

**Multiple images and the construction of meaning:
a study of multiple-image artworks,
with reference to Daina Mabunda's *Twenty rings*, Angela Buckland's
Block A Jacobs men's hostel and Ernestine White's *Memory wall***

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the significance of multiple-image artworks, in which a number of discrete images are presented to the viewer together as a single work. Daina Mabunda's *Twenty rings*, Angela Buckland's *Block A Jacobs mens' hostel*, Ernestine White's *Memory wall* and the candidate's own work are explored as examples of this type of artwork. The concept of fragmentation in visual art (particularly as a feature of modernism) is looked at, including the development of installation art. Theory relating to installation art is explored, particularly the ideas put forward by Claire Bishop in *Installation art* and Graham Coulter-Smith in *Deconstructing installation art*. Bishop's work on the role of the viewer in relation to the installation, particularly her concept of activation, is looked at. Coulter-Smith's response to Bishop's ideas and his work on deconstructive art as nonlinear narrative are examined. Concepts from literary theory dealing with fragmentation, and the role of the reader are also dealt with. Literary theory (particularly work by Bakhtin, Derrida, Kristeva and Barthes) provides different ways of responding to some of the questions at the heart of this research, namely: what constitutes reader/viewer engagement, what facilitates this type of engagement, and what is the significance of this type of engagement?

Keywords

Mabunda, Buckland, White

fragmentation, installation, activation, deconstruction, narrative, reader, viewer

Bakhtin, Derrida, Kristeva, Barthes

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Prefatory note

This dissertation is referenced using the Harvard method. In-text references provide the author's name, the date of publication and the page on which the information can be found. The bibliography at the end of the dissertation (see page 68) gives full details of the publication.

Illustrations appear in the body of the text, and a list of illustrations is provided at the end of the dissertation (see page 67).

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Chapter 1

Multiple-image artworks

This chapter will introduce the project and provide an overview of the topics that will be explored. The main texts which have contributed to the theoretical framework of this dissertation will also be introduced; these include art historical texts on the fragment in visual art, particularly in the twentieth century, and on contemporary installation art. Works of literary theory, and theory relating to broader concepts of signification, have also informed the theoretical framework of this dissertation. The methodological approach will also be outlined in this chapter. The significance of qualitative research methods will be examined in relation to the concerns and objectives of this dissertation.

Introduction

In the final year of my BA (Visual Art), I found that the idea of pieces or fragments recurred in my studio work, either as elements within a work, or as a number of works to be viewed together. This preoccupation continued in paintings and drawings produced as part of my Honours degree, and continues in the work I am producing for my MAFA. As I had worked with a configuration of smaller works, I was interested in works by other artists which had been produced in a similar way. The works selected for this study have led me to seek a vocabulary for what these artworks achieve and for what I am trying to do with my work.

Mabunda's *Twenty rings* (2000) consists of twenty embroideries of beads on velvet in embroidery rings (see Figure 2). The embroidered images are diverse (an angel, a hennaed hand, a praying mantis) and there is no immediately obvious sense of what connects them. The manner of their presentation, however, with each image in the same media and format, requires the viewer to engage with the configuration of images as a whole. Buckland's *Block A Jacobs men's hostel* (2002) is a series of photographs of the interior of this Durban hostel (see Figure 1). Each photograph is captioned by a bed number – each image is of a particular resident or their personal belongings. The images include a figure wrapped in a blanket, a pack of playing cards, a rosary. The images are detailed, close-up views of personal spaces. As with Mabunda's work, Buckland's photographs are all presented in the same format and media. Again, the viewer is made to put together a complex, diverse range of images. In White's *Memory wall* (2003), fragments of text ('so important', 'silent swift thrifty', 'nothing

I'd like better') and images sourced from packaging and maps emerge from areas of freely worked colour (see Figure 3). As with the other works, each 'piece' of *Memory wall* is the same size, giving the impression of a coherent system. I will also be looking at examples of my own work produced towards the practical requirement of the MAFA degree (see Figures 4 and 5). These works in mixed media (mainly paint and pastel) on wood and canvas combine fragments of text with images taken mainly from floral printed fabric. Each of these works used as examples in this dissertation can be seen as setting up a dialogue, as each brings together a number of images and requires the viewer to look for the connections between them. In examining these works, this research will seek to generate possible answers to the problems of why artists produce multiple images, and how viewers relate to and make sense of multiple images. I will examine this method of working as one which has the potential to 'open out' the artistic process and to make the play and pleasure (not necessarily in the light or trivial senses of these terms) involved in producing an artwork available to the viewer. In addition to this, I will examine the concept of the productive work done by the viewer in terms of gaining meaning from a text. This concept has been informed by Roland Barthes' understanding of the role of the reader, as well as Hans-Georg Gadamer's view of textual meaning as ongoing.

The aim of this research is to examine the implications of constructing an artwork using a series of images, by looking at examples of works composed in this way and relating these to concepts of text and meaning in poststructuralism and related areas of philosophy and literary theory. Mikhail Bakhtin's work on dialogicity, V.N.Vološinov's concept of the 'bridge' between speaker and listener (1996: 74) and Jacques Derrida's theory of the 'infinite implication' which constitutes meaning (1978: 25) will contribute to the generation of a reading of the multiple image. Janet Maybin notes that the works attributed to Vološinov, a colleague of Bakhtin's, 'are believed by some critics to have been authored by Bakhtin' (2001: 64).

This chapter will look at the literature and the methodology informing this dissertation. The following chapter will focus on the viewer's engagement with artworks consisting of multiple images, through an examination of theory relating to installation art, and then a look at Buckland's *Block A Jacobs men's hostel* as an example of such a work. The third chapter explores plural meaning, looking at the concepts of deconstruction, *différance* and intertextuality, and exploring Mabunda's *Twenty rings* as an example of a work which sets up

a play of different meanings. In the fourth chapter, the significance of subjectivity and the particular unique view (from a particular vantage point) is explored, looking at White's *Memory wall* as an example of a work which speaks to these ideas. In the next chapter, the idea of an artwork's multiple meanings will be looked at in relation to that of dialogue, and I will look at examples of my own work in relation to these ideas. The final chapter will review each of these main issues (viewer engagement, plural meaning, subjectivity and dialogue) and look at the main conclusions gained from the investigation of these issues.

Literature review

I have relied on literature from various fields, but mainly from art history and theory (particularly looking at installation art, and the relationship between modernism and fragmentation), and literary history and theory.

The concept of a 'broken up' or deconstructed artwork is explored by Claire Bishop and Graham Coulter-Smith in their texts on installation art. Bishop is especially concerned with the role of the viewer in installation art, and Coulter-Smith responds to her work in putting forward his own reading of installation or 'deconstructive' art. These ideas will be addressed in the next chapter. Linda Nochlin's *The body in pieces* (1994) traces the idea of the 'broken' artwork in the history of western art. *The body in pieces* provides a sense of the development of the way in which fragmentation has been employed in visual art, and its relationship to socio-political changes (particularly from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century). Nochlin's work supports the texts on installation art by looking at fragmentation as part of a history rather than as an isolated phenomenon. Clara Orban's *The culture of fragments* (1997) focuses on early twentieth century art and poetry which is concerned with taking apart and reconstructing art. Orban's work also provides depth to the reading of contemporary deconstructive art, by looking at the way in which language and imagery have been deconstructed in the past.

The body in pieces begins with an examination of images of fragments as an expression of longing for the past in classical representation (Nochlin 1994: 7). The book focuses on images from the late eighteenth century and late nineteenth century. Nochlin looks at the French revolution as 'the transformative event that ushered in the modern period' (1994: 8), and sees this as the point where the fragmented image becomes less about longing and more

about destruction – celebrating rather than mourning the process of fragmentation. Nochlin suggests that this is where the fragment in art became a symbol of the ‘deliberate destruction’ of the past ‘or at least, a pulverisation of what were perceived to be its repressive traditions’ (1994: 8). Nochlin suggests that both ‘outright vandalism and...a recycling of the vandalised fragments of the past...functioned as Revolutionary strategies’ (1994: 8).

Nochlin examines Impressionism as another important point of departure, where fragmented brushwork was used, rather than the concealed brushwork which had largely been the norm. While artists had previously tended to work towards a particular kind of realism, the Impressionists began to explore and disrupt the painting of light and colour. Instead of adhering to the traditional visual language, the Impressionists experimented with other means of representing visual experience. Nochlin looks at van Gogh and Cézanne as artists who worked with cut off picture planes and fragmented space respectively. Nochlin also examines the rise of collage during the early twentieth century, describing the ‘cutting and cropping’ and ‘joining and suturing’ involved in collage as part of ‘the struggle to overcome the disintegrative effects...inscribed’ in modern experience (1994: 53). Nochlin provides a complex reading of the fragment in visual art – examining it both as a symptom of and as a means of coping with the modern condition. This interest in taking apart the accepted visual language, our accepted means of representing the world, of playing with and reconfiguring what is ‘sayable’/‘paintable’, could be part of what motivates artists to use multiple interdependent images. The artworks I am looking at as examples in this dissertation were all made fairly recently, so this text has provided a sense of how contemporary ideas are related to earlier changes in society’s relationship to the past, and the way in which society makes sense of itself.

Like Nochlin, Orban suggests the importance of collage in relation to the ‘modernist break’ with tradition (1997: 5). Orban also examines the ‘intrusion’ of text into the picture plane which occurred in early twentieth century art, particularly in collage (1997: 2). Orban suggests that this intrusion demanded a different kind of engagement from the viewer (1997: 2). The viewer had to combine reading and viewing, and resolve the relationship between the two sign-systems (Orban 1997: 2). Orban focuses on futurism and surrealism as continuations of the cubist project, where fragmentation was a ‘central mode of artistic production’ (1997: 7). Orban also describes how the artists involved in these movements employed ‘a praxis of disruption’ where ‘logical sequencing’ is negated and ‘connections

must be supplied by the reader' (1997: 4). Orban cites Roger Shattuck's description of works which, in order to be completed, 'demand the spectator's active collaboration in pursuing developments and associations that have been...suggested' (1997: 5). In a sense, meaning is withheld from the viewer. Orban describes the 'destabilising effect' of the fragmentary image on the viewer (1997: 7). In the works under discussion in this dissertation, there is not a clear sequential link from image to image. For example, Mabunda's *Twenty rings* is presented in a circular format. The viewer does not look at Ring 1 and move on to Ring 2, but rather follow their own 'route' in looking at the works. Even in Buckland's *Block A Jacobs men's hostel*, where the images are presented in rows, which the viewer may be likely to read in a linear sequence, the linearity is disturbed by the fragmentary images. Rather than showing the viewer a kind of mugshot of each bed or space in the hostel, Buckland focuses on different details and textures in each image.

Graham Coulter-Smith, in *Deconstructing installation art* (2006), examines a similar concept in his discussion of Bertolt Brecht's theory of the *verfremdungseffekt* (2006: ch.2 p.2). Brecht's 'distancing' or 'estranging' effect works to draw attention to the fact that the narrative is a narrative, a construction (Coulter-Smith 2006: ch.2 p.2). A narrative is established, but then 'broken' in some way. Brecht's intention, in using the *verfremdungseffekt*, is 'to enhance people's consciousness not only of the constructed nature of the narrative they are watching but also to suggest that it is possible to become passively immersed in one's everyday world' (Coulter-Smith 2006: ch.2 p.2). I think that Brecht's concern about passivity remains as relevant as ever. The ability to question narrative, to recognise narrative as such (not as something necessarily 'corrupting' or 'bad', but rather as a particular way of telling a story), allows us to choose what kind of narrative we participate in. If a narrative can be seen as such (rather than as an artefact of truth), the viewer can try to weight it up – to look for it in their view of the world, in their community's view, and to see if there is something valuable in it, or what could be limiting or destructive about it. Artworks with multiple images could use the format to explore the idea of views, narratives, as multiple possibilities.

Another idea that relates to this research is that of the viewer's agency, which Claire Bishop explores in *Installation art* (2005). Bishop suggests that the mode of exhibition of installation art requires the viewer to reconcile objects and/or effects like light or sound in a space (2005: 11). The fact that the parts have to be examined as part of one 'picture', she suggests,

requires a different kind of participation to that required by a two-dimensional work on its own (2005: 11). Rather than being able to ‘stand back’ and regard a work, the viewer is required to actively investigate the connections between the elements of an installation (2005: 11). Bishop also relates this dynamic to power relations, citing Erwin Panofsky’s argument that ‘Renaissance perspective placed the viewer at the centre of the hypothetical ‘world’ depicted in the painting: the line of perspective with its vanishing point on the horizon of the picture, was connected to the eyes of the viewer who stood before it’ (2005: 11). Bishop describes a ‘hierarchical relationship... between the centred viewer and the ‘world’ of the painting spread before him’ (2005: 11). Bishop suggests that artists ‘throughout the twentieth century have sought to disrupt this hierarchical model in various ways’ (2005: 13).

The concepts of fragmentation and of the viewer’s agency are of relevance to this study in terms of the correspondence between art and life – the flow or dialogue between them. A broken picture plane may correspond to a broken world, a world which includes contradiction. A smooth convincing picture plane may speak of a coherent (and in this way ‘knowable’) world. Bishop suggests this connection in outlining the concept of activation – the viewer’s interaction with an artwork may relate to their interaction with the world. Being asked to think critically in the context of an artwork may provide a model for critical thought in other contexts.

The concept of a ‘decentred’ subject is one aspect of theory which works to disrupt the hierarchical model of self and world which Bishop describes. Mieke Bal explores the idea of the decentred subject in ‘Dreaming art’ (2006). Bal examines the idea of the artist as a divided self, who, as such, cannot claim complete control over the work (2006 a: 3). This applies to the viewer as well. Where the artwork would provide the viewer with a centred, stable position in relation to the subject matter, here the viewer has to negotiate a relationship to the artwork – rather than stepping into someone’s shoes, the viewer has to find their own position in relation to the work. Bal looks at the concept of the ‘artist-dreamer’ and the play between the conscious and the unconscious in artistic production (2006 a: 33). In ‘Intention’ (2006 b), Bal looks at the limits of artistic agency. Bal writes that because art “‘works” across time’ the artist is ‘involved only part of the way’ and what ‘happens after the work has been made is not determinable by artistic will’ (2006 b: 237). Sean Burke examines the same concept in ‘Doubling the text’ (1992), when he traces Jacques Derrida’s arguments on intention. Burke suggests that Derrida recognises the existence and necessity of intention, but

questions what is perceived as its ‘absolutely determinable hegemony...over the communicative act’ (1992: 140). Burke writes that intention ‘is within signification, and as a powerful and necessary agency, but it does not command this process’ (1992: 141). In *Writing and difference* (1978), Derrida outlines a situation where both writer and reader take their place in a process of infinite recycling. Derrida looks at the processes of authoring and reading so closely that it becomes difficult to tell them apart – they make more sense here as aspects of one process. Derrida locates meaning in ‘the passageway of deferred reciprocity between reading and writing’ (1978: 11). Meaning here takes place in the space between writing and reading. This is a valuable concept for this dissertation as it provides a model for looking at the similarly deferred interaction between artist and viewer.

