

A torrent in the sandpit

Curator statement

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“We all live inside the terrible engine of authority, and it grinds and shrieks and burns so that no one will say: lines on maps are silly.”

— Catherynne M. Valente, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*

The two artists displaying their animated films in the online exhibition collectively titled *A torrent in the sandpit*, are both grappling with notions of how meaning is constructed in our society, raising questions about the role of systems and structures that steer our meaning-making pursuit. How do we navigate a path where the tension between a quest for meaning and an inherent meaningless world is a daily obstacle?

At first glance, Christel Liebenberg’s animated video *Torrent* (2013) shows an everyday domestic scene: a daily routine in an ordinary kitchen, a couple drinking their morning coffee. Except, instead of drinking coffee, the bodies are consuming a bombardment of broadcasted events, filling up with a montage of typical news footage.

With this video Christel is making visible how we engage with excessive, low quality information in our everyday existence. It spills over us like a fluid, indecipherable and not really making sense. We pick up disjointed snippets, but the in-depth meaning is lost. It does not affect us or change our behaviour; in the end each person puts the coffee mug down as usual, turns away and departs to start the tasks of the day.

Hanne-Lize Delport’s series of five short animations called *Artefacts from the Sandpit and Other Lice* (2013) was sparked off by a collective response to bewildering experiences in her own life, such as being sued by an insurance company years after a motor car accident, and knowingly that she cannot afford to pay the amount. Employing humour and satire, she subverts these experiences in absurd narratives where fish fall from the sky and a zebra moves on wheels. Hanne-Lize’s playful scenes are constructed from found print images, creating collages of hybridical characters.

As a two-person exhibition, these artists highlight two different aspects of the same issue. Whereas Christel suggests the loss of meaning through excessive, low quality information, Hanne-Lize questions how meaning is constructed through systems in society. Both artists allude to a sense of absurdity.

The notion of absurdity in artworks as a response to the seemingly meaninglessness of life is known from as early as the farcical scenes depicted by the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450 - August 9, 1516) in paintings such as *The Garden of earthly delights* (1504), and continues in the 20th Century art movements of Dada and Surrealism. Like Dada and Surrealist artists, contemporary artists and visual culture use distorted, fragmented and hybridical images that defy rational understanding and comment on the perceived absurdity of current events and systems. The work of the fashion designer Alexander McQueen (1969 – 2010), and the artists Eva Kotatkova and William Kentridge are good examples of this notion.

In Albert Camus' essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), " ... absurdity is best captured in an image, not an argument: of Sisyphus straining to push his rock up the mountain, watching it roll down, then descending after the rock to begin all over, in an endless cycle. Like Sisyphus, humans cannot help but continue to ask after the meaning of life, only to see our answers tumble back down."

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/>

The two artists in the *Torrent in the sandpit* exhibition use several conventions to suggest the notion of absurdity. Christel and Hanne-Lize are constructing imagery through collage or montage techniques either digitally (as in the case of Christel) or hand crafted and then taken into a digital animation (as in the case of Hanne-Lize) to enable devices such as distortion, fragmentation, hybridity or subliminal visual associations which enhance strangeness. These techniques and their visual results serve as metaphors for the disruption of meaning in the videos of both artists.

In Christel's *Torrent*, the bodies of the two coffee drinkers become fragmented by their transparent nature, blending with the news footage and their environment. They lose all sense of self and of a unique identity. The endlessness of the cycle is suggested in the action of the two figures: tomorrow they will drink their morning coffee again, as usual, and again they will be filled up with meaningless imagery.

Whereas Christel's video forms a complete narrative on its own, Hanne-Lize's series of short animations postulates a disjointed, interrupted narrative, much in the same way that she has interrupted imagery of animal and human bodies with her cut and paste collage technique. The action of Sisyphus' endless attempt to push a rock up the mountain is evoked by Hanne-Lize's recurring theme of a cockroach, driving the wheels of a war tank through his incessant running.

The viewer of Christel's *Torrent* and Hanne-Lize's *Artefacts from the Sandpit and Other Lice* is invited to engage with the imagery on a level beyond reason, and

instead allow him/herself to be lured into a bizarre sequence of events that is sometimes delightfully funny and playful, yet speaking of the grand narratives of life.

The intention of the juxtaposition of the two artists in the exhibition *Torrent in the Sandpit* is to suggest two different ways that visual imagery could navigate the absurdity of contemporary meaning-making pursuits. The exhibition also comments on the reciprocal relationship between visual imagery and our quest for meaning in life.

“If the world were clear, art would not exist”

Albert Camus