The experience of cultural domination has been articulated in various ways over the past sixty years. The division of the world into, for example, civilised and uncivilised people – a perspective ensuing from “civilised” people as a matter of course, proclaiming with the division the position of the “civilised” to be the yardstick for any further distinction – has become questionable. Practices of “civilising” the “uncivilised” by forcing “civilised” languages on minority and presumably unintegrated groups in a society – even taking the children of such groups away by force and reallocating them with “civilised” families – were common and legally acceptable until quite recently in some Western democratic societies. The South African sculptor, Willem Boshoff, takes issue with this problem of oppression of one group by another in some of his recent major works. There is a certain resonance between these works and the philosophies of Theodor Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas who, among many others, have alerted Western society to the issues of domination and purported “allergy” or deep cultural bias in social formations, and who have formulated considered responses to this problem which had, and in certain instances still has, lethal consequences for large parts of humanity. This article explores these resonances, first by introducing the issue of in- and out-groups in the world of art, where Boshoff, in a critical move, turns the tables on almost entrenched interest groups in the art world, in particular the able-bodied, sighted art-going public. A second aspect of the more general phenomenon of group formation – at the linguistic level – is explored in two further works of Boshoff. These two works – which take language for their subject – are then linked with philosophical critiques of domination and social hostility by Adorno and Levinas.

IN-GROUPS AND OUT-GROUPS IN THE ART WORLD

Teaching aesthetics to senior undergraduate students, one very often encounters the complaint that the art world is élitist and irrational. The complaint is usually formulated in the following way: “Apparently anything goes in the world of art. Anything may count as art, as long as it is expensive and has an outlandish label. I, or my little sister for that matter, can
produce an object like those that are displayed as art. It is just a big rip-off. Mine won’t count as art because I do not have the proper diploma, I do not know what the critics want and I do not make enough of a show about my work.” What irks the student (and usually people with a casual acquaintance of art, a category which includes a large number of students) is the apparently sham élitism of the world of art which communicates the message, “You are one of them, not one of us.” In this reckoning, art should be accessible (i.e., understandable) to everyone, and therefore enjoyable (i.e., consumable) by everyone in a way that is not demanded of mathematics, religion or most other human endeavours. Not even sport or the world of pop music sparks the intense feelings of animosity caused by a brush with the art world which, inadvertently but unavoidably, leaves the complainant in the position of an undesired, frowned-upon ignoramus.

Unfortunately, as a teacher of aesthetics, one is not assisted in countering these views by the dynamics of the art world. Creating divisions and transgressing lines of division are part and parcel of the art world. David Hume’s rationalisation of the “standard[s] of taste” gave rise to the profoundly ambiguous phenomenon of the cognoscenti versus the uniniated, those allegedly with and those allegedly without taste. The “standard of taste” was not only a checklist by which to identify and verify the credentials of the connoisseur of a work of art in order to submit to his judgement, but it also functioned as a programme of aesthetic education. This ambiguity became insidious when the lines of division in the art world coalesced with the class divisions of society, breeding the same kind of contempt and conflict. “Fine art” was regarded either as “an enemy of the people,” because of the strictures of “refined taste” imposed by the class which had the power and the means to access and wield that power, i.e., the educated, wealthy élite; or art had to be taken out of its closely guarded realms and distributed among the common folk – i.e., art must be “art for the people,” accessible by and speaking to a broad public, edifying them in order to make them masters of their (collective) destiny.

Whatever the cause of these conflicts, judgements and demands brought by so-called “outsiders” of the art world, the art world itself has not remained indifferent to such issues. Whereas public art galleries were sponsored initially as enclaves of the preservation of a “higher” or more “refined” civilisation, the dynamics of the gallery’s situation (very often involving the changed public accountability of the sponsors) forced art institutions to review the conceptions underlying their brief and that of the public for which they catered. At present one may venture to say that, generally, art institutions (even where they are not managed as public institutions) are not as exclusivist as they were, say, half a century ago. The politics of recognition and multiculturalism have done their part to change institutions.

INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED

It has become the order of the day to have female artists exhibiting or performing alongside male artists or even in completely female events, something that was not the norm even fifty years ago. Indigenous art is also extensively shown. The art of the Aborigine, San and Inuit peoples, for instance, has found its way into public galleries, as have the people of the communities who produced this art (although they have not yet become – compared to more
privileged or socially advanced groups – an equal part of the sponsorship or managing echelons of art institutions).