In the essay ‘Art and answerability’ (1990: 1-3), Bakhtin interrogates the coherence of ‘artist’ and ‘human being’. Where is the line drawn between ‘ordinary’ and ‘artistic’ activity? Bakhtin does not claim there is no difference between these activities, but rather that they make sense together. In the essay ‘Author and hero in aesthetic activity’ (1990: 4-256), Bakhtin explores the significance of unfinishedness in artistic production and in the construction of identity. Bakhtin suggests that as long as one regards work and life as ongoing (rather than as utterly resolved), one remains capable of going further. In ‘Epic and novel’ (1981), Bakhtin explores the epic as a form which is ‘finished’ and therefore unquestionable – not open to debate. Bakhtin contrasts this form with others (particularly the novel) where concepts may be left open to discussion. Bakhtin uses Socratic dialogue as an example of a form where the content is always subject to questioning. This content is susceptible to change, to chance – it is not ‘walled off’ in the way that Bakhtin suggests the epic is. Ernestine White’s *Memory wall* explores the artist’s identity through memory (Perryer 2004: 406), but this does not seem to take the form of concrete expressions of self, but rather attempts at finding what Kristeva calls ‘a little more truth’ (1980: ix). White seems not so much to demonstrate her identity but rather to involve the viewer in the question of identity. There seems still to be uncertainty as to a ‘final self’, a final truth about self. This places the viewer in a different role than just a passive audience – they are asked to do more than witness, but to also participate in a debate.

Barthes’ *The pleasure of the text* (1976) and *The rustle of language* (1986) have influenced my understanding of reading. Barthes’ concept of the text does not seem limited to written texts, although this is where it begins, and seems valuable in looking at art. Barthes’

understanding of reading provides a useful model in looking at the role of the viewer in visual art. In *The pleasure of the text*, Barthes looks at how poetic language can break up or otherwise disrupt the rules of language in order to explore meaning. In *The rustle of language* Barthes suggests that this ‘broken’ discourse keeps a work from positing a final meaning. It maintains its openness and remains susceptible to interpretation, to reading. This view is valuable in looking at how a multiple-image artwork could work. How does Buckland’s use of multiple images in *Block A* compare to producing one ‘summary’ or ‘whole’ image of the hostel? Buckland does not put together a panorama – the images do not represent continuous space, but rather fragments of the space. In this way, the work acknowledges its fragmentary nature – it sets out to present pieces of a place, rather than a whole picture. In ‘Word, dialogue, and novel’ (1980: 64-91), Julia Kristeva explores the concept that ‘the minimal unit of poetic language is at least *double*, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but rather, in terms of *one and another*’ (1980: 69). Here Kristeva explores the absence of ‘one’ in poetic language, where there can only be more than one meaning. Kristeva, like Barthes, looks at poetic language as a ‘breaking’ of the rules of discourse. Kristeva describes this in terms of the transgression of one, the skipping of one (1980: 70). Rather than using a word to express *only* its ‘logical’ or denotative meaning, this logic is passed over, forfeited, in favour of its associative meanings. White’s *Memory wall* could be seen as entering into this dialogue between the logic of ordinary discourse and what Kristeva terms ‘carnavalesque language’ (1980: 70), building on Bakhtin’s understanding of how literature can establish a space where ordinary rules are transgressed, as the carnival does. White’s inclusion of text from advertising asks the viewer to skip its denotative meaning. The words ‘silent swift thrifty’, for example, are not easy to read as encouragement to use a particular product – their literal or original meaning is not legible in this context. If the words are not used as a direct description, what function do they have in the work? In this way, White seems to play with, to break the logic of everyday discourse (of advertising in this case). White removes, in a sense, the text’s literal meaning, opening it out to different associative possibilities. Mabunda also incorporates images from packaging in her work, but in the process of embroidery these images are reworked into the artist’s own language in a different way to White’s prints. Mabunda removes the image from where it ordinarily belongs and rewrites it, puts it into a sentence where it can no longer be read only in terms of its ordinary logic.

Methodology

In describing monological discourse, Kristeva writes that the ‘dialogue inherent in all discourse is smothered by a *prohibition*, a censorship, such that this discourse refuses to turn back on itself, to enter into dialogue with itself’ (1980: 76). Methodology, an exploration of method, seems to offer a means of turning discourse back on itself, allowing discourse to question itself and its methods. In this way, the discourse can form part of a dialogue and can include dialogue. This dissertation aims to maintain an openness to different logic than its own, as it can only outline a part of what is taken as its subject matter. By exploring the ways conclusions have been made, these conclusions can remain questionable – they are not independent, absolute entities but are rather pieced together in different ways. Considering methodology allows the constructed nature of the conclusions made in the study to remain evident. We can ask why the pieces were put together in such a way, whether it is productive to do so, what such a method allows for and what it makes impossible.

Hennie Boeije writes that qualitative data analysis involves ‘segmenting and reassembling the data’ (2010: 16). This concept of taking data apart and putting it back together again is of relevance to this dissertation on various levels. On one level, creating images can be looked at as segmenting experience – or perhaps segmenting the subject matter. Presenting these images as a whole can be seen as reassembling the data. Photography is a useful example of this – in taking a photograph one can represent a ‘piece’ of experience, a view. Angela Buckland’s *Block A Jacobs Mens’ Hostel*, for example, involves the artist gathering together the data, the pieces, she has collected. The artist, like the qualitative researcher, sets a particular aspect apart by focussing on it, and then brings it into a relationship with other aspects which have been set apart in the same way. This holds true for the viewer too. The viewer may pay attention to a particular image, but also looks at the installation or collection as a whole, looking for connections between images, for what is similar or different about them. Another way in which this concept relates to this dissertation is in terms of the way in which this research has been conducted. Reading has been the basis of much of the research for this dissertation. In reading and taking notes, one is engaged in this same process of taking apart and reassembling. One goes through the text, isolating and noting particular aspects or fragments. Then, in writing, these fragments are brought into a relationship, are made coherent in some way.

Boeije also writes that qualitative methodologies offer ‘the opportunity for participants to describe the subject of their study in their own words and to do so largely on their own conditions’ (2010: 32) and that ‘it is the researcher’s interpretations that constitute the results’ (2010: 150). Qualitative research also affords space for a subjective reading of a topic. Gillian Rose suggests that this is a means of looking into ‘audiencing’ (2001: 189) – the practice of being an audience – without employing techniques such as interviews. John Hartley writes that ‘a methodological bias in favour of generalisable findings pushed the social sciences towards what became known as empirical audience research. This favoured large-scale sampling using surveys, focus groups...and other methods that might yield quantifiable results’ (Hartley 2003: 127). Rose presents subjective experience as an alternative to these methods. In *Foucault*, Deleuze writes that the ‘struggle for subjectivity presents itself...as the right to difference, variation and metamorphosis’ (1988: 105). What qualitative research appears to allow is these possibilities of difference and change – to read a topic in a different way to another reader, and to change one’s reading. This makes it possible for the researcher to view their understanding of the topic as changing and unresolved, and affords the possibility of establishing a dialogue – there is always room for another perspective as one’s own view cannot be the whole view.

In Rose’s *Visual methodologies*, the issues of subjectivity and truth (in relation to methodology) are raised. Stuart Hall suggests that a subjective approach is inescapable in looking at visual art as ‘there is no law which can guarantee that things will have ‘one, true meaning’, or that meanings won’t change over time’ (Rose 2001: 2). Hall suggests there is no such thing as a correct answer to the question of what an image means (Rose 2001: 2). In this context, one’s response is one of many possible responses, none of which will be correct. The value of one’s response is the value of a contribution to a conversation, as opposed to that of a potentially correct answer.

In examining the works by Mabunda, White and Buckland, and in relating them to relevant discourse, a range of methodologies will be used. One of these will be formal analysis, involving an examination of each work’s visual appearance in terms of its formal elements (such as the kind of line, colour and composition used). As this research takes a compositional technique as its starting point, formal analysis will be a useful approach.

Discourse analysis is a methodology which focuses on ‘text, intertextuality and context’ (Rose 2001: 135), and is useful for this research in terms of this concern with the relationships between texts. The challenge of this research is to explore such relationships at various levels – the relationships between the small texts which constitute the larger text of the artwork, the relationships between various relevant theoretical arguments and the relationships between the artworks and the theoretical arguments. Discourse analysis is most useful to this study in terms of providing concepts of how language works in everyday life, so that this can be compared with how visual language works and how it is applied in the artworks considered in this dissertation.

One such concept is that of the difference between a transactional and interactional view of language (Brown and Yule 1983: 1-3). A transactional view looks at language in terms of its purely ‘functional’ role, where information is simply transferred from speaker to listener (1983: 2). An interactional view of language starts from language’s role in establishing and maintaining social relationships (1983: 3). What kind of view does a particular artwork require? Does it set out to transmit a particular message? Does it have a role in social relationships?

Another relevant aspect of this theory is the difference between the view of text as a product, and as a process (Brown and Yule 1983: 24). The ‘cohesion’ view looks at the text as a product - at how elements are linked together to create a text. This is perhaps the kind of view which formal analysis takes – examining an artwork’s elements and the way in which they have been brought together by the artist. Looking at text as a process, however, involves looking at form ‘not as a static object, but as a dynamic means of expressing intended meaning’ (Brown and Yule 1983: 24). Charles Guignon explores the idea of the meaning of an artwork as an event (2003: 38). Guignon suggests that an artwork’s meaning is open to interpretation and for this reason never stops unfolding – it can always be interpreted again and differently (2003: 38-41). This dissertation will aim to look at both the ‘static’ elements of the artwork, as well as questions of interpretation.

The theory of discourse analysis also offers the concepts of reference, inference and co-text. Reference here is the act of referring to the world, and inference, the act of filling in the gaps in this received information (Brown and Yule 1983: 28-33). Brown and Yule suggest that there are certain conventional connections which we are used to making, which are termed

automatic, while others are non-automatic, requiring us to negotiate a connection (to infer) in a more conscious way (1983: 46). How does this relate to the way in which we interpret artworks? What kind of references does the artist use and what kind of inference does this require from the viewer? The concept of co-text relates to the way in which the preceding or surrounding text affects the reading of a particular word or term (Brown and Yule 1983: 46). Barthes looks at this relationship in his description of the 'syntagmatic relation', where different signs are brought together and combined to create meaning (1982: 217). This idea informs the way in which the construction of meaning will be explored in this dissertation.

Chapter 2

Multiple images and viewer engagement

This chapter will examine Bishop's concept of activation in relation to the viewer, Coulter-Smith's definition of deconstructive art and Barthes' understanding of the productive role of the reader. The focus of this chapter will be how the viewer relates to an artwork consisting of multiple pieces. These ideas will be looked at in relation to the kind of engagement demanded by *Block A Jacobs men's hostel*.

Activation

Bishop writes that the 'need to move around and through the [installation] work in order to experience it *activates* the viewer, in contrast to art which simply requires optical contemplation (which is considered to be passive and detached)' (2005: 11). Bishop's suggestion is that the 'whole picture' is not made immediately available to the viewer in installation art and that the viewer needs to move through it to be able to gain a sense of the whole. Rather than being presented with a whole image, the viewer needs to go in search of it. Coulter-Smith picks up and develops this concept in his definition of deconstructive art (2006: ch.2 p.1). Coulter-Smith supports Bishop's view that installation works can facilitate a more complex sensory experience, but suggests that it is the experience of trying to fit different elements together which is more crucial than physical movement and sensory involvement in themselves (2006: ch.2 p.1, ch.4 p.1).

Bishop sets up a divide between art requiring 'optical contemplation' and art that asks the viewer to move through a space. What kind of passivity and activity are at issue here? John Hartley investigates some of the difficulties involved in examining the passivity or activity of the viewer. Hartley writes that the 'idea of active audiences gained ground when cultural studies challenged the prevailing assumption that watching TV was passive, but in this instance active too was an abstract idea' (2003: 127). This challenges the idea that the viewer only receives information, rather than constantly forming a response to it or understanding the information through their own experiences. Rather than writing off the way in which people interact with TV (in this instance) as purely passive and unproductive, a critical approach exploring possible interactions is adopted.

‘Active’ here is read as ‘actively making sense of the communicative content of media’ (Hartley 2003: 127). Hartley examines the problems with making generalisations about viewer activity or passivity, in looking at how audiences have been studied in various disciplines. Hartley writes that viewers ‘had a bit of work to do, such as decoding, but what that practice comprised, how long it took, using what internal and contextual resources, and how it fitted into their own purposes and reflexions, were harder to study...questions of what exactly *happened* in encounters with texts, and how the moment of sense-making (if it was a moment) could be captured for analysis, were never fully resolved’ (2003: 127).

Hartley suggests that in some ways, the viewer’s experience stays out of reach of analysis. Coulter-Smith also investigates the distinction between audience passivity and activity, suggesting that the viewer’s experience is not determinable as viewers take different (unpredictable) experiences away from the same artwork. Coulter-Smith suggests that the reader/viewer’s ability to produce significance is completely ungovernable – that it does not adhere to any restrictions or limits as to what it *should* find significance in (2006: ch.2 p.2). If one takes this idea seriously, Bishop’s concept of activation makes sense more in terms of potential rather than necessity – by asking the viewer to move through an installation, the artist can potentially provide (or contribute to) an experience which ‘activates’ the viewer in some way – which brings them to engage with the text in a meaningful way. There is no guarantee that a viewer of installation art will experience it as meaningful, and no certainty as to which texts any given viewer will experience as meaningful.

In responding to Bishop’s concept of activation, Coulter-Smith examines the dichotomy between art which only appeals to the viewer’s sense of sight and art which appeals to more of the viewer’s senses (2006: ch.1 p.1). Coulter-Smith argues that visual perception is not so easy to disentangle from ‘bodily and spatial sensibility’ (2006: ch.1 p.1). Coulter-Smith suggests that if visual perception cannot be neatly set apart from other sensual perception, it is very difficult to draw a line between optical and physical engagement with an artwork (2006: ch.1 p.1).

