

# Taxi Hand Signs for the Blind

by Susan Woolf

Documenting South African taxi hand signs as a language for the blind

## Taxi Hand Signs for the Blind

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# About the Artist: Susan Woolf MATHABO

Susan Woolf is a fine artist who is currently doing a cross disciplinary Doctoral thesis, *Taxi Hand Signs in Social Spaces*, at the University of the Witwatersrand. It is a social interventionist art and anthropological project. For the purpose of history and practical usage Woolf is also currently documenting and capturing recognised taxi destinations and relating them to the taxi hand signs used to hail mini bus taxis. Woolf's artwork on the Taxi signs will be one of the themes for the South African National Stamp for 2010. Taxi hand sign booklets for the general public and this Blind taxi hand sign book is a part of the investigation. The first of a series of books was published for the libraries in May 2007.

Other conceptual and three dimensional art includes:

*Witness: Shadow of Ubuntu*. This a design for an expansive outdoor installation which projects shadows that collectively read Ubuntu throughout the year, every day, at a specific time. The eleven shapes of the maquette are hand carved in different types of wood. The large version will be made of steel and stone (2006).

The *Healing* installation and the 30 resin and steel *Healing Art Books*, exhibited in Museum Africa, were a part of a social interventionist arts project concerned with low cost housing.

A five storey high, three ton, aluminium kinetic *Mobile City* was designed for Absa Bank in collaboration with architects Levin and Cawood. This was the subject of Woolf's Masters Degree dissertation entitled *The Conceptual and Practical Realisation of a Corporate Art Commission*.

Earlier works of Resistance Art in South Africa include exhibitions on *Hostels* and *Crisis* in South Africa and a personal invitation by past President Jimmy Carter to exhibit these works at *The Carter Presidential Center in Atlanta*.

Woolf project-managed an exhibition *South African Art to Atlanta, Common and Uncommon Ground* for the 1996 Cultural Olympiad and Atlanta Olympic Games.

Various solo art exhibitions in galleries and museums around South Africa and abroad include *Towards Mandela* at the King Plow Centre and Bernau University Atlanta 1997; *The Potter* at the Klutnsnik Museum, Washington; *Is This Your Face?* at the Civic Gallery and later *Mapping Generations* exhibited at the Warren Siebrits gallery, amongst other recipients of the Ampersand Fellowship foundation.

# About the Curator

Natalie Knight qualified as an attorney before gaining a BA in History of Art and History of Drama (University of the Witwatersrand). Knight wrote and produced two plays: *Barmy Days*, starring Sarah Sylvia and *There's no Sugar Left*, produced at the Market Theatre. With Suzanne Priebatsch, she produced an exhibition and audio-visual programme *Designs of the Ndebele* (commissioned by the Smithsonian Institute Travelling Exhibitions in Washington) which toured the USA from 1979-81. Knight and Priebatsch published *Ndebele Images* (1983) and *the Art of the Ndebele: Evolution of a cultural identity* (for Atlanta International Museum, USA 2000).

Between 1981 and 1995, Knight took on the role of director at the Natalie Knight Gallery in Hyde Park Corner, where she specialised in the works of leading international artists and promoted then little-known black artists, who have now achieved recognition.

Knight and Nessa Leibhammer of the Johannesburg Art Gallery co-curated the exhibition and publication *Dungamanzhi / Stirring Waters* (a study of the Tsonga / Shangaan of Southern Africa), which toured the National Galleries in South Africa during 2007 and 2008. In July 2008 Natalie Knight curated the exhibition *Mandela@90* with the Artworks Committee at the Constitutional Court. She currently runs Natalie Knight – The Art Source, working as curator, consultant and lecturer. She is married to Zamie Liknaitzky (who is the executor of the estate of the late Leopold Spiegel).

Knight is the Curator of the Maria Stein-Lessing Exhibition at Museum Africa, where she is facilitating the launch of the *Blind Taxi Hand Sign Book* and the corresponding education program.

# Foreword

South Africa has eleven official languages but in reality, there are twelve. The twelfth language is Sign Language. Part of this language is the rapidly evolving hand signals developed by millions of South Africans across townships and cities - the language of commuters. As the taxi routes expand, the hand signs continuously develop as a logical, visual commuter language.

