

Views and (Re)Views

The dialectic of dialogue

Stephen Marcus Finn*

* Stephen Marcus Finn is Professor Emeritus in the Department of English at the University of Pretoria.

TRANSCODE // Dialogues around Intermedia Practice, 7–30 September 2011, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria.

The word 'stutter' was first used in English in the sixteenth century, about the time the German Hans Holbein was court painter to Henry VIII. Significantly, the word is related to the German one meaning 'to strike against' with an implication of repetition, which in turn implies a dialogue, be it with oneself or with others. It is this notion that permeates Gwen Miller's superbly curated exhibition at Unisa, *TRANSCODE // Dialogues around Intermedia Practice* and emblematised by Nathaniel Stern's remarkable interactive digital installation, *Stuttering*. Viewers become both performers and artists, act and are acted upon, as they form a dialogue with a blank screen which cannot be art without their interaction with it. As they move, words appear in different places on the canvas, reminding us that we all give our own meaning to any work.

Across from it in the gallery Colleen Alborough's video installation, *Fear and Trembling*, continues the discourse. It mixes the traditional with the cutting edge. Amongst caverns of cotton, cardboard figures pop up seemingly at random. Above, a film of this depicts a stylised man, frantically trying on different heads in a desperate attempt to find the right one, like a mechanised golem frantically seeking meaning in its conversation with a world it does not understand. Its attempt here is similar to the oracularity of Minette Vári's ink on paper works and also to her video *Oracle Remembered*, in which a figure is represented eating itself and regurgitating its unpalatable self.

Vári's figure is as insubstantial as Marcus Neustetter's video, *Space Drawing I*, with its echoes of Man Ray's Rayographs and with constellations formed line by line, until a figure appears from what could well be a mess. In Carolyn Parton's *Jump and Dive*, the individual emerges from the morass of society. This theme continues in Churchill Madikida's video *Stampede*, where an individual buffalo is subsumed in the group as they go on the rampage.



1 Nathaniel Stern, *Stuttering* (2003). Video installation, dimensions variable. Unisa Art Collection. Reproduced with permission of the artist.



2 Colleen Alborough, *Fear and Trembling* (2010–2011). Video installation, dimensions variable. Unisa Art Collection. Photograph by Rupert de Beer.



3 Carolyn Parton, *Dive* (2004–2011). Archival print on cotton paper, paint residue ink, 116 x 85 cm. Artist's collection. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

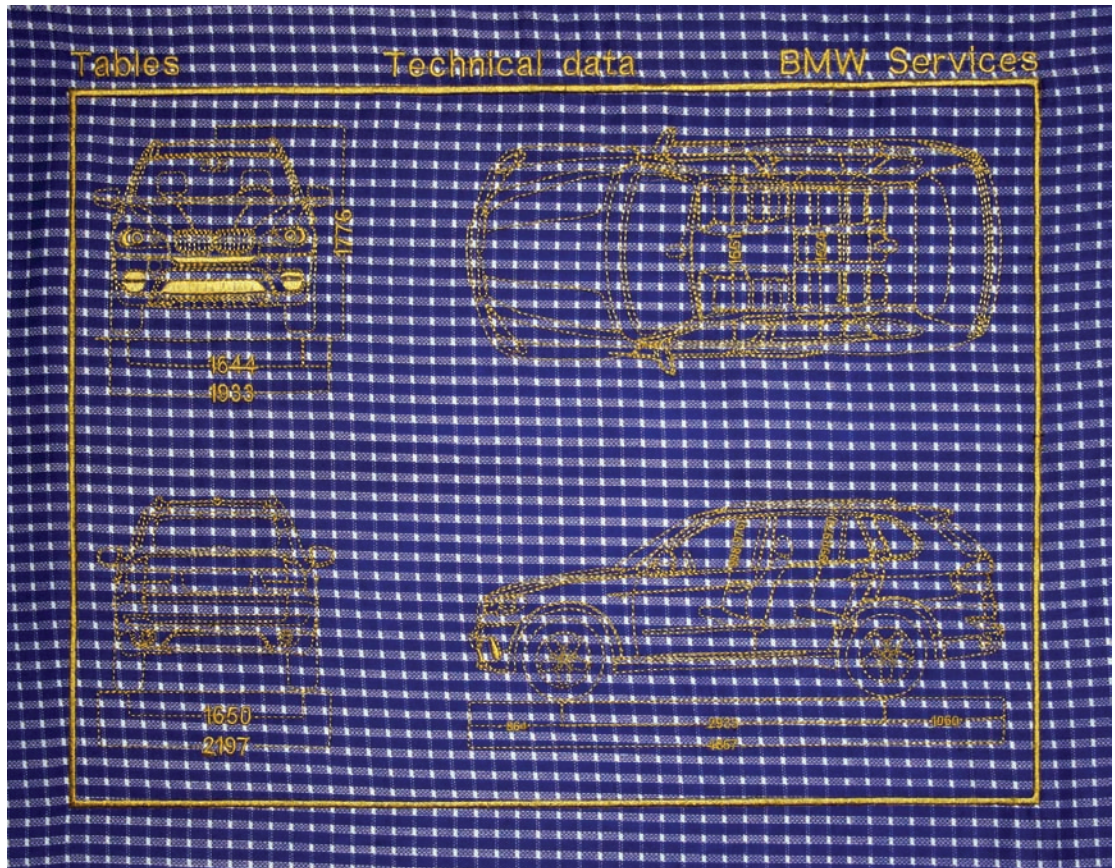


4 Celia de Villiers and Intuthuko, Detail of *Synchronic Journey* (2011). Quilt inspired by animation, 220 x 220 cm. Unisa Art Collection. Photograph by Izelle Jacobs.

