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# VISUAL DIALOGUES:

South Africa in conversation



Artwork by Nathani Lüneburg



This document is a compilation of papers presented verbally  
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# ARTISTS' BOOKS AND AN AVERSION TO THEORY: APPLYING BAKHTIN'S DIALOGISM AND HETEROGLOSSIA TO SELECTED EXAMPLES OF THE ARTIST'S BOOK.

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## Abstract

Recent research projects and conferences devoted to the book arts have responded to Johanna Drucker's 2005 call for urgent work to be done on establishing a more rigorous theoretical underpinning of the field of book art production. Yet these projects and conferences, due to the participation of artists and other practitioners in the field, not surprisingly, point any discussion on the book arts towards practice and away from theory. In acknowledging that a need still exists for a more rigorous examination of the theoretical underpinnings of the book arts, this paper explores selected examples of artist's books by Stéphane Mallarmé, Marcel Broodthaers, Buzz Spector, Ulises Carrión and the South African artist Ilka van Schalkwyk through a lens provided by Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*. These critical terms, which demonstrate the multivocal and heteroglot voices between these works in history and within themselves, are shown to be appropriate frames for the analysis of particular qualities which enunciate artists' books: *self-consciousness*, *discursive perceptivity* and *reflexivity*. I apply Bakhtin's notions of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia* to the task of proposing a theoretical foundation for the artist's book as a dynamic and relational visual language.

## Introduction

This paper responds to Johanna Drucker's (2005:3) rebuke that the critical apparatus for artists' books is about as sophisticated as that which exists for needlework, decoupage, and other 'crafts', and that its theoretical foundation doesn't yet exist. Drucker's challenge responds to Dick Higgins'

(in Lyons 1985:12) much earlier call for critical theoretical work to be done when he stated; the language of normative criticism is not geared towards the discussion of an experience, which is the main focus of most artists' books. More recent research projects and conferences<sup>1</sup> however continue to place any theoretical debate on the artists' book firmly within practice. Clearly what is needed is an articulate voice - from within the given of practice - which points decisively towards theory. For the purposes of attempting to construct a tentative theoretical foundation for the artist's book, I argue here, through an investigation of selected examples, that *dialogism* and *heteroglossia* enunciate their theoretical operations: these being, self-consciousness, discursive perceptivity and self-reflexivity (or bookness).

## **Dialogism**

The term *dialogism*,<sup>2</sup> has its origins in the literary theoretical works of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1950). In his writings,<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin maintains a continual dialogue with other works of literature and other authors: multiple communications between words, phrases, works and bodies of work with their literary past.<sup>4</sup> For Bakhtin, all language, indeed every thought, appears dialogically responsive to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in response. All language and the ideas which language contain and communicate are dynamic, relational and engaged in a process of endless redescriptions of the world. Dialogism implies a polyvocality in which various registers and languages interact and respond to each other. Yet this view of Bakhtin's work also underscores dialogism's resistance to "being confined to any exclusively 'literary' application". Indeed, according to Michael Holquist (2002:107) "the fixity of boundaries between 'literary' and 'extra-literary' discourse is precisely what it questions". As artists' books are notorious for their ability to cross boundaries - are they books or artworks? A question with which librarians often struggle when an artist's book enters their special collection section - dialogism seems to suggest a space for possible application to, and analysis of, artists' books as visual texts. In fact, Bakhtin's words might act as a foundation for Drucker's own survey of artist's books (2007:1) which she describes as "a zone of activity ... made at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields, and ideas".

I therefore apply Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia to the task of proposing a theoretical foundation for the artist's book as a dynamic visual language. I begin by locating these elements of dialogism in relation to Marcel Broodthaers' response to the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's 1914 publication<sup>5</sup> *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*).

Mallarmé's typography and material presentation suggests the movement of a listing ship and spreads across two pages, creating what Anna Arnar (2011:206) describes as "...not only a more spacious configuration but also a more challenging experience of reading" while "[c]ertain phrases ... are abruptly and wittily cut by the boundaries of the page", causing a reader to move between recto and verso pages while having to read across the gutter. Its unorthodox layout makes references to electrical and magnetic energies which function metaphorically, in Arnar's (2011:118) terms, as "an invisible force uniting the dispersed fragments of text". Page-turning ignites a "spark" which, Mallarmé believed, connected the reader and the work (Arnar 2011:221). By exploiting the textual, visual, and temporal elements of the book, Mallarmé explicitly expressed his desire to protect the unique visual character of his text; the poem being a visual composition in its own right, one which did not require the proposed illustrations of his friend Odilon Redon. These dialogically 'refracting' gestures (to use Bakhtin's term) operationalise each element of a work in relation to a history of usage to which it responds,<sup>6</sup> while also anticipating future responses. Broodthaers' version, titled *Un coup de dés: Image* (1969), is a dialogical refraction of Mallarmé's poem in its intention and physical production. It is a careful and particular response to Mallarmé's edition<sup>7</sup> and to objects more generally, as signs of negation.

