

The Terror of Not Reading Seeing

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This paper will focus on my research practice as an artist and an academic. I will begin by presenting the ideas of arts practitioners whose views inform my own and then briefly describe one of my research projects. I acknowledge that there are many different approaches to research in the fields of Design, Art, Craft and Performance. However as an academic attached to an institution it is a productive strategy to identify and publish ones own research methodology and focus, in order to initiate the possibility of discourse with other researchers in related areas and also to combine research interests in order to apply for collaborative funding. It is also necessary for academics to identify the focus of their interests in order to attract post graduate students who are seeking to work in this area; these students can often be productively employed as research or technical assistants while pursuing their degree.

My main strategy as a practising artist is to question, to analyse and to edit every aspect involved in the production of a work. I constantly question my motivations and the results of my practice as an artist, every installation, action, and photograph is up for scrutiny. I look critically at my work. The results of these interrogations inform my searching/researching. I look before I read, which perhaps explains the title of this paper which is: "The Terror of Not Reading Seeing" (The title of an exhibition curated by Ian Burn in 1993). There is a certain security in the safety of text, of definition, but by placing "seeing" first we move into uncharted waters.

Mary Kelly, in the conference on "Pedagogical Ethics and the Supervisory Encounter" at UWS, Nepean, made it clear that her practice as a lecturer was always to look at the work and to speak to the work, and then to encourage other students to look at the work before finally asking the artist/student to speak, if in fact, they needed to speak at all this time.

This process of looking places the art work at the heart of the discussion, it is not presented as an illustration to a theoretical position but understood as a visual, spatial communicative experienced. It is:

A field of operations in which the production of theory takes place³³

Mary Kelly in describing her response to one of her own recent installations began with the phenomena of the work in the place, her initial analysis discussed the bodily response to the height of the works on the wall. Her analysis was of course informed by feminist discourse and also Lacanian theory, but issues in relation to these theories emerged through looking at the work.

³³ Michelle deCerteau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall, University of California press 1984

Bill Viola also writes about the visual and the relationship of the artist/viewer to the visual space of art. Viola writes about the physical, the bodily response to being in the space of art:

Art has always been a whole-body physical experience. This sensuality is the basis of its true conceptual and intellectual nature, and is inseparable from it.... For me, when I think of the work that I am doing as related to the body, I don't necessarily think that there should be an image of a body in it, but that the persons who come in to experience the work have to receive it with their whole body, not just the intellect, or not just with their eyes, and that they will do so whether they are conscious of it or not... there is such a deep connection between seeing and knowing that it is odd to think the two could ever have been considered separate.³⁴

This relationship between the practice and the theorisation of practice is described by Italo Tomassoni, in writing about Joseph Beuys. Tomassoni says that for Beuys the practice of art is:

*...both the object and means of research; it is both the interruption and the space in which the interruption takes place; it is both the effect and the description of the cause. And all of that is so since art is a practice which preceded a theory; anticipates it takes it by surprise, instigates and provokes it. But if it did not possess an area of theory, art would follow some fatal historical path and give up its status as an operative risk full of the lucid awareness of producing raw and unadulterated creativity.*³⁵

Beuys investigated the boundary between the material world and conceptual space, he made the phenomena that occur on this boundary visible, he did not represent or illustrate them. Beuys argued that art was thought manifested in material acts in the world.

It has become a matter of increasing urgency to identify and defend this position in contemporary art education. Artists who are also academics (students or lecturers) have been increasingly submitting their vocation to a mode of theoretical exhortation which commits them to working within the agendas of an institutional notion of art, rather than acknowledging the practice of their own quite different discipline. Ted Colless writes a memorable criticism of "art theory" and its impact on art education in his recent book: The Error of My Ways:

Studio work is seen as a component of an encompassing but indefinite institutional activity dubbed "artistic practise". The student is required to

³⁴ Bill Viola *Putting The Whole Back Together* in Bill Viola, Reasons for Knocking at an Empty H House, editor Robert Violette, pub. Anthony d'Offay Gallery London. 1995 p.265

³⁵ Italo Tomassoni *Ouverture* in Incontro con Beuys DIAC editrice 1984

explicate the theoretical milieu of their practice since that alone is demonstrable within the terms of art theory.³⁶

Colless feels that this mode of explication is dangerous. It causes art work to be produced as a result of a clearly defined procedure which relates to a set of fashionable issues.