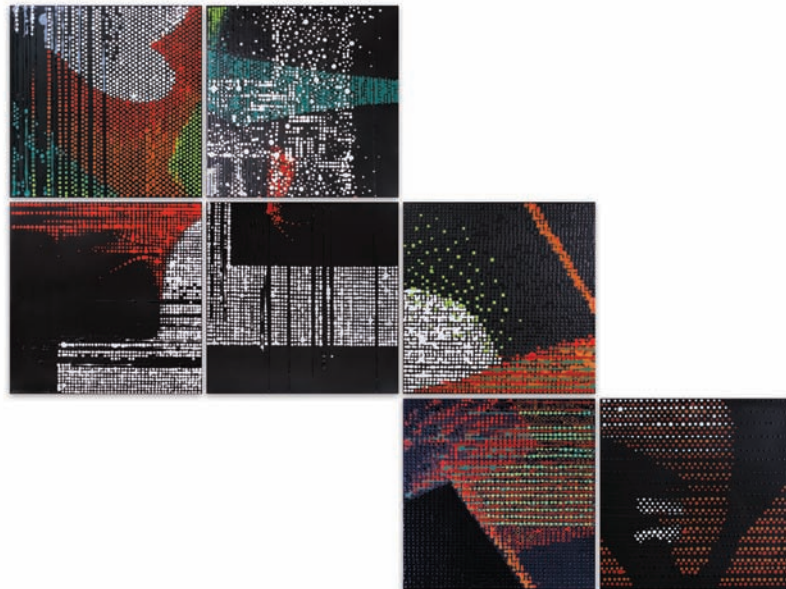
The reciprocal effect of the individual and community is also found in Celia de Villiers and the Intuthuko Sewing Group's hand-embroidered quilts and concomitant animation, reminding us of the permeation of society by politics – a facet also recurring in the mechanised embroidery of Lawrence Lemaona. Included here are diagrams of the inside of a BMW, taking the viewer into a façade and revealing that there might just be nothing there. His folded jackets which cover nothing do the same, and make us question reality and the face shown to the outside world. This is a world as hidden as Sello Mhlangu's *Xeno-World*, a digital interactive drawing in which a shantytown is depicted floating in the ether. The viewer is able to zoom in on the individuals living there; however these 'individuals' are mere shadows caught in a miasmic labyrinth of awkward communication.

This theme also carries thought in the work of Fabian Wargau and Gwen Miller. Wargau presents a mixed media and video installation work with enamel pigment on porcelain tiles. The iconography of the maze can be more easily organised, visually speaking, through the viewer's interaction with the work, as he or she attempts to make sense of the world. Gwen Miller also applies this idea. In her impressive installation she divines family portraits in laboratory apparatus and hair, remembering not faces but feelings as she – like so many of the other artists in their works here – reveals a desperate attempt to retain memory.

A dialogue is set up in works by Frikkie Eksteen, suggesting a visual and conceptual play with the work of other artists on the show. *Cephalophore*, the oil and inkjet print on canvas, consists of twelve figures (including a fleshless skull) represented in various stages of decomposition and decay. Their rapidly dissolving fleshy coverings suggest that beneath all is nothing – an inevitable emptiness recalling a similar theme in work by Alborough, Lemaona, Neustetter and Vári.



5 Lawrence Lemaona, Detail of *Your Success, Beautifully Reflected I, II, III* (2011). Textile and embroidery, 113 x 57.5 cm each. Unisa Art Collection. Photograph by Izelle Jacobs.



6 Fabian Wargau, Floor detail as part of a larger installation which includes a projection - *VME 006' Series* (2007). Enamel on porcelain tile, 60 x 60 cm each. Unisa Art Collection. Photograph by Izelle Jacobs.



Terminal Host, by Frikkie Eksteen, can be read as a composite of University of Pretoria rectors, appearing like a Frankenstein or another golem and gazing across at *The Ambassadors*, a work impossible to fathom straight on with its exquisitely rendered ghoulish figures, but from the side easily seen as another composite of twelve rectors. Therefore, it can be viewed in a way similar to Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), with its skull in the centre acting as a memento mori, striking our eyes as we understand its fluency in what appears at first as an artistic stutter.

In so many of the works in this exhibition, the viewer is led to engage mindfully through constructive dialogue and it is this theme that forms the central focus of the show which took place between 7 and 30 September 2011 at the Unisa Art Gallery. The exhibition, which forms part of the first practice-led doctorate research project at the Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology at the University of South Africa, included work by Colleen Alborough, Celia de Villiers and the Intuthuko Sewing Group, Frikkie Eksteen, Lawrence Lemaona, Churchill Madikida, Sello Mahlangu, Gwen Miller, Marcus Neustetter, Carolyn Parton, Nathaniel Stern, Minnette Vári and Fabian Wargau.

7 Gwen Miller, *Residual System: Family Portrait* (2011). Laboratory glass, hand-blown glass, perspex, rusted iron plate, light fittings, 157.5 x 107 x 30 cm. Artist's collection. Photograph by Izelle Jacobs.



8 Frikkie Eksteen, *Cephalophore* (2011). Oil and inkjet print on canvas, 123 x 295 cm. Unisa Art Collection. Photograph by Izelle Jacobs.