Drucker (2007:115) describes the work as

a conceptual transformation of [the] earlier piece, skilfully citing and restating its premises in a manner which dialogues across historical time and cultural assumptions. ... Where each line of the poem should lie on the page a dark black line, simple, geometric, stark is placed in its stead. This is a physical equivalent, a moral inequivalent, a recapitulation and obliteration.

The Broodthaers version is not a witty play on the formal, typographic conventions so important to Mallarmé, and Drucker (2007:115-116) reminds us that even as “it elevates the structure of the work to a concept worthy of study in its own right ... Broodthaers offers a conceptual analysis of Mallarmé’s poem across the distance of nearly a century”. In this work, argues Birgit Pelzer (1987:159) Broodthaers states that the subject “figures poorly in its meaning” and, “that it is caught up ... in the network of social relations that play out the symbolic representation with which the subject is charged”. Broodthaers’ (in Pelzer 1987:158) intention then is “to restrict the notion of the subject” by interrogating the “loss of the real” stating that, “to be represented, a thing must be lost”.

In dialogical terms, Broodthaers’ oeuvre would be particularly receptive to the assertion, according to Holquist (2002:18) that “the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*”. Broodthaers’ dark black, geometric, inequivalent and obliterating linear metaphor, halts any metonymic drift away from the thing which is signalled as lost, evoking Mallarmé’s own use of *electric* and *magnetic* typography as, Mallarmé (cited in Pelzer 1987:181) states, a “way of averting the falling off ... [through] recourse to some absolute power, such as Metaphor”.

Broodthaers’ typographic obliteration of Mallarmé’s work implies, what Bakhtin terms, *intentional hybridization*: Broodthaers’ is one linguistic consciousness which explicitly represents another consciousness (Mallarmé’s) with each belonging to a different system of language (Evans 2011:63) – Broodthaers: image and Mallarmé: text. Fred Evans (2011:66) describes this as “a polyphony of battling and internally divided voices” as “we would see them through each other’s eyes”. Broodthaers’ reading of Mallarmé’s text in visual terms, as an image,<sup>8</sup> is exploited through the agency of the artist’s book as the most appropriate form in which to acknowledge the visual impact Mallarmé (cited in Drucker 2007:36) demanded of his text; as a “divine and intricate organism required by literature”. Thus Broodthaers succeeds in calling attention to, what Drucker describes as, the conventions by which, through constant exposure, a book normally neutralises its identity, achieving this through the theoretical operation of its enunciation (Drucker 2007:161).

Holquist (2002:16) states that a dialogical framework “is itself not a systematic philosophy” and “refuses to be systematic” and thus constructs a space of polyvocality; of simultaneity, within which artists’ books may speak to one another and within which a productive theoretical position might be taken up. This simultaneity (*both/and* rather than *either/or*) (Holquist 2002:41) is a more useful position, preventing reliance upon categories such as *similarity* in and between works which display purely formal, subject or broadly conceptual congruence or shared features. If Broodthaers is acutely aware of the implications of cancellation and absence in his reference to Mallarmé he would not be surprised to find examples of artists’ books which pursue this trajectory and which may, themselves, include Broodthaers’ work in their remit. Renée and Judd Hubert (1999:87-89) read Buzz Spector’s bookwork in just this way, accounting for his oft-repeated trope of strategically tearing pages (shortsheeting) from existing texts.

By carefully tearing down each page vertically, Spector removes most of the readable text and by progressively shifting the place of each tear, increases the size of each successive partially surviving page. The result is a set of triangularly closing books which seem ‘normal’ when the spines are viewed on a bookshelf. In *Marcel Broodthaers* (1988), Spector uses the titular artist’s exhibition catalogue as “the sacrificial book” (Hubert & Hubert 1999:88). Hubert & Hubert (1999:88) draw attention to the manner in which the straight black lines of horizontal text in the catalogue give way to vertical opticality just as the many pages give way to a single sloping page and where reading shifts to looking. Hubert and Hubert direct us to Spector’s particular dialogical relationship with Broodthaers’ obliteration of Mallarmé’s work as well as the broader field of artists’ books and the art and literary terrains with which they dialogue, stating: “As Spector also produces texts, critical as well as meditative, we can classify him as a writer, in which capacity he deliberately makes himself vulnerable to his own artistic practice” (Hubert & Hubert 1999:89).

