Slippages in meaning: The influence of context in scripto/visual communication

by

Karin Elizabeth Basel

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Supervisor David Paton

Co- Supervisor Karen Von Veh

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I hereby declare that the dissertation, which I herewith submit for the research qualification
Master of Technology: Fine Art
to the University of Johannesburg is, apart from the recognised assistance, my own work and
has not been previously submitted by me to another institution to obtain a research diploma or
degree.

Karin Basel  ___________________
Date          ____________________

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This study is dedicated to my partner, Greg, and my parents, Barbara and Detlef, for their support.
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ABSTRACT

My research investigates the relationship between context and the interpretation of signs within ‘scripto/visual’ communication processes. I focus on the belief that no interpretation is context free. I have experienced that context is not consistent as it is based on the cultural, social and personal backgrounds of each individual. As there is always a context that serves to anchor the sign to our experiences, we construct a specific meaning when we interpret a sign. This specific meaning is, however, not necessarily the one originally intended by the sender. Central to my project is the argument that the choices made which affect the interpretation of signs when encoding and decoding them are influenced by the context of both the sender and the receiver, as well as the specific context within which the exchange takes place. I have chosen, amongst many other modes of sign interpretation, the operational processes of similarity and association. I investigate why both of these processes, in relation to the unfixed nature of context, are problematic and result in miscommunication. I have chosen to include discussions on specific artworks by two South African artists: Joni Brenner and Willem Boshoff as I feel that both artists make work in response to the fact that interpretation does not produce a ‘fixed truth’.

KEY WORDS
Scripto/visual, communication, interpretation, context, similarity, association, Willem Boshoff, Joni Brenner
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT &amp; KEY WORDS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: TOWARDS INTERPRETATION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: JONI BRENNER’S PORTRAITURE: A LIBERATION FROM CONVENTIONS</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sense - Sensing though other ways</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connotative Association within the 'Open Text'</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs of Meaning: Symbolic and Indexical Signs</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: WILLEM BOSHOFF: LIBERATION THROUGH IGNORANCE</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions, Codes and Context</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Words</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Lost</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: JOINING DOTS: A DISCUSSION OF MY PRACTICAL OUTPUT</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity and Association</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX 1</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Where appropriate dimensions are given in width, height, and depth, in cm.

PAGE

Figure 1: 18
Top - Shirley Huges. **Untitled.** 1982. pen and ink, 6 x 9.
(Huges 1982:21).

Centre - Anne Cumbers. **Untitled.** n.d. photograph, 8.5 x 5.
(Pond 1979:plate 7).

Bottom - Shirley Huges. **Untitled.** 1982. pen and ink, 4 x 3.
(Huges 1982:16).

Figure 2: 19
John Constable. **The Haywain.** 1821. oil on canvas,
177.50 x 182.50. National Gallery London. (Gardener 1980:752).

Figure 3: 20
Pieter Claesz. **Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring and Bread.**
1642. oil on panel, 30 x 35.8. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts
Boston. (Sturken and Cartwright 2002:14).

Figure 4: 35
Joni Brenner. **A Portrait of Wilson Mootane.** 1995-6. oil on canvas,

Figure 5: 36
oil and spray-paint on canvas, 25 x 30.
Collection of Darryl Katzenstein. (reproduction supplied by the artist).

Figure 6: 36
coloured plaster of paris, oil paint and ink, 30 x 35 x 5.
Collection of the artist. (reproduction supplied by the artist).

Figure 7: 37
Joni Brenner. **Mark.** 2002. enamel paint on plaster on enamel-painted

Figure 8: 38
Joni Brenner. **Souvenir.** 2002. plaster and copper spray-paint on
enamel spray-painted shelf, 41 x 45 x 40. Collection of the artist.

Figure 10: Joni Brenner. Posts. 2001-2. oil paint on wood, on enamel-painted posts with glass, 28.5 x 160 x 11 each. USA, private collection. (Infra-red 2002:9).


Figure 15: Willem Boshoff. Kring van Kennis. (detail). 2000. granite. Grounds of the University of Johannesburg.

Figure 16: Willem Boshoff. Kring van Kennis. (detail). 2000. granite. Grounds of the University of Johannesburg.

Figure 17: Willem Boshoff. Kring van Kennis. (detail). 2000. granite. Grounds of the University of Johannesburg.

Figure 18: Willem Boshoff. Kring van Kennis. (detail). 2000. granite. Grounds of the University of Johannesburg.

Figure 19: Aggregated settlement (possibly pre-Tswana) Vlakfontein, Gauteng. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:35).


Figure 22: Willem Boshoff. *SDROW FO NWODKAERB*. 2004. old tools, paper, 8 panels, each 60 x 90. (Nonplussed 2004:n.p.).

Figure 23: Willem Boshoff. *SDROW FO NWODKAERB*. 2004. old tools, paper, 8 panels, each 60 x 90. (Nonplussed 2004:n.p.).

Figure 24: Willem Boshoff. *Bread and Pebble Road Map*. 2004. stones, bread rolls, wood, sand, paint, glass, 40 panels – 40 x 100 x 7. (Nonplussed 2004:n.p.).

Figure 25: Willem Boshoff. *Bread and Pebble Road Map* (detail). 2004. stones, bread rolls, wood, sand, paint, glass, 40 panels – 40 x 100 x 7. (Nonplussed 2004:n.p.).

Figure 26: Karin Basel. *Untitled*. 2003. paper, 150 x 220 each. Collection of the artist.

Figure 27: Karin Basel. Installation of Light boxes and Untitled Works. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 150 x 150 in total. Collection of the artist.

Figure 28: René Magritte. *The Treachery of Images*. 1929. oil on canvas, 62.2 x 81. Los Angeles, County Museum. (Meuris 1993:120).

Figure 29: René Magritte. *The Key to Dreams*. 1930. oil on canvas, 81 x 60. Paris, private collection. (Meuris 1993:129).

Figure 30: Karin Basel. *Untitled*. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45. Collection of the artist.

Figure 31: Karin Basel. *Untitled*. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45.
Figure 32: Karin Basel. Untitled. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 33: Karin Basel. Untitled. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 34: Karin Basel. Untitled. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 35: Karin Basel. Untitled. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 36: Karin Basel. Untitled. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 37: Karin Basel. Untitled. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 38: Karin Basel. Untitled. 2003. wood, glass, paper, 45 x 45.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 39: Karin Basel. Untitled 1/6. 2003. paper, 150 x 220.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 40: Karin Basel. Untitled 2/6. 2003. paper, 150 x 220.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 41: Karin Basel. Untitled 3/6. 2003. paper, 150 x 220.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 42: Karin Basel. Untitled 4/6. 2003. paper, 150 x 220.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 43: Karin Basel. Untitled 5/6. 2003. paper, 150 x 220.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 45: René Magritte. The Key to Dreams. (detail). 1930. oil on canvas, 81 x 60. Paris, private collection. (Meuris 1993:129).


Figure 51: Karin Basel. Memory 1. 2004. suitcase, wax, white pva, found objects, 500 x 250 x 200. Collection of the artist.

Figure 52: Karin Basel. Memory 1. (detail). 2004. suitcase, wax, white pva, found objects, 500 x 250 x 200. Collection of the artist.

Figure 53: Karin Basel. Memory 2. 2004. suitcase, white pva, found objects. 440 x 270 x 450. Collection of the artist.

Figure 54: Karin Basel. Memory 2. (detail). 2004. suitcase, white pva, found objects. 440 x 270 x 450. Collection of the artist.

Figure 56:  

Figure 57:  

Figure 58:  

Figure 59:  

Figure 60:  
INTRODUCTION

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things”. (Lewis Carroll 1982:184).

The area with which I am concerned, in both my theoretical research and practical output, is why and how slippages of meaning occur within both linguistic and visual communication processes. This interest has developed out of a realisation that, when people talk to one another, they do not always share a common meaning. We make assumptions when communicating with one another, and become frustrated when we do not receive the response that we expect. My concern with miscommunication has arisen from my experiences of teaching within a multicultural environment as I have found that lecturers and students do not always interpret information in the same way, thus inhibiting the education process. As a lecturer involved in visual communication, I have also noted that we do not read images in the same way.

My interest in semiotics and post structuralism began eight years ago when I was completing my Bachelor of Arts degree, during which I studied literary theory. I found similarities between reading objects in the theatre and interpreting objects in artworks. While signs in the theatre are used to establish the context within which a scene takes place, objects and formal elements provide the context for an artwork’s meaning. These signs are only able to do this if the audience/viewer makes the right type of associations, i.e. s/he recognises a table as being a specific type of table such as a kitchen table, thus establishing the context within which certain actions will take place.

I am currently teaching a visual literacy course and I experience a wide discrepancy between my own and my students’ interpretation of both linguistic and visual signs. I believe that the reason for this is based on the differences between my background and experiences and those of my students. This belief motivates both my theoretical research and my practical work.
My research is limited to an investigation of the relationship between context and the operation of two processes; association and similarity, which I believe human beings use when interpreting signs. The investigation of this relationship is a connecting thread throughout my research. Both this dissertation and my practical work are positioned within post modern and post structuralist discourses in relation to the interpretation of signs. Semiotic theory underpins my research despite originally being developed for the interpretation of linguistic signs rather than visual signs. There is a debate concerning the accuracy of interpreting visual images using a system developed by literary theorists as it is not always possible to find direct equivalents for words, sentences or phrases within visual images. There are, however, systems that govern the interpretation of visual images and we do have rules which help us to interpret images. My investigation centres on how these rules have been constructed and is supported by W.J.T. Mitchell’s (1987:65) analysis of Nelson Goodman’s discussion of images and texts in which Mitchell states that “[p]ictures like paragraphs have to be read as an arbitrary code”.

Although a text is read in a linear form from the top of a page to the end of a page while an artwork is looked at non linearly, both forms of communication require a link between parts (in a sentence or particular motifs) that have to be read or viewed in relation to one another in order to comprehend a complete concept. Neither a sentence in a text nor a motif in an artwork exists in isolation. Rather the viewer/reader interprets the whole, through their understanding of individual elements. Mieke Bal (1996:32) contends that

...every act of looking is – not only, not exclusively, but always also - a reading, simply because without the processing of signs into syntactic chains that resonate against the backdrop of a frame of references an image cannot yield meaning.

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2Images and objects in an artwork may be seen in terms of their message, which is read by looking at specific objects in the artwork and the placement of these particular objects. Thus either a specific object or the complete work can operate as a sign. Meaning is often constructed as there are certain conventions which are continually used in artworks; such as symbolic colour e.g. dark colours to indicate sadness or objects acting as symbols e.g. a dog standing for fidelity. These conventions also vary according to culture and time.
In order to grapple with Bal’s contention I have divided this dissertation into four chapters. I discuss theories of interpretation and the role of context in Chapter One. This broad discussion helps me explore the process of interpretation of visual or linguistic signs as scripto/visual artefacts\(^3\) through the operational elements of similarity and association in relation to context\(^4\). In my research I refer to theories developed by Roland Barthes and Jaques Derrida in order to support my investigation of the role of context in the communication process and to underpin my analysis of artworks in the subsequent chapters. The post structuralist relationship between a text and its many readers, first explored by Barthes, is relevant to my discussion on the construction of codes and conventions within interpretation, while my investigation into the fact that it is possible for an individual to construct multiple interpretations of the same event or object, is grounded in Derrida’s argument that there is no such thing as a single fixed context. In my analysis of the operational element, similarity, I make use of Goodman’s discussion on the problems of applying similarity. As my research is positioned within both semiotics and post structuralism, the writings of Jonathan Culler provide a broad overview of semiotic theory and position the main theorists I consult. Finally, as my work is based within visual theory, the writings of Bal and Norman Bryson prove useful as they develop links between literary theory and the interpretation of visual images.

By the end of Chapter One I will have positioned the unstable nature of ‘context’, exploring how this instability impacts on the use of association and similarity during the interpretation process. I wish to show that the application of similarity and association are problematic as they may lead to multiple interpretations.

In Chapter Two my investigation of the production of specific works by South African artist Joni Brenner is grounded in the analysis of context, similarity and

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\(^3\)By this I am referring to texts which have been written or spoken, and visual images. The word ‘scripto’ operates in relation to three different aspects: firstly as part of image/text relationships generally; secondly as images read in relation to titles and texts which implicate themselves in the meaning of the visual work, and finally it refers to visual elements in artworks or the artwork itself which consist of text, script and words as images.

\(^4\)In my research I consider context to be comprised of the physical place in which communication takes place, the specific fixed identity of people communicating i.e. their gender, race, age etc as well as the background/prior experience all of the communicators.
association discussed in Chapter One. The relationship between Brenner’s portraits and her ideas on the construction of codes and conventions is explored in order to show how Brenner’s rejection of any similarity between an image and her model renders iconicity problematic. I focus specifically on her rejection of the notion of ‘a copy’ when creating a portrait, in favour of connotative signs that operate through association. I also investigate how these connotative signs lead to possible multiple interpretations but, more specifically, how they may act as traces which lead the viewer back to the notion of a human being which, thus, render her works portraits. Brenner chooses to make use of indexical and symbolic signs because connotative associations with the model are better suited to both the creation and the interpretation of her work. This is done by analysing Brenner’s mode of interpreting her sitter through the construction of her artworks.

In Chapter Three selected works of South African artist Willem Boshoff are analysed in order to show that he is acutely aware of the role of context in the interpretation process. Boshoff intentionally manipulates the codes and conventions required for the interpretation of his artworks, thus subverting the viewer’s attempts at reading meaning into his artworks. I explain how Boshoff manipulates and juxtaposes dense symbolic signs in order to problematise and undermine the manner in which conventions are constructed into dogmatic ‘fixed truths’. I argue that these works are intended to show that any finite meaning leads to dogma while an ‘unfixed’ interpretation encourages self-reflection and development.

In Chapter Four I discuss my own work in relation to the analysis of context, similarity and association presented in Chapter One and to the working modes and strategies of the two South African artists discussed in the previous chapters. My art making focuses on creating identifiable links with my theoretical investigations and is thus a very determined process. My artworks are an attempt to find ways of presenting intangible concepts through visual metaphors because I desire to make visible the transitory nature of thoughts. The works are, thus, an attempt to provide visual equivalences of what I believe takes place in our minds when we engage in the construction of meaning.
I have divided Chapter Four into two sections: the first focuses on works arising from my exploration of the uses of similarity and association when interpreting a sign the second concentrates on how memory may operate as a context for interpretation. In order to support the discussion on how memory may operate, I cite the works of Paul Crowther, John Story and Stanley Pinker who provide a theoretical grounding for my representation of memory. I work, however, within a paradox because, while each artwork is determined by the theoretical concepts which I attempt to ‘illustrate’, I am aware that I have no control over the viewer’s interpretation of the work, thus ‘slippages of meaning’ will still occur.

I believe that it is important for communicators to realise that we do not interpret signs in the same way and thus during the communication process we need to make adjustments in order for a common understanding to be achieved. These adjustments are based on an awareness that we do not all share common backgrounds and experiences. Through this dissertation I will attempt to show how our diverse contexts impact on our interpretation of signs.
CHAPTER ONE
TOWARDS INTERPRETATION

What a theory of the sign establishes first and foremost is that a sign points to a meaning outside itself and this meaning is inferred by the viewer or reader on the basis of her or his previous experience of decoding signs. (Alex Potts 1996:18).

Alex Potts’ statement introduces the notion that the meaning of the sign is not based upon a fixed set of rules but rather on an individual or group experience. In this chapter I investigate the relationship between these ‘experiences’ and the application of similarity (and difference) and association in the interpretation process. I show that, although these two processes are conventionally deployed in order for interpretation to begin, they are, by their very nature, problematic. I also investigate how the nature of context itself does not allow for a singular finite interpretation of any sign. This chapter thus provides an analysis of two strategies which are employed to generate meaning in linguistic and visual signs.

