

BIRMINGHAM MUSEUMS AND ART GALLERY

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ART AND THE BLIND

THE ARTWORK BLIND ALPHABET B BY WILLEM BOSHOFF

AT SIYAWELA: AN EXHIBITION OF ART FROM SOUTH AFRICA:

An art exhibition where normal vision is a disadvantage? As incredible as it may seem, this is Willem Boshoff's aim.

His **Blind Alphabet B**, on show at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is an installation consisting of ninety boxes concealing carved wooden objects. The pieces can only be viewed by sighted people with the aid of a visually impaired guide, who can interpret the Braille signs on top of the concealing boxes, lift the lids and give access to the objects inside. The blind are allowed to touch the display, the sighted are not.

In this exhibition, the sighted are the disadvantaged. Touch and language are the primary method of access to the objects on display, and the blind act as guides who will enable others by what they describe, and by allowing touch; - an *enabling* by the *'disabled'*. Boshoff inverts the visual tradition of the art museum where blind people are traditionally disadvantaged.

This work functions like a strange and massive book, a dictionary of different kinds of forms. It is a book that we can walk around in. So far, four chapters of the book have been placed in different parts of the world. Chapter one, discussing and displaying the 94 shapes that begin with the letter 'A' is placed in the South African National Museum in Bloemfontein, The ninety shapes of the letter 'B' is on display here in Birmingham, and the first half of the letter 'C' has found two homes, 77 sculptures from it will be placed in Atlanta, USA in 1996, and the other 77 are in the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.

The "blind language" is a language that the sighted would normally use to describe invisible, out-of-reach experiences to the blind. Here, that language is administered to the sighted. There exists a scientific language that describes forms and structures, a language sometimes used by microbiologists, botanists and heraldicists. The most expert sculptors and art critics do not really know the correct scientific terminology for what they are looking at. Who knows that

They are the experts of visual experience and the art gallery is the bastion of sighted display. The shapes 'news' to the unsuspecting sighted because *calceolate* means

'shaped like a slipper or pebble', or, that *bathycopous* describes someone that has a deep bosom. In this work, the blind do.

, *bothrenchymatous*, *apopetalous* which describe form, structure and texture. The Braille labels and the objects themselves explain these words, and the people who can learn and transmit their meaning within the exhibition are the non-sighted.

A blind person's highly developed sense of touch is the key to understanding what is on display. The blind are now empowered within the space of the art museum, they become critics of the tactile arts. To reflect this status of the blind as expert art interpreters, Boshoff suggests a new word for describing blind people, *chirosophist*. This means hand-wise or hand thinker, and tells us what such people *are*, and not, as in the case of the word *blind*, what they *are not*.

Boshoff's Blind Alphabet Project is a tangible morphological (or word-form) dictionary which, in time, will be complemented by a printed dictionary. The words in this dictionary are chosen according to four cardinal rules: they must deal with definitions for appearance, form, structure and texture; they must be recondite, arcane or abstruse; they must not be made up, that is, they must be recognised in the disciplines of science or culture; and the shapes designated by these words must be recorded in sculpted form. Boshoff carried out extensive background research identifying the words, and the method of producing (or explaining) them in three-dimensional form displays a similar obsessive work ethic. He began sculpting the project 1 January 1993 and committed himself to making one piece a day out of different types of wood, allowing Sundays and twelve holidays off. On the last day of 1993 he had completed 300 pieces representing words from A to C. By the beginning of 1995 he had completed 340 pieces.

At the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery installation ninety pieces are concealed within ninety black mesh boxes on top of metal bases. The boxes are displayed in symmetrical groups, allowing easy access between each group. To the sighted, the effect is of an impersonal military cemetery with rows of graves. The *chirosophist*, unlikely to have that negative perception, would probably appreciate the display more as a well-ordered reference library than a graveyard.

The bleak cemetery aspect is shocking to the sighted. It is uncomfortable to feel excluded and unwelcome in a space where one usually feels at home. The discomfort is exacerbated because the sighted are denied the means to engage with the display in order to understand it. The shock is one of exclusion. We, the sighted, are excluded because we do not have the skills to appreciate Boshoff's display. We have become blind.

Boshoff's aim in this installation is to engage with the space of the art gallery in such a way that new aesthetic values are established. He makes the aesthetic of touch as special an activity as viewing has become in the appreciation of any prized painting or precious artifact. In his own words, the sighted "are placed at the mercy of the blind touch-experts". This is an unusual and challenging experience for both sighted and *chirosophist*.

Jillian Carman
Johannesburg Art Gallery

Article adapted for use with Birmingham installation
Published under the title "Alternative Art", *Infama* (bi-monthly journal of the South African National Council for the Blind), April 1995, Vol. 35, No 2.

THE BLIND ALPHABET B

(above article very much abbreviated)

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us what such people *are*, and not, as in the case of the word *blind*, what they *are not*.

Jillian Carman, Johannesburg Art Gallery: Article adapted for use with Birmingham installation, published under the title "Alternative Art", in *Infama* (a bi-monthly journal of the South African National Council for the Blind), April 1995, Vol. 35, No 2.

**AN ART INSTALLATION FOR BLIND AND SIGHTED
BIRMINGHAM MUSEUMS AND ART GALLERY
CHAMBERLAIN SQUARE
BIRMINGHAM**

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Boshoff aims to invert the space in an art museum where blind people are traditionally disadvantaged because visitors are allowed to look but not touch (thus denying access to the blind who can only 'see' through touch). In this exhibition, the sighted are the disadvantaged. Touch is the primary method of access to the objects on display, and the blind are only visitors allowed to touch. The sighted have to experience the displays through intervention from the blind. This is the first aspect of what Boshoff calls his "blind language". The second is the hidden aspect of language itself - words that are so obscure that they probably only appear in the comprehensive Oxford English Dictionary (the one that the sighted require a magnifying glass to consult): words like *calceolate*, *bothrenchymatous*, *apopetalous* which describe form, structure and texture. The Braille labels and the objects themselves explain these words, and the people who can learn and transmit their meaning within the exhibition are the non-sighted.

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