The jargon is easy to adopt, even if the theory producing it is bad; artists need only speak about the development of a "body of work" which "addresses" or "deals with" the topics of cultural theory (gender difference, multiculturalism, aboriginality) in order for their "practice" to be justifiable. And deadly.³⁷

Colless goes on to describe "good art" and "bad art", both of which he approves of. He pours scorn on the mediocre. The mediocre may present itself as some *pure ideational form reduced from the accidents of matter* or as *materiality freed from the ideological forms of representation*. Colless is not interested in the accidents of matter presented as expression nor is he interested in theory presented as art. He is interested in "impure originality". This impure originality would seem to emerge out of the practice of making art, out of an artists response to the flux of influences that impact on the production of a work of art, out of an acknowledgment of a different process and methodology.

Art practice when it exists in an academy, needs to take on the process of a kind of translation. One purely practical reason for this is that artist/academics in research funding applications need to be understood. It can be appreciated why artists have attempted to adopt existing successful models, such as the humanities model, or the scientific model. However these models generate a distorted impression of the process of research in the visual arts. They do not always apply to this different discipline. It may be useful to look at Walter Benjamin's musings on translation, the translation from one language to another is not dissimilar to the translation of art work to language.

Walter Benjamin talks about the failure of translation, he describes bad translation as:

*the inaccurate transmission of inessential information.*³⁸

He goes on to describe translation which is of value and his description of this would apply as aptly to the translation of a work of art to language as of the translation of one tongue to another.

All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the

³⁶ Ted Colless, *Vengeance* in *The Error of My Ways* published by IMA Brisbane, 1994

³⁷ Ted Colless, *ibid*

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn published by Fontana, London. 1992 edition

representation of its significance. Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship: but it can represent it by realising it in embryonic or intensive form.... Languages are not strangers to one another but are... interrelated in what they want to express.³⁹

Text and Image are often interrelated in what they want to express, but as in translation between cultures or between words and bodies, often the meaning is between the lines, in the gaps. The theorisation of artistic practice which has had a tendency to dominate in academia has resulted in a loss of vision a dependence on words. This occurred when art schools moved to universities and existing models of "research" were adopted for want of any other form of translatability of this practice into institutional acceptability. This acceptance of models appropriate to other disciplines has caused many art students the kind of grief described by Ted Colless.

Artists/Academics are no longer satisfied with inaccurate models, they are no longer willing to submit to the restraints of a badly fitting model to justify their existence. They have taken to the task of translation. Obviously it is only artists attached to institutions and institutional funding who have no choice in this, but it would seem that this desire to be bilingual has moved into the general practice of art making. Perhaps it is necessary to do this to avoid what Beuys described as "the fatal historic path". The worm has turned, we wish to take the responsibility for our narration, description and identification upon our own shoulders.

This movement in Australia may well have been given impetus by the late Ian Burn. Ian has had a profound influence on contemporary thinking in the visual arts and in art theory. In 1993 Ian Burn curated an exhibition called "Looking at Seeing and Reading". In the catalogue introduction for this exhibition Nick Waterlow quotes Burns commenting on the fact that the 1990's were a time "when the tendency was for theory to be objectified", Burns concludes:

"This tendency for the art to be read and not looked at...represents a shift in perception - but, in certain ways, also a shift away from perception. Away from using our looking as a part of the dialogue with a work of art, as a way of questioning the object".⁴⁰

Burns argues for the recovery of perception, of looking in a critical way in order to become aware of and acknowledge the complex, layering of art-making. He did not argue for the notion of an ideal or transcendental subject and insisted on the acknowledgment of a socially produced subject, that is, an historically specific viewer (spatially) co extensive with the object. In a way he is echoing Tomassoni on Beuys:

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *ibid*

⁴⁰ Ian Burn, Looking at Seeing and Reading, catalogue, pub. Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, July 1-31, 1993

Art is the only technique that agrees to illustrate the place in which it finds formation and to describe the time that renders it possible outside of an archaeological time and space. It is the nexus in which the subject is the irreducible objectivity of the work of art and where the theory exists not as the power that produces the movement of thought, but rather as the objects proper field of autonomy; it is the condition in which the object appears and the form that it chooses to assume.⁴¹

Once this is accepted and the problems of seeing acknowledged many other questions need to be asked in order to inform each act of seeing. We need to ask what kind of viewer is privileged within the field of vision? What role do culture and gender play in the act of seeing? Burns states that if, in looking at a work of art, the artist viewer is producing the experience of seeing, then there is no "pure seeing", we are back in the impure space of Colless. The artist-viewer is located as part of the problematic within the visual space.

Burns ideas resonate with the visual - not what is seen, but seeing itself in its entirety. The viewer is in a context, all aspects of the seen must be responded to.

Where do Kelly, Beuys, Burns and Viola meet? They meet in attention to seeing, to looking, all aspects of a space / place are informing the open, critical artist/viewer/creator.