We are surrounded by signs which we are continually interpreting in order to make meaning of the world in which we live. These signs can be written, spoken or visual. According to Charles Sanders Pierce (cited in Culler 1981:28) “it is not that we have objects on the one hand and thoughts or meaning on the other, it is rather that we have signs everywhere ‘some more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular’.”

Although there are many different types of signs, my main area of focus in this chapter is on visual images and how they operate as signs. My interest in visual images as a form of communication is based on my experience that, in today’s society of mass media, i.e. television, the internet, newspapers and magazines, visual images are pivotal to the way we make meaning, communicate, structure our identity and form our understanding of the world around us. As a visual arts lecturer and a visual artist I, like Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2002:42), believe that: “interpreting images is one way that we as viewers contribute to the process of assigning value to the culture in which we live.”
Through an investigation of the relationship between individual and social conventions used when interpreting signs, the problematic nature of similarity and association in relation to the unfixed nature of context will be explored as a post-structuralist position.

Communication theorists such as G. Fauconnier (1981:32) explain that communication involves a sender, a message and a receiver, and the message is presented in the form of either spoken or written words, sounds or visual images. These words or images are signs and, according to J.J. Roelofse (1987:28), “[m]eaning cannot be conveyed between a communicator and his destination without the mediation of the sign, because we cannot experience the inner life of others.” To this Tim O’Sullivan et al (1989:214) add that “[a] sign has three essential characteristics. It must have a physical form, it must refer to something other than itself, and it must be used and recognized by people as a sign.”

Signs are part of the communication system and therefore are not natural but constructed. Ferdinand de Saussure (cited in Sturken & Cartwright 2002:28) explains that “language is like a game of chess: it depends on conventions and codes for its meaning.” Saussure’s conception of the meaning of a sign is reliant on context, as the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified is conventional and is, thus, a learnt set of rules within a specific culture or group. When making use of difference in order to find meaning, an interpreter must make use of prior knowledge, to group similar signifieds and similar signifiers and then

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1By language, I am referring to all types of language: written, oral and visual. Saussure considers language as being made up of signs (signifiers) and their meaning (signifieds). A signifier is “a conventional arbitrary image, usually acoustic or visual” and a signified is “the concept or meaning attached to the image” (Van Zyl 1996:68). Saussure deduced that:

a) the relationship between signifier and signified is usually arbitrary. For example: when we hear or read the word ‘cat’ we link it to an image we have of a cat but the letters c a t (signifier) have nothing to do with the qualities of a cat (signified) in the real world. The link between the word (written or spoken) and an actual cat is purely a social convention which is taught to anyone learning the English language. In a similar manner, the visual sign θ is a signifier and stands for the signified ‘no entry’ but the relationship between the two is arbitrary as there is no direct or specific link between signifier and signified. This sign has been constructed, and is understood, only because of the conventions within the culture in which the sign operates.

b) meaning is a result of difference. For example: a signifier such as the word ‘cat’ is recognised by its difference from the words ‘hat’ or ‘cap’ while the signified ‘cat’ is recognised as a cat because it is different from a dog or a rat.
look for their differences. Iconic, Indexical and Symbolic signs\(^2\) were introduced by Pierce (in Eagleton1983:101) in relation to contexts where prior knowledge is necessary in order to establish their meanings. As my intention is to map a trajectory between the imagery and the interpretation of that imagery in the notoriously slippery terrain of both Brenner’s and Boshoff’s work, I will be forging a set of links between the iconic sign and the denotation of similarity; between the indexical sign and connotated associations; and between the symbolic sign and the conventions of context.

As meaning is created through actions, events and even objects which “…have agreed upon conventional associations or meanings rather than ‘automatic’ physical consequences” (Van Zyl 1996:67) there are underlying systems and structures for all sign types. The conventions operate by using learnt rules, identifying differences, grouping concepts or objects though similarity or opposites and, finally, finding associations between what is seen and what is known. In order for a single shared meaning to exist, interpretation has to take place within a static system. In this system both the sender and receiver will share a common set of conventions as well as have access to the common knowledge. As social and conventional systems are anything but static, identifying the same similarities, opposites and associations is not a universal given. Multiple possibilities for the interpretation of signs therefore result as “meaning resides not in the initial perception of the sign but in the interpretation of the perception and subsequent action based on the perception.” (Pierce cited in Sturken & Cartwright 2002:28).

The diagram on the following page illustrates how one interprets signs in relation to one’s context though the use of similarity and association\(^3\).

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\(^2\)Iconic Signs: where the signifier in some way looks similar to what it stands for, as with a picture of an object, for example a photograph used in an identity document to represent the owner. Indexical Signs: where the signifier is related to what it stands for by association, as with smoke for fire or the trace left by a brush mark. Symbolic Signs: where the link between the signifier and signified is purely conventional: C a t put together is read as cat, while the colour red may stand for anger.

\(^3\)The aim of this diagram is to show how similarity and association are used to connect what an individual knows about the new sign which they are interpreting. As has been stated, a common meaning for signs is only possible if both sender and receiver are in agreement regarding the conventions within which they work. The relationship between context, similarity and association during the interpretation process is difficult to separate as they do not operate independently.
Similarity

The first process we identify when interpreting a particular sign is the attempt to find similarities and differences between what we already know and the sign we are interpreting. When attempting to interpret a sign we look at it in relation to the properties (schema) of all similar signs that we know. This will enable us to understand how the sign functions as well as its relationship to other objects or concepts, as “[n]o single thing ‘gives off’ meaning of its own accord: it does so only through its relationship to other things” (Ward 1997:81). In both art and linguistics we interpret signs in relationship to other signs because nothing is created or interpreted in isolation.

We choose to group things together by looking for elements that are the same, either in appearance or character. We are able to begin the process of making meaning by categorising images or concepts into similar groups and then identifying qualities in a sign based on similarity and difference⁴. Bal (1998:77) finds it “useful to realize how much of a visual image we can process because we have seen elements, structures, poses, colours, and compositional elements of it before.”

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⁴On the most simplistic level we know, for example, that a leopard is a feline by comparing it with what we know about all felines. In the visual arts we have learnt conventions about artworks such as painting style or types; for example when we look at a paintings of flowers and fruit we compare it to similar painting that we have seen before. We locate the image of flowers and fruit within our prior knowledge and then categorise it as a still life. We can then begin to interpret the still life against the expectations which we have of still lives.
The use of similarity as an interpretive tool must be approached with caution however, as we do not all have the same context for the application of similarity and difference. When looking for similarity in visual signs one often assumes that if one object resembles another, they are similar to one another. This problematic relationship has been highlighted by Goodman (1984(b):87) who questions “[t]he conviction that resemblance is the necessary and sufficient condition for representation”. To illustrate this, he points out that many things resemble each other but are not representations of each other: identical twins, multiple copies of identical coins, multiples of an identical printed image. Goodman (1976:4) explains that,

\[
\text{an object resembles itself to the maximum degree but rarely represents itself; resemblance, unlike representation is reflexive. Again, unlike representation, resemblance is symmetric: } B \text{ as much like } A \text{ as } A \text{ is like } B, \text{ but while a painting may represent the Duke of Wellington, the Duke does not represent the painting.}
\]

Goodman also observes that objects or concepts are judged to be similar if they share a least one quality (1984(b):87)(Fig. 1). The problem with such judgement is that the applied criteria are not universal. Almost any two things can be found to share at least one quality, depending on how one looks at them\(^5\). It is, therefore, impossible to categorise signs uniformly based on similarity and difference alone and, thus, each individual constructs a slightly different interpretation of the same image or text. This is because there are no fixed criteria for finding one thing similar to another. Any criteria applied are based on the context of an individual or a society, resulting in the possibility of almost anything being similar to anything else in at least one aspect.

\(^5\)For example, when looking for similarities between the following three animals: a horse, a cat and an impala, one could choose to focus on which animals are domestic as opposed to wild, or one could choose to focus on which animals have hooves as opposed to paws. The criteria determine which animals are considered to be similar. When comparing different types of images, similarity can be based on either the style of drawing or on the type of image being drawn: the criteria used are constructed from within our personal, cultural and temporal contexts.
Since images struggle to obtain any degree of iconicity\(^6\) to which the real object is comparable (photography makes the most successful attempt), and attempts at finding similarity are bound to denotative factual accounting, similarity provides little headway in interpreting signs.

**Association**

Once we have rapidly exhausted a sign’s similarity to other signs as a means of constructing meaning, we may employ association as being more connotatively sympathetic in order to gain more knowledge about a sign\(^7\). Association, as a process of interpretation, is also not without problems. While association extends meaning and may enrich our understanding of a sign, it may also lead to misunderstanding. For example, a student of mine looked at *The Haywain* by John Constable (1821)(Fig. 2) and decided that it was about the Great Trek\(^8\) because she saw a wagon in the painting. Her worldview and historical knowledge was limited to her specific association with wagons and she could not consider wagons existing outside of this context. Signification through association is based upon the individual’s prior knowledge, constructed within cultural practices and contexts.

Attempts at finding similarity and association when interpreting signs do not involve the same process. In the case of finding similarity we label and categorise signs as denotative. When making use of association we are not making direct links with how a symbol looks or what it is used for, rather we are adding subjective experiences in order to find broader connotative links with the signifier. Sturkend and Cartwright (2002:19) explain that:

\(^6\)Pierce (Eagleton 1983:101) stated that an iconic sign was one where the signifier in some way looks similar to what it stands for, as with a picture of an object.

\(^7\)For example, when someone reads the word ‘Dog’ (s)he may associate the word with their pet dog, or with the cartoon character Snoopy or with a past experience where (s)he was bitten by a dog. Thus the dog the receiver ‘sees’ will be linked to the dogs (s)he has experienced in the past. Through association we bring more understanding and knowledge to a concept or idea. We are able to add all the qualities of other dogs that we have ever known to our knowledge of ‘dogness’.

\(^8\)The migration of thousands of Dutch-speaking farmers mainly from the Eastern Cape, intending to establish their own independent republic outside he borders of the Cape Colony (in the early 19\(^{th}\) century).
The denotative meaning of an image refers to its literal descriptive meaning. The same photograph connotes more culturally specific meanings. Connotative meanings rely on the cultural and historical context of the image and its viewer's lived, felt knowledge of those circumstances – all that the image means to them personally and socially.

The use of association is not as limiting as the use of similarity because it is a connotative process. However, if no limitations are placed on how we make connections between the sign and our context, constructive interpretations will not be possible and meaningful communication will not take place. The implementation of both similarity and association when interpreting a sign is only possible in relation to a context. Thus context is an important determining factor in the interpretation process. Derrida (1979:81) however, reminds us that “[n]o meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation” as context itself keeps changing.

Context

Culler (cited in Bal & Bryson 1991:175) explains that:

*Context is not given but produced; what belongs to context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by events.*

Context includes both external and internal elements. The external elements are the physical place and time in which communication takes place, either between two people or by means of a written text or a visual image⁹. In contrast the internal elements are the sender and receiver’s prior knowledge based on, for example, education, experience and belief systems¹⁰. Crowther (1997:9) explains the nature of context stating that “[n]othing has meaning in itself. An item is meaningful only

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⁹A written text or artwork is made within a particular historical period and is written from a specific belief system however, when it is read, it is interpreted in relation to the current perceptions of the readers’ era/society.

¹⁰A person’s prior knowledge and belief systems are moulded by their age, race, gender, position in society and relationship to one another.
in relation to a context. Such contexts are usually provided by other signs, concepts or items and relations.”

Context forms the locale within which the process of finding similarities and making associations takes place. As context itself is not a fixed entity, miscommunication might occur. There are two factors that cause the nature of context to change. The first is the relationship between the context of the sender and that of the receiver who, in a text or an artwork, are the writer/artist and the readers/viewers. The second is the fluid nature of context itself. Variations in situation, time, knowledge and/or emotions can all result in different interpretations of the same sign. Discrepancies in the contexts of the sender and receiver result in different links\(^\text{11}\) being formed during the processes of encoding and decoding signs. However, as Nerina Jansen and Sheila Steinberg (1991: 53) explain, miscommunication often occurs because

\[\text{we simply assume that ‘the world’ is the same for all of us and that we all act in it according to the same taken-for-granted knowledge. Likewise, we take the existence of others and our communication with them for granted.}\]

Barthes (1988:170) explores how the interpretation of a text could change because of the discrepancies between different readers. He explains that there is no single meaning in a text dictated by the author, but rather multiple possible interpretations created by the reader, stating:

\[\text{We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (170).}\]

Barthes sees any cultural object (text or image) as polysemic, i.e. open to a variety of readings, because it operates within a range of contexts which ‘blend and clash’. These contexts are brought to the text by the reader and not by the author alone. A text/artwork (or a reproduction of an artwork) must stand on its own without the mediation of the writer/artist to direct the thought processes of the reader/viewer. The multiple readings that are possible in any text/artwork are a

\(^{11}\)These links are used when finding similarity between objects or concepts and when making associations between a sign and an individuals prior knowledge.
result of there being infinite possibilities for links (finding similarities and forming associations). Thus, as Sturken and Cartwright (2002: 41-42) point out “[t]o interpret images is to examine the assumptions that we and others bring to them, and to decode the visual language that they ‘speak’.”

The interpretation of the sign requires the receiver to find similarities and associations in order to access meaning. However, as context is unfixed, there are no limitations to the criteria which are used to determine similarities or associations. Once an individual has decided on what a sign means s/he will not necessarily retain that interpretation. As Derrida (cited in Webster 1990:105) suggests, meaning is never, in fact, single or fixed but constantly proliferating and shifting or slipping. He terms this scattering and flickering of meanings which potentially arises from any kind of text dissemination which results in the possibility of multiple meanings for any particular sign. Since our lives are part of a continuum of events, our interpretation of experiences and objects is in a continual state of flux. Our knowledge is thus continually being added to affecting the links we select from our context in relation to the sign we are interpreting. Fauconnier (1981:65) confirms this by stating that: “We are continually interpreting and reinterpreting the stimuli in our environment and due to experience (our own and others) we continually change our behaviour.” According to Derrida (cited in Webster 1990:106), different words are defined by other words which are, in turn, defined by other words so that we can never come to a point of fully realised non-regressive meaning. By continuing to find more and more associations within a sign, our interpretation can be infinite, as we are continually shifting and adding information during the interpretation process, thus the sign can continually be reinterpreted or added to. Derrida (cited in Gilbert-Rolf 1995:137) expands on this, stating that:

The text is not the construction and expression of a single voice - a constituted subject constituting itself in speech - but rather a field or pool or bog…into which flow many other texts, which are there themselves rewritten.