One may call the expansion of the repertoire and of the public of art institutions a process of enfranchisement. Apart from women and indigenous groups previously largely excluded from public galleries in Western contexts, other kinds of artworks and people who were previously, either deliberately or by default, regarded as lacking in artistic endeavour are now given their due recognition in the art world. Why should the speech-impaired figure in a play only as the village idiot or the sage who observes but does not speak? Mark Medoff’s *Children of a Lesser God* (1980) made the speech-impaired Sarah Norman the major character of this stage drama – the theatregoer quickly learned how to understand the sign language of Sarah, and how expressive it can also be. Physically “other-abled” people are now empowered to participate in dance acts – dance movements are no longer the exclusive domain of physically able people. The prospects for deaf people are somewhat bleaker: music still seems to pose an almost insurmountable challenge to those for whom sound is totally inaudible. However, in the world of visual art, blind people have relatively recently been enfranchised by the work of one artist – and in such a way that the sighted are made to depend on the blind to “see” the works of art in question.

The South African sculptor, Willem Boshoff, exhibited the first collection of sculptures he made for an ongoing project entitled *Blind Alphabet* at the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995. The work consists of sculpted objects representing “learned,” infrequently used, words in English relating to the morphology of objects (such as “cercelee” and “cymbiform”). The morphological term is rendered in a sculpture made of indigenous wood (sometimes various indigenous woods are used together to heighten the sense of texture, weight and volume), in a format that fits the human hand (Figures 1, 2 and 3). These works are specifically designed for blind people to handle. To this end, Boshoff went to considerable lengths to

![Figure 1: Willem Boshoff, Bifistular: Blind Alphabet. Imbuia wood (image courtesy of the artist).](image)

![Figure 2: Willem Boshoff, Adnascence: Blind Alphabet. Petal: tambotie wood, stalk: Zimbabwean teak, pollen: zebra wood (image courtesy of the artist).](image)

![Figure 3: Willem Boshoff, Choroid: Blind Alphabet. Kiaat wood (image courtesy of the artist).](image)
disadvantage the regular, sighted gallery visitor (Figure 4). Each sculpture was placed in a black casket of steel mesh, obstructing its viewing by the typical gallery visitor. In a reversal of roles, sighted gallery visitors were further inhibited by the noticeboards which reminded them not to touch anything – admonitions which, of course, went unheeded by blind visitors. Each of the 338 caskets was set on a pedestal, and the pedestals were positioned at an arm’s length from one another – a spatial order amenable to the blind visitor but claustrophobic and confounding for the sighted visitor. To add further insult to the injury of the sighted visitor’s disempowerment, each object had its own label – in Braille script. The complete dictionary definition, containing the dry, academic explanation of the term in question, its etymology and its uses were reproduced, in Braille, on an aluminium plaque. The sighted gallery-goer was thus forced to depend on the blind visitor to open up the casket, to read – albeit with difficulty – the complex explanation of the little sculpture, and to receive the sculpture’s meaning as well as the object itself from the hands of the blind (Figure 5). This process puts the typical gallery-goer at a distinct disadvantage. They have “to see with their ears.”

TO EMPOWER THE MARGINALISED

The strategy of empowering the marginalised in *Blind Alphabet* is developed along different but equally evocative lines in a further work, *Circle of Knowledge*, at the University of Johannesburg (the result of a merger between the Rand Afrikaans University and the Witwatersrand Technicon). Various sculptors were invited to present drafts of works, on an open brief, for the so-called Millennium Memorial for the university in 2000.

In order to understand the final choice of Boshoff’s proposal by the university, something needs to be said about the topography and architectural layout of the site. The main building of the University of Johannesburg’s Auckland Park Campus, which accommodates the majority of lecture halls, laboratories and offices, consists of a seven-storied semicircular reinforced concrete structure, with its open side facing to the north and west, sitting on land sloping to the southeast. Twelve truncated wings of offices all point towards an imaginary centre and
enclose a very spacious, terraced garden that is in its turn concentrically shaped around a large off-centre pond with a fountain which acts as the focal point of the vista of the inner space seen from any point on its rim.

The majority of the invited designs proposed an abstract sculpture of monumental proportions to be placed in the pond. Only two proposals went against this modernist grain – Boshoff’s and Isa Steinberg’s. Steinberg proposed a large sculpture opposite the pond, sited up on the slope, with the building and its large trees as background. Her concept was somewhat akin to the kind of monumental sculpture one would encounter in an English landscape garden. Boshoff’s concept contrasted significantly with all the other proposals. Physically, it comprised a circle of eleven granite stones – each roughly one metre in diameter and knee-high – a circle not located in the already established rhythm of the concentric circles of the garden layout, but intersecting it, a circle with a different hub. The eleven stones were to be placed in the large walkways between the entrance to the main building and the library, in such a way that they do not obstruct access but serve as resting places and diversions along the way between the library and the main building and on into the central garden (Figure 6).