Another aspect of the issue of the viewer’s activity or passivity, Coulter-Smith argues, is that of distance (2006: ch.2 p.2). What distance is kept between the viewer and the narrative of the artwork? Is the viewer completely immersed in the work, or does the viewer look at the

work from a definite distance? Coulter-Smith refers to Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* where the aim is to bring about the viewer's estrangement from the narrative in order to disturb what could otherwise be a passive, unquestioning involvement with it (2006: ch.2 p.2). Brecht's rationale is that learning to recognise narrative as such allows the viewer to look at narratives in everyday life and take up new positions towards them – to become activated. Brecht wants viewers to recognise constructions as constructions rather than seeing them as given, as unalterable (Coulter-Smith 2006: ch. 2 p.2). A construction can be taken apart, fall apart or be otherwise altered.

The fracturing or dispersion of the elements of an artwork could be seen as a means of 'distancing' the viewer from the work – it could be a way of making the constructed nature of the work obvious. Coulter-Smith suggests that the narrative set up by an installation could also work in the opposite direction, providing an immersive experience which pacifies the viewer in the way in which Brecht argues that narrative can (2006: ch.2 p.2). Barthes describes Brecht's consciousness of the convincing nature of what is continuous. It is 'the *smooth*, the *sustained*, the *successive*' (Barthes 1986: 216) which is most likely to convince, to be taken for truth. Art's work, as it is understood here, is to disrupt and cut up all that is absolutely convincing, to subject it to questioning. Questioning here is an infinite process, not something that functions only as a means to an end but is an ongoing approach. It does not function within limited areas, but completely freely – the whole smooth structure is exactly what critical art seeks to disturb.

Deconstructive art

Coulter-Smith describes Bishop's 'observation that installation art presents the viewer with fragments that must be explored and assembled in a manner that 'activates' the viewer' (2006: ch.1 p.1) and builds on this concept. Coulter-Smith looks at deconstructive art – art which presents the viewer with a number of fragments to reconcile in some way – as a form of nonlinear narrative (2006: ch. 4 p.1). Coulter-Smith suggests that works which do not present the viewer with elements with an obvious sequence or immediately evident connection can be seen as nonlinear narrative, as they require the viewer to construct, to make up, the narrative which ties the separate elements together. Coulter-Smith suggests that there is no clear line between linear and nonlinear narrative (2006: ch. 2 p.2), but rather that

they are a means of describing the way in which one interacts with a work and what kind of interaction a work may set in motion.

The productive role of the reader

Barthes writes that ‘the goal of literary work...is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text’ (1976a: 4). This concern with the role of the reader is similar to the interest in viewer experience which emerged in installation art of the 1960s (Bishop 2005: 10). Barthes’ reader actively makes sense of the text, rather than receiving it passively. Furthermore, Barthes suggests that the reader’s engagement with the text is ‘an act of desire’ (Emerling 2005: 72). This concern with the viewer’s intention – the viewer’s subjectivity and agency – makes it impossible to see a text’s meaning as stable. It becomes impossible to track or measure the production of meaning in any definite or absolute way (as Hartley points out) if this production is in the hands of the readers. Who has engaged with the text? What came of each engagement? Barthes suggests that these are not answerable questions, that the text ‘answers not to an interpretation...but to an explosion, a dissemination’ because ‘the text is that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject...in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder’ (1986: 64). Barthes’ ideas here seem to relate to Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and Voloshinov’s concept of a word as ‘territory shared by both addresser and addressee’ (1996: 74). Barthes’ main argument in this appears to be that in engaging with a text, one is already involved in the production of its meaning and cannot step outside this space in order to make an objective statement (a ‘judgement’). Barthes does not seem to be suggesting that one should not express one’s opinions, but rather that one needs to acknowledge one’s own ‘complicity’ in the communicative situation initiated by the text. Observations are made from somewhere inside the space of interaction with the artwork.

This sense of implication is emphasised by Barthes when he suggests that the reader/viewer’s engagement with the text is an ‘act of desire’. Seen in this way, a reader or viewer has to go inside the narrative space set up by the text in order to gain a sense of what the text is, what it says. Voloshinov writes that a word is ‘a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee’ (1996: 74). These

theorists focus on engagement as central to meaning - the meeting between the agencies or subjectivities of the artist and the viewer, writer and reader, speaker and listener. Stephen Watson suggests that desire opens up a distance, a longing (2010: 19). This distance asks to be crossed, and communication is what can cross it, bridge it (Watson 2010: 19). The production of meaning here depends on both the artist and the viewer's desire to 'talk', to engage.

Bakhtin also looks at perception as 'an act of authoring' (1990: xvi). In Bakhtin's work 'the individual subject is conceived as similar to the artist who seeks to render what is *not* an artwork in itself (independent of the artist's activity) into something that *is* the kind of conceptual whole we can recognise as a painting or a text' (1990: xvi). The work of everyday experience, of perception, Bakhtin suggests, is 'the struggle to effect a whole out of the potential chaos of parts' (1990: xxiii).

In Bakhtin's work, there is no such thing as passive contemplation – contemplation, perception is necessarily 'active and productive' (1990: 24). Bakhtin bases this idea on the 'ungiveness' of experience (1990: xvi). Experience, according to this view, does not come to us as 'given', as ready-made, so that each person has to constantly make sense of the world according to the information available to them. Both Bakhtin and Brecht are concerned with the idea of becoming confined to a particular construction or view, where there is no space left for different possibilities – a state Bakhtin refers to as monologism (1984: 286). To work against this, Brecht looks to ways of breaking the audience's engagement with the narrative in order to let the audience have a clear view of the fragmentary (put-together) nature of what appears to be such a smooth whole. Bakhtin looks to dialogue as a means of becoming free from limitation to one particular narrative, and becoming conscious of different narratives.

The value of being open to other narratives is equivalent to the value of the other, in Bakhtin's work. Bakhtin frames this in terms of vision. I am unable to see myself as a 'whole' person, but I am able to see others as whole people, as complete figures. Bakhtin terms this inability to see oneself a 'lack of seeing' and the ability to see others an 'excess of seeing' (1990: xxvi). We can only get a sense of our wholeness from others, who can see us as such. In turn, we can provide others with a sense of themselves as 'wholes'. Remaining limited to one particular view restricts this exchange of vision. It may mean that an

individual only has their own view of themselves to go on, or only a view of themselves from one particular viewpoint – this is not ‘all’ of what they are, it is how they are seen from one point. Equally, an individual may lose the possibility of empathising – of exchanging their view with that of another person, and lose the ability to see a person as another experiencing subject. In Bakhtin’s work the concept of dialogue is ‘a recognition of the constant need for exchange’ (1990: xli).

Relating to multiple images: *Block A Jacobs men’s hostel*

Buckland’s *Block A Jacobs men’s hostel* (2002) is a series of photographs of the personal spaces of the residents of this Durban hostel. Buckland uses details of the hostel residents’ beds, the residents themselves and personal effects to give a sense of everyday life in this space.

The images are displayed in three strips along the wall, with a little space between the strips but no gaps within the rows. As with a strip of negatives, there is a sense of both flow and fracture – each moment is cut off from the next by the frame, but there is still a connection running through the images. Here there is a sense of narrative established by the sequence of images, the linear way in which they are displayed. However, this narrative also drifts and changes focus – there is not a definite move from A to B with each subsequent image.

The bed number which captions each image gives a sense of the ‘depersonalised’ hostel space. Like prisoners, the hostel residents are referred to here by number not by name. Buckland also dedicated a frame to each bed, so the presentation of the work mirrors the official divides of property and identity. This contrasts with the attention to particularity in the images – the details of someone’s life – the bald patch on their mattress, the things they use every day, the traces they leave. The sense of uniformity is undone by this concern with ordinary human life – these are people who sleep, iron their clothes, comb their hair, pray, play cards. If this installation can be said to ‘activate’ the viewer, in the way suggested by Bishop, what kind of activity does it challenge the viewer to participate in? A photograph of a frayed mattress cover, for example, is unlikely to make the front page of a newspaper – it does not elicit an outraged reaction. It does not disgust or horrify the viewer and it does not

give the viewer enough distance to condemn or pity the actions related to it. It relies on synecdoche, on quiet inference, on suggestion. It suggests the passage of time, sleep, pattern and routine, poverty. It is not a poverty to be horrified by, but rather one a viewer might recognise or imagine as a personal experience. The main thing these images seem to ask of the viewer is to recognise the humanity of their subjects.

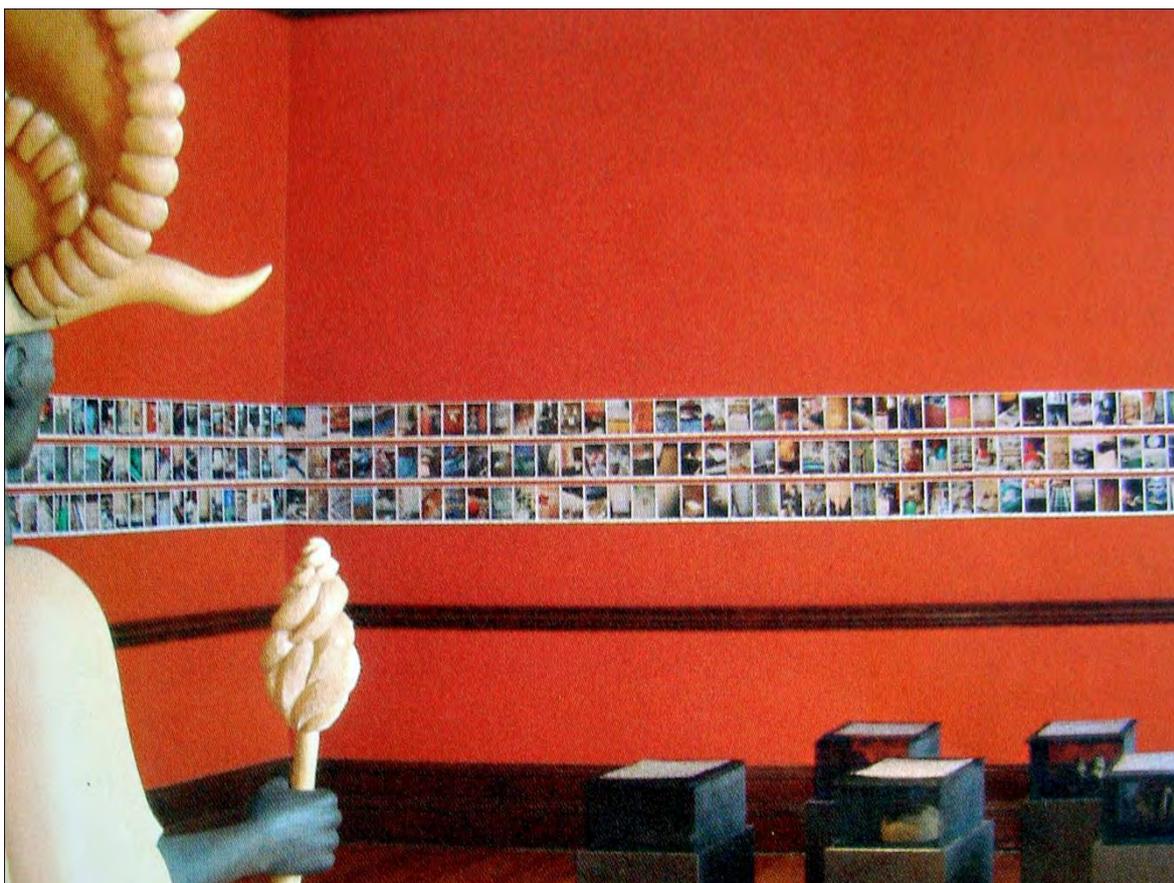


Figure 1 Angela Buckland. Installation view: *Block A Jacobs men's hostel*, 2002. Machine jumbo prints. Durban Art Gallery. (Brown 2004: 7)

Njabulo Ndebele writes that ‘the ordinary is defined as the opposite of the spectacular’ (2006: 46). Ndebele suggests that the representation (or re-representation) of the ordinary can create an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the ordinary experience of others, rather than setting one apart from the others represented (as in spectacle) (2006: 46). Ndebele, in tracing the shift in South African literary representation from the spectacular to the ordinary, writes that where ‘before the South African reality was a symbol of spectacular moral wrong, it is now a direct object of change’ (2006: 46). Rather than being paralysed by horror, or called to

arms, by the spectacle of another's suffering, the viewer is required to look at another's experience closely, looking at the details, recognising themselves in the other – the similarity of basic human needs and experiences. There is not a spectacle – there are no clearly defined roles for villain, victim and hero. The viewer of this installation is not activated in the sense of being recruited, or moved to make a donation, but rather in the sense of being challenged to engage with other people as such, as people.

The amassing of details gives a sense of the complexity of the lives of the people represented in this work. Ndebele writes of how a work can 'break down the barriers of the obvious in order to reveal new possibilities of understanding and action' (2006: 46). The attention to detail may challenge a viewer to rethink their concepts of the represented experience. In writing about Joël Matlou's short story 'Man against himself', Ndebele describes how the detailed intimate description of a mine worker's subjective experience requires the reader to deal with the character as someone complex and unique rather than as a 'typical' mine worker (2006: 47). The reader is not provided with an archetype, or stereotype but a person who suffers, thinks, desires, guesses, dreams. Buckland's images function in a similar way. These glimpses of hundreds of lives provide no final resolved 'type' or template, but rather a number of different answers to the question of what it is to live in the hostel. This may be an experience which is fairly alien to some viewers, and could provide a model for engaging with what is unknown about the experience of others. Buckland's images linger on the small things – handwritten words, the way the light falls, a fold of fabric. This attention to detail allows the viewer to look closely at a world which might otherwise be understood according to generalisations.

Buckland's *Block A Jacobs mens' hostel* is presented in a way which suggests a linear narrative – it is literally linear, presented in 'strips' like film stills or comics where one might expect a sequential flow from frame to frame. To some degree the images stick to this concept as each image refers to a particular hostel dweller's space. However, Buckland's approach also upsets this linearity by letting go of any sense of progression or uniformity. Buckland's focus on different details of life in the hostel goes against the kind of official anonymity established by the idea of bed numbers and the linear presentation of the images. The attention to particularity gives an intimate, closely observed sense of personal spaces. Buckland's approach allows for a sense of the ordinariness of everyday life in this space.

This provides the viewer with the possibility of identifying with the people whose spaces are represented, without seeking a specific response from the viewer.