If dialogism implies, in Holquist’s (2002:59) terms, an *extra*-literary language which refuses to be systematic and moves on and across the borders of multiple disciplines, then I see it as an appropriate tool for enunciating artists’ books theoretical operations as well as their relationship with each other. If artists’ books can be considered in Bakhtinian terms as an ‘utterance’, then as

Holquist (2002:60-61) states, "...texts, like other kinds of utterance, depend not only on the activity of the author, but also on the place they hold in the social and historical forces at work when the text is produced and when it was consumed". Of even greater importance to the manner in which action 'completes' the experience of the artist's book (and with particular relevance to Mallarmé) is Bakhtin's idea of the "utterance as active and performed" (Holquist 2002:59). Dialogism helps to announce and enunciate both the existence of the field of artists' books as well as their own historiography, operating in temporal/spatial terms, between works separated in time.

### Heteroglossia

Bakhtin's notion of *heteroglossia* which operates underneath this broad dialogism might help to operationalize the way in which artists' books call attention to themselves, enunciate themselves and de-neutralise their identities.

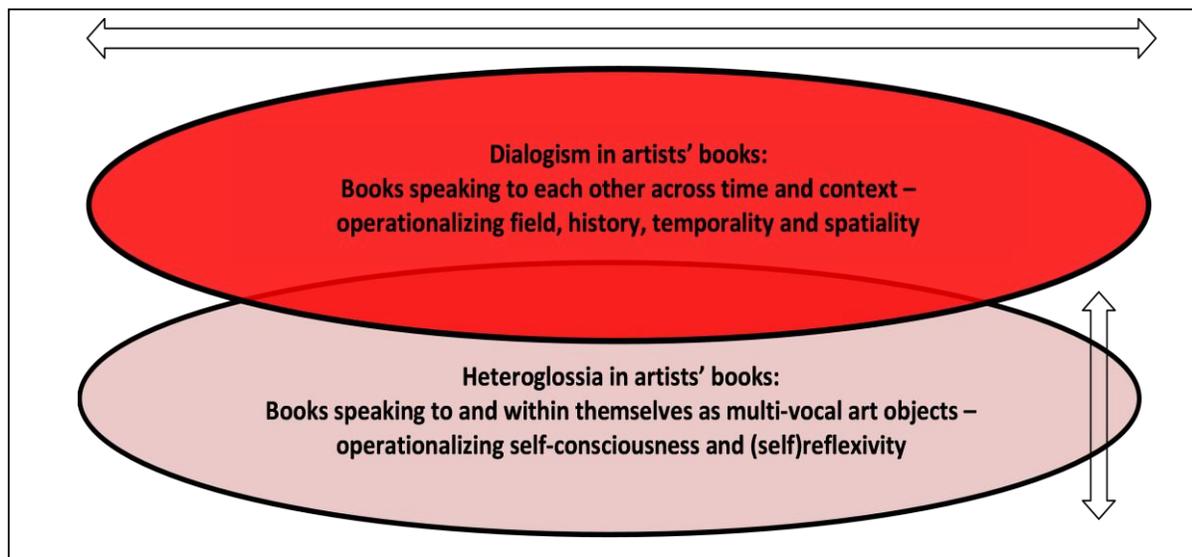


Fig. 1. Dialogism and heteroglossia in the artist's book. Derived from Julia Kristeva's (1980) spatial conception of language's poetic operation: The horizontal and the vertical status of the word.

Sue Vice (1997:20) states that “[d]ialogism describes the way languages interact, while heteroglossia<sup>9</sup> describes the languages themselves”. Holquist (2002:69) describes heteroglossia as governing the “operation of meaning” in the kind of utterance we call texts, “as it does in any utterance”. Holquist (2002:70) continues:

All utterances are heteroglot in that they are shaped by forces whose particularity and variety are practically beyond systematization. The idea of heteroglossia comes as close as possible to conceptualizing a locus where the great centripetal and centrifugal forces that shape discourse can meaningfully come together.

