

# BALANOID

This shape entitled *BALANOID* by the artist Willem Boshoff is a remake of one of the wooden sculptures he originally made for his *BLIND ALPHABET PROJECT*. The inscription in Braille on this remade shape reads: *BALANOID BALANIFEROUS - WILLEM BOSHOFF 1996*.

In English, *balanoid* means 'acorn-shaped' and *balaniferous* indicates plants as 'acorn-bearing'. Both words are from the Greek, *balanos*, an 'acorn'. A *balanos*, in English, is an erect penis, also sometimes referred to as a *glans penis*. It has occasionally also been called the *penis balanic*. The Greek *balanos* or acorn is called *glans* in Latin. An inflammation of the penis is called *balanitis*. Oak trees tree full of acorns are *balaniferous* or acorn-bearing. Some sea-shells are of the *Balanidae* or 'acorn-shell' group. They are called *balanids* for short. Missiles fitted with nuclear caps, oval-shaped light-bulbs and their shafts, chubby fingers sheathed in thimbles and the heads of popes and Jews, adorned in scull-caps, are all a somewhat *balanoid*.

The original *BALANOID* was made for the *BLIND ALPHABET PROJECT* on Saturday, 8 May 1993. The date of completion of this later *BALANOID* is 26 November 1996. The types of wood used are African Rosewood, Leadwood, and Zebrawood, all durable African woods and the Braille, consisting of escutcheon pins, is punched in by hand.

The *BLIND ALPHABET PROJECT* is a three-dimensional dictionary of 338 completed sculptural units with more work in progress. The project enables sighted visitors to benefit from the reading skills of blind guides. Without blind people in attendance, the Blind Alphabet remains lost - an exercise in aesthetic futility. The sculptures are hidden from clear view by being placed in boxes, where gallery rules will prevent them from being opened by the sighted. When blind people visit art galleries they are usually, and with some degree of difficulty, guided to find sculptures that they are allowed to touch. In sharp contrast to this, the units of the Blind Alphabet are so close together that the blind are not lost. Each piece, like the *BALANOID*, is of a manageable size and at a convenient height so that it can be picked up and fondled close to the body, over a basket where it won't fall to the ground. To the sighted, the 338 sculptures look like a cemetery, repeated in endless rows. It is intended to disorientate. The blind, of course, do not know that the work makes sighted people feel lost, because they only can only 'see' one object at a time. Each work is labeled in a complex Braille essay whereby the blind might enlighten even those who are visual experts. By their special magic they dictate the most abstruse texts through their fingertips.

The *BLIND ALPHABET PROJECT* has been successfully exhibited in Birmingham, Atlanta and Lisbon. A group of seventy seven units from it is South Africa's entry for the 1996 São Paulo Biennale. Large sections of the work are now in the permanent collections of the National Gallery, Cape Town; Sandton Art Gallery; Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein and Artsense in Birmingham.

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