Both Bal (1998:75) and Sturken and Cartwright (2002:10-44) have noted examples of how paintings, as signifiers, can be linked to many different signifieds and result in many different signs, firstly, because the context of the viewer is not fixed and,
secondly, because artworks are continually being reinterpreted and repositioned over time. Sturken and Cartwright (2002:13) suggest for example that Dutch still life painting does not merely work as an iconic image in its representation of the physical attributes of everyday objects but also on a symbolic level. An example of this is provided in their discussion of Pieter Claesz’s *Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring and Bread* (1642)(Fig. 3). This painting depicts a glass of wine, a fish on a plate, a knife and a loaf of bread. These objects operate as signs on many different levels compounded by the fact that the context of the artwork has changed from when it was originally painted (and will keep changing).¹²

In order to interpret a painting we must first look at the subject matter where we are able to make assumptions about the objects because we recognise them as similar to what we know (as Sturken & Cartwright did in relation to Claesz’s *Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring and Bread*). We also take note of how the objects differ from everyday objects which we might own or with which we are familiar, but we can locate them within our knowledge of history and culture. We use this information to decode what type of objects we are looking at as well as what type of artwork we are looking at. Secondly, we might consider how this artwork can be categorised in relation to other artworks that we know, i.e. still life paintings or landscape paintings, or else we might relate it to artworks made in a similar style. This is because, as Sturken and Cartwright (2002: 41-42) explain,

> *all images contain layers of meaning that include their formal aspects, their cultural and socio-historical references, the way they make reference to the images that precede and surround them, and the contexts in which they are displayed.*

In the example of Claesz’s *Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring and Bread* we use association to find a link between the bread and fish and Christian symbolism. We look at the subject matter and associate it with the conventions of 17th century Dutch painting. Our associations are determined by our context; are

¹²For example, a viewer may interpret the works as one or a combination of the following possibilities. The food may symbolise the transience of life, a major interest of Dutch artists when the work was originally made. A link may be found to Christianity as loaves and wine are a symbol for the sacrament and fishes are also used as a Christian symbol. The objects may be seen to refer to the culture of 17th century Holland, the period in which this painting was made. The painting may be acknowledged for its accuracy as a copy of specific food and the painting may be seen for its technical skill or may simply be viewed as a set of objects unrelated to any of the above.
we looking at this artwork from an art historian’s perspective; are we looking at it from a painter’s perspective? The meaning of the image may change depending on where we see it: in its original form in an art gallery, as a reproduction in an art history book, or a reproduction as a decoration for a restaurant or even in a book about food.

When an image or text is interpreted it is important to limit the context and thus establish a frame of reference from which one may read the image or text. This is usually done by taking a position on how one would read the work and conducting research on the text/artwork as well as on the writer/author. Without such a framework, interpretation often becomes self indulgent and does not lead to the acquisition of knowledge. In the example of my student's interpretation of The Haywain, she did not look at the title, the date of the artwork or research any information about the artwork or artist. Being selective when looking at the image and focusing only on the wagon and not on the building or the trees resulted in an inappropriate and unproductive reading of the image.

Bal and Bryson (1991:179) provide another reason why the context of a sign is not stable: “Signs are by definition repeatable. They enter into a plurality of contexts; works of art are constituted by different viewers in different ways at different times and places.” When we communicate using written or spoken signs we can reproduce the same sign many times. Once a particular sign is reproduced it changes, because its context is altered by what the sender and the receiver already know and understand as well as by the particular situation in which both the sender and receiver exist at a particular time. This means that we cannot “claim access to un-coded ‘pure’ or objective experience of a ‘real’, permanently existing world” (Hawkes 1977:107).

From my discussion on the role of context in relation to similarity and association, it can be seen that a sign is not a single fixed entity. As Derrida (cited in Royle 2003:78) explains “In order to be what it ‘is’ a text is an essentially vitiated, impure, open, haunted thing, consisting of traces and traces of traces: no text is

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13 For example, from a feminist perspective or a formalist reading.
purely present, nor was there some purely present text in the past”. Rather its meaning is made up from what the interpreter brings to the sign and, thus, the meaning of a sign without a singular fixed interpretation implies that there is no universal truth.

In verbal conversations it is usually important to ensure that both participants in the communication process share a common understanding. As this is a direct form of communication it is usually possible to rectify any misunderstandings. As discussed earlier, an artwork or a written text is often not mediated by its author and is open to contextual change, thus both artworks and written texts are polysemic. However, the possibility of multiple meaning in both the visual arts and literature is not a negative phenomenon as it ensures the continual relevance of scripto/visual works within a variety of contexts. Potts (1996:18) observes that,

[the value of semiotic theory lies in the way it makes us rethink the how of meaning...[It enables us to] envisage a work of art as a sign or combination of signs, [thus] our understanding of its form no longer operates at a purely visual level, but also concerns the articulation of meaning.

As my own practical work has developed from my interest in how we construct meaning, this investigation has led me to look at other artists who might have a similar preoccupation. I argue that the work of both Brenner and Boshoff, who are discussed in the following chapters, is a product of their knowledge and acceptance of the unfixed nature of the sign in multiple contexts and the lack of any universal truth inhabiting our system of signification. Brenner acknowledges that there is no fixed way of reading an artwork. I will show that Brenner’s work operates through the process of association as she provides “traces of traces” (Derrida cited in Royle 2003:78) of her models on the canvas which she attempts to get her viewer to interpret. As “the sign [is] not a thing but an event, the issue [is] not to delimit and isolate the one sign from other signs but to trace the possible emergence of the sign in a concrete situation, as an event in the world” (Bal & Bryson 1991:195). The work of Brenner successfully acknowledges itself as an ‘open text’.
**Figure 1:** Three illustrations to show the problem of similarity when objects are judged to be similar if they share at least one quality.
**Figure 2:** John Constable. *The Haywain*. 1821.
Figure 3: Pieter Claesz. Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring and Bread. 1642.
CHAPTER TWO
JONI BRENNER’S PORTRAITUDE: A LIBERATION FROM CONVENTIONS

I have consciously worked with stretching the boundaries of the possibilities of what one understands with likeness (Brenner personal interview 2005).

In this chapter I discuss selected works of Brenner, positioning her art making process as a liberation from the physiological conventions of portraiture. I argue that Brenner self-consciously subverts these conventions, by preventing the viewer from finding denotative signs in her portraits thus invalidating their attempt to detect similarity between the physiology of her sitter and the resultant artworks. I argue that Brenner’s focus further utilises multiple possible associative meanings through the use of connotative signs, making interpretation an extremely complex process. In order to explore this, I will investigate Brenner’s mode of interpreting her sitter through the construction of her artworks. Brenner does this in an attempt to overcome the limitations of the conventions of portraiture, as these conventions do not lead to an automatic inclusive understanding of her sitter as a human being. I also discuss how the artworks are negotiated by the viewer, investigating how they can be interpreted through symbolic and indexical signs, which connote aspects of the human being as portraiture. Selected works by Brenner from 1995 until the present will be discussed in order to support my argument.

Making Sense - Sensing Though Other Ways.

Brenner deliberately moves away from an attempt to recreate a physical likeness of her sitter and instead creates an object which intentionally encourages multiple readings by the viewer, what Brenner (2005) refers to as an “open-text”. In this move from convention to ‘open text’, Brenner acknowledges the inadequacy of

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1In the rest of this chapter I will refer to the interview with Brenner as Brenner (2005).

2These conventions include the expectation that a copy of an individual must look like that individual based on likeness, representation and verisimilitude.

3Barthes (1988:167) refers to the fact that each individual forms their own associations with the signs in the text. This results in many different interpretations of the same text or artwork.
physiognomy in the construction of a ‘true’ portrait and, thus, acknowledges the futility of attempting to find similarity with physiological conventions of portraiture as well as the problems of seemingly ‘limitless possibilities’ of association.

Karel Nel (2002(a):26) explains that “The conventions of portrait-painting have for centuries attempted to fix features” and according to Richard Brilliant (1991:25):

> Because portraits require some discernible connection between the visible image and the person portrayed in order to legitimise the analogy, some degree of resemblance is normally posited, however imagined. That purported resemblance, a restriction on the images’ freedom of reference, has brought about the use of the term ‘likeness’ as synonym for ‘portrait’.

However, when one looks at Brenner’s artworks it is not easy to find any literal likeness to her sitters. In fact, it is impossible to even recognise the images as portraits, yet both Brenner and a number of writers refer to her artworks as ‘portraits’.

David Bunn (2002:10) comments that, for Brenner,

> the face is still a field that commands attention. It is consciousness written in the face, and the face as a minimal sign – seen in moments of partial recognition, and offhand glances – that still preoccupies her.

When I asked Brenner (2005) if her work was about portraiture she told me that, although the sitter is unrecognisable and the artworks do not look like conventional portraits, there is still “…an intended connection between the sitter and the image”.

Brenner (1996:26) explains that because “a portrait can ‘stand for’ a particular human being, [it] allows for the image to be seen as a sign.” She then states that, “[t]o see a portrait as a sign is to see it as a social construct”(26), because it is painted within a specific society which has provided the criteria for the sign to be identifiable. This is confirmed by Brilliant (1991:38) who states that “[a]rtists…represent people in portraits by means of the established or invented schema whose recognizable content shapes the identity of the subject and conveys it to the beholder”. He then goes on to explain that the criteria for a correct copy “must be established at the time of the portrait’s making and
distinguished from the aesthetic criteria in effect at some later period of viewing” (39). These criteria are based on the conventions of physical likeness and appropriate symbolism⁴.

A conventional portrait attempts to recreate an image of the sitter by reproducing physiological features similar to those of the sitter in the artwork. Some portraits also contain symbols⁵ which may help to identify the sitter. Conventionally, a portrait is valued by how 'like' the image is to the sitter. Brenner (2005), however, questions the choices an artist makes when recreating 'likeness', asking “[w]hat is likeness? What constitutes a portrait...as something that is like the sitter? I know that the painting is not the person.” Brenner (1996:78), in positioning her own works, states that they “question traditional concepts of resemblance and recognition as based almost exclusively in the description of facial physiognomy”.

If a portrait is a sign for a person, the question is what aspect of the person is represented in the sign. Brenner (2005) does not feel that 'likeness' i.e. attempting to reproduce the physical attributes of the sitter, enables the artist to produce any real sense of the sitter, she thus attempts to find “other ways” of representing them.

Brenner’s belief in the futility of reproducing a physiologically similar likeness addresses the problem of denotation. One of the conventional criteria for similarity is for objects or ideas to be ‘like’ one another, however, the criteria we use for finding this ‘likeness’ are subjective as was discussed in Chapter One. When one chooses to produce a sign, one needs to find a signifier that correlates with a specific signified. When one wishes to make a sign denote a specific person, however, one is confronted with the many aspects (signifieds) of that person. One then has to decide which aspect of the person must be chosen as ‘most similar’ to or most ‘like’ that person in order for it to be used as the sign for that person. In

⁴Portraits have an important historical and political status as they have often been made to stand in for the person when they are not present. A portrait can be a reminder of who is in power, or a reminder of someone who is no longer alive, thus presuming the convention of likeness as a minimum criterion. A portrait becomes a fixed moment in time from a fixed perspective.

⁵For example, a crown can be a symbol for a king or books indicate that a person is a writer or scholar.
the previous chapter I discussed the fact that similarity is not a fixed notion, as each individual chooses which elements of an object or idea are similar to another object or idea. As it is possible for different people to find different criteria for similarity, they will find different aspects of individuals or objects similar. In much the same way, when looking for what constitutes ‘likeness’ in an individual, we may all focus on different aspects of that individual.

A Portrait of Wilson Mootane (1995)(Fig. 4) is one of the first portraits in which Brenner “investigat[es] deeply the notions of likeness and recognition beyond the conventions of the optically correct snap shots” (Nel 2002(b):28). Here she chose to show her sitter from behind. With the viewer unable to fix upon any recognisable facial features, Brenner introduced the idea that when one knows an individual, it is possible to recognise them by many more features than merely their face: a more complex physical presence is recognisable. Recognition, being based on such things as how someone moves or the sounds they make, provides ‘a sense’ of a person beyond a flat image. It is this ‘sense’ that Brenner began to explore.

Bunn (2002:4) states that “for Joni Brenner, the face has always been the major premise in a complicated argument about subjectivity [for many years] she has been interested in the limits of facial representation” and Brenner (1996:81) describes her process as “based on a search for a kind of likeness which extends the boundaries of exact photo-like resemblance”, realising that the search for likeness in a portrait does not result in a strong enough ‘presence’ of the sitter. In attempting to find ways to acknowledge the fact that the sitter is “alive and moves”, Brenner (2005) explored a variety of materials and began making three-dimensional objects.

This development is illustrated by comparing A portrait of Darryl Katzenstein (1995)(Fig. 5) with another work of the same sitter, A portrait of Darryl Katzenstein (1995-6)(Fig. 6). In the first portrait, which is oil on canvas, it is possible to distinguish facial features, such as ears, eyes, nose and mouth. In the second portrait, one is confronted with a lump of plaster which has finger imprints and carved marks with no reference to any conventional physiological aspects of the
sitter. Brenner (2005) found paint too flat and so experimented with different ways of representation “that were more physical and were more physical embodiments of the subject”, first by introducing marble dust into her paintings and then by working with plaster.

It is in this exploration beyond conventions of physical likeness that any attempt at finding similarity to the body irretrievably breaks down. Brenner (2005) wished to “invest the portrait with some sort of sense of an emotional relationship or other way of knowing the person other than what they looked like or what they presented”. Therefore, despite the lack of recognisable features there is in these works, arguably, a more direct link based on Brenner’s knowledge of and relationship with specific people.

Brenner (1996:81) then began to explore how various marks and gestures, associated with diverse materials, might begin to evoke the presence of her sitters. Her works thus evolved from images which can be recognised as faces to ones which appear to be more about the materials from which they are made. One of the reasons for this shift was because Brenner moved from working from photographs to working with actual people who she could observe. She looked for personal signs which provoked associations with her sitters, and these signs were expressed in and through the materials’ formal qualities and their presentation. Her portraits have evolved even further as, for the last fifteen years, Brenner has worked with one sitter, Wilson Mootane, resulting in a unique relationship of trust. Mootane has no expectations of what she will make and thus has liberated Brenner, who is able to focus on how she utilises paint, canvas, plaster, marble dust etc as signs for her sitter. Brenner’s concern with the act of representing rather than with an attempt at recreating likeness has resulted in dichotomous artworks. Each “represents a real person whose actuality it announces through its title and through ‘individualizing’ detail; at the same time, it presents itself as a work of art” (Brenner:2005).

In her works Brenner has pushed this duality to such a degree that the viewer struggles to identify the work as a portrait. Her work exists in the space between being a representation of a specific individual while, at the same time being an
object which stands on its own, free of this context. Brenner thus exploits the fact that an artwork has the potential to be interpreted from different perspectives and within different contexts. This potential informs Brenner’s working process, as she makes specific formal choices\(^6\) which encourage multiple readings. Brenner (2005) admits to deliberately using “a complex visual language” in an attempt to create an ‘open text’ that allows for her works to be read in a variety of ways, freeing the viewer to create their own meaning but also liberating the artist to explore the “act of representing”.

The portrait thus becomes an object which is made up of signs of the artist’s own set of connotations which she associates with a living human being. The artwork, however, will be interpreted differently by viewers who will not necessarily have access to the artist’s set of connotative associations. Most artists work with the dynamic between the private production of an artwork and its public reception, however I contend that Brenner is consciously encouraging the viewer to bring their own set of associations into the dynamic of the interpretation process. As Brenner (2005) has “consciously worked with stretching the boundaries of the possibilities of what one understands with likeness” and without the ability to find conventional similarity, the viewer needs to ask what associations they can make with the object and how it has been constructed. This leads to the work being open to multiple interpretations as an ‘open text’.

Notwithstanding the seemingly limitless interpretations a viewer can make, Brenner’s use of material, colour, modes of display and titles sets up a dialogue between the object’s ‘open text’ and the viewer’s negotiation of personal connotative associations in order to forge possible connections with Brenner’s intentions and to interpret her work.

\(^6\)These choices include, amongst other elements, material, colour, presentation and size of each artwork.
Connotative Association within the ‘Open Text’

Part of the value and, thus, the power of ‘the arts’ (visual arts, music and literature) is the fact that there can be infinite possibilities for interpretation which result from finding ways to associate what we see, listen to or read with our past experiences. As I stated in Chapter One, our particular context informs and guides our interpretation and, thus, there is no certainty of the final meaning of any sign. The less specific the artist/writer is, the more possible interpretations there are, as long as there is no specific ‘right answer’ expected. Brenner acknowledges the value of the viewer’s interaction with the artwork as she states (1996:80) that:

I am suggesting that my…work becomes deliberately unfixed or ambiguous so as to allow each viewer to bring to the work her or his own set of associations and to complete it individually in a private meditative capacity.

