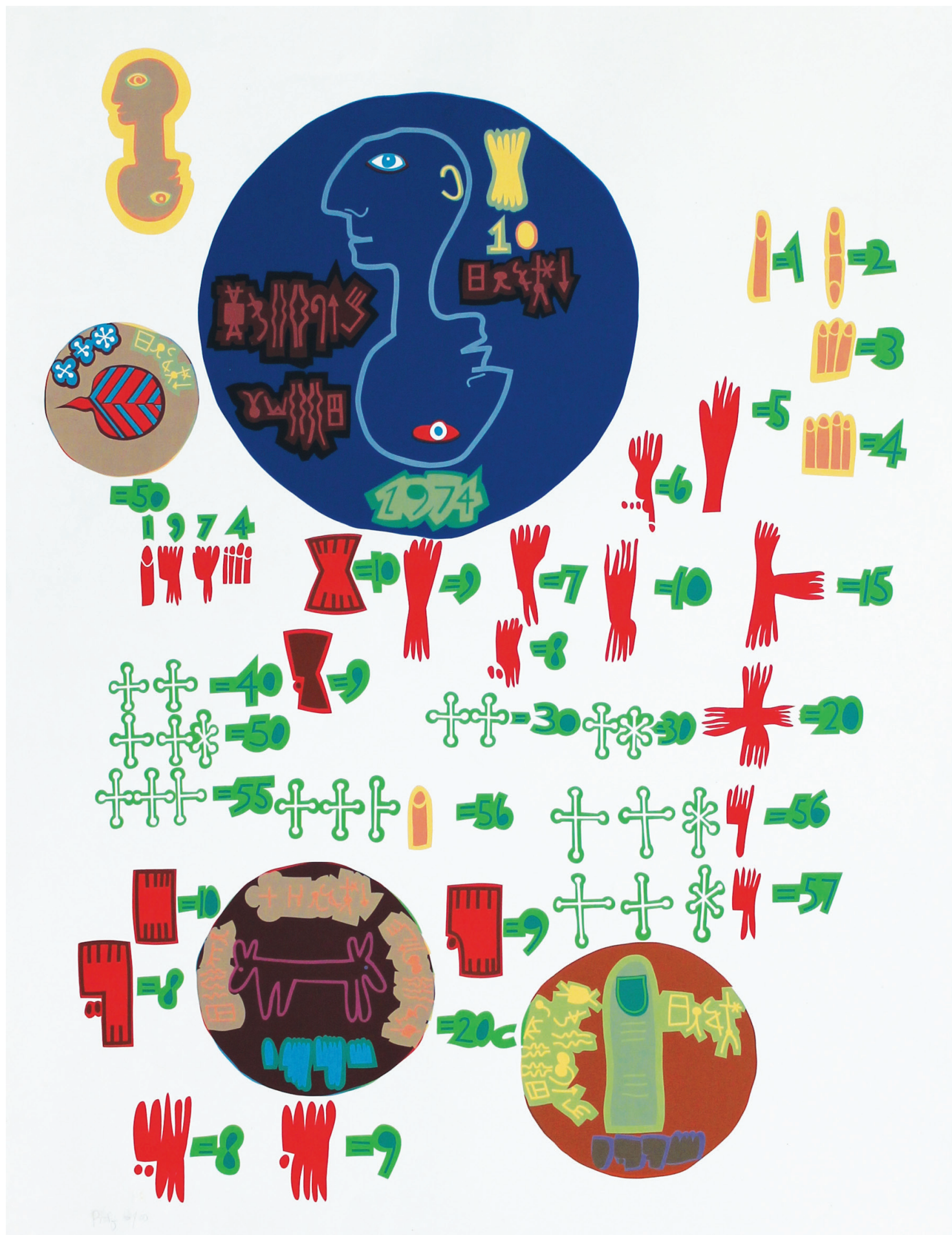


# FOOK ISLAND

art & objects



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## Stuffed Moonwhite Trout and Twilight Sauce: Walter Battiss and Norman Catherine Fooking Around