Susan Woolf has done South African taxi commuters a great service. She has catalogued the hand signals and linked them to the relevant taxi routes, in what is initially a single user-friendly booklet. With this guide everyone, literate or illiterate, young or old, rural or urban, local or international, can now navigate to their destinations like seasoned professionals. All of us should welcome this empowering tool. This is a guide book whose time has come.

With 2010 around the corner, many of the tourists will now find their way to and from the games and in and out of the city and townships. This book is born out of a pride in what is so ingeniously, truly South African. I am proud to be part of the history that documents this twelfth South African language.

Dr Molefe Tsele.

*South African Ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo  
Former General Secretary, South African Council of Churches.*

# Table of Contents

## A

... Alberton to Baragwaneth.....	2a
... Alexandra to Corporate Park via Midrand.....	3c
... Alexandra to Doornfontein.....	3c
... Alexandra to Fourways.....	1a
... Alexandra to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Alexandra to Jo'burg CBD via Johannesburg General Hospital.....	1a
... Alexandra to Limbro Park via Eastbank (through 2nd Ave.).....	2c
... Alexandra to Limbro Park via Eastbank (through Clifford Rd.).....	2c
... Alexandra to Limbro Park via Pan Africa.....	2c
... Alexandra to Local (within Alex):.....	
... a. Pan Africa to East Bank Ave.....	2c
... b. Pan Africa to London Rd.....	2c
... c. Pan Africa to Cemetery Settlement.....	2c
... d. Pan Africa to Selbourne.....	2c
... Alexandra to Marlboro.....	2c
... Alexandra to Midrand.....	3c
... Alexandra to Oliven North Bosch via Kyalami Park.....	Ask
... Alexandra to Randburg via Republic.....	2b
... Alexandra to Randburg via Peter Place.....	2b
... Alexandra to Rosebank.....	Ask
... Alexandra to Sandton via Grayston.....	Ask
... Alexandra to Sandton via Catherine.....	Ask
... Alexandra via Vorna Valley, Voda World & Centurian to Ranties.....	3c
... Alexandra to Wynburg.....	2c

## B

... Baragwaneth & Orlando East to Dobsonville.....	1c
... Baragwaneth to Steeldale.....	2a
... Bassonia to Nelspruit.....	Ask
... Bok Street * & Jo'burg CBD to Eastgate.....	4b
... Braamfontein to Jo'burg CBD.....	2b
... Braamfontein to Eastgate.....	5c
... Bree to Cosmo City / Kya-Sand.....	5a

... Bree to Craighall.....	2b
... Bree to Diepsloot.....	7a
... Bree to Eastgate.....	2c
... Bree to Fairlands.....	4b
... Bree to Fourways.....	2a
... Bree to Greymont / Florida Glen.....	2a
... Bree to Honeydew.....	4c
... Bree to Jules.....	
... Bree to Leeukop.....	
... Bree to Radiokop.....	1b
... Bree to Randburg.....	1a
... Bree to Weltevreden Park.....	2a
... Bree to Strijdom Park.....	
... Bree / Plein to Yeoville.....	1a

## C

... CNJ (Central Western Jabavu) & Ikwezi to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Crossroads to Jo'burg CBD.....	5c

## D

... De Deur to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Delters to Alberton.....	2c
... Delters to Basonia.....	7a
... Delters to Market.....	1a
... Delters to Ridges Park / Steeldale.....	6c
... Delters to Spruit.....	1a
... Diepkloof & Orlando East to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Dobsonville (T-Junction) to Baragwaneth.....	1b
... Dobsonville (T-Junction) to Highgate.....	1b
... Dobsonville (T-Junction) to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Dube, Mufolo & Phefeni to Highgate.....	1b
... Dube, Mufolo & Phefeni to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Dunkeld to Rosebank.....	2c

## E

... Emdeni & Naledi to Baragwanath.....	4b
... Emdeni & Naledi to Highgate.....	1b
... Emdeni & Naledi to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Emdeni & Naledi via Sakkies to Baragwanath.....	2a
... Emdeni, Zola & Jabulani to Indimgilzi.....	2c
... Eastgate to Braamfontein.....	1c
... Eastgate to Bree.....	5c
... Eastgate to Malvern.....	2c
... Eikenhof to Southgate.....	1c
... Eikenhof / Meredale to Jo'burg CBD.....	2c
... Ikwezi to Jo'burg CBD.....	Ask

## F

... Faraday to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Faraday to R.Road.....	1a
... Fordsburg to Jeppe.....	1a
... Fourways to Alexander.....	4b