Conclusion: multiple images and viewer engagement

In this chapter Bishop's concept of a distinction between art which engages the viewer only visually, and art which requires physical participation too was explored. Concepts of viewer activity and passivity and difficulties with gauging what counts as an active, and what counts as passive were also looked at. Coulter-Smith's consciousness of the importance of distance in considering viewers' activity or passivity was examined. Coulter-Smith uses Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* as an example of how art can try to maintain a distance between viewer and narrative, rather than providing a completely immersive experience which may not ask the viewer to question the narrative's logic. Coulter-Smith looks at deconstructive art – art which asks the viewer to reconcile disparate elements – as nonlinear narrative. This form of narrative interrupts itself, breaking up and scattering linear or sequential logic. The viewer is left to draw together different elements into something coherent.

Barthes views the reader as a producer of the text – as someone whose work is productive and contributes to what the text is, rather than only receptive and basically irrelevant to the text's meaning. Barthes also looks at the reader as essentially complicit and involved in a text's meaning, rather than as someone who can step right outside of the text and see it in a purely objective way. Bakhtin views everyday perception as authoring, as a kind of conceptual shaping. Voloshinov understands communication as essentially reciprocal, as always involving a 'me and you'. There is no way for words to be disentangled from this reciprocal situation. If this is applied to other communicative contexts, it problematises the concept of authorial or artistic control. This control can only be partial – the rest of the meaning is in the hands of the 'receiver' of the text.

For Bakhtin, the significance of the essentially reciprocal nature of all forms of communication is the way it makes other perspectives available to the individual, who would otherwise be limited to one view. For Bakhtin, the other acts as an author – able to fill in the context of the individual from their own point of view, in a way in which the individual

cannot. Likewise, the individual authors the other – viewing them as they appear from the individual's perspective, able to see the other in a way in which this other cannot. The other always has something that the individual does not have their own access to, and the individual always has something the other cannot access on their own – so there is always something to exchange. This exchange is inexhaustible. Applied to the context of art, the artist always needs the viewer and the viewer always needs the artist if meaning is to be gained from art. I think the main significance of Bakhtin's arguments is that speech is never made 'for no one', or cut off from a desire to communicate, to exchange. This makes it impossible to see the artist as an author in an absolute sense, someone who makes work which requires no response of any kind – a work which is complete in the instant of its completion by the artist, not requiring any audience to give it meaning but being its own complete meaning. Barthes looks at the reality of authoring as basically the opposite of this – the author creates a hollow, in order for it to be filled by an audience – 'to write is to permit others to conclude one's own discourse, and writing is only a *proposition*' (1972: 278). The artist, in this case, needs to be understood as proposing, suggesting – and the work is a means of communication, an expression of the need to exchange ideas (rather than something which comes with a completed fixed meaning attached).

Chapter 3

Plural meaning

In this chapter I will look at how the theory relating to deconstruction, *différance* and intertextuality may inform the reading of artworks composed of multiple pieces. The play of meanings within the artwork will be considered here as a space for the viewer to become involved with the production of meaning and for the artist to reveal their subjective experience. *Twenty rings* will be examined as an example of a work which sets up a play of different meanings.

Deconstruction

The main aim of deconstruction appears to be to upset the apparent coherence of texts, by tracing aspects of the text which disturb its overall logic. The deconstructive reading appears to be motivated by a resistance to or wariness of determinate meaning in a text. Sean Burke writes that deconstruction ‘as criticism...finds its own voice in the hollow of an Other’s’ (1992: 152). Deconstruction, as understood here, is always a taking apart of another’s text – a response to a text which subjects the construction and coherence of the text to questioning.

Donald Preziosi describes deconstruction as ‘the practice of reading elaborated in the work of ...Derrida beginning in the 1960s’ (2009: 271). Preziosi examines deconstruction as Derrida’s development of Heidegger’s concept of *destruktion*, a critical approach to tradition (2009: 271). *Destruktion* describes an approach to tradition which is ‘both detached and attached’ (Preziosi 2009: 271) – which is both critical of and closely connected to its tradition, and more specifically uses tradition itself (that learned from tradition) in order to question it. Deconstruction follows from this, describing the process of investigating ‘the contradictions...that haunt an appearance of unity’, and ‘thinking with it, using its own language’ (Preziosi 2009: 271). As Burke suggests, this is the other’s language – deconstruction takes shape as a response, a critical continuation.

M. A. R. Habib suggests that, in literary criticism, deconstruction is mainly seen as ‘a way of challenging interpretations of texts based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning’ (2008: 100). Rather than

exploring a text's mirror images of stable phenomena, a deconstructive reading involves the examination of representations of phenomena which are not assumed to be 'stable'. Does the text represent the world in stable terms, and if so how and where? What kind of oppositions are set up in the text? What stabilities do these oppositions rely on? These are the main questions a deconstructive reading appears to raise (Habib 2008: 106-107).

Deconstructive readings are not restricted to consciously deconstructive texts. Alex Thomson writes that, in literary criticism, deconstruction has sometimes been looked at as 'a way of reading and accounting for what specific experimental literary works seek to achieve' (2006: 314). This view of deconstruction, however, defuses what is most 'disturbing' about it (Thomson 2006: 314). It resists or overlooks the idea that deconstruction is 'at work even in the most apparently banal or old-fashioned literary text, and beyond literature, not only in every text, but in reality itself, the opposition between them no longer being absolutely determinable' (Thomson 2006: 314). In this case the divide between literary criticism and literature itself is unclear. Thomson suggests that 'deconstruction is interested in literature as a specific example of that general structure which Derrida calls writing' (2006: 314). Here deconstruction does not have a definite place as either a critical or creative practice as, in Derrida's work, responding to texts and creating texts are not clearly separable processes. Gordon Graham describes how the deconstructive approach has been pursued in literature, and suggests that this appears to be just as easily translatable into visual and performance art (2005: 241). Peter Brunette and David Wills suggest that deconstruction is useful for visual art because of its critical stance towards fixed meaning (1994: 4). Derrida writes that 'language always entails a "spacing"...that works, by definition, at a remove from its producer. For communication to occur, words must travel' (Brunette and Wills: 3). This travel opens the message up, taking it out of its context. This is art and literature's shared situation – writing is read at a geographical, temporal, cultural remove from the situation in which it is produced, in the same way that art is usually viewed in a different context to that in which it was produced. Even if it is viewed or read right where it was made, just after it was made, the work is still 'out of context' because of the absence of the author. Even if the author is present, they cannot speak for the work in the same way that the work speaks for itself.

Derrida explores the idea of multiple theses or positions being set out in one text (1995: 22). The aim of deconstruction appears to be to work against what Derrida calls ‘the logic of ‘only’’ (1995: 23). Derrida suggests that logocentrism involves the idea of absolutely stable meaning which originates from ‘absolute authority’ (Habib 2008: 101). Derrida suggests that logocentrism is the sanctioning of one particular meaning, which is sanctioned and set above the realm of doubt or debate (Habib 2008: 103). Deconstruction’s project is to question and explore what is ‘non-negotiable’ – what is closed and decided, or taken for granted in a text (Habib 2008: 103). Deconstruction’s main concern seems to be surrendering a text’s ‘known’ or fixed meaning, and instead exploring its inconsistencies or uncertainties – the unanswered questions in it.

The space of plural meaning

Derrida uses *différance* to describe ‘the play of difference’ (1982: 5) in a text. Derrida plays on the meanings of ‘differ’ and ‘defer’. The deferral here refers to the open-ended play of possible meanings – the proper or final meaning is put off. Derrida suggests that ‘*différance* can refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings’ (1982: 8) and it also refers to the configuration of the meanings of other words and texts. *Différance* is used to describe the range of a text’s potential meanings. Habib writes that the theory of *différance* ‘derives partly from Saussure’s concept of “difference” as the constituting principle of language: a term is defined...by its differences from other terms’ (2008: 105). Here, every idea is made sense of not in terms of intact complete identity, but rather in terms of a set of relations – its identity is dispersed within these relations (Habib 2008: 105-106). This is similar to the Socratic concept of truth (or identity), which Bakhtin pursues in constructing the theory of dialogism. In these instances truth is not inherently resident anywhere other than interaction, connection. In *Memory wall*, White appears to explore a similar form of identity. Rather than presenting the viewer with an unequivocal ‘this is me’, she seems to explore her identity in terms of her various connections, such as the Cape Town suburbs where she has lived (Perryer 2004: 406).

Habib suggests that in Derrida’s construction of the concept of *différance*, a new hierarchy is established – another binary opposition (multiple meanings versus fixed meaning) (2008: 111). It appears that this theory, along with others where such oppositions are involved (such

as Barthes' readerly and writerly texts), is most useful when these oppositions are read as potential qualities of a text, rather than categories to which texts must belong to exclusively. For example, it could be productive to explore readerly and writerly elements within one text, or set out to explore what is writerly about various texts. It seems that it would be unproductive, however, to classify texts and maintain a hierarchy based on this classification. Kristeva also explores the concept of a field of multiple, simultaneous meanings, describing this field or range as a 'continuum' or 'interval' (1980: 70). As Derrida looks at indeterminate meaning as something which undoes the 'logic of 'only'', Kristeva understands the '0-2 interval' as something which transgresses this 'monologic' (1980: 70). While Derrida positions *différance* as the alternative to logocentrism, Kristeva explores this 0-2 interval as an alternative to a view of the world in which meaning is fixed and one-dimensional. Poetic language, Kristeva suggests, disturbs the logic of 'one' – 'one' possibility. Kristeva suggests that poetic discourse involves multiple meanings from the start. Similarly, Barbara Johnson writes that 'as soon as there is meaning there is difference' (Derrida 1981: ix). Kristeva uses 1 to describe 'the linguistic, psychic, and social 'prohibition'' of other meanings than the one authorised meaning (1980: 70) – the denial or suppression of difference in favour of one particular meaning.

Barthes examines the difference between a word's 'use' and its 'work' (1986: 249). Barthes writes of Georges Bataille's view that 'a dictionary begins once it gives, not the meaning, but the *tasks* of words' (1986: 248-249). Barthes suggests that '*task* goes further', shifting our attention from the word's function 'to its work, to its delight...how the word "rummages" in the intertext, in connotation' (1986: 249). Here Barthes describes the move from a word's fixed meaning to the range of its potential meanings. Barthes emphasises the way in which a word points to other words, other concepts – it sets up associative paths, rather than being contained or fixed to one point of meaning. A word is understood here as a starting point from where ideas can follow in different directions, rather than as a complete contained meaning in itself. Similarly, Buckland's approach to her subject matter in *Block A Jacobs Men's Hostel* seems to involve an exploration of what it is to live in a hostel, without setting out to define the experience by summarising it. Each image is not 'a meaning' but rather the beginning of a range of meanings – a suggestion of possibilities.

Barthes insists on the unfixed nature of the text, stating that ‘a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash’ (1979: 146). Barthes moves away from the transactional view of communication (sender sends message, and receiver receives message without any change in the message’s meaning), to the concept of a communicative space where concepts are related. Barthes seems to use ‘text’ (as opposed to ‘work’) to describe this space, this fluidity of meaning (1979: 155-164). The text here represents the life of a ‘work’ – how it is imagined, thought of, what is made of it, what associations it sets up, what it evokes – everything that exceeds its literal meaning. Barthes writes that the ‘logic regulating the Text is...metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over’ (1979: 158). The way we make sense of texts, Barthes suggests, cannot be dictated. A single meaning cannot be spelled out, without creating the possibility of other readings. Barthes states that ‘the author never produces anything but presumptions of meaning, forms, and it is the world which fills them’ (1972: xi). This filling is an unlimited process, and ‘the Text practises the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory’ (Barthes 1979: 158). As with *différance*, there can always be another meaning in Barthes’ text – it cannot be deciphered and closed. Mabunda’s *Twenty rings* could be seen as an example of the open-endedness of textual meaning. In looking at this work I have never come to a definite sense of its meaning, but rather accumulated a subjective, provisional idea of what it means. It seems to defy definition by working with a logic other than that of definitions, as in Bataille’s dictionary where the meanings of words are not given, but rather their tasks – meaning here is located in a complex process of connection.

Kristeva distinguishes sign from symbol in an opposition similar to Barthes’ text and work. Kristeva suggests that the symbol represents the ‘signified object...through a restrictive function-relation’ (1986: 64), while the sign ‘evokes a collection of associated images and ideas’ (1986: 71). The symbol here conveys a conventional meaning – it could be compared with the concept of automatic connection in language (Brown and Yule 1983: 46). Automatic connection describes the way in which a listener might fill in a gap in the information they receive, but it is a conventional gap and a conventional way of filling it in. The ‘filling in’ is so familiar that the listener does it more or less unconsciously. In contrast, the sign does not have a fixed, learned meaning and requires a different kind of interaction –

meaning has to be constructed from the start, in some ways, rather than according to a template or habit. Kristeva writes that within the sign's 'field, new structures are forever generated and transformed' (1986: 71). Bakhtin explores these different modes of signification in his distinction between epic and novel. The epic form has a kind of legitimacy and certainty relating to its being situated in a known and experienced ('definite') past, while the novel tends to be situated in 'modern times' and does not always have a filled-in future – the future of the narrative may exceed the book, may be unknown. Bakhtin suggests that this inconclusiveness gives rise to an 'eternal re-thinking and re-evaluating' (1981: 31). The reader is not provided with a conclusion, with what definitely came of the events in the novel, in the same way that Kristeva's sign makes no immediate sense in itself – it needs interpretation, to be made sense of, rather than slipping automatically into a familiar kind of sense.

Barthes also considers this inconclusiveness to be central to the project of writing. Barthes describes the risk taken by the writer in writing (without providing a conclusion, without concluding) – it is the risk of asking a question (1972: 263). Barthes suggests that writing 'is only a *proposition* whose answer one never knows' (1972: 278). Rather than being able to make a statement, the writer here can only ask a question. Instead of being able to transmit a fixed meaning, the writer can disperse possibilities. This is a valuable activity in terms of thinking in a different way to dominant logic where necessary, such as when this logic results in injustice. Artists and writers can explore officially 'unacceptable' possibilities and provide a space where readers or viewers can further develop alternative ideas. For example, when a stereotypical view of a sector of society holds sway, art and literature can maintain a space in which the stereotype is always subject to questioning.

Kristeva also takes up Bakhtin's concept of the literary word as 'an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings' (1980: 65). This idea of a space rather than a 'point' of meaning seems important in the writing of Derrida and Barthes too, as *différance* and 'text' (the play, fluidity of the text) respectively. This concept of 'textual space' is the basis on which Kristeva pursues the idea of the poetic word as always in dialogue, always engaged with 'other' words, alternative possibilities.