Each stone represents one of the official languages of South Africa. On each stone is inscribed a spiral of words, containing twenty rare English terms ending in “-ology” or “-ism” – i.e., words denoting some kind of knowledge (Figure 7). A brief explanation of this unusual English word is then supplied in one of the eleven official languages. The eleven stones are thus veritable dictionaries, set in granite, each with a different set of twenty words, conjuring ancient practices of recording knowledge on stone and the incantation of words in ritual spaces to adjure all kinds of supernatural forces.

But there is more to this work. Because the stones are placed in a common thoroughfare, outside the library, they function as seats for students taking a (smoking) break from studying. People’s curiosity is aroused by the rare English words inscribed on the stones. In South Africa, almost everybody can read and speak English. Except for the “English” stone, the meaning of the English word on the other ten stones is withheld from those having English as their sole language. Even for those who know at least one indigenous language, someone with another native language is needed to decipher these latter-day Rosetta stones. Thus Boshoff’s dictionary in stone becomes a conversation piece involving people from different groups speaking in different tongues. The conversation is amicable, because the words to be explained are, or sound, rather amusing, like oology (from the “xiTsonga” stone, meaning a description of birds’ eggs) or psilology (from the “tsiVenda” stone, meaning vacuous chatter), and leads onto other topics, opening up former strangers to one another – an “infomal ‘entente cordiale’,” as the sculptor himself explains. The circle of knowledge is intended to end in a circle of acquaintances (Figure 8).

This work is also intended as satire, and satire is always social critique. It gibes at English as the purported universal language of commerce and learning. At a more subtle level it unsettles social hierarchies. If a visitor to the university or a foreign tourist encounters this work, say, over a weekend, he or she will be lost as to the meaning of it all. Such a person may then turn to the only people then available in the vicinity of the work – the odd security guard or cleaner. The lowly educated will then become the facilitators of knowledge for the wealthy and probably higher educated inquirer.
Boshoff’s use of dictionaries in these two works is the result of a long involvement with specifically English glossaries and his concern about language as such. As a descendant of people who spent time in the concentration and exile camps run by the British during the South African War (1899-1902), “he was raised with a deep mistrust and disliking for ‘the English’.”11 This deeply ingrained mistrust, in all probability, later caused him to interpret the responses of his English-speaking colleagues to his own English, spoken with an Afrikaans accent, as a kind of bullying. This led in turn to his resolve to outwit his jingoistic colleagues by acquiring a knowledge of English that would far surpass their own by literally working his way through dictionaries. This became a lifelong obsession, and so far Boshoff has worked his way through two hundred dictionaries, including the twenty-five volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary.12 His reading of dictionaries has left him, amongst other things, with a list of approximately 18,000 words which he calls a “Dictionary of Perplexing English.” It is from this list that he draws many of the words for his texted sculptures. But his voracious appetite for words does not merely satisfy his lexicographical interests. His fascination for words feeds his interest in the ways human beings create their particular worlds through networks consisting of the interrelated forms and meanings of words. To be ignorant of a language is to be ignorant of a different and enriching world experience – to be a complacent individual with a reduced text-ure of the world.

MEMORY OF LOST MEANINGS

Paniface was conceived as a protest against the impoverishment of the world by cultural (and political) imperialism. The clue to the work is the words from the Gospel of Matthew: “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?” (7:9). Paniface is a collection of pairs of loaves and breadboards, each pair consisting of a single loaf (fashioned from a brick) set on a breadboard inscribed with the Gospel verse in an extant European language, and a loaf-cum-breadboard inscribed with the same verse in an African, sometimes extinct, language (Figures 9 and 10). The work poses a searing question: can the bread of European culture that has been distributed throughout the world be regarded as wholesome or deadly? What is shared by Europe and Africa? Is it memories of extinction, such as that of the culture of the San people who were hunted down like animals? Or do Africa and Europe make

On facing page:

Figure 6: Willem Boshoff, Circle of Knowledge, University of Johannesburg: view towards the terraced garden (image courtesy of the artist).

Figure 7: Willem Boshoff, Circle of Knowledge, University of Johannesburg: the artist with one of the stones (image courtesy of the artist).

Figure 8: Willem Boshoff, Circle of Knowledge, University of Johannesburg: the “circle of acquaintance” (image courtesy of the artist).