## G

... Germiston to Katlehong.....	6b
... Germiston to Takosa.....	
... Glen to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Greenvillage & Island to Baragwaneth.....	4b
... Greenvillage & Island to Highgate.....	1b
... Greenvillage & Island to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a

## H

... Highgate / Crouses to Pinehaven.....	1a
--	----

## I

... Ikwezi & CWJ (Central Western Jabavu) to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Illovo to Rosebank.....	2c
... Island & Greenvillage to Baragwanath.....	4b
... Island & Greenvillage to Highgate.....	1b



... Island & Greenvillage to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Ivory Park to Fourways.....	2a
... Ivory Park to Jo'burg CBD.....	
... Ivory Park to Sandton.....	1c
... Ivory Park to Midrand.....	3c

## J

... Jabulani, Zola & Emdeni to Ikwezi.....	2c
... Jabulani, Zola & Emdeni to Indimgilzi.....	1b
... Jeppe / Delfers to Rocheville / Denver.....	5c
... Jeppe to R Road.....	1a
... John Page to Eastgate.....	1c
... Jo'burg CBD to Diepsloot.....	7b
... Jo'burg CBD to Dobsonville.....	1b
... Jo'burg CBD to Edenvale.....	5c
... Jo'burg CBD to Fourways.....	2a
... Jo'burg CBD to Glen.....	
... Jo'burg CBD to Hill.....	1a
... Jo'burg CBD to Johannesburg General Hospital.....	
... Jo'burg CBD to Local.....	2c
... Jo'burg CBD to Orange Farm.....	5a
... Jo'burg CBD to Parkmore via Sandton.....	2b
... Jo'burg CBD to Pinehaven.....	
... Jo'burg CBD to Phola Park.....	9a
... Jo'burg CBD to Randburg.....	2b
... Jo'burg CBD to Randjies via Voda World.....	
... Jo'burg CBD to Rivonia via Sandton.....	2c
... Jo'burg CBD to Sandton.....	5c
... Jo'burg CBD to Tembisa.....	4a
... Jo'burg CBD via Sanderwood to Linksfield.....	9c
... Jo'burg CBD to Zonke.....	1c

## K

... Kyalami to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Kyalami to Tembisa.....	Ask

## L

... Limbro Park to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Little Falls to Honeydew / Honeydew Ridge.....	1b
... Little Falls to Newclare.....	7c
... Louis Botha to Edenvale.....	5c

## M

... Midrand to Kraaifontein.....	3a
... Midrand to Vorna Valley.....	3c
... Midrand to Kyalami.....	3c
... Midrand to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Midrand to Fourways.....	2a
... Midrand to Randburg.....	Ask
... Midrand to Sandton.....	Ask
... Mondeor to Greenfield.....	5a
... Mufolo, Dube & Phefeni to Highgate.....	1b
... Mufolo, Dube & Phefeni to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a

## N

... Naledi & Emdeni to Baragwanath.....	4b
... Naledi & Emdeni to Baragwanath via Sakkies.....	2a
... Naledi & Emdeni to Highgate.....	1b
... Naledi & Emdeni to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Newclare to Honeydew.....	1b
... Noort to Spruit.....	1a
... Noort to Sanderwood.....	Ask

## O

... Oliven North Bosch to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
... Oliven North Bosch to Midrand.....	3c
... Oliven North Bosch to Sandton.....	Ask
... Oliven North Bosch to Randburg.....	Ask
... Orlando East to Highgate.....	1b
... Orlando East & Diepkloof to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a

## P

...Phefeni, Dube & Mufolo to Highgate.....	1b
...Phefeni, Dube & Mufolo to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
...Pinehaven to Crouses / Highgate.....	1c
...Plein to Randburg.....	2b
...Plein to Johannesburg General Hospital.....	5b
...Polar Park to Jo'burg CBD.....	Ask

## R

...Rocheville / Denver to Jeppe / Delfers.....	5c
...Radiokop to Honeydew.....	2c
...Randburg to Diepsloot.....	Ask
...Randburg to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
...Randburg to Plein.....	2b
...Randburg to Tembisa.....	3b
...Ridgeway to Southgate.....	1c
...R. Road to Bree.....	Ask
...R. Road to Faraday.....	1a
...R. Road to Jeppe.....	4b