Intertextuality

In the same way that the word can be seen as an ‘intersection’ rather than a point, the text itself can be seen as an intersection of other texts. Intertextuality describes this dialogue between a text and the other texts it refers to directly or indirectly – by quotation, by similarity, by difference – by taking another text to pieces, rejecting it, questioning it, rewriting it. This is Bakhtin’s dialogic activity – ‘questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting activity’ (1984: 285).

Bakhtin’s sense of dialogism informed the concept of intertextuality (Sotirova 2011: 192). From Bakhtin’s concern with the importance of an ‘other’ or competing voice or view within a text, comes the consciousness of texts’ complex layers of reference and interdependence. Derrida explores Claude Levi-Strauss’ dichotomy of *bricolage* – of piecing together from what is available – and engineering – creating from nothing, from the ‘beginning’ (1978: 285). Derrida suggests that discourse is *bricolage*, that is a way of rethinking what is already there, recombining what is already at hand (1978: 285). In terms of texts, no text here is an absolute beginning, but rather a rereading of other texts. The epigraph of the work, *Writing and difference*, in which Derrida sets out these ideas, is a line of Mallarmé’s which translates as ‘[all] without innovation except for a certain spacing-out of reading’ (Johnson 2009: 235). This places emphasis on the importance of this concept of writing as a form of reading other texts.

A space of exchange: viewer as artist and artist as viewer

If the writer is viewed as someone who rearranges existing texts, the artist can be seen as someone who rearranges existing images – putting existing images together in new ways, playing with the existing language of images. El Anatsui writes that the questions artists are asked by viewers usually ‘boil down to wanting to know what goes on in the artist’s mind...what is demanded is not a cut-and-dried answer – it clearly defies that – but rather an extension of an experience’ (1993: 39).

How can artistic experience be extended or opened out to the viewer? If we take Derrida seriously, if writing is a form of reading (or rereading), then we can also explore the reverse of this – reading as a form of writing. Bakhtin’s concept of perception as authoring, as

artistic activity (1990: xvi) is also relevant here. Here, the viewer is experiencing what it is to be an artist by reading the visual text and making sense of it, necessarily in relation to other texts (the immediate context of the work, all the works it may refer to and all of the works the viewer can relate this particular work to). In this sense a viewer already knows what is to make art, by interpreting art.

While all art may necessarily allow for an experience for ‘writing’ (producing an image), by being necessarily open to interpretation, Barthes describes an ‘unfulfilled technique of meaning’ which an artist can employ in order to consciously extend the text to the viewer – to intentionally leave the text to the viewer in some way (1972: 268). The artist/writer can do this by leaving their work in the form of a question – the meaning of the text is left ‘unfulfilled’ – still asking (Barthes 1972: 263). Barthes describes this process of leaving a text ‘open’, by referring to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, writing that literature ‘is Orpheus returning from the underworld; as long as literature walks ahead, aware that it is leading someone, the reality behind it which it is gradually leading out of the unnamed – that reality breathes, walks, lives, heads toward the light of a meaning; but once literature turns around to look at what it loves, all that is left is a named meaning, which is a dead meaning’ (1972: 268). Barthes suggests that by not stating a definite meaning, by not attempting to narrow the reading of the text to one fixed possibility or answer one’s own question in a final way, the text maintains a kind of poetic space in which meaning can ‘breathe’. Barthes writes that the writer ‘uses language to constitute a world which is emphatically signifying but never finally signified’ (1972: 268). Like Bakhtin’s novel which remains tied to the present by virtue of its inconclusiveness (1981: 30), Barthes’ ‘intransitive’ writing remains ongoing (1972: 268).

Coulter-Smith suggests that ‘every artist is also a viewer-reader’, because in the process of creating a work, the artist is confronted with this work which they read and reread (2006: ch.5 p.2). Coulter-Smith suggests that in responding to external texts, in rereading other texts, the artist also reads their own text, their own response. It is not that the viewer will have the same response as the artist to the text, but rather that the activity in which both artist and viewer participate in is one of reading a text, interpreting it in relation to other texts, following different associations. As Vološinov suggests when describing the word as a space

shared by speaker and listener (1996: 74), the text and its potential meanings is a space where both artist and viewer are engaged in the process of making sense.

A play of meanings: *Twenty rings*

Daina Mabunda produced *Twenty rings* as part of a collaborative body of work along with Bronwen Findlay and Faiza Galdhari, which was shown at the KZNSA in 2001 (Coombes 2004: 81). Mabunda and Findlay began working collaboratively in 1992 (Coombes 2004: 82). Mabunda embroidered images of birds, animals, flowers and other motifs with pale beads onto velvet. Annie Coombes writes of how embroidery rings usually ‘provide a temporary support’, but are used here as a permanent frame for the work (2004: 82). The works are displayed with one ring in the centre, with a circle of seven rings around it, and a larger circle of twelve images around these.



Figure 2 Daina Mabunda. *Twenty rings*, 2000. Beads, thread, velvet, embroidery rings. Durban Art Gallery. (Coombes 2004: 82)

Coombes describes the ‘promiscuous and ambiguous’ nature of Mabunda’s sources in the production of these images (2004: 83). Mabunda references diverse traditions of imagery. An angel from Giotto’s *Lamentation* (Coombes 2004: 82), an image of a hennaed hand and more abstract geometric designs are brought together in this configuration of images. Arum lilies, a praying mantis, a set of concentric hearts – Mabunda takes images without any conventional thread and arranges them in a pattern. In this way, Mabunda appears to allow for a kind of profusion of meanings. The title, *Twenty rings*, draws attention to the construction of the work rather than making any directions as to how it should be read. The complete meaning of the combined images is suspended, left to the viewer.

These images work as signs rather than symbols, in Kristeva’s definitions of these terms, where signs require the viewer to work more imaginatively in making sense of them, whereas symbols have a conventional way of being read. While the images in *Twenty rings* may be sourced from contexts where they function as symbols, with a fixed conventional meaning, such as the image of an insect adapted from insecticide labels (Coombes 2004: 82), they are cut off from this conventional reading by being brought into a different context, and translated into a different medium (in this case, embroidery rather than print). The way in which each image is translated into this medium and format, and arranged in a coherent pattern, sets up a kind of play between coherence and contradiction. While the embroidery rings limit and contain these images, they also make up what Coombes describes as an ‘ever-expanding circle’ (2004: 82), evoking an infinite process of association.

In this chapter, deconstruction’s concern with exploring what upsets or goes against a text’s internal logic was investigated, as well as how the concept of plural meaning has been explored in the work of Derrida, Kristeva and Barthes. The way in which a text is ‘made out of other texts’, and the way it maintains relationships to other texts, was examined, along with the idea of language as *bricolage*, as a process of adapting what is already available to convey something new.

Chapter 4

Subjectivity and meaning

In this chapter I will investigate the idea of the ‘incomplete’ representation and the ‘incomplete’ interpretation. This idea draws on the concept of knowledge as ‘relative’ and ‘perspectival’ (Burke 1992: 113). The idea of the finitude of vision as necessary to the production of meaning will be explored here. *Memory wall* will be examined as an example of an artwork which relates to ideas of subjectivity and the ‘incomplete’ view.

Situated knowledge

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that the ‘visible...can fill and occupy me only because I who see it do not see it from the midst of nothingness, but from the midst of itself; I the seer am also visible’ (1968: 113). Merleau-Ponty suggests that the solidity of things ‘is not that of a pure object which the mind soars over’ but rather that ‘I experience their solidity from within insofar as I am among them’ (1968: 114). In this reading, it is not possible to view the world ‘objectively’ – there is no detached vision, vision cut off from a viewer.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that concepts cannot be detached from being and ‘spread out on display under the gaze’ (1968: 119). The world is ‘knowable’, available to us as experience – we cannot extract the facts, pull them out of life, disentangle them. Knowledge, in this reading, is what can be gained from looking from particular points of views, from particular places in space and time. The viewer here is bound to particularity – they see the world from where they are. If they look closely at one object, they see that one object clearly and forfeit a clear view of other objects for that time.

This emphasis on perspective leaves the problem of everything which disappears from view. Merleau-Ponty writes that ‘the visible present is not *in* time and space, nor, of course, *outside* of them: there is nothing before it, after it, about it, that could compete with its visibility. And yet it is not alone, it is not everything. To put it precisely, it stops up my view, that is, time and space extend beyond the visible present, and at the same time they are *behind* it, in depth, in hiding’ (1968: 113).

Limits and vision

In Bakhtin's work wholeness 'is a kind of fiction that can be created only from a particular point of view' (1990: x). As with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of vision, there is no absolute vision, no vision without a particular person looking. Vision here is necessarily subjective, as is knowledge – it depends on a subject. The process of making sense requires a subject situated in the world, looking from a particular perspective. Bakhtin works with the concept that 'each of us occupies a situation in existence that, for the time we occupy such space, is ours and ours alone' (Bakhtin 1990: xxv). The limits on our vision allow us access to things no one else can see as we do, but also leave us blind to what is outside these limits. This 'uniqueness of the self' is 'the condition in which the necessity of the other is born' (Bakhtin 1990: xxv). By exchanging views with the other, the self can get a sense of the world behind its back (Bakhtin 1990: xxv). Rather than knowledge being 'mappable', available as a kind of summarised aerial view, knowledge here is understood as being based in first-hand experience (from a particular perspective) and in dialogue.

In Bakhtin's work, an individual as such only has access to knowledge within specific limits. At the heart of Bakhtin's conceptualization of this, is the way in which people see – it appears to be the central metaphor or image in his work. I cannot see the back of my head – I can glimpse it in a mirror but I cannot see it like another person can. Likewise, this other person cannot see the back of their head as I can see it. This basic condition, where we can see both more and less than each other, is what Bakhtin bases his sense of the importance of exchange, of reciprocity on. Dialogue is the means of mediation between limits in Bakhtin's work. The fact that an individual can share views with others mitigates the restriction imposed by being a particular individual who can only see within specific limits. Bakhtin bases his work on the uniqueness of the individual's knowledge of the world – its uniqueness is what makes it valuable, but is also what makes it need others. Rather than every individual having a full picture of the world, here each individual has a different view, and a fuller picture is something that needs to be produced with the help of others.

In Bakhtin's work this 'full picture' is always relative (1990: x) – something which cannot really be fixed. Bakhtin's sense of the value of the 'incomplete' view is set out in his 'Epic and novel' where he suggests that the novel retains a strong link to the present because of its own relationship to its present time (1981: 27). Bakhtin suggests that a novel can maintain a

kind of uncertainty or ambiguity about its future, which ties it to the context in which it is read, a present with its own uncertainty. This concept of an ‘uncertain’ or unfixed whole can also be seen in terms of Bakhtin’s response to Hermann Cohen’s understanding of the relationship between mind and world (1990: xiii). Hermann Cohen looks at the concept of mind and world as one essential entity (1990: xiii). Bakhtin works with this idea but problematises it – the unity of mind and world is worked with as a problem rather than as a given (1990: xv). Bakhtin appears to locate meaning in the *attempt* to make sense, in the space between mind and world, the space of exchange. Mind and world are not conceptually resolved into one, but remain two things between which there is a flow of exchange.

Subjective seeing

Dialogism is the confrontation of different views – at its centre is the idea of an interaction between self and other. In Bakhtin’s work, the other is ‘conceived not as an object in the outside world, but as another subject’ (Sotirova 2011: 5). In order to enter dialogue, I need to recognise the other as ‘another *I*’ (Bakhtin 1984: 286). Also, I need to recognise myself as an other (Bakhtin 1990: xxvi). This is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the relatedness of seeing and being visible – I can see you, you can see me. For Bakhtin, this basic recognition of a mutual but unique subjective experience is what makes dialogue possible.

Bakhtin writes that ‘with a monologic approach...*another person* remains wholly and merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness. No response is expected from it that could change everything in the world of my consciousness. Monologue is finalised and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive force*’ (1984: 292-293). Here, the other is only recognised as a seen object, not as a seeing subject – the shared situation of seeing is not accepted.

What does it mean for an artist to recognise the viewer as another subject whose response has ‘decisive force’? Perhaps this can be done by allowing an openness or ‘unfinishedness’ in the text – by not filling in and closing suggestions, and leaving it to the viewer to pursue their own interpretation. From the viewer’s side, perhaps what is needed (to avoid a monologic approach where the text cannot affect you in any way, as it must either conform to your existing ideas, or be completely irrelevant) is to see the artist’s suggestions set out in the

work as something to respond to on the same level, as an equal. If the viewers see themselves as participants in a dialogue they can see the artwork as something which they can respond to – they can agree with some aspects, and disagree with others, ask questions and provide possible answers.

Reflections: *Memory wall*

In *Memory wall*, Ernestine White combines fragments of diagrams, maps and typeset text with areas of gestural colour. This provides a contrast between the uniformity and control of the borrowed images with the expressive, messy nature of marks made by hand. The simple ‘how-to’ images are layered over the drifts of colour, bringing these two different languages into conversation. The layering of the images gives the work a sense of depth – memory here is explored as layers of traces. The past leaves marks on the present, superimposed like after-images. This conceptualisation of the passage of time has something in common with Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of how what is *not* the present remains somehow latent in our vision of the present (1968: 113). Other times and places stay in the depths of our vision, even while the present fills and preoccupies this vision (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 113). This work seems to explore the act of remembering – images that swim to the surface and others that stay partly submerged.

Merleau-Ponty writes that ‘the present, the visible counts so much for me and has an absolute prestige for me only by reason of this immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere which it announces and which it conceals’ (1968: 114). While Merleau-Ponty prioritises immediate sensory/affective experience, this experience is not understood as a ‘pure’ immediacy, a pure being where only the particular time and place the subject finds themselves in is of any significance. Rather, Merleau-Ponty suggests that immediate experience has such significance because of its place *between* other times, other places. White, by using a large number of smaller images, seems to approach memory and identity as things which takes place in scattered instances rather than as absolutely coherent phenomena. None of these instances are set apart, but rather situated within the context of the others.