It is my intention here to show how, with the infinite possibilities of personal interpretation, a viewer can negotiate the ‘complex visual language’ of Brenner’s ‘open texts’ in order to return to a reading of her work as connoting the body and, thus, portraiture. In these terms, Steven Bann (1996:87) states that

…the process that is commonly called ‘interpretation’ – is a virtually limitless one, which can be terminated only by the atrophy of the individual subject’s desire to know. This is not, however, tantamount to making the exploration of meaning a pursuit of wild, subjective fantasy. It is in the nature of works of art themselves that they should support and favour the process of interpretation.

As Brenner has intentionally unfixed and constructed ambiguous signs in her work, the viewer must, rather, rely on connotative associations. These connotative associations are not universal constructs but rather evolve out of a ‘private meditative’ interaction with the artwork.

This process of the viewer finding their own meaning can lead in one of two directions. The viewer could either look at the work as connoting an infinite possible set of associations outside of portraiture, or s/he could deconstruct the

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7As mentioned in Chapter One, productive interpretation of an artwork or piece of literature is not possible if one sets no reference points. It is important to consider what information the artist has provided in order to guide the direction of one’s associations. In the case of Brenner, her titles provide a link to the fact that we are looking at people.
connotative associations provided by the symbolic (title) and indexical (medium)
signs as being “of or about the human being” and potentially “of or about
portraiture” (Brenner 2005).

This second reading is a sophisticated and complex one. Brenner does not make
use of an iconographic system which is based on interpreting the subject matter
of an artwork. Her works thus, do not operate in the same way as a photograph
nor are they based on painting conventions. Rather, Brenner’s works operate as
symbolic and indexical signs for portraiture and a specific individual, as the
signifier is related to what it stands for through association. Brenner (2005)
comments that her works “assert themselves as material objects or as the
material. One reads them often first in terms of colour and form and material but
the material, colour and form are not about abstract art”.

**Signs of Meaning: Symbolic and Indexical Signs**

Brenner (2005) states that she self-consciously forged a link between paint and
flesh, between clay and movement, and between plaster and marble. She adds
that the medium of an artwork is an important catalyst for possible association as
the artwork can provide insight into why it was made or what it means. These
possible associations are the individual’s sense-making decisions around possible
interpretations, catalysed by the open-ended connotations (the ‘open text’) suggested in, through and by the medium. In this context, Brenner (2005) feels
that “the medium is always so loaded in terms of connotations and what it
suggests and what it allows or doesn’t allow”.

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8 Brenner runs educational workshops during her exhibitions in order to encourage students to find
associative connotations with which to construct an interpretation. She states (2005) “I always try
and make it [the work] accessible because I know that it requires a learning of a whole other
language and thinking”.

9 Iconography is a branch of art history that deals with the subject matter of the figurative arts (Piper
1984:227), in which meaning can be found in artistic images by identifying figures from their
attributes, or to establish the repertory of motives, symbols, themes etc, characteristic of the art of

10 Brenner has made use of formal elements but, unlike abstract artists, the formal elements are not
divorced from representational intent and do not exist purely for their own sake. One can look at
her works in terms of their aesthetic value but her intention is for them to be more than ‘just’ colour
or mark.
The viewer must make specific reference to the indexical signs Brenner provides by finding a relationship with their knowledge of human beings and portraits, as well as from prior experience of the material, its formal elements and the display of the artwork they are interpreting. The indexical signs with which Brenner works are: texture, colour, size and presentation inherent in the material used. These signs all operate simultaneously in order to provide access to the work (although some viewers may only focus on one or two indexical signs). At the same time, the title of the work as a symbolic sign may help the viewer find a context from which to begin.

A pertinent example of the way in which texture and colour is helpful in building connotative association in Brenner’s work is provided by Bunn (2002:14) who states:

*The beautiful black work Presley reduces the portrait to a highly abstracted form of cross hatching, which is at the same time the glistening waves of Elvis’s brilliantined hair, or a vinyl LP held at varying angles, in a series of quick gestures, against the light.*

The title, the texture and the colour work together, encouraging and facilitating meaning.

In order to illustrate how Brenner’s ‘complex visual language’ operates, I will now focus on specific indexical and symbolic signs and highlight how they could be interpreted in such a way that the viewer may arrive at portraiture as the meaning. My aim is not to focus on the meaning of a specific work but, rather, to show how a specific work has been constructed to allow for an alternative access not based on physiological likeness (similarity) but on connotative association.

In *Mark* (2002)(Fig. 7) the title, as a symbolic sign, does not actually refer to the sitter but it is still the name of a person. This name, therefore, sets up an association with portraiture. However, it is possible that the word *Mark*, as a symbolic sign, has another meaning which Brenner (2002:34) describes as follows:
The work is called Mark because of the physical marks of my hands in the clay (before it was cast in plaster) and then because of the marks left by the screwdriver as I chipped away at the plaster mould.

The symbolic sign of the title (as a person) points the viewer towards an indexical sign (as the material trace), thus setting up an ‘open text’ in which readings of connotative association help the viewer piece together clues for a meaningful interpretation of her work.

Although the title has specific associations for Brenner, she is not concerned whether the viewer understands the title or not. The viewer can look at other aspects of the artwork to find its meaning. Brenner expects the viewer to find their own reference point between the title and the artwork, thus the title must be considered against other indexical signs. The viewer may do this by considering the size and shape of the artwork as being connotative because the object that she has made is similar in size to a human head.

From Brenner’s (2002:34) comment we know that Mark was originally made from clay. Clay, as earth, connotes life and this, in turn, can be associated with human life and growth. The clay was manipulated so that it had indentations and protrusions. These can connote movement, which can be related to the physical quality of lungs breathing air in and out of the body, setting up associations with a living breathing human. Mark was then cast in plaster which, originally in a liquid state, then set to its specific form. The changing nature of the plaster connotes life through transformation.

The final plaster product has been painted white, resulting in connotations of marble which is a common medium for sculptured portraits. In this way, Brenner presents possible associations between this artwork and portraiture. It is important to note that, as these indexical signs are not universal, there is no guarantee what the final interpretation of this ‘open text’ will be.

Up to this point I have discussed Brenner’s need to reflect the ‘sense of the sitter’ through establishing connotative associations with ‘a living, breathing, moving’ individual. Brenner (2005), however, also states that portraits “stop time” and
“become memories”. Just as a photograph retains the image of a person at a very specific moment in time, while the person themselves continues to change, Brenner’s portraits construct a set of associations with memory and death.

In *Souvenir* (2002)(Fig. 8), the viewer may attempt to find associations between the title and colour of the artwork. The title *Souvenir* has connotations of keeping something as a memory of a specific time or event. The idea that the object we are looking at is not the original, or is a link back to something that once existed or happened, is created by the title. Although this artwork has similarities to *Mark*, where the quality of the original clay connotes a breathing, moving human being, here, the final plaster cast has been painted with shiny copper enamel paint. Brenner (2002:16) states that there is an association between this copper paint and the copper plated objects that people sometimes collect in their homes as memorabilia. For example, some people have their children’s first pair of shoes copper plated. This act can be associated with a desire to fix a moment in time. This can be related back to one of the properties of portraiture i.e. it is static and the person in the portrait is fixed in time while the model ages.

*Clay for Adam* (2000)(Fig. 9) consists of oil paint on pigmented plaster on enamel-painted board with perspex case. In this work Brenner has establishes a relationship between the words in the title and the enclosed object. This object is three dimensional, consisting of textured marks connoting leaves or mud, or a combination of the two. The colours (reds, browns and blacks) could connote cooling molten lava, or rotting leaves, or gaping flesh. A dialogue between the title and the material is set up i.e. between the word *clay* and the earthiness of the object. The word *Adam* could be the name of any male or a specific reference to the ‘first man’ Adam. In the book of Genesis in the Bible, Adam is said to have been made from earth or clay, thus there are connotations of the beginning of life. The colours and marks in this artwork can connote flesh or lava. The flesh could then be associated with a human being, specifically Adam. The lava could be associated with the origins of the earth and, just as the earth was originally a mass of volcanic lava, the artwork was originally a mass of disassociated material.
This precious object, a remnant of the beginnings of life, has been placed within a display box, to be eternally preserved and thus ‘stopped in time’. The display itself is, therefore, another symbolic sign which becomes implicated in the meaning of the final artwork. Brenner (1996:97) believes that “a shelf in itself has a fixed set of associations and functions” and in her catalogues the dimensions and medium of her shelving and display board are always included.

The importance of display as a sign can also be found in Posts (2001-2)(Fig 10) which consists of two small square paintings mounted onto ‘posts’. The shape of the works is reminiscent of gravestones or memorial posts, thus alluding, once again, to Brenner’s beliefs about the nature of a portrait – a portrait is about memory and stasis since it is not alive. Brenner has, however, set up a multivalent reading in this work as, through the colour, display and mark making she provides connotative associations with life and movement. Brenner (2002:8) comments on the small square paintings at the top of each ‘post’ stating that: “Against such death this style of painting strives: the transiency of resolution keeps the mind active, at play, conjectural and the image mobile and alive”.

The multivalent reading continues in the formal contrast in texture between the small square paintings and the long rectangular boards to which they are attached. This contrast creates a sense of movement as one’s eye is drawn from one surface to the other. There is also a ‘pattern’ created though the alternate colours of red and grey, (a red painting is attached to a grey post and a grey painting is attached to a red post). This pattern causes one’s eye to also move diagonally between the two posts. The artwork thus generates movement, the very evidence of life.

Taking the connotative associations of the work’s signs a step further, the display allows for the paintings to become ‘faces’ on the elongated ‘bodies’ of the posts. These bodies are upright and ‘look back’ at the viewer, thus there is a connotation of people whose faces and bodies are animated. These multivalent combinations could connote male and female, life and death.
The associations the viewer has made with *Posts* can be superimposed upon other works. Like *Clay for Adam*, these small square paintings are made with thick paint. The quality of the mark or texture of the paint can connote moving liquid or living flesh. The colour of the paint adds to this connotation of lava or blood, thus alluding to life or the beginnings of all life.

Although Brenner states that she does not expect the viewer to reach a definitive interpretation, the titles, for example, are linked to personal thoughts/experiences she has while making the works. She states (2005) “[in] the making process I am reminded of certain things, references and ideas and I am trying to use those to give another way into the work”. These works are thus self reflective, as Nel (2002a:26) indicates “[s]uccessive waves of images tell us as much about the sitters as the artists and again as much about the social context and milieu in which they were painted”. In this way her work might even be considered self portraiture.

In conclusion, Brenner (1996:114) believes that “[g]rowth and change occur precisely when art challenges existing conventions, using them to re-evaluate the ‘common knowledge’ of a culture”. In these terms, in contrast to her work being implicated in a “pursuit of wild, subjective fantasy” (Bann 1996:87), her work is part of an empowering process which aims to transform the viewer from being passive, ignorant or afraid, to being able to take ownership of the meanings of these objects through a negotiation of Brenner’s ‘complex visual language’. Ultimately, as Brenner (1986:105) states,

> [i]t is in the presence of interpretation or inter-relations, or in the shift from exact resemblance, that the sitter gains status as something other than mere object, and the image gains status as something more than mere imitation.

In this chapter I have attempted to show how Brenner has created an ‘open text’ through the use of connotative association, in order to establish a ‘sense’ of her sitter as she has found similarity and ‘likeness’ a limiting convention for portrait making. Through a discussion of how Brenner exploits the fact that an artwork has the potential to be interpreted from different perspectives and within different contexts, I have attempted to show how both similarity and association operate
during the interpretation process. Brenner’s work foregrounds the limitations of similarities while, at the same time, confirms the fact that the use of association does not lead to a fixed meaning. In the next chapter I will discuss Willem Boshoff’s work in relation to the role of context in interpretation. I will focus specifically on how he manipulates codes and conventions in relation to context also acknowledging the fact that signs do not have fixed meanings.
Figure 4: Joni Brenner. A Portrait of Wilson Mootane. 1995-96.
Figure 5: Jonni Brenner. *A Portrait of Darryl Katzenstein*. 1995.

Figure 6: Jonni Brenner. *A Portrait of Darryl Katzenstein*. 1995-96.
Figure 7: Joni Brenner. *Mark*, 2002.
Figure 8: Joni Brenner. *Souvenir*. 2002.
Figure 9: Joni Brenner. Clay for Adam. 2000.
Figure 10: Joni Brenner. *Posts*. 2001-2.
At one extreme is the common-sense view that language just provides names for thoughts that exist independently; language offers ways of expressing pre-existing thoughts. At the other extreme...the language we speak determines what we can think. (Jonathan Culler 1997:58-59).

In this chapter I discuss selected works of Boshoff, focussing on the relationship between context and the construction of conventions which give his chosen signs their meaning. I do this by investigating how Boshoff intentionally makes viewers’ attempts at reading meaning in his text invalid through his shifting of the contextual relationship between artist, viewer and the physical view. A context is established through the acceptance and operation of a given set of conventions. These conventions, in conjunction with codes, are necessary for the interpretation of signs. In Boshoff’s work codes and conventions in relation to context have intentionally been manipulated, interrupting the interpretation process. I will, therefore, position Boshoff’s work, within the framework of the interpretation of signs by investigating his manipulation of conventions in relation to a viewer’s experience of the work. I will show that the selected works by Boshoff are grounded in understanding of the nature of language, i.e. his concern with the power of words: how words are used to define concepts and how concepts are connected to ideology and ‘truths’. Once these ‘truths’ are written down they become fixed and lead to dogma or to the dominance of one group of people over another. Boshoff’s works are intended to show the viewer the value of ‘not knowing’. If there is no final truth, one can continue to look for meaning, allowing for information to be fluid and flexible rather than static, rigid and dogmatic.

1For the purposes of this chapter codes operate as signifiers while conventions operate as the signified. Together codes and conventions form signs.

2The works that will be discussed are Blind Alphabet ABC (1991-95), Kring van Kennis (2000), Writing in the Sand (2000), SDROW FO NWODKAERB (2004) and Bread and Pebble Road Map (2004). The foundation issues established in the beginning of the chapter relate to and will be applied to these works later in this chapter.
Conventions, Codes and Context

Before addressing specific examples of Boshoff’s work I will briefly explain the theoretical context within which Boshoff works. Boshoff’s awareness of the relationship between conventions, codes and context in the interpretation process appears to be post structuralist and this relationship relies upon the unfixed state of context as explained by both Barthes and Derrida. These theorists do not see language as a stable constant entity arguing that it consists of a “constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through by everything else” (Eagleton 1983:129).

Boshoff problematises the role of conventions and codes in the interpretation process, foregrounding the fact that there are no universal conventions or codes, nor are there some conventions and codes which are more valid than others. An analysis of specific works reveals how Boshoff persuades the viewer to question the value of their knowledge (which is based on their context) by removing or manipulating expected conventions that access meaning. These works operate though the use of textual and visual codes thereby operating as scripto/visual artifacts that can be read as both art objects and texts. In Boshoff’s work the scripto/visual signs are set up against one another to destabilise the conventions and codes the viewer uses to find meaning. Although each of the selected works contain texts which the viewer attempts to read, they are not books in the conventional sense as they are not bound pages of text. Instead, Boshoff has written on a variety of objects using different materials, such as stone, sand or wood. The choice of objects and materials is very specific, as they also need to be interpreted in order to realise the final meaning of each artwork. Boshoff explores the relationship between the physical context in which a work has been placed and the text. Understanding the meaning of new or unusual words is not what the

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3In selected examples of works, texts are constructed to be read in a linear fashion as words are placed next to one another to form sentences, while the medium, size and texture of the objects act as codes which must be read as visual images.