Drucker’s (2007:161) metacritical language of enunciation which operationalizes artists’ books is a heteroglossic utterance. Bakhtin’s focus on the novel, however, might help us isolate particular critical operational elements with which to proceed. Firstly, Holquist (2002:72) states that “Bakhtin is particularly drawn to the novel, the genre least secure (or *most self-conscious*) about its own status as a genre”. Secondly, he (2002:72) draws attention to “... the novel’s peculiar ability to open a window in discourse from which the extraordinary variety of social languages can be perceived”. Thirdly, in relation to Bakhtin’s two major protagonists, Holquist (2002:72-73) states, “Rabelais and Dostoevsky are significant for Bakhtin not merely because they write novels, but because they advance the work of novelness, and it is novelness – not the novel, nor Rabelais, not even Dostoevsky – that is the name of his real hero”. From this I can isolate three critical elements of Bakhtin’s thought which might underpin the artist’s book’s acts of theoretical enunciation: self-consciousness, discursive perceptivity and self-reflexivity or bookness. Heteroglossia, I argue, activates these elements and governs the operation of meaning. Bakhtin (cited in Vice 1997:19) tells us that heteroglossia is “a double-voiced discourse, as it serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author”.

Importantly for my argument, Bakhtin’s (*DN* 324) “incorporated genres” include “non-literary forms (menus, advertisements)” (*DN* 321) and it is here where his heteroglot discursive perceptivity opens itself to the possibility of imagistic and other forms of scripto-visual text for

inclusion and analysis. The artist's book even exploits the seemingly private text, some of which Bakhtin (DN 321) identifies as "the confessional, the diary, travel notes, biography, the personal letter", any of which have found themselves meaningful subjects of artists' books. In heteroglossic terms, the author, the narrator, characters and the reader, become the artist, subjects, characterisations and the viewer, each aware of the positions and roles the others take up and play.

Any textual or scripto-visual utterance in the artist's book, then, is dialogilized heteroglossia. An example is Ulises Carrión's *For Fans and Scholars Alike* (1987). The layout of each page is composed in the visual language of the magazine divided into column blocks which frame spaces for illustrations and create space for headings. The page is an image of literary conventions in which the gutter, marginalia, indices, running heads and footers "are so codified that they can be quoted without any verbal content, as shapes and forms on the page and function as a self-conscious investigation" (Drucker 2007:163). This codified language, however, is double-voiced: Carrión composes his text blocks entirely of the letter "i" with 'headlines' made up of bracket-like shapes and with the 'illustrations' containing graphic marks described by Drucker as "taking up space as if they comprised a readable image" (Drucker 2007:164). The grey cover boards contain the same "i" imagery; an undifferentiated space whether external or internal and in which the voice of the book's narrative is the same as the one which announces the book on the cover. The title, too, points us towards the 'double-voicedness' of Carrión's project. Drucker (2007:164) states: "The book displays a self-conscious level of organization as a structural feature of the work. ... But the book is neither nonsense (silly gibberish) nor without sense (meaningless) instead it represents structure as meaning".

Carrión's character, "i", serves to represent the physical space which it self-consciously occupies while, at the same time, the conventions of the occupied space articulate the space as the "i" of the narrative. For Carrión, as author, however, this double-voiced self-consciousness is predicated upon a reflexive, small "i". Holquist (2002:23) quoting Jakobson suggests that

'I' is a 'shifter' because it moves the center of discourse from one speaking subject to another: its emptiness is the no man's land in which subjects can exchange the lease they hold on all of language by virtue of saying 'I.' ... 'I' is the invisible ground of all other indices in language, the benchmark to which all its spatial operations are referred, and the Greenwich mean by which all its time distinctions are calibrated. 'I' marks the point between 'now' and 'then,' as well as between 'here' and 'there'.

Carrión's small "i" is a self-consciously articulated, depersonalised heteroglossic voice and, as such, an example of Jacobson's referential 'shifter' in which the 'now' and 'here' of the space of the page as well as the reiterated and reinforced visual analogue (Drucker 2007:164) of the book's whole are articulated.

The second example of heteroglossia in an artist's book is provided by the South African artist Ilka van Schalkwyk's *Reading Colour* (2009). van Schalkwyk's work is a visual reading of Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, his first novel after *The Satanic Verses*. For van Schalkwyk (2010:s.p.) the story conjures the dichotomous nature of life: silence vs. expression; dark vs. light; the continuous vs. the layered which were the very things she wished to explore in her art. However this is not an illustrative rendition of Rushdie's text. In *Reading Colour* van Schalkwyk explores her personal experiences of what is termed *grapheme synaesthesia*, a condition in which a person associates colours with words, letters of the alphabet, numbers or days of the week (van Schalkwyk 2009:1). van Schalkwyk's work exploits a personal 'alphabet of colour' and in which she 'translates' Rushdie's text into her own colour language.