Figure 3 Ernestine White. *Memory wall*, 2003. Monotype, lithography and hand colouring. Detail of 300 images, each 10 x 15 cm. (Perryer 2004: 408)

Merleau-Ponty suggests that ‘what there is is a whole architecture, a whole complex of phenomena “in tiers”’ (1968: 114). White could be seen as exploring this layered ‘architecture’ of experience – the way in which other times and places inform the present, occupying its depths (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 124). By layering and combining images, White can suggest this depth – the sense of how what we see can be ‘written on’ by previous experience, or ideas for the future; how our subjective situation colours our vision. This could also be seen as exploring the combination of looking and thinking (remembering, imagining, guessing) – how vision and thought combine in the process of perception. Merleau-Ponty writes that what makes meaning possible (or perhaps rather inherent in experience) is the fact that ‘space and time are not the sum of local and temporal individuals, but the presence and latency behind each of all the others, and behind those of still others’ (1968: 117). In Merleau-Ponty’s view, it is this layering which gives experience significance.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that ‘we are experiences, that is, thoughts that feel behind themselves the weight of the space, the time, the very Being they think, and which therefore do not hold

under their gaze a serial space and time nor the pure idea of series, but have about themselves a time and a space that exist by piling up, by proliferation, by encroachment, by promiscuity' (1968: 115). White's images which overlap with and interrupt one another seem to give a sense of this 'piling up' or accumulation of experiences and thoughts. Coulter-Smith looks at this idea in terms of a text, which he describes as 'an accumulation of manifold 'nows' and their accompanying envelopes of memory and cognition' (2006: ch.5 p.2). White was born in Cape Town and later moved to the United States (Perryer 2004: 406). She writes that returning to South Africa did not result 'in a sense of completeness', but rather a 'sense of personal fragmentation' (Perryer 2004: 406). This suggests that the different 'nows' that a text brings together could be at odds with each other in some ways. The fragments of maps could be seen as recurring memories and thoughts of home, or suggest dislocation – the edges of the maps do not join up – once you are at the edge of the map, where to next? This work could problematise memory too – the difficulties in reconciling different times and places, of making sense of a current situation in relation to these other circumstances. This work does not appear to offer memories as a reconciled whole, but rather something the artist herself struggles with. Thembinkosi Goniwe suggests that the artist here is 'in the process of construction and becoming' (Perryer 2004: 406). This gives a sense of the artist's investigation into memory (and related ideas, such as place and identity) as ongoing. What White appears to aim for is glimpses, reflections of what memory is, rather than a comprehensive or conclusive view of it.

Chapter 5

Dialogue

This chapter will examine the multiple-image artwork as a means of making sense of a subject without attempting to pin down its definite or absolute meaning, as this way of producing work can facilitate the exploration of multiple (indefinite) meanings. These ideas will be looked at in relation to practical work produced for my MAFA.

Concepts of dialogue: carnival logic

Bakhtin explores the epic as a kind of literature in which things have already taken place and taken on complete meanings, as opposed to the novel which can allow for more uncertainty (1981: 15). Kristeva suggests that epic discourse involves the prohibition of that logic which is other to it (1980: 70). Discourse here needs to follow one form of logic – deviating from or unpicking this logic can only be read as an error or irrelevance. Opposite to this, Bakhtin places the novel, as a form which can allow for uncertainty, for holes and contradictions in its own logic. For example, Bakhtin writes that the novelist ‘may interfere in the conversations of his heroes’ (1981: 27). We may not generally expect a scientist or a historian to interfere in the events they record. Bakhtin suggests that the novel forfeits its claim to objectivity - Bakhtin’s author talks to rather than about the story he or she sets out. The author’s views and the views traced by the author are not in perfect agreement. Bakhtin writes that he does not assume ‘a passivity on the part of the author who would then merely assemble others’ points of view, others’ truths, completely denying his own truth. The author is profoundly *active*, but his activity is of a special *dialogic* sort’ (1984: 285).

Kristeva explores this idea in her concept of a 0-2 interval (1980: 70). Kristeva suggests that a text need not choose between silence and one voice, but can rather negotiate through the space between silence and multiple voices. The 0-2 interval does not apply only to silence versus voice, but any binary opposition, such as true/false, or good/evil (Kristeva 1980: 70). The author’s position here is not one who is either silent or setting out only their own view, but rather one who participates in what Bakhtin terms ‘the open-ended dialogue’ – who puts forward their own view, but always in relation to those of others, forming both a response and a proposition – a reply and something to be replied to (1984: 293).

Bakhtin also explores Menippean satire as a genre which involves pulling the ‘absolute past’ of the epic down to the level of everyday contemporary life, using ‘low’ contemporary language (1981: 21). Bakhtin suggests that it is laughter that works against the epic sense of distance (1981: 23) – the concepts are brought onto a plane where they *can* be laughable, rather than unquestionable or beyond reproach. Menippean satire is understood here as a descendant of folk traditions of dialogue and satire (1981: 21) – which could be seen as ‘low’ or popular literature (or not literature at all in the official sense). Bakhtin suggests that this genre works to make a subject available to its audience in a different way than it is ordinarily perceived, by erasing the distance set up to maintain its authority, the means by which it is set apart and kept out of reach (1981: 23). Here laughter allows the object to be ‘broken apart’ (Bakhtin 1981: 24), rather than maintaining a distance so that the object remains intact (and therefore out of the reach of doubt, questioning, exploration). The comic here acts as a kind of other logic – a juxtaposition of the serious with the comic (this genre was traditionally classified as ‘serio-comical’) (Bakhtin 1981: 22). The object can be looked at not only on its own terms but in terms of a different logic, too (Bakhtin 1981: 18). In this way it can be taken apart, analysed, played with (Bakhtin 1981: 24).

Socratic dialogue is another genre which Bakhtin explores as a form which sometimes succeeds in incorporating and maintaining the presence of different views, rather than subordinating all views to one overarching coherent view. Bakhtin describes Socrates’ role as that of the wise fool – a wise man engaging with people on the street in the way one may only expect of a ‘fool’ (a jester or mime, a lunatic) (1981: 24). This role seems to embody the main motivation of the ‘serio-comical’ – the project of confronting ‘high’ culture with popular culture. If Socrates is a wise man, if he possesses wisdom, why does he need to ask people in the street what they think? Bakhtin pursues this Socratic location of wisdom in dialogue (1984: 110). In Socratic dialogue, ‘wisdom’ is tested, made relative, tried in different contexts. Its authority is relative rather than absolute, it competes amongst other ‘wisdoms’. The Socratic view involves looking at truth as something which is not ‘to be found inside the head of an individual person’, but rather something ‘born *between people...* in the process of their dialogic interaction’ (Bakhtin 1984: 110).

Bakhtin also explores the idea of the carnival as a stylistic and conceptual influence on literature (1984: 122). Bakhtin examines the carnival as a way of taking theatre to the streets (theatre ‘without footlights’, without the conventional means of framing it and setting it apart from ordinary life) (1984: 122). This is similar to Bakhtin’s understanding of Menippean satire and Socratic dialogue as forms which seek to erase or undermine the traditional ways of framing and distancing the represented world. Bakhtin explores the carnival as a time when conventional distances fall away – people who do not usually interact freely with one another are able to relate as equals, and words and gestures are also freed from ordinary restrictions (1984: 122-123). Bakhtin emphasises the fact that during carnival ‘*free and familiar contact among people*’ is completely permissible, in ways it is not in ordinary life (1984: 123). The restrictions which are usually observed are temporarily suspended. Bakhtin suggests that a ‘free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things. All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another...are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane’ (1984: 123). The implication here is that literature can also work in this way – drawing together that which is ordinarily kept within particular limits and exploring new relationships, or reinventing existing relationships.

Multiple images and dialogue

Bakhtin’s exploration of these genres seems to be mainly concerned with the different ways of testing and questioning ideas in literature – ways of bringing ideas ‘up close’, where they can be explored and assessed. One way of doing so, Bakhtin suggests, is to look at concepts from ‘high’ culture, in relation to ‘low’ or popular culture (and vice versa). Menippean satire sometimes does this by bringing ‘epic’ figures into relation with more ordinary, contemporary figures and situations (1981: 26). Artists using multiple images to form an artwork or installation could be seen as working in a similar dialogic way, when the medium is used to disrupt the formality and distancing involved in the gallery context, and in the context of visual art in general. This is not to argue that this constitutes avant garde or revolutionary activity – these works, as understood here, do not seek to overthrow and ‘vanquish’ the category of visual art or the idea of visual art. Rather, it appears that they add this alternative logic described by Bakhtin, Kristeva and others to the current dominant or

determining logic of the gallery, of the visual art system as a whole. They work within the existing limits, with existing materials and concepts, but suggest other possibilities, other latent forms of logic – different ways of thinking of art, and different ways of apprehending the world itself.

By presenting work in a gallery or other sanctioned spaces, artists have traditionally been given a kind of authority, or privileged voice – their work is attached to a social hierarchy and accrues a certain status as such. Although this situation continues in certain ways, artists can still use this platform to question this hierarchy by dismantling and reconfiguring hierarchical relationships in their work. In an installation of many small images, for example, the traditional weight and authority that could be attached to a single large image could be seen as being disrupted and dispersed.

White's *Memory wall*, for example, includes fragments of diagrams, maps and advertisements and in doing so sets up a dialogue between these forms of representation and the logic accompanying them, and the colour applied by hand and its logic. These different forms of representation ask the viewer to read in more than one way, and to then establish connections between these, to generate a more or less coherent understanding of the work as a whole. A diagram from a box of tea, for example, is generally read as 'not art' – by placing it in the context of art, White brings this distinction (art/not art) into question, or brings about a temporary undoing of the usual boundary between art and 'not art'. The inclusion of fragments of 'non-art' in visual art has a long history, with an important point being collage works (beginning with Picasso and Braque) of the early twentieth century (Orban 1997: 2).

If 'non-art' has already been absorbed into art in a particular way, can its inclusion still be understood as introducing a different form of language to art? Kristeva explores this problem in looking at how transgression can take on a specific form and become a language within the dominant language, that no longer points to different possibilities but rather diffuses its own tension – a kind of empty threat to the dominant system's stability. Kristeva terms this 'pseudo-transgression', a form of transgression which only recognises itself as such, rather than as a real alternative. It becomes conscious transgression for the sake of transgression with no further outlook, rather than transgression in pursuit of independence from the dominant system (1980: 71). Perhaps this is always a potential problem or area of concern

when working in the arts – the possibility of having nothing to do with reality, only making feints at criticism of dominant cultures, without any view to real change. However, it seems there is always the chance of the opposite occurring too, where those working in the arts can suggest other possibilities and encourage independent thought. As understood here, White's work demands a complex reading of what constitutes memory and identity, rather than allowing for any 'black and white' views of these concepts.

Mabunda's *Twenty rings* also brings aspects of 'high' and 'low' art into relation. For example, one of the angels from Giotto's *Lamentation* is brought into a nonhierarchical relationship with a mendhi pattern. These images are given equal weight. Mendhi is not usually classified as 'high art' in exactly the same way that Giotto's images are. Again, there is nothing especially revolutionary or shocking about the artist's freedom in gathering together images, but they do appear to have a low-key subversive power to them. Bakhtin suggests that the carnival provides literature with a model of a space where things can 'collide' in a way which they are usually prevented from doing. The carnival provides an example of a way of staging 'equality...freedom, the interrelatedness of all things' and 'the unity of opposites' (Bakhtin 1984: 123). Mabunda's free use of imagery seems to set up such a space.

Bakhtin explores syncretism as a means of testing and questioning ideas in both Menippean satire (1984: 115) and Socratic dialogue (1984: 110). Syncretism is described as 'the juxtaposition of various points of view on a specific object' (Bakhtin 1984: 110). An artwork put together from multiple images appears to have the potential to use syncretism through its format – to bring together different views of one concept. Bakhtin describes Menippean satires as 'adventures of truth' – the testing of a truth, an idea, in various contexts (1984: 115). The multiple image could allow for this – for the testing and travelling of an idea. This is not to say that this is exclusive to this format – there is nothing to say that a single image cannot do the same. It would be unhelpful to suggest that one way (in this case, the use of multiple images as one artwork) of producing art is better than another. Images, however used, can communicate in a variety of ways, in different degrees of complexity. It is not that multiple images necessarily give rise to complex readings, but that they can, and this has been explored by looking at artworks which, as understood here, are examples of works which generate such readings. In the works under discussion here, there appears to be a

considered use of format, where multiple images are employed in generating a complex representation of the artwork's subject matter. The use of format could be seen as a response to the complex nature of the subject matter – the subject matter is a question without one definite answer, but rather a number of possible ones.

Broken pattern: MAFA practical work

Anselm Kiefer writes that all 'of painting, but also literature and all that goes with it, is merely a process of going round and round something inexpressible, round a black hole or crater whose centre one cannot penetrate. And those things one seizes on as subject matter, they have merely the character of pebbles at the foot of the crater – they mark out a circle' (Ruhrberg et al 2005: 372). Kiefer describes making art as a process of moving toward something, as a gesture towards something. In this view, there is no question of having a definite meaning in mind and carrying it out fully in one's work, but rather working 'around' meaning – following its edges. The meaning itself is out of reach, except as something gestured at, suggested or traced.



Figure 4 Elizabeth Wang. *Untitled: studio view, 2012*. Mixed media on wood and canvas.

The idea of a theme seems to come with so much weight attached, and the idea that we should know what we are talking about before we attempt to talk about it (as opposed to trying to work out what we are talking about by talking about it, around it). I found in beginning my practical work that there was just a ghost of meaning to the theme I was working with – I could not really explain my choice or its significance. When I was required to write artist's statements, I found the more specific I tried to be about the meaning of the images, and the reasons I chose them, the less accurate and useful my comments seemed to be. So much of how I make sense of these works only seems apparent in retrospect. Bakhtin outlines the problem of describing artistic activity, suggesting that when 'an artist undertakes to speak about his act of creation independently of and as a supplement to the work he has produced, he usually substitutes a new relationship for his actual creative relationship to the work' (1990: 7). Bakhtin suggests that this kind of artistic statement usually describes a 'relationship to the already created work' (1990: 7).

In the body of work I have produced as part of my MAFA, I have used images from floral printed fabric, working in paint and pastel on wood and canvas. A pattern establishes its own logic, and I found that in translating pattern into paint, this logic seemed to be both maintained and upset. Sometimes the structure of the pattern is drowned in paint, lost in the mess that was originally meant to describe it. At other times the pattern stayed intact and dominated the image. This was also linked to how paint as a medium allows for so much layering. In these works, I painted over or scratched and scraped off areas that looked like mistakes to me, trying to salvage what I thought was not. My attempts at 'fixing' the image interfered and became part of a different painting than the one I had originally been working towards. Marcel Duchamp describes the 'struggle toward the realisation' of artistic intention as 'a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions' and suggests that the 'result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realisation' (1975: 139). These changes and erasures changed the work's direction slightly, rather than concealing mistakes.