4This relationship is explored in the specific works which I have chosen to discuss. For example the relationship between Kring van Kennis and its placement in the grounds of a university will be explored later in this chapter.
artworks focus on, rather the artworks’ intention is found through the process of attempting to find meaning by reading the text in relation to the physical construction of the text. At the same time, the viewer must interpret other visual signs in the artwork such as size, material and shape. The viewer must, therefore, read the textual and pictorial signs simultaneously. This is possible as “there is no essential difference between poetry and painting, no difference, that is, that is given for all time by the inherent natures of media” (Mitchell 1987:49).

The Power of Words

The texts that Boshoff uses in the works that I have selected are dictionary definitions. The allocation of a specific word for an object or a concept is one of the first steps in any communication process as words are linked to knowledge, and this is the initial process of creating a sign. Roelofse (1987:12) explains that “[b]y naming something you virtually arrest it. By naming that which you are conscious of as ‘world’ you anchor it. You create a point of reference to which you can always come back”. Access to knowledge, based on knowing the ‘right’ words, may result in an imbalance of power as it may either lead to privileging certain members of a society (those who have access to education, jobs and political power) or result in the ability of ‘higher powers’ such as governments or religious institutions to control how a society interprets a given situation. The ‘higher power’ may select the words to explain an event or categorise group of people, thereby constructing the prevailing ideology as “[c]ommunication is both the sharing of meaning and the sharing of values” (Roelofse 1987:7). Words affect how we live our lives because if we know ‘the right’ words we can communicate in the right places and, therefore, succeed financially and/or politically. If language constructs a context for power though the agency of ‘the right’ words’ ability to inform, it inevitably constructs what we think and how we think.

5Boshoff’s Dictionary of Perplexing English forms part of many of the works which I will discuss. Boshoff provides his own examples and, where possible, he uses a South African point of view when giving definitions to words (Nonplussed:2004 n.p.).

6Ideology is a body of ideas that reflects the beliefs of a nation, political system, class etc.
Boshoff has made works which explore this relationship between words, language and power. His selection of words, however, are not those used in everyday conversations and are not aimed at informing the viewer. They are no longer part of our everyday experience or context. Boshoff (cited in Jamal 1996:4) explains:

_I write dictionaries containing many thousands of strange words…Their purpose is anything but to inform: I write dictionaries of words that I hope nobody will understand. I try to look for words that are socially relevant, useful if you know them, but they are words that are dead or lost._

The reason for this is that Boshoff intends to interrogate how words operate and what value we give to the written word as a fixed and serious statement of truth. From a similar perspective Karen Armstrong (2005:11) observes that “[h]istorians have noted that the shift from oral to written scripture often results in strident, misplaced certainty”. Boshoff (In Williamson 2001:online) believes that the written word can be dangerous and he states that “[b]ooks can be prisons once something is written, it’s written, and it can become dogma”. Thus, in order to prevent dogma, Boshoff undermines any chance of finding a final truth, wanting the viewer to discover the value of ‘not knowing’, as he believes this leads to change and growth. For Boshoff “ignorance is a chastising pursuit – it levels the fictions of certainty, makes it possible to ceaselessly discover anew” (Jamal 1996:3).

Boshoff finds alternative ways to make ‘dictionaries’ of words and their definitions in order to encourage a new perspective and stimulate a willingness to question how we experience and perceive the world around us. In order to do this, Boshoff undermines the conventions and codes which the viewer uses to construct meaning by highlighting the limitations of conventions and acknowledging the existence of other contexts. In the artworks which I discuss, Boshoff intentionally limits the viewer’s access to information as he uses codes and conventions from multiple contexts, thus the context from which the viewer usually operates is not helpful in the interpretation of the work. This experience forces the viewer to become more conscious of who has access to the information necessary to interpret the text. The privileging of those who have access to knowledge is thus foregrounded as an issue of concern.
For Boshoff (cited in Gentric 2004(b):online) “[w]ords create more entanglement than disentanglement” as words do not exist in isolation. They form the language that we speak and, thus, our identity and ideology. Marina Warner (2004: 93) states that

[a] language carries codes of identity, creates bonds and allegiances across frontiers, communicates the stories of the past and local principles of ethics and justice. It strengthens common bonds and is formed by the circumstances of its use as it develops. Above all, a language embodies power, reproduces positions of authority, and subordination. To impose a language, or to forbid a language, represents a tyrant’s first move.

Boshoff’s interrogation of how one linguistic code which ‘imposes’ itself on a multicultural system is detrimental to speakers of other languages highlights his concern that one language may dominate and destroy another and, in the process, eradicate the cultures which use these languages. Boshoff (2005:online) states that his work deals “primarily with loss…An abject extinction of people’s collective myth when they no longer share it by word of mouth…and the loss of smaller languages due to the dominance of a superlanguage.”

Boshoff’s concern with the relationship between power and language originated from personal experience with Afrikaans in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s. It is not within the scope of this dissertation; however, to discuss the historical development of Boshoff’s work, rather I will focus on his interest in the dominance of English within a society which has eleven official languages. The specific examples of work I have chosen, Blind Alphabet ABC (1991-95)(Figs. 11-14),

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7Post 1998, 11 languages have been officially recognised in South Africa: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Afrikaans and English. English, however, predominates in both government communication and educational institutions. South Africa’s new Constitution (1996:14) gives everyone the right to receive education in the official language(s) of their choice, however most tertiary institutions only offer education in English or Afrikaans. There is also a problem with the development of contemporary vocabulary for languages other than English as can be noted from the letter taken from the PANSLAB web site accessed on 11 July 2005 found in Appendix 1. In this letter the author discusses how his mother tongue does not have the necessary words for a contemporary lifestyle as new words are not being developed for new technologies. English is, thus, the dominant language as it contains the words necessary for communication.

8This concern can be see in works such as BANGBOEK (1977-81) which was made in response to Boshoff’s experience in the army and his need to write in code (Vladislavic 2005:40). KYKAFRIKAANS (published in 1980) was made in response to Boshoff’s experiences as an Afrikaans speaker in an English environment, in which he was made to feel “ignorant” and “uncouth” (Vladislavic 2005:48).
Kring van Kennis (2000)(Figs. 15-18), Writing in the Sand (2000)(Figs. 20-21) and SDROW FO NWODKAERB (2004)(Figs. 22-23), evidence a move away from being personal and private to encouraging dialogue between different cultures. These works explore how one group is more ‘powerful’ than another group and how this ‘power’ has been exploited though the manipulation of language. Each of these examples refers to Boshoffs’ ‘alternative’ dictionaries, in which he focuses on language/cultural issues in South Africa. The final work that I will discuss Bread and Pebble Road Map (2004)(Figs. 24-25), however, explores the way in which politics and history are recorded, focusing on international issues. Although this work does not include definitions it still questions the process of interpretation because it interrogates the perspective of a writer.

**Getting Lost**

In Blind Alphabet ABC (Fig. 11)\(^9\), Boshoff shifts the relationship between the physical context of the artwork and the physical ability of his viewers. Boshoff reverses the conventions of an art gallery, normally the domain of the sighted, by privileging the blind\(^10\) and preventing the sighted from fully accessing the artwork. The title of the work informs the viewer that they are looking at an alphabet, while the catalogue refers to “a morphological dictionary for the ‘blind’” (Koloane et al 1996:2). The conventional understanding of a dictionary is of text in a book, and one would expect to find a book in a library rather than in an art gallery. Boshoff also changes the conventional codes by substituting objects for words (Figs. 12-14). The definitions are not in a common code either as they have been written in Braille, a code familiar to a minority of people. Boshoff (cited in Jamal 1996:4) says of this piece: “*In Blind Alphabet I revive the seeds of dead words by asking blind people to make them grow in an art gallery, a place where the blind are least expected*”.

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\(^9\)The work consists of 338 separate wire mesh boxes, each of which contains a wooden sculpture which illustrates an obscure word that defines a shape, a structure or a texture. Above each box is a plaque impressed with Braille. This plaque carries a dictionary definition of the chosen word, as well as some information about the sculpture (Williamson & Jamal 1996:149).

\(^10\)The blind are usually at a disadvantage and need the help of the sighted. People often behave very strangely towards blind people for example shouting at them as if they were deaf or talking to them in simplified English as if they were uneducated or less intelligent than the sighted.
As sight is the predominant sense in a gallery and one ‘reads’ and interprets an artwork by looking at it, visitors are instructed to look but not touch. Boshoff’s artwork, however, is predominantly a physical experience, made as it is of rows of mesh boxes containing the physical realisation of a word and Braille definitions. Boshoff’s choices, which appear sterile and inaccessible, alienate the sighted viewer as they are made conscious of the fact that they cannot experience the artwork in the same way as a blind viewer. Conversely this arrangement helps the blind to access the work as it is neat and ordered. The blind viewer is given access to the physical objects as they can take them out of the boxes and touch them, as also have access to the definitions of the object. For the sighted viewer, in contrast, the aluminium sheets of embossed Braille are inaccessible and can only be read as visual signs i.e. taking note of the medium of the sheets and the texture and pattern created by the Braille. The sighted viewer has no linguistic codes to interpret this work and must rely on interpreting visual codes. This is a frustrating exercise as they can only see partially hidden objects within boxes which do not lead to any conclusive meaning. The blind viewer, however has access to codes with which they are familiar (Braille), making use of touch when interacting with their environment. As the sighted viewer does not have access to the meaning of each object, s/he is dependent upon the blind ‘viewer’ in order to gain the relevant information about each object and its definition. This means that the sighted viewer has to rely on a second hand interpretation or experience mediated by the blind viewer.

Boshoff (cited in Vladislavic 2005:61) states: 

I believe that touching provides for a more intimate sensory experience than sight. Touch eliminates distance whereas sight enforces it, touch is committed to an immediate encounter whereas sight is illusionary and superficial.

As sighted people we often undervalue the role of touch. In fact, touch has been neglected as, in our society of mass media, television, computer games and movies, we experience and evaluate our world through sight and sound, with little tactile contact with the object or event. Sight, as Boshoff states, is less intimate than touch and thus may limit our experience of an object or event because we are removed from what we are experiencing. As the sighted are not allowed to touch
the objects in *Blind Alphabet*, only having access to them through the blind viewer’s experience, these objects operate within a context that is outside of the sighted viewer’s understanding. This alters the experience and interpretation of the artwork as what a blind person ‘reads’ from touch is not the same as what a sighted person ‘reads’ from sight. The blind viewer cannot read visual codes such as colour or presentation, aspects of the artwork that the sighted viewer encounters and attempts to interpret. The blind viewer relies on weight, texture, size and shape in order to interpret the work. The work interchanges what is known and what is unknown through altering the conventions of a sculpture exhibition and how the codes are read. The sighted viewer remains ‘outside’ the experience of the blind person’s process of interpretation. Boshoff (cited in Williamson & Jamal 1996:150) referring to the sighted viewer, states that “through this reversal of roles, we the sighted participants, ‘lose our clues for a change’”. This work is, therefore, a challenge to assumptions which are made around knowledge and information, the privileged and the handicapped. The work reverses who has control and who has power, as the group that is usually at a disadvantage is now in a context in which they function optimally, whereas the ‘normally’ functional viewer is handicapped.

Williamson and Jamal (1996:150) state that “*Blind Alphabet*...resists the desire to contain and to hold. Bereft, we come to understand the little we know”. The purpose of *Blind Alphabet* is not to inform the viewer of the meaning of the objects, but rather for the viewer to be liberated through the realisation that they cannot know everything. The work therefore explores the process of interpretation, forcing the viewer to re-evaluate what s/he takes for granted within her or his own context. It aims to show us that the beliefs and concepts we assume to be fixed truths are limited to our own context. Boshoff manipulates the relationship between codes, conventions and context in order to stimulate the viewer into re-evaluating the conventions which they hold as truth or which they take for granted. As we make meaning using a set of conventions with which to formulate our context, these conventions must be learned as they are not natural truths. Those who know the conventions, however, are not necessarily better than those who do not. Boshoff wants to undermine our confidence in ‘truth’ as he believes that it is this confidence which makes us feel that we are better or more empowered than others. Any
‘certainty’ is an illusion as it is only based on the codes and conventions of our particular context.

In *Blind Alphabet ABC* Boshoff enables the blind viewer to ‘read’ information while the sighted viewer is limited to looking at closed boxes and Braille. In *Kring van Kennis*, however, Boshoff provides scripto/visual codes which can simultaneously be viewed as image and read as text but will still disempower the previously advantaged viewer in their attempt to find a meaning.

*Kring van Kennis* highlights the context of different languages, specifically the relationship between dominant and disempowered languages. In this work Boshoff, once again, shifts what is known and unknown in relation to context. As has been stated, it is through language that we identify and express ourselves and apportion value to ourselves. Our background and culture is intertwined with the languages we speak and we are most comfortable using our mother tongue which provides expression of our identity. Language is power and has always been an element of South African politics. Although South Africa has eleven official languages and many other unofficial languages, English has become the dominant means of communication in most public spheres, to the detriment of other language speakers. As English is privileged over other languages, a notion of ‘better educated’ or ‘more intelligent’ people has developed in relation to how well a person speaks the predominant language. Not only are speakers of the other languages disempowered, but their cultures are also under threat¹¹. Boshoff chooses to make artworks which re-evaluate these notions of language and power, by making the group who ‘knows’ ignorant and those who feel powerful, disempowered. Boshoff (2005:online) believes that the dominant culture is not always aware of the damage that it is doing, stating that: “…the big unicultural and unilingual groups do not understand themselves to be a threat - in fact they are keen to see themselves as saving the rest of humanity”. The dominant group often believes that their knowledge, codes and conventions are more relevant and thus,

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¹¹Currently there is much debate around the role of English in education and in the business world in South Africa in relation to how it privileges certain members of society. More information can be found on the PANSALB websight: [www.pansalb.org.za/English/vision.htm](http://www.pansalb.org.za/English/vision.htm). These debates have taken place in Parliament as well as at educational conferences. A more detailed discussion can be found on [http://www.litnet.co.za/isikhundla/10pansalb.asp](http://www.litnet.co.za/isikhundla/10pansalb.asp).
through education, they are ‘empowering’ underprivileged groups as they attempt to introduce their own set of codes and conventions. The speakers of a dominant language may also confuse knowledge and intelligence with skill (the ability to speak a particular language) as those who communicate effectively are often seen as having more knowledge and insight and are, thus, treated differently.

Roelofse (1987:1) states that: “communication can either create or alleviate tension, create or reduce prejudice and racism, forge or destroy human relationships”. Communication is only successful if we access common signs. If we do not share the same culture or language (context), communication is unsuccessful, as we do not trust one another.

In Kring van Kennis (Fig. 15) and Writing in the Sand (Fig. 21) Boshoff requires people from different South African contexts (backgrounds and cultures) to communicate in order to interpret his texts. Kring van Kennis and Writing in the Sand both contain text written in the eleven official languages of South Africa and, in order to read the text, people from different language groups need to work together as no single piece of writing is written in one language. According to Boshoff (2005:online), the intention of both of these works is to acknowledge the marginalisation of other languages due to the use of English. Boshoff (2005:online) expresses this intention when he states that:

For the past few hundred years the European languages of English and Afrikaans have dominated the printed and spoken matter in academic and official circles in South Africa. This, together with the policies of apartheid and forced removal, had a stifling effect on our indigenous languages.