Figure 9: Willem Boshoff, Paniface: detail (image courtesy of the artist).

Figure 10: Willem Boshoff, Paniface: overview (image courtesy of the artist).
company – that is, come together (Latin: cum) for bread (Latin: panis)? In the final analysis, Paniface reflects on the nature of the sharing of meaning between groups, in all its potential concreteness. Is meaning encountered in the humane gesture of reaching out to the other in his or her otherness, enriching the self by the experience of the other – or is meaning dictated by casting the self in stone and exporting it to distant consumers, presumably in need of a self like the one-and-only European self?13

To summarise: Willem Boshoff’s works of art (at least the three discussed in this article) are works – texts, in the broad sense of the word – that are informed by a specific issue of late twentieth-century society, viz. the relationship between “groups”, i.e. societies or collectives of people sharing certain characteristics as values and as bonds in the face of societies or collectives with purportedly stronger and superior values. As such, these artworks foreground a theme that lies at the heart of Theodor Adorno’s critique of twentieth-century Western society – the redemption of the non-identical.

TO SAY “WE”: INSULT OR INVITATION?

One can perhaps best access Adorno’s critique of twentieth-century Western society – late capitalist, centrally controlled and administered, with its vested interests and asymmetrical power relationships – through one of his aphorisms: “To speak ‘we’ but to intend ‘I’ is one of the most exquisite insults.”14 According to Adorno’s analysis of late capitalist society there is no truly general interest or commonweal. What passes as the commonweal are the expressed interests of a powerful élite who, with the assistance of modern organisation and communication techniques, propagate its interest as the common interest. What we see, in reality, is how a particular interest projects itself as a universal interest. In late capitalist society everybody has to earn his or her wages, respect and recognition. People earn only inasmuch as they identify with the sources of gratification. In this kind of society it becomes second nature to internalise the goals, ideals and interests of those on whom one depends. The individual in this centrally administered society is taught to adapt, to continually remodel him- or herself so as not to be left out or left behind.

One of the most powerful means to groom the individual for this kind of society is the culture industry. It supplies the star as the role model for success and at the same time it abolishes the individual. The culture industry absolutises imitation. In a macabre way, according to Adorno, one has to understand the Donald Duck comic strip in terms of this enforced socialisation:

In so far as cartoons do any more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous friction, the breaking down of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment.15

One has a responsibility in this centrally administered society not to deviate, not to be the exception. There is an all-pervasive consensus that what is deemed to be general – i.e., the same in everybody – because of its apparent quantitative preponderance is also correct. It need not deal with what is foreign in the general estimation. The foreign, the exception, that which is unable to identify with the same, that for which there is no available “size” or any other
kind of label, ought to excuse itself, stay out of sight – or else it will be shoved aside, even be outlawed. What cannot fit in will be exterminated. The culture industry and the extermination camp, Auschwitz, are both sides of the same coin. Capitalist, centrally controlled society is a matter of “[t]he universal that compresses the particular, like a torture instrument, until it splinters.” That which cannot be absorbed into or assimilated by the trendsetting centre of power, the non-identical, is repressed, denied, expurgated or exterminated. In capitalist Western society “‘we are all in the same boat’, nobody dares to be better off.” If one has to make a judgement on the achievements of the twentieth century, according to Adorno, one is bound to say that the logic of history is branded by the sign of indifference towards the individual. That is why critical theory, the only kind of philosophy for which Adorno sees any justification, is “only a theory of human relationships insofar as it is also a theory of the inhumanity of these relationships.”

To do justice to the particular, the individual and the non-identical, the general or the universal has to be changed. One has to rethink the universal. It is not an entity on its own that can be forced onto a given particular. It is not the mould of discipline that prescribes to a particular, and to which the particular responds by applying itself to fit the supplied, prescribed or expected mould, or shedding itself of non-conforming elements, to be swallowed up and completely assimilated by the universal. And neither is the particular a function or example of the universal. The relationship should be turned on its head. The universal is rather a kind of horizon of expectation for the realisation of unspecified and unpredictable possibilities inherent in a particular. It is not the universal that determines the particular, but the particular that contribute towards the completion of the universal by supporting the realisation of the possibilities of other particulars. Adorno’s own formulation of this alternative to the centrally administered society is rather subdued – for fear of its becoming just the next centrally co-ordinated blueprint, with its subsequent repetition of domination and abolition of the already vulnerable individual. One of the few glimpses that Adorno permits himself of this liberated existence refers to his childhood experience:

The feeling for the [Socialist] International is [almost] by birth close to my heart, also as a consequence of the circle of guests of my parents, with names such as Firino and Sidney Clifton Hall. That International was not a centralized state. Its peace was maintained by the festive ensemble of differents, colourful like the flags and the innocent boundary posts which, as I had discovered to my astonishment, did not cause any change in the topography/scene. The land that was enclosed by these posts and which I occupied, playing on my own, was a no man’s land. Later, during the war, this word surfaced for the destroyed parts before both fronts. But that is a true translation of the Greek – Aristophanic – word which I understood better at that time the lesser I knew it, namely utopia.