Bakhtin suggests that Menippean satire tests concepts by taking an idea out of its distanced setting (for example, an official political statement) and introducing the idea to other forms of logic than that governing its original context (1981: 18). One way of doing this is by conflating 'high' and 'low' literature – by establishing a space where there is no way of maintaining authority based on this kind of categorisation (Bakhtin 1981: 21). The division

of art into categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’ seems to be more a way of assigning value after the fact, when the processes involved in producing the works (whether ‘high’ or ‘low’) are difficult to separate and classify. The division of artforms into high and low appears to be strongly linked to the division between art and ‘ordinary’ life. Bakhtin describes the difficult opposition between the two and suggests that the way to work with this difficulty is to accept the difference but work to make the two ‘answer’ to one another, rather than allowing art to ignore and be ‘ignored by life’ (1990: 2). This concept makes sense in relation to Bakhtin’s understanding of the author’s ‘dialogic’ (rather than either purely active, or purely passive) role (1984: 285). In this view, the author or artist mediates between art and life, attempting to get them to speak to each other, of each other – to keep up a flow between them. Even though painting as a tradition is tied to oppressive, institutionalised concepts of what constitutes high and low or official and marginal artforms, it seems to still allow for a space where these divisions can lose their determining power. In the same way that seeing someone we know in a different context to the one in which we usually interact with them can allow us to see a new side to them, painting seems to have the potential to be this other context for aspects of experience, something like the carnival space Bakhtin describes.

In these works I was able to confront the structure of pattern with the more accidental, random marks and surfaces that come about in painting, as well as with fragments of text. With the patterns I worked mainly with photocopies or photographs of printed fabric, copying directly from these. The pieces of texts were mainly song lyrics. The challenge involved in making a painting was to give these different ideas some coherence. Working from different sources was a lot like writing – putting together different views, and working them into something which could make sense as a whole. This is the kind of activity Bakhtin describes as ‘authoring’ – working ‘what is *not* an artwork in itself (independent of the artist’s activity) into something that is the kind of conceptual whole we can recognise as a painting or a text’ (1990: xvi). Bakhtin views this as fundamentally similar to everyday perception, to making sense of things in more general terms (1990: xvi). These works allowed me to bring together aspects of my experience and acted as a way of making sense of these experiences – not in a particularly literal way, but associatively. These paintings were a way of testing out ‘truths’ of this experience, in the way that Bakhtin suggests Socratic dialogue can through the process of syncrisis. The different aspects do not explain one another in any direct way – the text doesn’t label the images in a literal way, and the images do not illustrate the text in a

denotative way. However, by being placed together, they ask to be made sense of as parts of a whole, rather than as stray or misplaced objects which only properly belong in their own original contexts. They fit somewhere between ordinary denotative imagery, and chance or intuitive combinations. There seems to be a play between literal and figurative modes of reading.

Coulter-Smith explores David Hume's concept of aesthetics in looking at 'everyday creativity' (2006: ch.4 p.1). Coulter-Smith is looking for what it is that joins the processes of reading and writing or producing and viewing art. Hume, similarly to Bakhtin, looks at 'the everyday imagination as the principal mechanism of mind' (Coulter-Smith 2006: ch.4 p.1). In this view, producing art is a process grown from imagination (which cannot be clearly distinguished from thought or perception here), as is viewing art. We can draw a line between artist and viewer, but it seems that this line can be crossed over from either direction and is by no means absolute. In White's work for example, in her exploration of identity, she seems to be involved in imagining identity. This does not leave the viewer as audience to a completely personal experience cut off from their own. Rather, the viewer imagines identity too, is drawn into a discussion of identity - not looking so much at who the artist is, but what identity is.

Hume explores association as a 'gentle force' – the patterns of connection between different objects and concepts (Coulter-Smith 2006: ch.4 p.2). This exploration of connection gives a sense of the basic situation linking the production and viewing of art – the artist is involved in working out their subject matter, following patterns of connection, and the viewer, in making sense of these patterns, puts together their own strings of concepts, their own links. These explorations are both tied to the work itself, but do not follow precise routes, from concept to concept. Bakhtin suggests how the carnival involves a suspension of distance – between people, thoughts and experiences (1984: 123). The logic which usually governs these, which segments life, dividing it according to hierarchies, is suspended (Bakhtin 1984: 123). This space allows for open association – there are no boundaries to maintain. The paintings produced as part of my MAFA allowed me to explore connections between different works, to look at one concept in a number of different 'takes', as well as exploring the links between different aspects within each work, as I aimed to develop the painting as a whole.



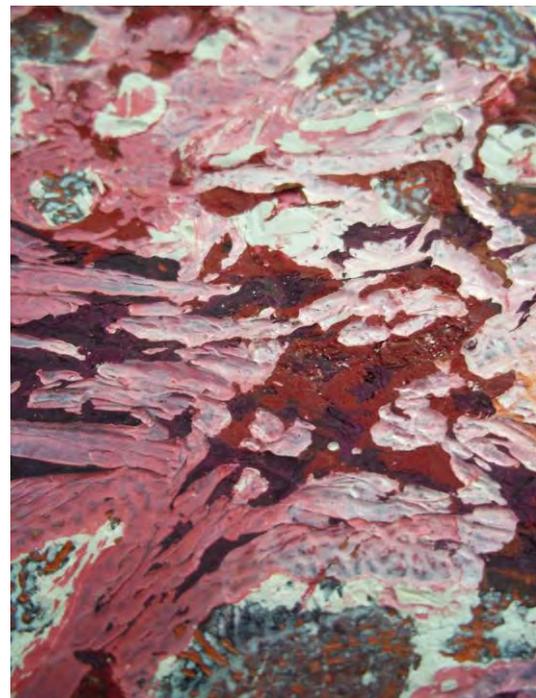
Figure 5 Elizabeth Wang. Untitled: studio view, 2012. Mixed media on canvas.

In the first image above I was experimenting with printing lace onto the canvas by covering it in paint and pressing it down to leave an impression. I then worked over these ‘prints’ with paint and pastel. I worked in a way which resulted in a number of isolated images on the canvas which needed to be resolved. In the end, they are still separate ‘bits’ but I believe there is some flow between them as they are mostly made from the same piece of lace worked on in the same media and colours. They also became less rectangular as these edges got lost in the reworking with paint and pastel, helping them to become more like drifts or shreds of pattern rather than distinct blocks. In the central image I painted one pattern onto the canvas, then scratched off parts of this as it was very flat and handled in a uniform way. To bring back the line of the pattern I worked in thick paint in the negative spaces. I then scratched a different pattern into the pale ground on the canvas using a palette knife. As with the previous image, I do not feel I have totally resolved the tension between these different parts of the image, even though I feel I have gone some way to bringing them together as coherent aspects (by working around them with similar colours and trying to get different areas of the painting to overlap, rather than using strong edges). In the image on the right I also tried printing pieces of lace but was less successful and I drew a floral design onto the canvas. This image was bolder in terms of line, colour and tonal contrast and became more important in the image than the lace-print areas (in white). I think there is a connection between these parts of the image, as they emerge from one background. The purple I used on the floral image also spilt across into the other area. The thick white paint covered with a thin glaze that I used in the negative space of the floral image speaks to the more gestural, partly accidental marks in white on the right of the image.

I find it difficult to suggest ways of reading these works, as I find myself in a similar situation as when I try to describe what a work like Mabunda's *Twenty rings* means, or how it could be read. I can only offer a provisional, highly subjective view which has formed over time. My understanding of the meanings of the works pictured above relates mainly to growth. A fellow student, Natalie Fossey, suggested the connection between organic pattern and handwriting, which I had not thought of in those terms before. I think the idea of an organic process is a useful way of looking at these works, in terms of a kind of current or flow. The drips and spills that paint allows for contribute to this idea, as well as the image of growing, flowering plants, particularly the way in which plants keep reaching out for light, growing in pursuit of light. The use of red could also be seen here in terms of the idea of blood as a symbol of our own internal current, which could be seen in more general terms, or as referring to women, and the reproductive cycle, in particular. I think my ideas have been informed by the experience of being a mother and seeing a child growing – making sense of the world, learning and becoming. This experience has drawn my attention to the significance of organic growth and change, our innate drive to grow, survive and pursue life. The idea of a flower seems to contain that will to continue, to flourish – in itself it may be just a thing of short-lived beauty, but as part of a pattern it seems infinitely significant.

An important aspect of this practical investigation was the surface quality of the medium. Painting seems to have a special potential for the bringing together of different ideas in terms of the amount of layering it can accommodate. It acts as a space where accidents and intention can work together. In this way, I think it is always possible to keep learning new things about what can be done with paint as the painter is only nominally in control and is unlikely to produce the same image more than once. If each painting represents a different challenge, because the conditions are never entirely controlled, the process is inexhaustible and there is always more to learn. I may have complete control of my intentions and know exactly what I want to achieve with a painting, but these intentions are only part of what happens in the process of painting – I can only work with the medium, and with its potential and limits. I can develop skills in handling the medium, but this appears to be more learning how to deal with the medium rather than being able to subordinate the medium to my intention so that it is only a vehicle for this intention. The value of intention here appears to be as a contribution, rather than as the determining force in the work. I make certain choices in making a painting but the way these choices are carried out depend on various qualities of

the materials I use and how I can use them. These include the way in which different tools leave marks in paints (kitchen knives, palette knives, brushes, the handles of these tools) and the kind of pressure used, the way in which different paints dry on canvas (to a smooth or wrinkled surface), what happens when the paint is scratched into, pulled off the canvas (and whether the canvas will be torn in this process). Other factors are the way in which different media interact with one another (such as oil-based and water-based media, thin paint and thick paint) and how the surface is angled while it is worked on and while it dries. The results of the process of making are not ones which I could have known about before the end of the process. This is what has made painting such a valuable part of my research, and painting (along with all other forms of making) seems like an extremely valuable model (not only subject) for research because of the unpredictable nature of the process.



Figures 6 and 7 Elizabeth Wang. Details of paintings. 2012. Mixed media on canvas.

These details, and those on the following page, (Figures 6 to 9) show some of the textures that came about working in different media. Figure 6 shows where thick paint has dripped and dried, been glazed with thin paint and had text scratched into it with a panel pin. In Figure 7, layers of thick paint have been partly removed with a palette knife, and the wrinkled surface of thick enamel paint is visible beneath this.



Figures 8 and 9 Elizabeth Wang. Details of paintings, 2012. Mixed media on canvas and wood.



Figures 10 and 11 Elizabeth Wang. Untitled collagraphs, 2012. Photographs by Elizabeth Wang, 2012.

Another part of my practical investigation was translating ideas from painting into printmaking. A fellow student, Kristin Yang, suggested I try making collagraphs because I could work in paint (on the plate) and then print the image – this made trying a different medium less difficult because to some extent I was working with something I knew. Making collagraphs provided me with a different perspective on my work, and demanded a different attention to texture and line. Learning to ink up and wipe up a plate also required focussed attention to surface. Printmaking lecturer Colbert Mashile suggested the productiveness of moving to another medium and then returning to the other with a different perspective. My supervisor Faye Spencer suggested that working in different media allows the opportunity to explore ideas that may have been latent in one's work – ideas one may have wanted to pursue but whose expression were limited by the medium, or one's concept of what is possible with that chosen medium. A different medium offers the chance to review what is taking place in a body of work, and get an idea of other possible approaches.

Chapter 6

Summary and conclusion

In this chapter I will reflect on the concepts explored in chapters two to five, and bring these ideas together in order to make a provisional conclusion about the multiple-image artwork and its place in the artist and viewer's construction of meaning.

The viewer

Bishop explores the dichotomy of viewing traditional gallery artforms such as painting as opposed to installation art which involves the disturbance of the traditional viewer-work relationship. Installation art attempts to disrupt this 'steady' relationship by letting the work wander from its usual clearly demarcated limits. A painting, for example, can move out of its frame, off its canvas – it can cover the glass that would usually cover it, it can move onto the floor, out of the door. Installation art could be seen as display in crisis – a form of display which questions the logic of display, and asks the viewer to consider their own expectations and understanding of limits. This is an idea which comes through in Bishop and Coulter-Smith's work (looking at the issue of the viewer's agency and how an artwork can speak to this agency). Bishop and Coulter-Smith's work is interesting in relation to that of Barthes, Kristeva, Derrida and Bakhtin – all of whom seem to be focused on the 'active' nature of meaning (i.e. its existence as something which is unfixed and unfixable – not existing in any concrete, quantifiable sense). Coulter-Smith refers more directly to concepts related to poststructuralism, but the concept of interrogating the dominant gallery logic (or failing to do so, or making a compromise with this logic) are present in both writers' work. If the artist works at unravelling the 'normal' or dominant logic of the artwork, what position does this place the viewer in?

Bishop suggests that it gives the viewer a new active role, by requiring physical participation or involving the senses in a more complex way. Coulter-Smith supports Bishop's idea and pursues it in his discussion of Barthes' work on the role of the reader. Barthes sets up an opposition between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts – texts which require a passive reading, and texts which demand more active involvement respectively. 'Activity' and 'passivity' are not clear categories in this context, sometimes referring to physicality (this seems more

important in Bishop's work) and sometimes to the kind of thought or imaginative energy involved in making sense of a work (this is foregrounded in Barthes' writing). For Barthes, the depth of thinking involved in reading a 'writerly' work is linked to the kind of thought involved in writing – the reading required is similar or gives rise to the same kind of imagination required in writing. Coulter-Smith emphasizes this connection in looking at the way in which artworks present a narrative. In what he terms linear narrative, the story line or patterns of connection are laid out in such a way that the viewer is guided as to how to navigate the ideas represented by the work – a more literal form of narrative. In nonlinear narrative, the viewer is given less to go on when it comes to constructing a narrative in relation to the work and has more imaginative work to do in drawing together narrative elements. This is the mode of presentation which Coulter-Smith describes as deconstructive art – works where the narrative is taken apart rather than set out in a sequence. While these categories are useful in exploring the way in which viewers relate to artworks, they become extremely problematic as soon as they become absolute. A work's qualities cannot be removed from the space of debate – as Barthes suggests, there is no way of giving the final word on a work (for example, saying a particular work is absolutely, conclusively a nonlinear narrative). We make 'final' statements about works anyway, but all of these conclusions form part of a bigger narrative surrounding the work, rather than bringing an end to debate.