Kring van Kennis and Writing in the Sand both contain text which consists of words and their definitions, both artworks having their origins in Boshoff’s Dictionaries of Perplexing English. In both artworks, the definiendum (the word which needs to be understood or explained) is in English while the definiens (the explanation or definition) is written in one of the other ten official South African languages. As the definiendums are unfamiliar words and are no longer relevant to the context of

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12Martin Luther King (cited in Oakley-Smith 2005:7) stated that: “Men hate each other because they fear each other, they fear each other because they don’t know each other, they don’t know each other because they can’t communicate with each other and they can’t communicate with each other because they are separated from each other”.

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contemporary English, English speakers are forced into attempting to find and recognise linguistic conventions in order to find any meaning\(^{13}\). Boshoff (2005:online) states that these abstruse terms are selected to perplex and confuse the English intelligentsia. Privileged English speakers, used to dictate and patronise those in ‘lesser’ language groups, become frustrated by WRITING IN THE SAND because they cannot identify the difficult words in their own tongue and the explanations are given in a tongue they do not know.

The English speaker’s knowledge and background (context) does not help them to access the meaning of the word. The only way to find out what the word means is to find someone who can read the definition. Like Blind Alphabet this procedure results in a reversal of roles but, in this case, rather than empowering the blind, the speakers of ‘lesser’ languages are empowered.

Although Kring van Kennis and Writing in the Sand are similar to one another as they contain textual definitions, the final intention of each work differs and is found though interpreting the visual signs (the materials and presentation used) of the artwork. It is not Boshoff’s intention to educate various viewers/readers and teach them unusual and difficult words. These works are not merely about written signs, nor are they only visual objects consisting of different codes, rather they explore the uneasy relationship between written and visual signs as these signs need to be accessed using different conventions.

Kring van Kennis is a collection of 11 granite stones that are placed in the grounds of the University of Johannesburg (previously Rand Afrikaans University)\(^{14}\) (Fig. 16). These stones have words carved into them in a circular pattern (Fig. 15). One of the first aspects of the work with which the viewer interacts is the solid nature of the stones offset by the patterns made by the text carved into the stones. The colour, size and weight of the granite can be associated with permanence. These stones are grey and substantial and evoke the architecture of the University buildings. They also have a resonance with Afrikaaner nationalist architecture, thus

\(^{13}\)Boshoff had used word such as *pognoglogy* - the study of beards and *caliology* - the study of bird’s nests (Vlasislavic 2005:64). An English speaker recognised -*ology* and -*ism* but this knowledge is no help in interpreting the words.

\(^{14}\)The stones are placed in a circle and each stone represents one of the 11 official languages.
referring to the origins of the university as an Afrikaans institution. The circular patterns however can be associated with African Stone age structures (Fig. 19), while the languages in which the text is written are inclusive of all the current official languages. The work thus establishes a dialogue between the past and the present; the stones represent a solid static quality which contrasts with the movement engendered through the use of the circular patterns of text. The physical carving of the text and the meaning of the text set up a contradiction between contexts. The font in which the text is written is the same as that used in official university documents, implying a link between RAU and the ‘old’ South Africa, while the words that are written into the stones make use of all eleven languages insinuating a link to the current South African context. The words are placed in a spiral and are read from the outside to the centre and then out again, with the western convention of reading from the top left hand corner across the page until one reaches the bottom line being broken. The spiral, as a multi-cultural symbol found in Europe, Africa and the East, is linked to spiritual enlightenment (Cooper 1978:156) rather than to academic knowledge. In this way, Boshoff references and co-joins a variety of contexts to create his visual signs.

In *Kring van Kennis*, the English *definiendums* are linked to “*things that are worth learning about*” (Boshoff 2001:n.p.). Thus Boshoff explores the notion of intellectual power using words that focus on “*knowledge, cognitive power, acumen and intelligence, [and] typical university ideals are expressed and emphasized with ology, and ism suffixes*” (Boshoff 2001:n.p.). These words are ‘serious’ and ‘important’ as this knowledge has been carved into a rock for eternity. However, these words are useless to the English speaker who does not have the context to understand them or to interpret their definitions. The only way to gain access to the information on the stones is for people of different languages and cultures to mix and communicate with one another. The work explores this interaction, aimed at raising awareness of cultural similarities and differences as Boshoff (2001:n.p.) explains:

> My work is generally focused on bringing about conversation, especially between social groups that do not communicate with each other easily or often. The work serves as a type of icebreaker and becomes a forum of common interest.
As a theme which runs through many of Boshoff’s works, *Kring van Kennis*, has another function, which is the undermining of the notion of the superiority of one language/culture over another in order to prevent fixed ‘truths’. Fixed truths occur as a result of one context/culture becoming dominant and entrenched, preventing the growth and diversity of other ideas and beliefs. Boshoff (cited in Vladislavic 2005:72) states that “*by loosening the ties between a word and its meaning, it sets a chain of mistrust into motion*.” It is this ‘mistrust’ of the known, and of norms that Boshoff wants to encourage through a sense of being ‘lost’. What he seems to be stating is that uncertainty will promote a scenario in which greater development and understanding can take place.

*Kring van Kennis* encompasses two conflicting beliefs about knowledge: that knowledge is a fixed set of information which cannot be changed; and that knowledge is in a fluid state and is continually added to. The work forces an acknowledgement of the changing contexts within South Africa in order to bring about understanding of differences.

Unlike *Kring van Kennis*, *Writing in the Sand*15 has not been made using materials which create a sense of stability and permanence. The intention of this work differs from *Kring van Kennis*, in that it focuses on the fragile nature of South African indigenous languages and their associated cultures. This fragility is visualised through the choice of medium, as the work is made from sand (Figs. 20-21). Boshoff (2005:online) explains his choice of material by stating: “I write in the sand because it is an unstable medium and is easily disturbed. Writing in sandy places is easily damaged and extirpated by water and wind”.

Boshoff constructs black sand words on a white sand background, which follows the conventions of text on a page. When legal agreements, belief systems and intellectual knowledge are written down, the information is ‘fixed’. Those who can read the text have access to this information and are thus in a position of power. But, as Boshoff (2005:online) states “*people only proficient in an oral tradition*’.

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15This work has been set up in various art galleries for example: the Castle Champlitte, France, 2000 and the Havanna Biennale, 2001.
were terribly disadvantaged because they were unfamiliar with written demands and contracts”. His ‘pages’ of text are different from those found in books and documentation as they get swept away when the exhibition is removed.

In a changing world, people have to use the languages of education, commerce and politics in order to succeed. Many of South Africa’s indigenous languages have not been written down nor do they have the vocabulary necessary for the expression of a contemporary life\(^1^6\), thus these languages are rapidly losing their relevance and so may disappear. Boshoff (2005:online) states that “\textit{when the social fabric is ruined for languages rooted in speech rather than text, the common myth and legend together with shared culture begin to disappear}”. Both Kring van Kennis and Writing in the Sand explore Boshoff’s concern with the future of a polyglotic South Africa and encourages the viewer to re-evaluate societies’ linguistic bases and changing contexts.

Boshoff (2004:n.p.) acknowledges that time can erode and change the conventions of language when a context changes, thus words lose their meaning, stating that “\textit{as a pebble is shaped by the flow of water in a river, language becomes worn down and hybridised through the centuries}”. Thus, the words we use are relevant to the context in which we exist, i.e. our work, our social interactions and belief systems. In \textit{SDROW FO NWODKAERB}\(^1^7\) (Figs. 22-23) he explores the effect of different conventions and context on the same language, English.

The work comprises of both texts and objects, with two to three objects on each panel. These objects have then been covered by six columns of dictionary definitions. From a distance, the text forms a black and white pattern as the words are too small to read. It is, however, possible to recognise the objects which have been covered by the text. We recognise tools for working in the garden, with wood and in the kitchen, thus all the objects are connected to physical labour and

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\(^{16}\) See Appendix 1.

\(^{17}\)The words used for the text of this artwork are again taken from entries from the \textit{Dictionary of Perplexing English}. This work is made up of eight panels, each containing six columns of definitions which cover old and broken tools.
manual maintenance. Few of these tools are still in use\textsuperscript{18} as they have been replaced by more modern equipment\textsuperscript{19}. Both the words and the objects used in the artwork have been taken from one context, namely the nineteenth century, but are being read and interpreted in the twenty first century. Today we live in an age of consumerism and technology in which we do not have to produce our own food. We buy what we eat from shops, and find it neatly cut up and packaged for us. The words we use reflect our life style: we have ‘fast food’ and we ‘download’ information. The tools we use facilitate this speed and convenience, e.g. microwave ovens and computers. Mitchell (1987:29-30) comments that

\begin{quote}
[O]ur signs and thus our world, are a product of human action and understanding, that although modes of knowledge and representation may be ‘arbitrary’ and ‘conventional,’ they are constituents of the forms of life, the practices and traditions within which we must make epistemological, ethical, and political choices.
\end{quote}

From a twenty first century viewpoint, the tools appear ‘quaint’ and ‘whimsical’ yet they once had an important influence on the societies in which they were used. They are now largely irrelevant\textsuperscript{20} and are collected for their nostalgic value. The tools are reminiscent of a bygone era in which life was slower, and less automated and technological. Because of the shift in context, the objects are no longer functional but rather reminders of something which has been lost\textsuperscript{21}.

The words in this artwork are once again part of a dictionary, however unlike Boshoff’s earlier ‘dictionary definitions’, the complete text is in English as the intention of the work is focused on the changing context of time rather than on different cultures. The origins of the objects and words in this artwork are removed from our context as we have a new set of conventions by which to live and, thus,

\textsuperscript{18} The tools Boshoff includes are still used in places that do not have electricity, i.e. rural Africa. However I feel that Boshoff’s intention was to show tools that were no longer ‘state of the art’, ‘modern’ and in everyday use.

\textsuperscript{19} For example irons and drills are now electric.

\textsuperscript{20} When these tools were originally made they made people’s lives easier and simpler. In contrast, now we look at them and focus on the physical exertion needed to make them function.

\textsuperscript{21} They could remind us of a lost lifestyle or lost ideologies. We form a new set of associations with these objects based on our own context in relation to our beliefs about the past.
the signs around us have changed. This is explained by Robert Williams (2004: 64) who states that:

In the complex patterns of human action and interaction that make up history, meaning becomes attached to things, but then, after a time, also falls away from them; individual and collective energies are invested in signs but then are also divested and displaced elsewhere.

Boshoff (2004:n.p.) explores how both words and language are eroded by time, he explains that just as

...the tools have been broken and abandoned, the once useful words are now unwanted, defunct, extinct...[For example] embadomety, a word, almost totally lost for a primitive method of determining the size of a land. The streets of Johannesburg are a little disjointed in places because its embadometors used leather thongs in the beginning.

SDROW FO NWODKAERB reminds us that we do not exist in a static system in which there is only one meaning or truth for eternity. Rather, meaning changes in relation to society and ideology. Beliefs, concepts and systems that seem permanent and powerful change with time and become obsolete and useless. This may be negative, in the case of the disappearance of languages and cultures, but it may also be seen as positive as it prevents the permanent domination of one ideology over another.

Boshoff’s concern with dominant and disempowered cultures has lead him to look at more than just the loss of languages. He is also concerned with how a group of people can lose the use of their own natural resources and land if a new system of rules, which they cannot understand, is enforced on the group. He refers to how, in the past, many black South Africans were disadvantaged as they could not understand written English or Afrikaans legal demands or contracts and thus, as disadvantaged groups, lost their land. In Bread-and-Pebble Road Map (Figs. 24-25) Boshoff draws a parallel between ‘land grabbing’ in apartheid South Africa and the current ‘land grabbing’ in the Middle East. He states (cited in Gentric 2004(b):online) that:

Everyone must interpret by virtue of his cultural background, but the people in power feel that because of who they are, they necessarily

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22The work consists of 40 panels each filled with sand and numerous pebbles and bread rolls. It is difficult to differentiate between the stone and the bread. On every stone and bread roll, Boshoff has written an Arabic name (these names are explained in the Nonplussed catalogue).
have to interpret in a certain devious way, so that people will ‘be true’—
Being true to what? – in the end ‘truth’ becomes an instrument of
death, usually to steal land from other people.

Boshoff acknowledges a link between words and power which, ultimately, leads to political dominance and ownership of land and wealth. Thus, for him, language is more than just words, as language is ideology and political power. Williams (2004:240) explains that “[l]anguage…serves to ground or naturalise ideology”.

In Bread-and-Pebble Road Map Boshoff explores ownership of land in relation to the way in which the owner of the land is perceived. He explores the impact of ideology and context on the different perspectives of people who lay claim to the same piece of land, namely Arabs and Jews who are fighting over the occupation of Palestine/Israel. Unlike the previous works which I have discussed, Bread-and-Pebble Road Map does not contain dictionary definitions. It does, however, show similarities with Boshoff’s other works. Just as his definitions do not provide clarity and information, this ‘map’ does not provide information about a specific area. The codes and conventions used in Bread-and-Pebble Road Map are not what we expect when reading a map. The work does not contain signs or symbols which represent a specific territory, rather, it contains the actual constituents of territory as it is made from soil and stones. Instead of providing knowledge and clarity the work sets up a series of questions, forcing us to acknowledge what we do not know. Why is it made of bread and pebbles? Why are there names on the pebbles? Whose map is it? As the map prevents any clarity or certainty, it undermines any notion of a definite truth. Just as Boshoff previously made texts that could be read in many ways, he now creates a map which offers multiple interpretations. Boshoff wants us to acknowledge that, as there is no fixed truth, there are multiple perspectives since “…knowledge is better understood as a matter of social practices, disputes, and agreements, and not as the property of some particular mode of natural or unmediated representation” (Mitchell 1987:30).

Boshoff (cited in Gentric 2004(b):online) explains that the names on the stones and bread rolls can be read in two ways:

If I have a stone and I write your name on it this means ‘I am going to throw this stone with your name at you.’ But if I have a stone with my own
Thus, the stones in Bread-and-Pebble Road Map may signify more than merely possessions, they may be substitutes for a contract of proof of ownership. Both in South Africa and the Middle East, land ownership is a contentious issue. Depending on one’s perspective the land was stolen and needs to be given back to the victims, or the people who want the land back may be considered to be terrorists.

The context Boshoff explores in Bread-and-Pebble Road Map is one of political systems. He highlights the fact that meaning is often determined by those who have political power. Boshoff (cited in Gentric 2004b:online) comments that: “[s]ome ‘terrorists’ should be called ‘peaceful citizens’. Some ‘liberating forces’ should be called ‘terrorists’.” He goes on to say that “[p]eople wilfully bring a pretext and a context” to what they are interpreting. Throughout time, history has been written from the perspective of the winner, thus the winners are always portrayed as the ‘good liberators’ and the losers as the ‘invaders’ or the ‘terrorists’. It is the conventions within a context which determine the way in which words are used. Janet Wolff (1981:119) explains that “[w]ithout accepting any simplistic theory of reflection, it can be shown that the perspective (or world-view) of any individual is not only biographically constructed, but also the personal mediation of a group consciousness”.

In the works which I have discussed, I have attempted to show how Boshoff has taken text in both its linguistic and visual forms and used it as a subversive weapon to undermine the notion of a universal truth. As Culler (1997:60) states “[l]anguage is…both the concrete manifestation of ideology – the categories in which the speakers are authorized to think – and the site of its questioning or undoing”.

Boshoff has explored the relationship between context and the construction of conventions in order to problematise the notion of truth. Using the very means of propagating that ‘truth’ (the written word), Boshoff undermines our acceptance of privilege and power. He sweeps away our firm ground of knowledge and allows us to renegotiate the world with the freshness that comes from realising how little we...
know. The purpose of Boshoff’s work is thus to make us aware of “[o]ur illusory grasp of certainty and, in the beginning and end, the instruction that comes with ignorance” (Williamson & Jamal 1996:150).
Figure 11: Willem Boshoff. *The Blind Alphbet ABC*. 1991-95.
Figure 12: Willem Boshoff. The Blind Alphabet ABC. (detail). 1991-95.
Figure 13: Willem Boshoff. The Blind Alphabet ABC. (detail). 1991-95.
Figure 14: Willem Boshoff. The Blind Alphabet ABC. (detail). 1991-95.
Figure 16: Willem Boshoff. *Kring van Kennis*. (detail). 2000.