What Adorno yearns for is a kind of society where the particular will be allowed and supported to be its own peculiar self. Emmanuel Levinas calls it “a non-allergic relation with alterity,” “a non-violent transitivity,” i.e., a relationship between people that is free from fear, coercion and any form of repression. Levinas’ remarks on the commonality of language shed an interesting light on Adorno’s critique of the function of universals in an administered society,
and suggest further alternatives to this repressive society. “To speak is to make the world common...Language...lays the foundations for a possession in common.”\textsuperscript{23} Each word that one person utters in the presence of another person is an invitation to share the world in this possible way. Human beings are, or ought to be, hosts\textsuperscript{24} to one another. “My freedom does not have the last word; I am not alone.”\textsuperscript{25}

CONCLUSION

In his concern for extinct languages and cultures, as well as the disempowering effect of the universalisation of one language and one culture in the South African context, Willem Boshoff’s work embodies the concerns of philosophers such as Adorno and Levinas. In Circle of Knowledge and Paniface Boshoff offers people (and the communities they represent) the opportunity to present themselves and their appropriated meanings of the world to members of other groups or communities – in ways that do not cause political or cultural “allergies”, but rather extend invitations to share interpretations of being in the world and create shared horizons of meaning. His artwork facilitates the offering and reception of humane gestures and the acknowledgement of the enriching presence of the other.

With Adorno and Levinas, Boshoff’s work is rooted in the humanism that Immanuel Kant espoused as the moral climax of the Enlightenment (at the time of its first tragically botched attempt during the French Revolution). Especially for Boshoff and Adorno, but in a certain way also for Levinas,\textsuperscript{26} works of art may serve as a kind of training, an introduction, to the practice of “the sociability that befits [our] humanity” (in the original German of the first edition of the Critique of Judgement the word is, very tellingly, Geselligkeit), that is “both the universal feeling of sympathy [allgemeine Teilnehmungsgefühl], and the ability to engage universally in very intimate communication [sich innigst und allgemein mitteilen zu können].”\textsuperscript{27} At least as far as Boshoff is concerned, I have likened this strategy elsewhere to “the soft vengeance of a freedom fighter” – a pacifist freedom fighter’s response to the history of colonial conquest.\textsuperscript{28} It wants to exploit the realm of art – where it is taken for granted that at least imaginary worlds are to be made and unmade – as the locus of a testing ground for an education sentimentale in order to inculcate new and more humane practices for the well-being of all beings who can sense fear and pain.

1 I am indebted to Salomon Terblanche for his comments, which helped to clear up some issues, as well as to Willem Boshoff for granting me access to his personal archive and for permission to publish reproductions of his work.
3 For this dialectic in Hume, see Johan Snyman, “Art, Taste and Society (Does it Matter Whether Hume is a Snob?),” Acta Academica, 26:1 (1994), 1-17.
5 Many public galleries in the Second and Third World initially collected works from renowned First World artists in order to educate the local public about the achievements of “Western Civilisation.” These institutions have realised their responsibilities towards local, indigenous art only recently, and have only recently become repositories of local artistic endeavour.
Cf. Suzie Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1991). There are still exceptions – female conductors of symphony orchestras are few and far between. I do not know the exact reasons for this lacuna.


I was a member of the final selection committee, hence my knowledge.


“This ‘kring van kennis’ word dan ‘n kenniskring’,” Willem Boshoff, as quoted in the brochure distributed at the inauguration of the sculpture in 2001 (Rand Afrikaans University, 2001). The pun in the original Afrikaans is lost in the English translation.


Ibid., 52.


Ibid., 51.

Ibid., 76; cf. also 173.

Ibid., 299.

Ibid., 101.


Cf. Snyman, “Willem Boshoff’s *Paniface*,” 86.

**Johan Snyman** is professor of Philosophy at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He teaches aesthetics, social philosophy and the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century continental philosophy. He has published studies on the politics of memory, and on art, artists and society in various journals and as chapters in books.