The inception of Fook Island is commonly believed to have occurred in November 1971 when the idea of a 'fake island' purportedly came to Walter Battiss while walking back from yet another exhibition of conceptual art in London: "Concepts. You write them down on bits of paper and pin them up. You can't see any object or anything", Battiss related to Barry Davidow in 1979. Ironically, Battiss was not averse to playing with the notion of conceptual art himself. At least three loose sheets of paper, each titled, 'Concept' can be found in his archive. One, dated 31.1.1971, reads: "Paint an eye on one's back/& diligently train everyday/to see through it/Once it sees it/will not wash off/in hot water/In old age it may/require glasses/It will lead to a/new fashion in clothes." "So I decided while walking up Alymer Road", he continues telling to Davidow, "that I'll make up a concept of an island. The concept will become real. It won't just be a selfish thing that an artist makes up and pins onto the wall, but something that everyone can participate in. That will make this island become real... [although] it is a fake island. I then rushed upstairs and looked under 'F' in the London directory and found the name 'Fook'." Numerous sketches, titled 'Myth of Fake Island', initialed, WB, and dated 4 Nov 1971 can be found in Battiss' sketchbooks at the time. They include designs for the Fook Island Flag (dated 21.6.73), and for Fook currency, as well as notes on the mythology of Fook, and the 'history' of Fook, apparently dating back to the arrival of one Ferdinand on Fook Island on 6 January 1723. (Battiss was born on 6 January 1906). This history was written completely in Fook script, which seemed to have been a fully developed 'language' at the time.

A much longer gestation period can be identified for Fook Island if one considers Battiss' lifelong obsession with islands. The earliest reference to this can be found in a loose sheet notebook, dated Thursday 16 Oct 1952 in which Battiss wanted to conquer his own island on his extensive travels in the Limpopo province. He discovered an un-proclaimed island at the confluence of the Limpopo River and the Shashe, a tributary of the Zambezi River, at the nodal boarder point between South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. "Just as D.H. Lawrence was intrigued & driven to seek a separate paradise in which to expand", Battiss wrote, "I am compelled – almost madly – to go & 'capture' the Limpopo-Shashi Island that belongs to no one. Today I went to the Deeds Office & saw the plan of Greefswald [a farm on the South African side of the Limpopo River] & the island is NOT (great pleasure) part of Greefswald. And I went and saw the biggest map at the High Commissioner of Rhodesia & Rhodesia's line is on the east confluence & now I must see the boundary of the Bechuanaland Protectorate. In any case the law is the edge of the river so the island is nobodys! The legal point (Roman-Dutch Law) is how to occupy and claim by right this island? I think if I am the first to do all the enquiries I've done & stake my claim first then by law I can hold it. Grace [Anderson, Battiss' wife] says I'm a little bit mad over this idea! But my own world of phantasy [sic] & pleasure far exceeds in reality the crude world around me controlled by dreadful might alone." Many years later, and as a small, nostalgic consolation and a pertinent pun, Battiss advertised in the FOOKS NOOKSPAAKER, an 'Uninhibited Island For Sale'.

Another impetus of the Fook Island concept can be attributed to Battiss' meeting with Daniel Spoerri, the Neo-Dada artist, whom he met in 1954. They both served on the Executive Committee of the International Association of Plastic Arts, Unesco (based in Paris at the time) between 1954 and 1958. Spoerri shared his "Le petit colossi de Symi" brochure with Battiss (which Battiss annotated: "Sent to me by Dan Spoerri, WB"), together with a copy of his book, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (published in 1962, and translated in 1966). The former constitutes an 'archeology' of 25 objects Spoerri found on the Greek island of Symi to which he attributed magical powers, and the latter, extensive annotation of everyday objects on a table, called 'universals'. This encounter with Spoerri and the exchange of his literary output with Battiss most probably gave rise to the emphasis Battiss put on the material culture of his Fook Island. Objects abounded on Fook Island, alluding to many practices and rituals performed during its lifespan: Fook banners and flags, ceremonial Fook scepters, Fook currency in the form of notes and minted coins, Fook postage stamps, first day covers, postcards and cleft sticks, Fook passports and drivers' licenses, Fook newspapers and books, Fook cutlery in the form of Fish Knives and Forks, Fook waste paper bags, Fook clothes such as Fook jerseys and socks and Fookball T-shirts, and so on.