Figure 17: Willem Boshoff. *Kring van Kennis*. (detail). 2000.
Figure 18: Willem Boshoff. *Kring van Kennis*. (detail). 2000.

Figure 19: Aggregated settlement (possibly pre-Tswana) at Vlakfontein, Gauteng.
Figure 20: Willem Boshoff. *Writing in the Sand*. 2000.

Figure 22: Willem Boshoff. **SDROW FO NWODKAERB.** (4 panels). 2004.
Figure 24: Willem Boshoff. Bread and Pebble Roadmap (detail). 2004.
Figure 25: Willem Boshoff. *Bread and Pebble Road Map* (detail). 2004.
CHAPTER FOUR
JOINING DOTS: A DISCUSSION OF MY PRACTICAL OUTPUT

The sense of meaning that we give to an object is important, not the fact that our world is filled with objects. (J.J. Roelofse 1987:15).

It is generally accepted that we make use of a mixture of words, images and emotions when we think, however, psychologists have not been able to pinpoint exactly how we experience concepts and information in our mind. Stanley Pinker (1997:85-86,89) states that we use a variety of mechanisms to make links between knowledge, concepts and words, the use of images being one of these. He explains that we “…have a level of representation specific to the concepts behind words, not just the words themselves” and cites “our everyday ease in generalizing our knowledge [as] evidence that we have several kinds of data representations inside our heads”.

Mitchell (1987:9) suggests a link between physical images and mental images occurs as we think when he states that “[w]e speak of pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, memories and even ideas as images”. My work explores the relationship between the external images we read as signs and the internal images we conceptualise in order to create meaning. We interact with physical objects in the real world which are transferred into either words, images or concepts in our mind. The perceived objects cannot be separated from the person who perceives them because, as Plato (cited in Pinker 1997:84) states:

[W]e are trapped inside a cave and know the world only though the shadows it casts on the wall. Our skull is our cave, and mental representations are the shadows. The information in an internal representation is all that we can know about the world.

I have chosen to make artworks that visually represent aspects of what I believe takes place in the mind when we interpret external signs such as images, texts and objects. I have attempted to find metaphorical means to represent what takes place in the subconscious and how we interpret the world though layers of context arising from our life experience. The artworks take the form of installation pieces in which the construction of meaning is explored through representations of commonplace objects as signs.
The first group of works\(^1\) I will discuss was developed in conjunction with my exploration of how similarity and association operate when we interpret a sign (as discussed in Chapter One). Through the medium of light I have attempted to find a means of creating a metaphor for ‘images’ that have no physical presence and, thus, the works in this group become metaphors for the intangibility of the subconscious.

The second group of works\(^2\) is categorised thematically as ‘Memory Series’ works and explores the way in which we contextualise past experience when we interpret new signs. These works are comprised of real objects: suitcases containing everyday household objects such as bottles, tin openers and scissors. These recognisable objects act as metaphors for the past experiences which we ‘carry’ around with us.

**Similarity and Association**

The works that are categorised by similarity and association consist of six large pinprick stippled drawings\(^3\) (2003)(Fig. 26), nine light boxes containing small pinprick stippled drawings\(^4\) (2003)(Fig. 27) and one video installation, *Death of the Author* (2003).

I will begin by discussing the pinprick drawings because, despite differences in scale and image, they are all connected through the use of light as a visual medium. Both series of pinprick drawings highlight the relationship between a recognisable image and the viewer’s relationship with the original object\(^5\). In these

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\(^1\)The first two works are intentionally untitled. The third work is *Death of the Author*.

\(^2\)Memory 1, Memory 2, Memory 3, Memory 4, and Memory 5.

\(^3\)A locket, a woollen glove, an iron, a hammer, a camera and a coffee pot.

\(^4\)A showerhead, two different types of tin openers, a camera, a saw handle, a teapot, a Doc Martin boot, a colander and a clothes peg.

\(^5\)The works consist of blank white sheets of paper covered in pinpricks that form contours of the arbitrary household objects listed in footnote 3 and 4. The image’s existence depends on the combination of the pinpricks and the light projected onto the paper, rather than on a conventional positive mark i.e. graphite on paper. Each work represents a transient quality evoking fleeting thoughts and ideas.
works I have been concerned with how conventions create our reality and influence the interpretation process, resulting in the possibility of multiple meanings (as discussed in Chapter One). In order to visually explore the relationship between a sign and its meaning, I have chosen to depict individual objects which the viewer must attempt to recognise by first looking at the dots which create implied lines that, in turn, form the contours of the object. In the series of large pinprick drawings each object stands alone, while the nine light boxes are displayed as one unit and can be read in relation to one another.

I find it useful to discuss the pinprick drawings in relation to René Magritte’s The Treachery of Images (1929)(Fig. 28) and The Key to Dreams (1930)(Fig. 29) in order to highlight how the slipping of semiotic relationships, between the representation of an object and the object itself, occurs. I make reference to Magritte as not only is he one of the first artists to explore the relationship between the sign and its signification, but his images have also been applied to post structuralist theories through the writings of Michel Foucault. Sturken and Cartwright (2002:15), in their discussion of visual literacy, refer to Magritte’s work in relation to how we construct the world around us. They point out that in The Treachery of Images Magritte explores the relationship between words, objects and their ‘referent’ (the pipe) and, in doing so, he is analysing representation itself in order to see how words and images produce meaning in the world. Jacques Meuris (1993:132), in his exploration of this artist’s work, suggests that Magritte is exploring how symbols operate in relation to how the human mind constructs meaning, issues which I explore in my own research. Williams (2004:203), in his discussion of The Treachery of Images, claims that Magritte’s painting is not merely about the assertion that the depicted image is not a real pipe because it is a picture of a pipe, but the belief that an object can be more than itself in that

\[\text{even a real pipe is not necessarily a pipe; in psychoanalytic terms, an object may be a fetish, a substitute for something else. Such a picture is thus a blunt statement of the fact that conventional reality,}\]

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6 Magritte made more than one version of Key to Dreams dealing with the same issues. However I shall refer to the 1930 example.

7 See Michel Foucault, This is not a Pipe with illustrations and letters by René Magritte, translated and edited by James Harkness (1983).
precariously supported by language, is an illusion; it invites us to contemplate the endless depths hidden beneath the surface of things.

The initial process of interpretation of an image, such as the pipe in The Treachery of Images, may be denotative, because the viewer must first recognise an object in order to ‘label’ it and classify it into an appropriate category; for example an object used for smoking that could either be categorised as a functional container for smoking tobacco or a decorative object representing maleness on the door of a public toilet.

In my series of pinprick drawings (Figs. 30-38) and (Figs. 39-44), I do not provide dense information through the use of colour, texture or a narrative and so the viewer has to make decisions about how they access and construct meaning in the work by ‘filling in’ missing information. Through the denotative process of finding similarities and differences, the viewer may find a recognisable object from the images that I have made. Once this task has been completed, they may stop engaging with the work. However, it is my hope that the viewer will then begin to associate the denotative factual information with his/her own experiences of similar objects and, thus, the images will begin to operate as connotative signs from which the construction of meaning and interpretation may stem. An example of this level of interpretation was provided by a viewer who looked at the image of a saw handle (Fig. 33) and told me that it reminded him of his grandfather. For this person the artwork no longer denoted merely an object, but had become a sign for something beyond itself, connected to the individual’s context.

Magritte’s exploration of the arbitrary nature of association in two versions of The Key to Dreams depicts objects (Fig. 45) which have been labelled without any logical denotative link. Through this process, Magritte problematises the arbitrary, conventional meanings we attach to symbols, highlighting not only the semiotic

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8 The viewer for example may attempt to make associations between what they see and what they know about that type of object, i.e. its function, where it is found or its relationship to an object in their lives. As none of the objects have enough detail to be a specific object in a specific place, the viewer, through association, must add this information. Given that there is no ‘final’ and ‘correct’ interpretation for the work, associations which the viewer might make will be purely arbitrary and connected to their own personal experiences.

9 The French word *la Neige* means *snow* in English. This word therefore, has an arbitrary connection to the image of the hat as signifier.
slippage between an object and its representation but also the semantic slippage between objects and languages. Meuris (1993:129) explains Magritte’s seemingly illogical choice of signs as follows:

It is not what the picture shows that matters, but what it suggests. Reconstruction of a form of language: juxtaposition of unexpected objects, combined or not as the case may be with written words, paradoxically bestows quite different meanings on things which at first sight appeared quite unambiguous.

The concept of the juxtaposition of arbitrary objects has been explored in my series of nine light boxes which each contain an image of an object (Figs. 30-38). All nine light boxes are placed together so that they form one unit. The objects are thus seen in relation to one another and establish the expectation that they are connected in some way or that they form a cohesive narrative. Unlike Magritte, I have not labelled the objects and so the viewer needs to provide their own caption. My intention is that by confronting the viewer with nine arbitrary objects which have no practical relationship to one another, s/he may attempt to find ways of grouping objects together by classifying similarities. The criteria for the grouping will depend on the viewer’s context, for example, kitchen implements as opposed to garden tools, or large objects as rather than small objects. A sign is interpreted in relation to what is placed on either side of it, whether in spoken words, written sentences or visual images. Each sign in the chain of meaning is viewed through all the others to form a system of layers which is never exhausted. Consequently, no sign has a finite meaning as we keep finding another concept or object to link it to, a process that Derrida (cited in Webster 1990:105) termed dissemination (as mentioned in Chapter One). The relationship between the nine objects in the light box installation may thus result in chance associations.

In the above mentioned light boxes, each object is cropped by the edge of the format. Thus each viewer is obliged to ‘complete’ the contour by ‘filling in’ the missing denotative information. The criteria for selecting what is similar are not fixed, and this may result in each viewer seeing different objects as they attempt to find the similarity between the contours that they see and an object that they know.

I showed the image of the showerhead (Fig. 32) to three individuals; the first saw a
microphone\textsuperscript{10}, the second saw part of a watering can and the third saw the showerhead.

It is not my intention that the viewer find the ‘correct’ object as I, like Brenner and Boshoff, have intentionally made artworks which attempt to make viewers aware of how meaning is generated, rather than simply concentrating on the possible meaning itself. As discussed in Chapter Two, Brenner does not want the viewer to merely find ‘a copy’, rather she wants the viewer to engage further with her artwork, through connotative association, in order to find an appropriate meaning. My work operates in a similar manner as I, too, am not merely making ‘copies’ of household objects. Nor am I concerned with ensuring that viewers attempt to find out why I have selected certain objects in these works, rather my work encourages the viewer to explore the dynamic relationship between what they see and differing contexts. The signs that Brenner uses in order to direct the viewer towards finding a human subject in her work include texture and colour; signs that operate by means of association at both an indexical and symbolic level. In my artworks, I intentionally leave out texture and colour, thereby encouraging the viewer to ‘fill in’ the images’ possible colour and texture in relation to their own personal experience of a similar object.

In Chapter Three I explored how Boshoff alters the relationship between code, convention and context as a means of challenging conventional interpretation processes. Boshoff does this by using a variety of codes which cause the viewer to ‘get lost’. In order to create an awareness of the role of context within the interpretation process I, however, provide very sparse semiotic information. For example, I have intentionally not ‘labelled’ these works with a title. Ernst Gombrich (1982:142) explains that “[t]he chance of a correct reading of the image is governed by three variables: the code, the caption and the context”. My work requires the viewer to provide their own context and caption (title) for a set of very limited codes. The object that the viewer is reading may have the shape of something they know but it is made in such a way that it reinforces the fact that it is not the actual object that is evoked but rather a trace or a memory of it. It is this

\textsuperscript{10}This person is a sound engineer.
trace that sets up associations as the viewer needs to consider how they recognise the object and where they might have seen such an object before. In this way, the trace may trigger a variety of memories connected with the object.

In the video installation Death of the Author I attempt to visualise various processes that I believe take place in the mind as we read. The work consists of a number of ‘pages’, each of which comprises a continuously changing combination of written text and blank white spaces which define a shape. The nature of the shape is directly related to the texts and these ‘white’ shapes only exist in the spaces in which there is no text (Fig. 46). When the information on one ‘page’ merges into the next ‘page’, the shape also ‘morphs’ into another shape (Figs. 47-50). The concept underlying this artwork is that when we read, we form images in our mind of the signified concepts that we are reading. I have thus chosen to depict text which constructs images, for example, the text which forms the tap is from a DIY book on how to install a tap. I do not, however, intend the text to be read separately from the image because, together, they act as a metaphor for the process of conceptualisation when reading.

Interpretation is often influenced by the social or cultural context which, according to Barthes (1988:170), results in each individual interpreting a text slightly differently. In Death of the Author, the images formed by the text have minimal detail and, therefore, encourage the individual reader to ‘fill in’ the rest of the details using their own social and cultural experiences.

Barthes (1988:170) explains that when we read a text we are not reading this text in isolation but are rather experiencing it in relation to all other texts that we have

11This work was developed from my reading of Barthes ‘The death of the author’ (In: Lodge 1988).

12Once again I limit the detail in the image, making it a silhouette. I have made the image neutral in colour associations.

13The text consists of extracts from a variety of books, some fiction, others non fiction e.g. short stories from Gabriel García Márquez and Katherine Mansfield, an extract from Lewis Carroll, an information pamphlet on Doc Martins, instructions on how to prune a rosebush from a gardening magazine and extract on plumbing from a DIY book.

14The objects are: a tap, a coffee pot, a teapot, a Doc Martin boot, garden shears, a light bulb and a lamp.
ever read and that these texts meld into one another. In *Death of the Author* I have attempted to create a metaphor for this process by making each text fade into the next as each shape morphs into the following one. This explores how information becomes distorted and changed as we interpret it. Barthes (1988:170) continues by explaining that the texts which impact on one another originate from a variety of sources. The texts in *Death of the Author* were selected from a variety of arbitrary sources, such as novels (from different eras and cultures), magazine articles and pamphlets. This selection aims at evoking the idea that our minds contain a variety of arbitrary information which is continually being added to and which is used to interpret the next sign that we encounter.

Through the use of animation and the morphing of one image into the next, I attempt to show that interpretation is not a separate or isolated process but rather a process which is altered by what we already know and which impacts on what we will interpret in the future. Thus, each reading of a particular text is a new reading. *Death of the Author* is animated as a metaphor for the ever changing nature of thoughts. My experience has been that, as I read, my mind jumps from one concept to another, encountering a range of different signs, in order to construct meaning in a text. The human mind contains multiple memories and ways of connecting experiences to what is being read. It must be remembered, however, that in order to make sense of a text it is necessary to place parameters on this process in relation to what is being read.

**Memory**

I am also concerned with meaning in relation to temporality and, thus, I have made a series of works based on the influence of memory on interpretation. The works which fall in the category of memory include a series of four suitcases: Memory 1 (2004) (Figs. 51-52), Memory 2 (2004) (Figs. 53-54), Memory 3 (2004) (Figs. 55-56) and Memory 4 (2004) (Figs. 57-58) and one installation made of deconstructed clothing Memory 5 (2005) (Figs. 59-60).

Crowther (1997:13) explains that:
Memories…do not come ready-made; they are created through the reciprocity between our knowledge of facts about the past, and our capacity to realize these through the exercise of productive imagination. They exist as memories only when they are re-created in the present; and in each new present of re-creation, their character as particular memories is given new meaning and inflection by their shifting position in relation to the ever changing whole of the subject’s experience. Indeed, through being explicitly remembered, a particular memory actively influences the developing whole.

