.

**MC - How did your choices of image selection develop for *Misconstruction*?**

**NK** - The images I selected for this exhibition reflect a more intimate awareness of the text, this language and the need for decoding and interpretation. The imagery of randomly strewn laser-cut letters, or 'fallout', refers to that which is misconstrued before a level of

understanding is reached and a connection is made; as alluded to in the title of the etching, *Misconstruction*. This title also evokes the metaphor of the alphabet block as a building construct.

**MC - Do you feel that the work expresses your intentions?**

**NK** - My intention with this work is to inspire co-operative interpretation through a visual dialogue between viewer and artwork and hopefully trigger thought and action through new dialogues between other Centre/Peripheral connections. To this end, yes, I do feel that the work expresses my intentions.

**MC - And afterwards?**

**NK** - From a personal perspective, this body of work opened up new interactions in many ways. Woodcutting and etching are both printmaking processes. Printmaking is historically a social medium and the process revealed this on many levels in the making. The research process, interviews, conversations and actual woodblock cutting process all involved interactions which led to the discovery of unexpected and new considerations. The design, construction and installation of the alphabet blocks in *Relate/Translate* was challenging. It demanded decoding, tolerance and ultimately, a new understanding which manifested in a visual conversation between the self and other. And, in so doing, went a long way to expressing my aims.

The significance of the work to the viewer is of as much importance to me as was the making of this work. My hope is that my aspirations to form new interactions and to build connections will prompt a response from the viewer. In focusing in on the textual imagery, I aim to emphasise this issue and explore the potential for the 'retransmission' or reconnection of communication so often disrupted through misinterpretation.

**Thank you, Noeleen!**