

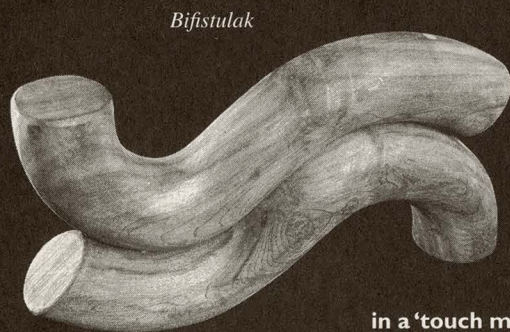
Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet*

Jeanne van Eeden



Blind Alphabet ABC, 1991-1995

Blind Alphabet was en-vised as a three-dimensional morphological dictionary and consists of 338 black mesh boxes, each containing a wooden sculpture. An essay in Braille on an aluminium sheet defining an abstruse or arcane word, explicates the enclosed sculpture. This strategy allows Boshoff to examine the complex relationship between signifier and signified, between word, concept and image. Each rigorously designed sculpture is an approximation or imaginative representation of a little-known word, for instance *calciform* (pebble-shaped). Boshoff plays with the confluence between text and texture, he offers clues to 'meaning', which is, however, typically deferred in a self-perpetuating network of intertextual associations. Boshoff (1997) is furthermore interested in the notion of access to information, and plays with the ideas of hermetic versus hermeneutic systems of knowledge. Thus to the sighted, who do not have access to the Braille texts, the boxes have an hermetic, sealed-off appearance, yet to the blind, *Blind Alphabet* is hermeneutic and an open system of sensible communication.



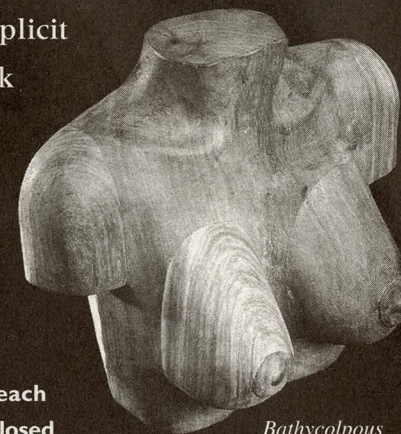
Bifistulak

in a 'touch museum' milieu in which tactile skills are prioritised over sight, where the fingertips of the blind can help the sighted 'to see' anew.

Boshoff's use of boxes, containers and layers of texts is a typical Postmodern device, and significantly the boxes in *Blind Alphabet* are semi-impervious, perhaps indicating the tantalising possibility of limited access. Neither can the boxes 'contain' meaning:

The installation resists the desire to contain and to hold. Bereft we grieve and come to understand the little we know, our illusory grasp of certainly and, finally, the constitutive health of limit and ignorance (Jamal 1996: 6).

Blind Alphabet by Willem Boshoff is a philosophical meditation on the nature of touch, sight and knowledge, and confronts sighted viewers with their own inadequacies in a world where sensibility is equated primarily with sight. Boshoff has challenged received notions regarding the privileging of sight over touch in many of his artworks, and this forms the explicit rationale for his installation *Blind Alphabet* (1991-1995, work in progress). According to Boshoff (1996) this work re-establishes the integrity of touch as a socially viable catalyst for interactive discourse. It sets up touch, in favour of sight by enabling, if not ennobling the state of blindness, and by disabling the sense of sight.



Bathycolpous



Barbated



Blind Alphabet ABC, 1991-1995. A morphological dictionary for the blind. Wood, steel, aluminium. Dimensions variable, height of each box: 73,5 cm



Bipectinate



Cetacian



Boustrophedon

Hence the artist's interest in defunct or obscure words, and the arbitrary and selective nature of knowledge and memory.

Boshoff implicitly alludes to the myriad connotations associated with the notion of loss (of meaning) and the state of being lost: 'it is this constitutive sense of loss, of being lost, which determines [his] being and method of art making' (Jamal 1996: 3). To illustrate this, he notes that the sighted frequently feel perplexed or overwhelmed when they are confronted with *Blind Alphabet* precisely because they can see the imposing magnitude of the work, whereas the blinds' loss of spatial perspective precludes them from feeling disorientated (Boshoff 1996).

Blind Alphabet is a profoundly cerebral exercise, yet the abiding impression is of its excellent craftsmanship and scrupulous attention to detail. It evokes the aesthetic category of the sublime, whether it be experienced through the hands and skin, or through the eyes. Through the mechanism of art *Blind Alphabet* challenges many of our preconceptions, and offers a discourse on the nature of mental and physical constraints.

Bibliography

Boshoff, W. 1996. Essay for Exhibition Catalogue: 23rd International São Paulo Biennial.

Boshoff, W. 1997. Personal communication, Johannesburg 23 July.

Jamal, A. 1996. Object lessons, in Willem Boshoff. *Blind Alphabet C Cocculiferous to Cymbiform*, catalogue for São Paulo Biennial, curated by D. Koloane, M. Martin, B. Dhlomo-Mautloa & C. Till.

Photography: Andrew Meintjies



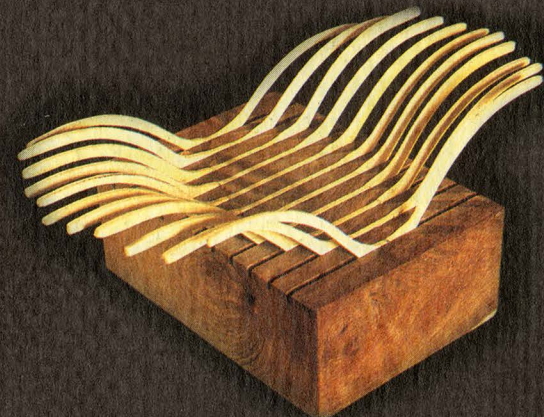
Calamiform



Bothrenchymatus



Compages



Ciliiform