## S

...Sanderwood to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a
...Sanderwood to Linksfield.....	9c
...Sandton to Alexandra.....	4b
...Southgate to Mondeor.....	2c
...Southgate to Ridgeway / Turfontein.....	1c
...Southgate to Spruit.....	Ask
...Southgate to Winchester.....	7a
...Soweto to Highgate.....	1b
...Soweto to Local (within Soweto).....	6c
...Steeldale to Baragwaneth.....	2a
...Sunninghill to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a

## T

...Tembisa to Isando.....	4c
...Tembisa to Jo'burg CBD.....	1c
...Tembisa to Kempton.....	6a
...Tembisa to Olifantsfontein.....	Ask
...Tembisa to Sebenza.....	8b
...Turfontein to Malberton.....	7c

## V

...Vlakfontein to Jo'burg CBD.....	2c
------------------------------------	----

## W

...Westgate to Bez Valley.....	7c
...Westgate to Kensington.....	1a
...Winchester to Southgate.....	7z
...Woodmead to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a

## Y

...Yeoville to Rosebank.....	1a
------------------------------	----

## Z

...Zola, Emdeni & Jabulani to Ikwezi.....	2c
...Zola, Emdeni & Jabulani to Indimgilzi.....	1c
...Zonke to Jo'burg CBD.....	1a

# How to Use Blind Taxi Hand Signs

Eight basic shapes combine to form all the taxi hand signs. The symbols are simple triangular, circular and oblong shapes which, combined in various ways, make up all the Taxi hand signs. A sighted person can explain these symbols to a blind person. They can also use the regular taxi book in conjunction with the blind taxi book to help explain the hand signs. In the next pages, explanations are on the left page, the images on the right page.

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The DOT represents the wrist. The TRIANGLE represents the palm of the hand.

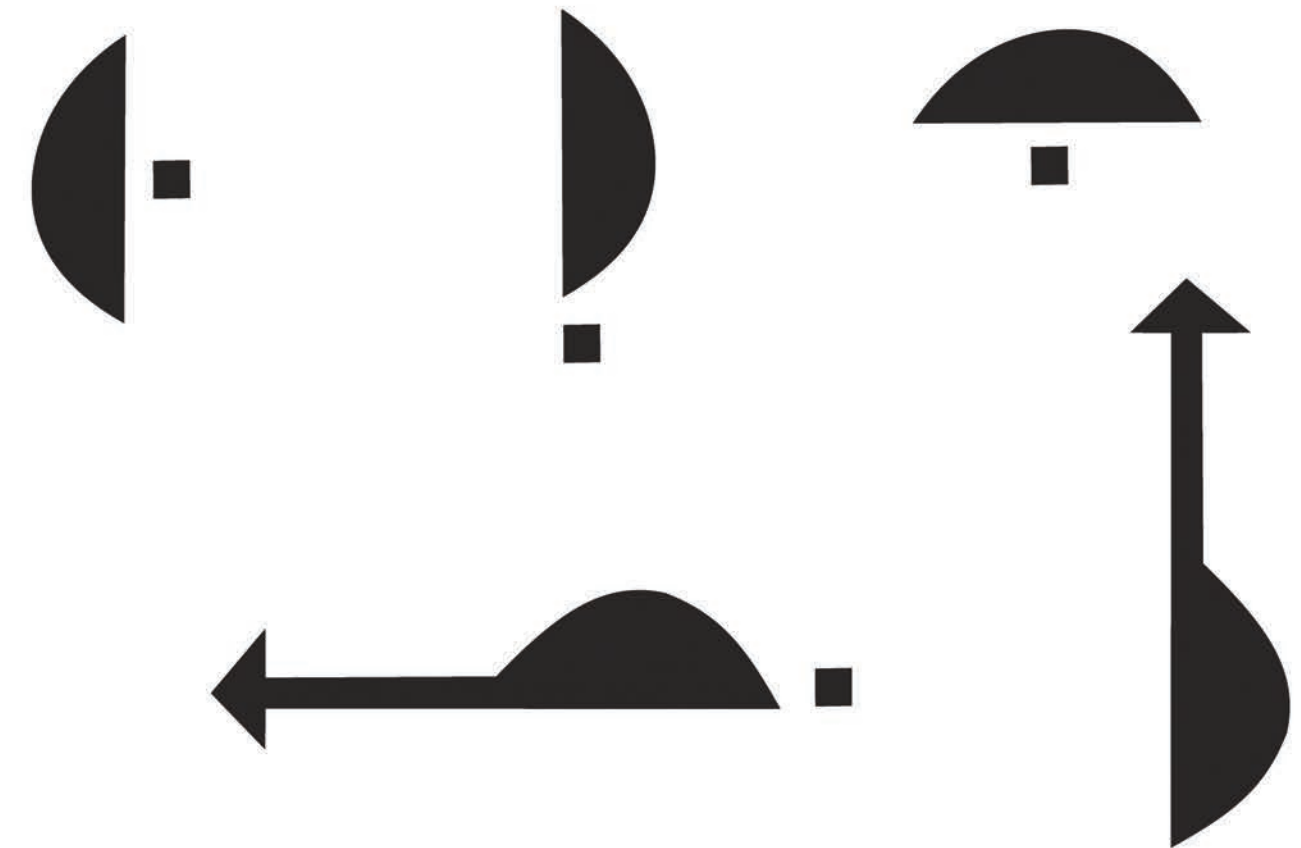
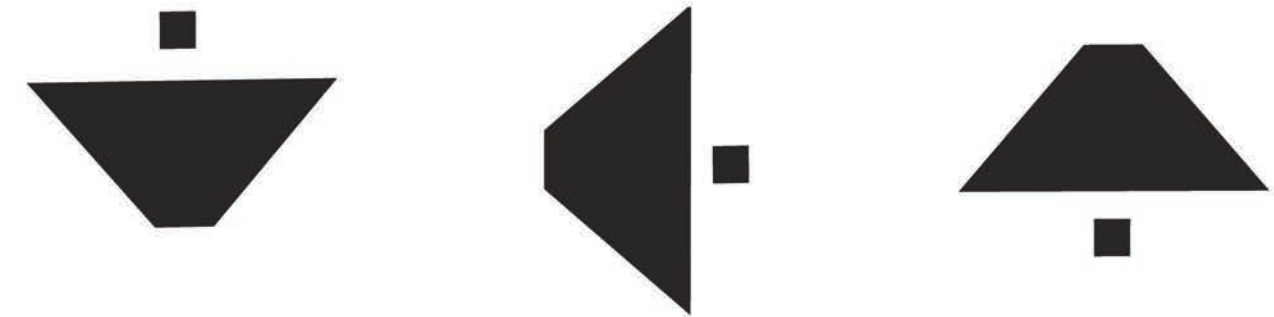
The TRIANGLE with the DOT under it represents the palm of the hand held upwards.