Coulter-Smith also examines Brecht's concept of the *verfremdungseffekt*, a technique of interrupting an established narrative and in this way imposing a distance between the viewer and the narrative – the necessary distance to look at the narrative as such (an 'external' view), rather than thinking only of the events of the narrative (a more 'internal' view). Brecht's view is that narrative can involve the viewer passively pursuing an already constructed narrative, rather than consciously engaging with and questioning the narratives offered to them. On the one hand, installation art could be seen as upsetting the traditional narrative of how artwork is read, by disturbing the idea of the frame, or the divide between a demarcated 'art' space and 'ordinary' space. Coulter-Smith suggests that installation art can, however, provide an immersive experience where the viewer is not necessarily moved to question the logic of the work.

Barthes' understanding of reading as 'work', as effort, which comes into equivalence with the work of writing, is of interest in looking at the viewer's work in the context of visual art.

Rather than situating artists as producers of meaning, and viewers as consumers of meaning, 'meaning' is understood rather as the product of work (whether this is art-making or viewing work). The reciprocity at the heart of all forms of communication is explored by Vološinov and Bakhtin (see page 2). Bakhtin locates meaning in the activity of constructing a narrative (as Coulter-Smith describes this process) – in the bringing together of elements which do not make sense 'by themselves'. Bakhtin, similarly to Barthes, looks at the link between an author's work and the work of human perception in general. What connects the two activities is the attempt to work disparate elements into 'sense' – into a provisional whole with meaningful connections.

Angela Buckland's *Block A Jacobs men's hostel* was looked at as an example of a work which seems to work in a nonlinear way, by presenting a number of images without any sense of finality or framing (in terms of how to read the images as a whole). Captions give the numbers assigned to each bed, and these inform the images but they seem to do so without telling us what to make of the images. The idea of the hostel as a terrible place, or a wonderful one, seems to be left alone. Buckland substitutes a stylised vision with instances of looking, and all the openness, contingency and ambiguity which goes with the process of looking.

Plural meaning

Deconstruction and related theory provide models for thinking about plural meaning. Deconstruction explores texts by problematising them, by aiming to see everything in them as potentially questionable. Derrida looks at *différance* as a means of describing a field of potential meanings, while Kristeva describes the space of poetic meaning as a 0-2 interval, because poetic meaning is seen as the transgression of fixed meaning (where only one meaning is seen as correct). For Kristeva, poetic meaning involves breaking the taboo of literal meaning, or at least the single literal meaning. By describing the range of meaning as 0-2, Kristeva is describing meaning without margins – a space where margins lose their ability to contain meaning. The 0-2 interval could also be seen as describing by the space of connotation, free association, intertextuality – where meanings mix with one another and do not have to resolve into a final image, but can rather continue being related to other meanings and in different ways. This is also similar to Bakhtin's concept of the significance of the

novel. By taking on an uncertain relationship to its own future, by situating itself in the present, the novel can keep reaching out into what Barthes calls the intertext – it can continue to mean something new. Arguably, this is true of any textual form. Even if a text's meaning is strictly governed (as may be the case with religious texts, for example) the way in which it is read cannot be entirely governed when it comes to a reader's way of making sense of it in their own terms, even if readers keep these alternative readings to themselves. Plural meaning, if we follow this view, is to be seen everywhere, in any text. Kristeva suggests that texts can take on and accommodate multiple meanings in a special way – by acknowledging and facilitating the play of different meanings. This is the function of poetry, or for Bakhtin, the function of the novel.

What is also of significance in looking at plural meaning, is the issue of exchange. If we look at a text's meaning as 'more than one', it is not a case of discovering the artist's intended meaning because there is necessarily more to the text than this intention. Even if the artist actively sets out to create different meanings, they seem to do so in recognition of the idea that they have already to some extent surrendered their authorial control – they can no longer say 'this work means *x*', but rather 'this work means *x*, but also *y* and *z*'. In a way, in doing this, the artist has opened up the meaning of the work, as a problem without one particular solution, which demands to be made sense of in a complex way. The artist is unable to come to a conclusion, but looks at various possibilities, in the same way that the viewer is not provided with a definite conclusion and instead explores different aspects of the work and from there forms a provisional interpretation – the basic situation of the artist and viewer in relation to the text is the same, even though they relate to it from opposite sides and make different sense of it.

Mabunda's *Twenty rings* was looked at as example of a work which seems to resist a settled, definite meaning. The way the work is titled leaves the subject matter open, and does not give the viewer too much direction in terms of how to read the work (other than as twenty rings). Gombrich writes that there 'is an observable bias in our perception for simple configurations, straight lines, circles and other simple orders' (2002: 4), and in discussing tattoos and scarification he writes that these 'are formations echoing and stabilising the activity of a constructive mind' (2002: 7). By looking at a tattoo as an example of something which speaks of 'the activity of a constructive mind', Gombrich provides an interesting

model for looking at all aesthetic activity. When someone plaits hair, embroiders fabric, doodles while talking on the phone – their activity can be looked at as making things make sense, ordering them, working them out. The idea of pattern as part of a tradition of working the world into sense is of interest here, as Mabunda employs simple decorative patterns in this work. These forms, if we follow Gombrich's view, are part of how we make sense of one another, ourselves and the world.

Subjectivity

Merleau-Ponty explores the idea of how we make sense of the world from 'inside' the world. We understand our surroundings from within our surroundings, as part of our surroundings. Merleau-Ponty questions the idea that we can step back from our world, and look at it as if we were absent from the scene, as if our presence could be invisible – without effect on and unaffected by the environment. Merleau-Ponty explores how vision belongs to subjective experience, and how it follows that knowledge is also only available to us as experience and in the exchange of these experiences. In this view, there is no knowledge, no absolute fact or law, other than what can be found in experience.

Bakhtin explores the idea of dialogue as sense, as a logic which allows for truth by incorporating more than one view. In Bakhtin's work, the opposite of sense, of logic, is extreme logic – logic which determines itself to be absolute, and does not allow for any other view. Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism has similarities to Merleau-Ponty's concept of the visible, where the condition for seeing is being part of the seen world. Merleau-Ponty suggests that we can only see because we belong to the visible world, and can be seen. Similarly, Bakhtin emphasises this reciprocity - we can see the other, and this other can see us. At the heart of Bakhtin's argument is that if we can recognise the other as both seen *and* seeing, and ourselves as both seeing *and* seen (as Merleau-Ponty argues that we have vision *and* are visible, and that these two conditions go together), we can recognise the other's view as valid because we can recognise its basic similarity to our own, and assign it the validity we give our own views, even if it is a view we disagree with. This validity means it is fundamentally worth arguing, worth discussing our views. Bakhtin suggests that if I dismiss the other entirely, and reject even the possibility of their having valid views (a subjective

experience, the ability to see, hear, take note and make sense of the world in their own terms), I am unable to go any further than my own necessarily limited views.

Merleau-Ponty and Bakhtin's work emphasises the reciprocity involved in visuality. The reciprocal nature of vision is of interest here in terms of the relationship between the experiences of artist and viewer. In the context of Merleau-Ponty and Bakhtin's work, it is easier to look at the exchange between artist and viewer as basically reciprocal, rather than unilateral. If the artwork is recognised in terms of communication and exchange (not a didactic, fixed object), every viewer's understanding is of significance, and forms part of the work's meaning (or, in Barthes' view, readings *are* the work's meaning – the true 'Text', of which the work is just a 'tail', a trace or clue).

White's *Memory wall* was explored as an example of a work which uses layered image and a large number of small images to give a sense of the weight of accumulation – the way the past makes itself known to us, as a body of glimpses, instances, traces. This relates to Merleau-Ponty's concept of vision, where we can only know what we can see, or have seen - that is, that the 'whole' of vision is not available to us in any concrete way. For example, we do not have our own lives on complete record, in terms of the world we experience through our senses, thoughts, emotions. We can record aspects of this experience (film it, paint it, write it down), but the thing itself, in its completeness, is not available. White seems to work in this way, looking at how the 'full' past is out of reach, and therefore also a full picture of her identity, which is not understood as absolute here, but rather something taking place in instances, fragments, which requires perceptual work to make something provisionally coherent of it.

Dialogue

Bakhtin explores the carnival as a model for literature, in terms of the transgression of ordinary limits. Carnival is examined as a space which allows for the suspension of everyday hierarchies, and in this way allows for a free flow of association between concepts, images, people, and events. This allows people, ideas and things to be made sense of in new ways. Preconceptions and other habitual ways of thinking have to adapt to accommodate other possibilities. Ordinary assumptions are no longer absolute truths, but rather optional

conveniences or encumbrances. In this way, the carnival can allow hierarchy to be seen in a new way too. Instead of being seen as the only logic, it may be seen more as a kind of appliance without which the world might not fall apart, even if it is stranger and more complex without it.

Artworks consisting of a number of images could be seen as establishing this type of space, when images which typically belong in separate contexts are brought together. Artists can draw together concepts and imagery from any sphere, without needing to apply any type of hierarchy to them. This can allow for the rethinking of both the individual images within the work (placed within this new context), as well as of the subject matter of the work as a whole, which is examined using these different images. The use of images and concepts drawn from a wide range of fields could be seen as a form of syncretism – the practice of allowing concepts from different contexts to converge, which Bakhtin emphasizes in his writing on Socratic dialogue.

Kiefer suggests that in making art and considering the subject matter, the artist is reaching towards or aiming at meaning, describing it, drawing round its edges. This seems similar to Barthes' concept of 'unfulfilled' meaning – the significance of the artist leaving their work hollow. For Barthes, art has the power to live and breathe when the artist uses their work to ask questions openly – without trying to provoke a specific reaction or answer and without replying to their own question. In this view, when the uncertainty in a work is allowed to persist and is opened up to the viewer, the work's meaning has a life of its own. Merleau-Ponty writes that 'every being presents itself at a distance, which does not prevent us from knowing it, which is on the contrary the guarantee for knowing it' (1968: 127). Meaning comes to life when space is left for it, when it can take shape at a distance – by not trying to render meaning, but by asking questions (from a distance, from a situation of uncertainty), the artist can present the viewer with a space which meaning can inhabit.

This leads Merleau-Ponty to the concept of a '*question-knowing*' (1968: 129), a mode of 'interrogation and intuition' (1968: 105-129), 'which by principle no statement or 'answer' can go beyond and which perhaps therefore is the proper mode of our relationship with Being' (1968: 129). The object here is not to pin meaning down, to possess it (as it is not understood as something which can be possessed, but rather something that can be

experienced in the process of exchange), but to question, to guess, to pursue meaning. Bakhtin seems to set out a similar view when he suggests that the ‘single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*’ (1984: 293). The open-ended dialogue, like Merleau-Ponty’s mode of question-knowing, is not something to be concluded by a ‘right answer’, but rather a conversation with provisional answers and questions, without the possibility of an absolute truth or answer which could end it.

In painting, the painter can reflect on the work they have done and come to a provisional answer to the questions in a body of work, but this answer seems to have to take the shape of a question in the end. That is, the reflection on one body of work does not free the painter from having to ask questions, but rather leads them to the next question – or how to ask the same question in a new light. It seems as if there is always a struggle – the struggle Duchamp describes, between intention and realisation. It is not a case of finding the solution which will end the struggle, because struggling is painting, but rather to pursue it, to continue to struggle. This concept is similar to Bakhtin’s approach to the mind-world problem – it is always a problem and there is no absolute unity at all, only an endlessly negotiated unity. The gap between intention and realisation is always there, but can always be mediated, in this view.

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to explore the use of multiple discrete images in one artwork, in terms of the artist’s motivation for using this format, as well as the type of viewer engagement these works appear to demand. These questions were considered in relation to examples of artworks employing multiple images, and also as they relate to selected work in art history and literary theory.

Firstly, the role of the viewer and what constitutes viewing was looked at in relation to Bishop’s concept of activation, and Coulter-Smith’s response to Bishop’s work. Bakhtin’s concept of the active nature of all perception was also looked at. Buckland’s *Block A Jacobs men’s hostel* was explored in terms of the idea of viewing, and the kind of viewer engagement this work appears to facilitate. Next, the idea of plural meaning was explored in relation to Derrida’s work on *différance* and Kristeva’s concept of poetic space as an interval

between zero and two – a space where meaning is ‘between’ and not attached to a single determinate meaning. Mabunda’s *Twenty rings* was looked at as an instance of how an artwork can accommodate a wealth of references without rationalising each choice or providing an overarching rationalisation – this appears to rather be left open to the viewer. In looking at the role of artist and viewer, Merleau-Ponty’s work on the limited (and on this basis, subjective) nature of vision was examined, as well as Bakhtin’s interest in the reciprocal nature of seeing. Merleau-Ponty looks at vision and visibility as inseparable conditions, and Bakhtin explores how the condition of seeing others as such comes with the fact that others see us in this way (i.e. we can see things about others that they cannot, and they have access to what we cannot see about ourselves). White’s *Memory wall* was looked at as an example of a work which appears to explore these conditions of seeing – the artwork is composed of a large number of small, layered images, suggesting a sense of the world that comes about through accumulation rather than sudden access to any ‘big picture’. White does not give a sense of having worked out what memory is, or what her own memories as a whole are – they are not summarised and sorted out for the viewer. The viewer sifts through the snatches of memory, with the same lack of conclusiveness as if looking at one’s own memories. From here, some concepts from Bakhtin’s work on dialogue were explored. Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival space which literature can establish was looked at. The bringing together of diverse images and ideas in artworks was examined as creating a carnival space by suspending conventions about how things are classified and grouped – the hierarchies which determine what belongs where. If an artwork is understood in this way, the artist’s work needs to be understood more as contributing to a dialogue rather than creating a fixed and complete statement in itself.

In conclusion, I will suggest that the main motivation artists have for working with multiple images in one work appears to be the desire for Kristeva’s ‘a little more truth’ (1980: ix) – to say what they can see, provoking others to say what they see, and in this way get to a broader sense of what there is to be seen. In the artworks explored in this dissertation, the viewer is asked to reconcile disparate ideas and try to create a narrative from these fragments. In this dissertation, the active nature of viewing was explored (particularly in relation to Bakhtin’s understanding of perception), as well as the ‘passive’ side to artistic production (informed by Barthes’ concept of unfulfilled meaning and the roles of writer and reader). The multiple-image artwork seems to offer the potential to facilitate working with plural meaning. If

meaning is not seen as fixed, this also puts artist and viewer on more of an equal footing in terms of how we understand the roles, because if there is no fixed meaning, the viewer is not so much playing a guessing game as participating in making sense of the subject matter. The 'incomplete' (limited, subjective, perspectival) nature of vision, as explored in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Bakhtin, is the condition on which a need for exchange between artist and viewer is premised. The multiple-image artwork can allow the artist to work with dialogue from the outset, rather than only getting across a fixed message to a passive viewer, as a number of different views can easily be incorporated in the work without their being resolved.