Norman Catherine joined Fook Island in 1973 after being invited by Battiss, or King Ferd III at the time of Catherine's exhibition at Goodman Gallery. Catherine, or Norman King Norman populated the island with many Fookians and Fook animals, many of which, Janet Walker-Catherine embroidered. They are still living in the famous Fook Manor designed by architect Stanley Saitowitz, at Hartbeespoort Dam. Other artists such as Ramsay MacKay invented an elaborate Fook cuisine, such as the title of this exhibition signals: 'Stuffed Moonwhite Trout in Twilight Sauce'. Esme Berman was the official Fook historian, Walter Saunders the Fook linguist and Linda Givon (Goodman) was named Queen Linda the Only and Queen Asteroa.

When Battiss first visited the Bajun group of islands off the east coast of Africa – Lamu, Manda and Partate – the news made headlines in the local papers: "Battiss finds dream isle" proclaimed Hugh Carruthers in the *Rand Daily Mail* of August 27, 1964. Battiss visited the Greek islands regularly, no fewer than 16 islands in 1967, visits that give rise to the publication of the first artist's book in South Africa, *Nesos*, 1968. He also visited the Seychelles twice in 1972, and the South Sea islands (Fiji, Samoa) and the Hawaiian islands in 1976 and Tahiti in 1978. He visited the Greek islands again for the last time in 1981, one year before his death on 20 August 1982.

It is ironic to note that despite the inclusivity and the openness that Battiss professed for his imaginary island where everything was free and permissible that the language was encoded in a special Fook Script. When *Male Fook Book 1* was published in 1973, the introduction in Fook script was translated on the next page. *Fook Book 2* (1978) contained a separate page with the decoded Fook alphabet on it. The evolution of this alphabet signals Battiss' interest in ancient cultures, most notably found in San rock art which he studied extensively from the late 1920s. In one of his numerous publications on South African rock art, *The Art of Africa* (1958) he illustrated engraved signs on rocks of the Lower Riet River, Douglas in the Northern Cape province (p50). The arrow heads, the circular shapes and the square-like motifs could well have found their way into the symbols he eventually devised for his Fook alphabet. Likewise, Battiss was particularly struck with the shape of the Southern Arabic letters which he encountered on his visits to the Middle East in 1961 and again in 1965. In his notebook, titled 'W Battiss 1965' he listed on a double page all the 29 letters of this alphabet, and what is immediately apparent is the triangular shapes, the Y forms and the zigzag motifs that are also characteristic of the Fook alphabet. When Walter Saunders, recited the Fook script orally, it gave rise to yet another, phonetic Fook language. Poems, such as LASALA GABBOG YIFOOK (YIROOM ZIK), (The Fook Island Creation Myth Canto One), published in the *Artists' and Writers' Guild Newsletter* #3, March 1975, abounded.

Merle Huntley (1989) theorizes about the significance of the Fook phenomenon in terms of Alfred Jarry's fictitious character, the tragic-comic dictator Ubu Roi, in terms of the anarchic nature of the Dada movement earlier in the 1910s in Europe, and the more measured, structured, utopian nature of JRR Tolkien's 'middle earth' in *The Hobbit*. All of these and more theories can well be invoked to explain the spirit of place and of space that was so evident in what can be argued convincingly as Walter Battiss' most vivid visual metaphor and conceptual piece in his work, as well as a monumentally sustained form of performance art in South Africa in the 1970s.

Wilhelm van Rensburg

With thanks to Giles Battiss, Norman Catherine, Janet Walker-Catherine and Marguerite Stephens

Image: Walter Battiss. *Fook Island Coinage*. Screenprint. 900X645mm