*Reading Colour* gives van Schalkwyk an opportunity to exploit her synaesthesia in positive and affirming ways by scanning each page from her copy of *Haroun* and painstakingly transposing every letter, word and sentence into her colour alphabet. Like Willem Boshoff's *Skynbord* (1977-79) and *Bangboek* (1977-81), it is possible to decipher *Reading Colour* given the right degree of fortitude and patience (van Schalkwyk 2010:s.p.). *Reading Colour* calls across the temporal-spatiality of the book to what Julia Kristeva (1980:s.p.) terms Bakhtin's *intertextuality* and Bakhtin (in Pechey 1989:41) terms *translinguistics* – the notion of a boundary transgressed.

If heteroglossia is differentiated speech, then *Reading Colour* speaks with the parodic and ironic tongues to which Bakhtin (DN 324) might have referred as, “another’s speech in another’s language”.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to respond to a perceived gap in the theoretical underpinning of the artist’s book by discussing specific examples of artists’ books: Marcel Broodthaer’s *Un Coup de Dés: Image*, which responds to Stéphane Mallarmé’s original work, Buzz Spector’s *Marcel Broodthaers*, Ulises Carrión’s *For Fans and Scholars Alike* and the South African artist Ilka van Schalkwyk’s *Reading Colour*. By exposing these artists’ books to the critical lenses of Bakhtin’s dialogism and heteroglossia, the multivocal and heteroglot voices between these works in history and within themselves are shown to be appropriate frames for the analysis of particular qualities which enunciate artists’ books: *self-consciousness, discursive perceptivity and reflexivity*.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Included here are:

- The *Pyramid Atlantic Book Arts Fair & Conference*, Silver Spring, Maryland, November 2006,
- The *Codex International Book Fair*, Berkeley, February 2007,
- The *Action/Interaction: Book/Arts Conference (A/I)*, Columbia College Center for Book and Paper Arts, Chicago, June 2007,
- Sarah Bodman and Tom Sowden, Centre for Fine Print Research, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, *What Will Constitute the Contexts of Artists’ Publishing in the Future?*, March 2008 to February 2010 and
- The CBAA’s *Time, Sequence & Technology: Book Art in the 21st Century*, San Francisco, January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Holquist notes that the term dialogism is used by scholars as a means of “... categorizing the different ways he meditated on dialogue” but was “never used by Bakhtin himself”.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of his work include: *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984), *Rabelais and His World* (1984) and the essays published in English as *The Dialogical Imagination* (1981). Note that these dates all refer to the first English translations. The original Russian transcripts date from 1919 (*Art and Answerability*).

<sup>4</sup> Dialogism opposes monologic works of literature – military orders, instructions, rules and even epic poetry – in which any orientation of the work towards a past or a future context, history or voice is minimised, prompting, rather, obedience, acquiescence or no interactivity at all.

<sup>5</sup> Mallarmé’s poem was first published in the journal *Cosmopolis* in May 1897. This version represents only a partial fulfilment of his ideas for the poem. The 1914 edition published by the Nouvelle Revue Française disregards particular specifications Mallarmé made before his death i.e. the specific Didot font to be used. Gallimard’s 2003 version, which I use in this paper & illustrations, is based on the 1914 publication.

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<sup>6</sup> Mallarmé's version could anticipate Broodthaers's version through the manner in which the original textual layout broke with typographic conventions of its day, influencing the visual typographies of later Futurist, Dada and Constructivist artists who, themselves, influenced postmodern typography and Broodthaers. It is here that the dialogical power of Mallarmé's work comes to the fore.

<sup>7</sup> Broodthaers' 1969 edition consists of:

- 10 unbound copies printed on 12 aluminium sheets,
- 90 copies printed on translucent paper with two sheets of white card cut to the size of the book so that individual pages could be isolated by the reader and
- 300 copies on normal paper allowing the ink impressions in *versō foliō* to be visible.

These printing decisions reinforce the dialogical relationship between Mallarmé and Broodthaers in that the optical qualities present in the post *Cosmopolis* versions can be exploited in the sequential & material possibilities of the artist's book.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Sigrídur Arnar cites Mallarmé's use of visual and affective terms to describe the import he expected of his texts as: *active, performative, oceanlike, musical, thunder, ecstatic, glittering, sparking, electric and flickering*.

<sup>9</sup> In Bakhtinian terms heteroglossia takes two forms:

- as social languages within a single national language and
- as different national languages within the same culture.

Within the novel form, heteroglossia appears:

- as characters' dialogues,
- as various forms of speech genre (language of a profession or class),
- as a culture's various dialects and languages.

Vice states that the manner in which these three interact in a text is dialogic.

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