

Simbao, Ruth, Rhodes University, South Africa

Non-Words and Resistant Readings: The Art of Xu Bing (China) and Willem Boshoff (South Africa)

Xu Bing and Willem Boshoff are two visual artists who have, for decades, been obsessed with words, books, scripts and the mischievous ambiguity of meaning. Meticulously producing works of extraordinary visual power, they challenge stereotypes related to language, speech and writing. Xu explores socio-political shifts in Chinese attitudes towards language and text, and subverts Western exoticization of 'mysterious Eastern calligraphy' by creating seemingly recognisable but meaningless Chinese characters. Comparably, Boshoff responds to the way English-speakers ridicule his Afrikaans accent, and he develops astounding mastery over the English language (he has written about 15 dictionaries) and turns the authority of the word on its head.

Both artists accumulate visual power through the obsessive, yet aesthetically beautiful repetition of letters, characters, symbols, designs or forms. This paper explores their use of seemingly futile repetition in light of Homi Bhabha's assertion that it is precisely due to the ambiguity and non-fixity of stereotypes that derogatory remarks and perceptions have to be repeated over and over again. Employing (and twisting) this strategy of repetition, Xu and Boshoff trip up stereotypes by playing with various expectations and comfort zones of language and text.