If the dot is at the top of the triangle it means that the hand is pointing downwards.

When the dot is on the left of the shape, the wrist is therefore on the left and the hand is pointing right.

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The CURVED HALF MOON shape represents the palm of the hand from the side or, sometimes, pointing forward.



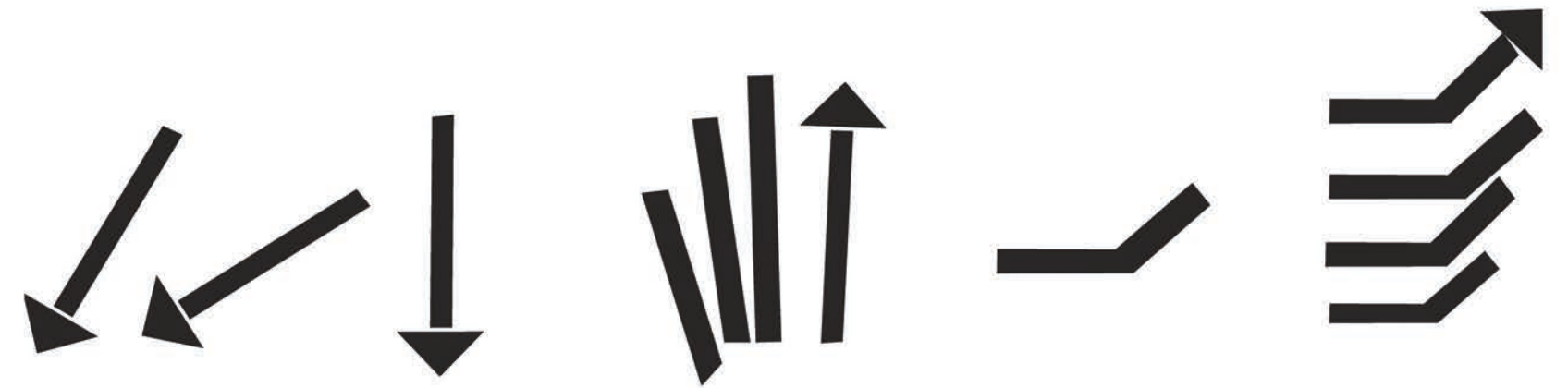


FINGERS are represented by three shapes:

- LONG OBLONG STICKS are the number of Fingers VISIBLE. They point up, down, left and right. Fingers not used for a hand sign are simply not shown.
- BENT LONG OBLONG STICKS: Long stick shapes that are bent in the center represent the fingers of a cupped hand OR an individual bent finger may form a circle.
- SHORTENED STICKS: Shortened sticks represent figures curled into a fist.

ARROW: The pointing finger always has a small triangular arrow tip. This arrow tip indicates if the hand is pointing downward or to the left or right. Sometimes when it is horizontal to the floor it is pointing behind to the back.

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THUMB: Short oblong with a thickened end represents the thumb.

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THUMB: Short oblong with a palm and a curved finger shape represents one finger touching the tip of the thumb.

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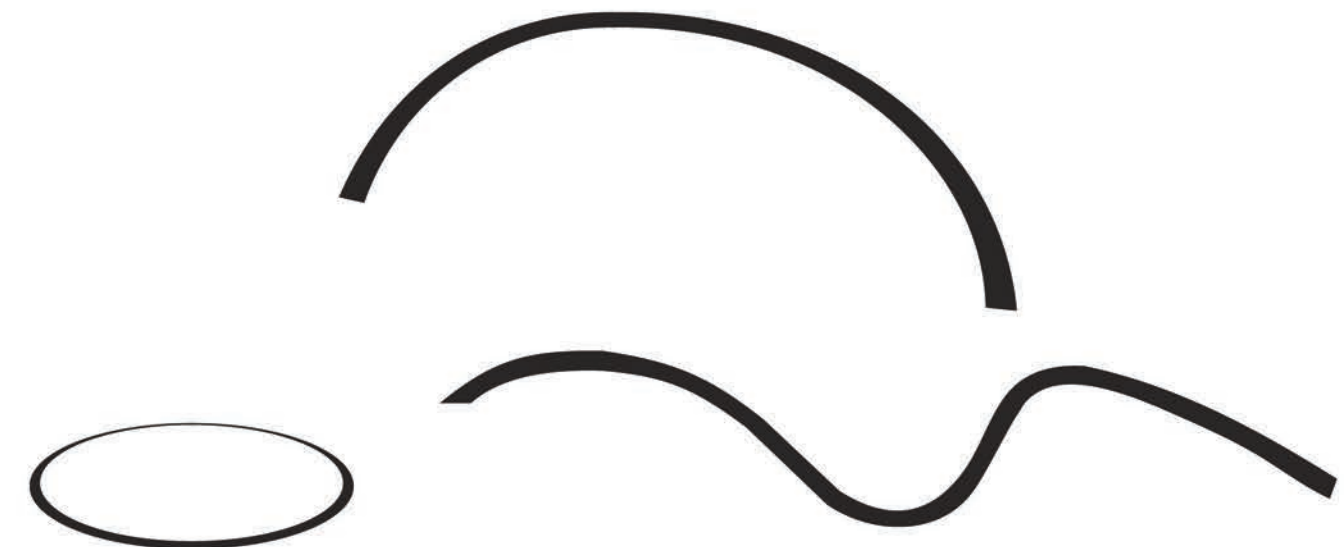


## Movement

THIN CURVE: A thin curved line indicates a sweep of movement of the hand, left to right and back again.

A WAVY LINE: A wavy line indicates that the hand must trace a wavy line in the air.

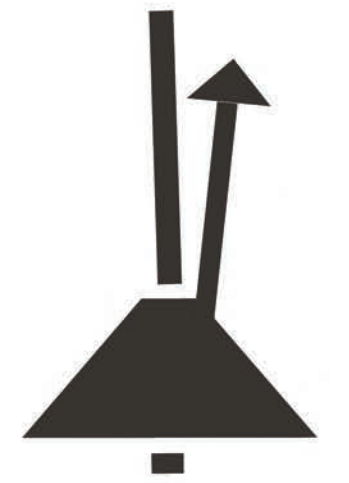
A COMPLETE CIRCLE means that the hand or finger must point around in a circular movement.