From the above quotation, it can be seen that each time an event is remembered, its re-interpretation will be different because it may change or be distorted in relation to new information that now exists in an individual’s subconscious. John Storey (2003:84) explains that, during the act of remembering, meaning is made in relation to current events. The past, therefore, only exists in terms of present situations and knowledge and, hence, memories do not only contain a clear recollection of the past but are intertwined with the present.

Through my manipulation of four suitcases filled with found objects¹⁵ I attempt to create metaphors for memory. Unlike the first series of works discussed above, I use real objects to represent events and concepts from my past. I have, however, altered and, at times, mutilated these objects to show how memory distorts and changes events and opinions resulting in the instability of meaning. Storey (2003:84) explains that “[w]hat we remember does not stay the same; memories are forgotten, revised, reorganized, updated as they undergo rehearsal, interpretation, and retelling”.

The first distortion that I make is to take away all reference to colour by painting both the suitcases and the objects inside them white. The reason for this is that memories are not always accessible, and lose their definition and detail. We ‘fill them out’ by adding information from our present situation.

The next alteration that I make is to warp both the objects’ physical form and the physical process of viewing them. I use this approach as a means of showing that memories are not separate events but seep into one another. When we

¹⁵The objects consist of a variety of household items from second hand shops and my house. They are arbitrary everyday items which we use or with which we come into contact with e.g. bottle openers, tin openers, shoes, scissors, pens, buttons, bottles.
remember a particular event it may trigger another memory which may have no logical, temporal or factual connection with the initial memory. Memories do not remain distinct and clear because one memory might overlay or impact on another memory, thus affecting how we experience the past. We are able to experience a multitude of ‘pasts’ in a single moment because, according to Pinker (1997:294), the imagination has neither physical nor temporal limitations. I use a variety of techniques to visually create metaphors for the way in which memories are connected and become distorted.

In **Memory 1** use real objects but bury them in wax. Hence, only parts of the objects are recognisable, allowing for uncertainty when identifying individual objects. Although the suitcase still has hints of its original purpose, the wax has softened the edges and it is no longer functional. The suitcase operates as ‘a container’ of memories in which nothing is distinct because all the household objects are seen in relation to the wax. The uneven application of the wax, together with the fact that it contains indexical impressions of the application process, further enhances the metaphorical nature of the artwork: the rough surface makes interpretation of the sign as a suitcase more difficult, while the indexical impressions form links with the past, for example, it is possible to see the brush marks made when applying the wax.

In **Memory 3** I present moulds of objects, made from gauze, which are joined together. The gauze is not rigid and, while still making reference to the original form, the new objects have no definition (Fig. 56). The gauze objects are merely visual traces, or memories, of objects or events and interpretation is further complicated by their juxtaposition with other objects. In this way the object is a metaphor for the manner in which memories of the past are continuously mutating. Memories blend into one another and lose their individual distinction, just as the depicted objects meld into one another and are difficult to recognise.

Memory cannot be recalled as a distinct individual experience because memories become interlinked. According to Pinker (1997:294), memory contains fragmentary images and we “recall glimpses of parts, arrange them in a mental
**tableau, then do a juggling act so as to refresh each part as it fades**”. In a similar vein, Crowther (1997:13) states that:

> Particular moments of experience do not come with exacting delimiting frames. They form a continuum such that, in recalling an experience – even from a few moments ago – an element of indeterminacy and partial arbitrariness has already entered. This element is consolidated as further moments pass.

Hence, when we attempt to access the past, we do not have a clear image with which to work because memory has distorted and faded it. I draw on this notion in Memory 4 as I attempt to evoke how memories meld into one another resulting in a change of understanding and knowledge, influencing how we reinterpret and event. I have cut out the ‘inside’ of various items of clothing, leaving only the seams, so the deconstructed remains become intertwined with one another and, thus, their unique characteristics have been lost and the specific garments are no longer easily recognisable.

As a means of creating a metaphor to show that memories are often inaccessible and unclear, I manipulate the physical access to the objects inside the suitcases of Memory 1 and Memory 2. Wilhelm Jordaan and Jackie Jordaan (1984:562) explain that “[a]ll the information in long term memory is available, but only some of it is accessible”. In Memory 1, the objects are separated from the viewer by a piece of Perspex, partially covered in wax. The only access to the objects below is by looking through a clear space on the Perspex which forms the silhouette of a pair of pliers. The objects are thus seen in relation to the pliers (Fig. 52), just as a new event is interpreted in relation to past memories. The past and the present become mixed as “interpretation will always be…informed by current attitudes and beliefs [and] not from the perspective of the context of the original memory” (Storey 2003:84).

In Memory 2, physical access to the objects is denied as the household objects can only be observed as reflections. The viewer has to look through a wide-angle lens into the suitcase (Fig. 53). A mirror has been placed on the interior base of

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16This clarity is a metaphor for the clarity of the present moment (clear), experienced in relation to the past (distorted). The memories (the objects) from the past are beneath the present concept/image (the pliers) and thus shape the interpretation of what is experienced in the present.
the suitcase and the household objects are suspended from the lid. The viewer’s attention is focused on the reflections of the objects, although some of them only appear on the periphery of one’s vision (Fig. 54). The objects themselves are thus both physically and visually inaccessible. The reflections are intended to act as a metaphor for memory, as memory is not an original experience but rather a re-experienced ‘copy’ of the event. As has been mentioned, human beings are able to recall memories of specific events but they are altered by new knowledge and understanding gained from the present. In Memory 2, I attempt to show that facts themselves do not constitute meaning “…but how the ‘facts’ are interpreted, how they are articulated to make meaning in the present” (Storey 2003:83).

Just as memories appear to be limitless, so too the information accessed during the interpretation process seems infinite. Bal and Bryson (1991:183) confirm this by stating that “contiguities go back in time forever, one chain joining another, ramifying outward like the branches of a vine, a vine the size of the universe”. In my Memory Series I have attempted to create a sense of this infinity in various ways. In Memory 2 the use of a wide-angle lens creates the impression that the interior of the suitcase is larger than the exterior and this, in conjunction with the mirror, produces a seemingly limitless space inside the suitcase. In Memory 3 and Memory 4 I have filled the suitcases with an excessive number of objects and amount of clothing, thus the suitcases can no longer store their contents (Figs. 55 & 57). My intention is to create objects that will assist viewers to contemplate the endless nature of memory. In Memory 4, the deconstructed clothing inside the suitcase is compacted into a central mass from which the strands of individual garments explode outwards and separate, thus becoming more recognisable as articles of clothing (Fig. 58). This serves as a medium for expressing the greater accessibility of recent memories as opposed to old experiences.

I have used suitcases for this series of works because I see them as personal containers for valued articles. Each suitcase is slightly different and contains different memories which can be packed up and carried away. While a purpose of all suitcases is to both contain the contents and protect them from public view, what is packed in a suitcase is a matter of personal choice. In my work the suitcases are containers for personal memories that cannot be completely shared
or explained. We all have an individual set of recollections and information that exists in the subconscious. Bal and Bryson (1991:187) refer to the importance of our own private memories stating that there are

private languages of memory and habit that reorder the dominant codes into secret configurations of desire and identity, codes that may or may not be revealed to another human being, codes whose nature may or may not be consciously recognised.

**Memory 5** is an installation comprising clothes; shirts, trousers, shorts and dresses, hanging in a room to form a defined rectangle (Fig. 59). Once again, I have cut out the ‘body’ of the clothing so that only the seams remain (Fig. 60). I chose to use clothing as a way of referring to the memories of an individual because a single garment is worn by an individual to different events over a period of time. Consequently, the collection of clothing in **Memory 5** embraces a collection of moments and all these moments combine to form an individual’s context. The installation is, thus, a metaphor for an individual’s total context.

Memories of the past are elusive and cannot be fully accessed. This is metaphorically evoked in **Memory 5** by retaining only ‘outlines’ of the clothing so that these objects represent fragments of memories which are both timeless and fleeting. I use only black garments as memories lose their definition and detail and the blackness operates in a similar way to the way in which white operates in the suitcases in **Memory 1** to **4**. Once again the details have been removed except for traces on certain garments such as a piece of lace or ribbon or a label.

The clothes are hung in such a way that many items of clothing are physically attached to one another. Once again I attempt to create a metaphor for the fact that no memory exists in isolation. As, during memory recall, the past and present become intertwined, I have constructed the work in such a way that it creates a ‘web’ of clothing, thus making it impossible to look at one item on its own. Crowther (1997:14) appears to allude to this particular facet of memory when he comments that

...there can be no present moment of perception or self-awareness except in so far as that moment can be defined in relation to an accumulating whole of other such moments. Each present state draws on and modifies a vast network of background beliefs, values,
and expectations, pertaining not only to an individual’s past and future, but also indeed, to counterfactual possibilities – paths which might have led to the present, but which did not in fact do so.

From my own experience, I believe that memory does not consist of linear chronological time when recalling a past event, and we can recall events from five years ago and five minutes ago simultaneously. Nor do we always know exactly how long ago something happened; we may generalise and say ‘when I was a child’ or ‘about five years ago’. Sometimes the order of events gets muddled when recalling them. Thus time seems to be ‘flattened’ within our memory.

In Memory 5, this ‘flattening of time’ is evident through the way in which the three dimensional construction can be viewed as a two dimensional line drawing in which the clothing is flattened into a grid of connected shapes. Storey (2003:84) states that “[t]he past is not preserved and recalled, it is actively and continually constructed in the context of the present”. When recapturing past events, time is ‘flattened’ into the ‘now’ in which we currently exist and the past is brought into this ‘now’. As Storey (2003:48) states “[t]o study memory, therefore, is not to study the past, but the past as it exists in the present”.

In Memory 5, the ‘negative spaces’ (cut-away sections) are often read before the lines (the seams), thus what does not exist becomes ‘solid’. The ‘positive’ lines and the ‘negative’ spaces play off against one another. Memories also contain information that is merely a wisp or a hint of something which we think we remember. The use of shadows and reflections on the walls of the installation space evoke the fading and thinning out of memories. Storey (2003:82) discusses the ‘untruth’ of memory when he explains that we make up our memories from what other people have told us, as well as from images such as photographs or ‘home movies’ that we have seen. Thus, our own memories are often intermingled and informed by other people’s memories.

Through this analysis of my work, I have attempted to show how my theoretical knowledge and my practical work have informed each another by constantly interacting, illustrating and explaining one another. Although I acknowledge that it is impossible to determine how my work will be interpreted, I hope that I have
created artworks that will encourage viewers to explore the relationship between external images and the internal images we use in order to create personal meaning.
Figure 26: Karin Basel. **Untitled**. 2003.
Figure 27: Karin Basel. Installation of Light boxes and Untitled Works. 2003.
Figure 28: René Magritte. *The Treachery of Images.* 1929.
Figure 29: René Magritte. The Key to Dreams. 1930.
Figure 30-32: Karin Basel. *Untitled* (3 panels). 2003.
Figure 36-38: Karin Basel. *Untitled*. (3 panel). 2003. (images converted to graphic grey scale)
Figure 39: Karin Basel. *Untitled 1/6*. 2003.
**Figure 40:** Karin Basel. *Untitled 2/6*. 2003.
Figure 41: Karin Basel. Untitled 3/6. 2003.
Figure 42: Karin Basel. Untitled 4/6. 2003.
(images converted to graphic grey scale)
Figure 43: Karin Basel. *Untitled 5/6*. 2003.
(images converted to graphic grey scale)
Figure 44: Karin Basel. Untitled 6/6. 2003. (images converted to graphic grey scale)
Figure 45: René Magritte. *The Key to Dreams.* (detail). 1930.
Figure 46: Karin Basel. Death of Author. (detail). 2003.
Figure 47-50: Karin Basel. *Death of the Author*. (detail). 2003.
Figure 51: Karin Basel. Memory 1. 2004.

Figure 52: Karin Basel. Memory 1. (detail). 2004.
Figure 53: Karin Basel. Memory 2. 2004.

Figure 54: Karin Basel. Memory 2 (detail). 2004.
Figure 55: Karin Basel. Memory 3. 2004.

Figure 56: Karin Basel. Memory 3 (detail). 2004.
Figure 59: Karin Basel. *Memory 5.* (detail). 2005.
Figure 60: Karin Basel. Memory 5. (detail). 2005.
CONCLUSION

*If meaning is producible only within an unstable field, then the relation of the self to the world and of the self to its own self-understanding are both, at best, provisional. Their ‘essence’ is to be constantly re-made, as the overall field of meaning itself undergoes reconfiguration. The self and its position in the world have no fixed centre; they are ‘ex-centric’. (Paul Crowther 1997:204).*

The above quotation summarises the concept that I have been researching for the past three years. I began this research based on my concerns with miscommunication, both socially and in the classroom. I originally looked at how we use language and questioned why misinterpretation occurs. However, as my research focuses on visual signs and I investigate how artworks are interpreted, I, like Potts (1996:18), came to realise the value of ‘unfixed’ signs. By analysing the process of interpretation we become aware that multiple meanings are possible. The value of art and literature is based on the fact that signs can be interpreted in many ways, keeping art and literature ‘alive’ and dynamic. Although this means that art and literature can be interpreted within a very broad context that appears to be virtually limitless, it is important to ground one’s reading of an artwork or piece of literature by researching either the artist’s/writer’s intentions or the specific codes which have been provided in relation to a variety of conventions. In this way one can create a framework from which to analyse the work and ensure productive interpretation.

Through my study of how different contexts result in slippages of meaning, I have come to the conclusion that such slippages have both negative and positive connotations. In the context of my role as a lecturer, it is important that my students and I understand each other’s contexts when encoding and decoding messages in order to reach a common understanding of the requirements of a particular academic course. However, in the field of both art and literature, the fact that viewers and readers will interpret texts in terms of their own context only adds to the universal quality of the text, thus ensuring its continued appeal and relevance to a wide range of viewers across time and space.
APPENDIX 1

Letter taken from PANSALB site:

In this letter the author discusses how his mother tongue does not have the necessary words for a contemporary lifestyle as new words are not being developed for new technologies.

I'm originally Zulu by birth but I did all my schooling in Sesotho primarily because the nearest school to my house was a Sesotho school and my mother was also a Mosotho. As a result I define myself as a Mosotho man and intend raising my daughter as one (even though my wife is Zulu!) I also speak fluent Afrikaans and one thing that I have noticed is that whenever there is a new word in English it takes no more than a month to see the development of the Afrikaans version. For instance I have noticed that Sesotho does not have a commonly accepted name for AIDS even though it is such a popular subject. Instead it is referred to as a virus! Another one is "table" which is called "tafole" in Sesotho. How is it possible that after more than 100 years of using the household item we still use a word borrowed from the Afrikaans word "Tafel"? What exactly are the researchers doing? I'm sure it will be difficult to encourage my daughter to speak a language that seems to have no progress. As much as she would be taught what a black & white cow is called, I'm sure she would be more interested in knowing what a "contact lens" or a "remote control" is in her language. I have a problem with names that describe rather than name an item. A cellphone is called "mohala wa lethekeng" (which means a phone that hangs from the waist). The problem is that it is no longer so. Phones are smaller and more compact and so that description is now outdated. The Zulu description is however more appropriate "makhala ekhukwhini" (A gadget that rings from the pocket).

As a Mosotho man I find it becoming increasingly hard to continue speaking Sesotho without being unable to express myself well. At one time Sesotho had beautiful names for things. One than comes to mind is "bolele" which in English means "algae", the green stuff that floats (or is seen) on the surface of stream waters and rivers. Come on bring us those words! And my new word? Seletsa masenke which means CD Player...