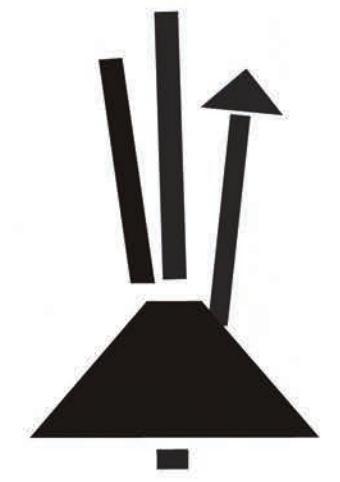
1a



1b



1c





2a



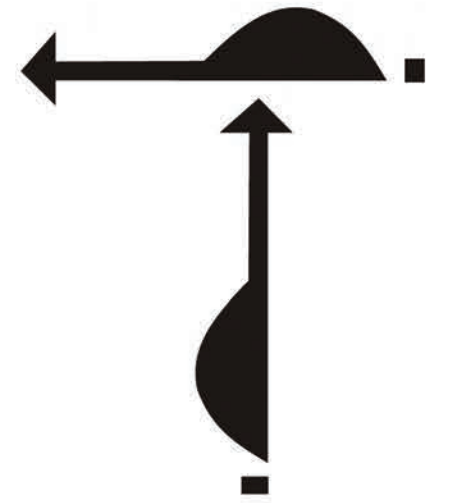
2b



2c



3a



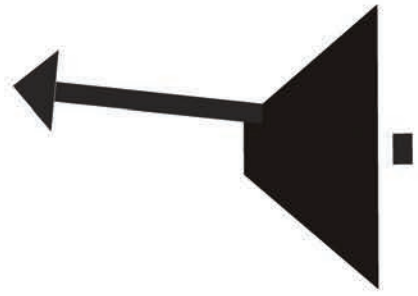
3b



3c



4a



4b



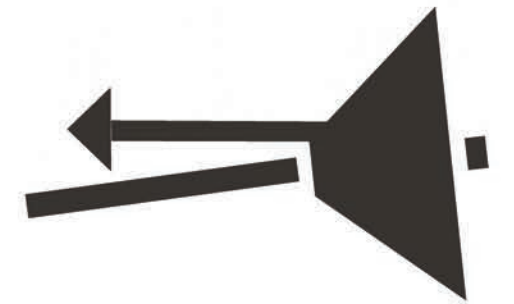
4c



5a

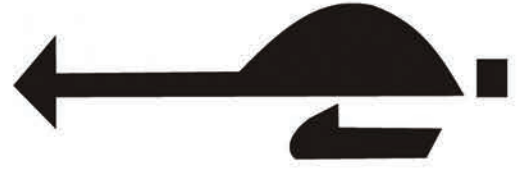


5b



5c

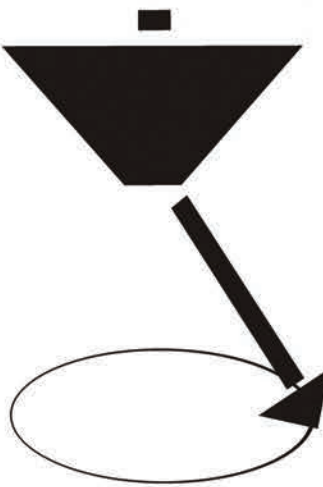




6a



6b

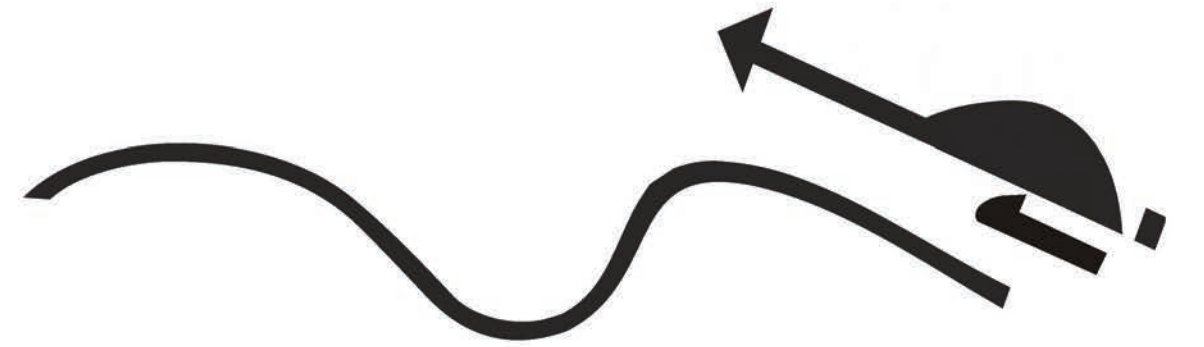


6c

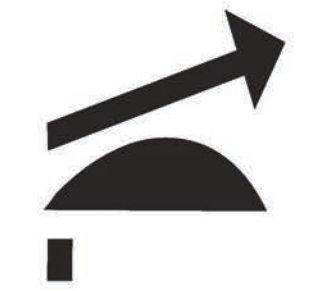
7a

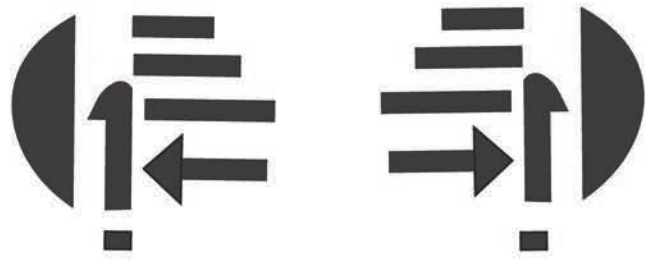


7b



7c





8a

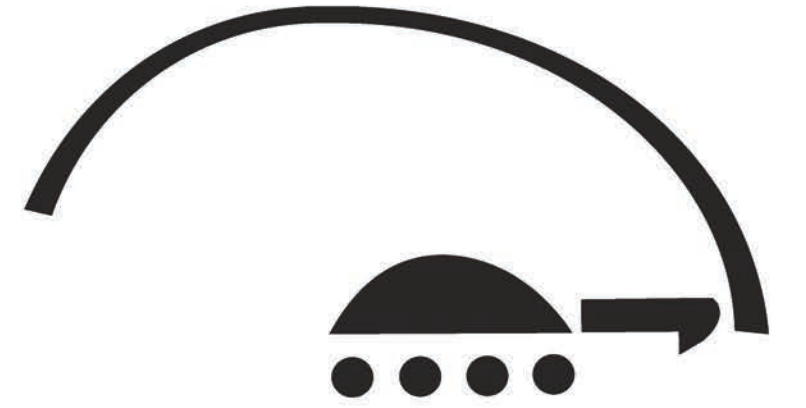


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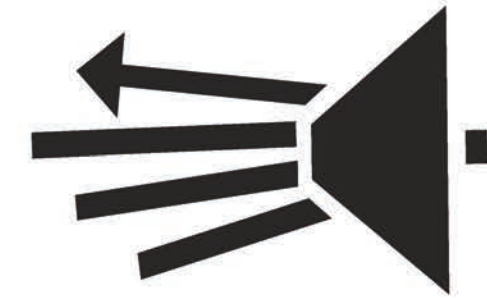


8c

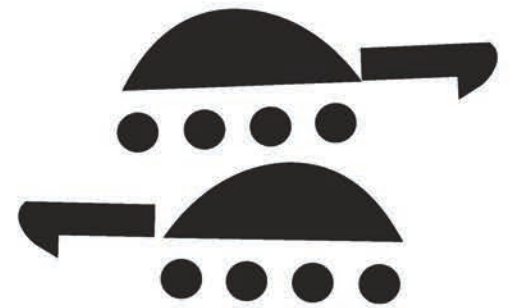
9a



9b



9c



# SPONSORS

Many thanks to the Estate of the late Leopold Spiegel for the sponsorship of the publication, which will be launched in the Spiegel / Stein-Lessing Wing of the l'Afrique exhibition at Museum Africa, Newtown, Johannesburg.

Additional thanks goes to SA Taxi Finance for their continuing support of Susan Woolf's taxi hand sign art and project.

## SATF LOGO

Finally, a debt of gratitude to Blind SA. Braille Services is the braille printing division of Blind SA. Their vision is to produce quality braille to blind people in their language of their choice, to enable them to access information, gain meaningful employment, and enhance their quality of life - and by printing this book at cost, they are doing just that.

## BLIND SA LOGO