On that note I felt perhaps it was time to stand up and be counted and briefly describe a research project of my own.

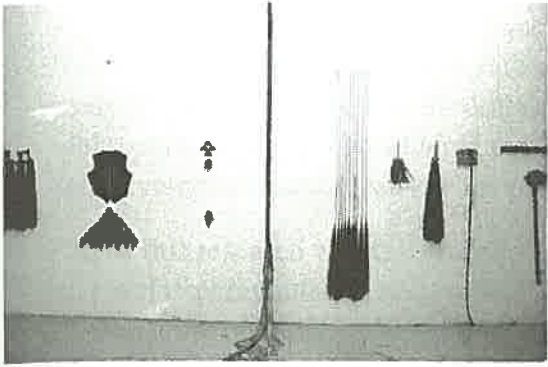
I came to Sydney in 1984 and began working at Long Bay Gaol as an Education Officer, my role was to implement a whole range of educational programs in the Western Region of NSW. I remained with the Department of Corrective Services for five years. The experiences and events that occurred in this difficult environment began to feed my art work. I left this job in 1989 and gained employment at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, in the Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts.

In 1994 I applied for and was successful in gaining ARC and Nepean Research funding of approximately \$11,000, this grant was awarded to enable me to explore more thoroughly the role of art, craft and work in gaols. The title of submission was: Doing time. I collaborated in this project with another artist Jacqueline Clayton. We also employed a research assistant Annie Stevens, who was an anthropologist and filmmaker, and two Postgraduate students as technical assistants.

⁴¹ Italo Tomassoni *Ouverture* in *Incontro con Beuys* DIAC editrice 1984

Installation
BY
Anne Graham

Studio, New York, 1994.



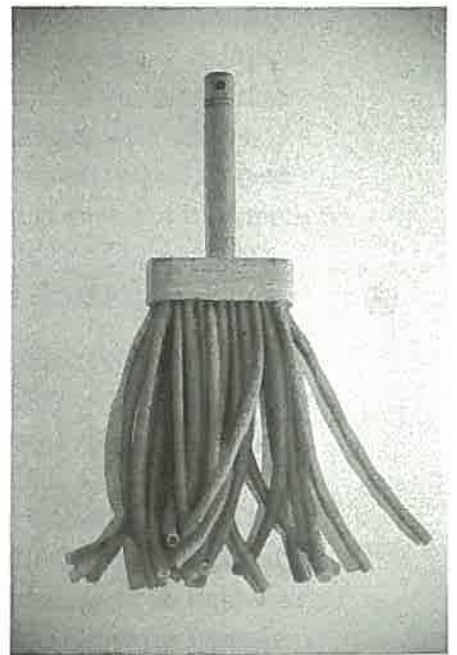
Sweat, 1995. Sydney.



Sweat, 1995.



Sweat 1995.



The aims of the project were to identify the roles and functions of art/craft activity in Australian women's prisons, with particular reference to the NSW experience. To review the place of formal (structured, taught) and informal (leisure) art/craft work in prisons and explore the bureaucratic rationale for supporting such endeavors and the perceived value of these activities to inmates. The study drew on both historical and contemporary data in its analysis of the function and significance of art/craft activities to the routine of prison life. The study investigated the value of routine and repeated behaviour in imposing and maintaining order and considered the impact of this in terms of self expression, self development and creativity for the women in gaol.

Out of this research which included visits to gaol, interviews, archival searches, material experimentation and reading and, I suppose, five years lived experience, came a body of work which related to:

The Power of the Medical Profession in Women's gaols.

Work and Exercise in Women's Gaols.

Clothing and Appearance, a second punishment for Women in Prison.

Jacqueline Clayton's work investigated the procedures of naming and definitions and how these things were instrumental in generating notions of identity.

Our collaborative work involved the use of archival material for example a leather bed from Long Bay which had been used with straps for purposes of restraint. We used historic photographic images with text to provide a background for the exhibition. In fact the collaborative aspects of the project were the most easily defined as academic, these works provided a space for the artworks to operate in. In its initial form the exhibition presented information in four ways: art works, archival objects, archival photographs with text, and a catalogue with essays exploring the historical and contemporary approaches to women in gaol. There was an extraordinary correspondence between these different forms of information and between this information and the location of the exhibition. The resonance and poetics of the space were as important as all the other elements.

To conclude, I have become interested in the poetic possibilities of translation from one kind of text to another, and in defending a flexibility of approach for arts practitioners in academia. Notions of translation must remain variable, the much broader sweep of artistic research needs to be accommodated. Conversation, narrative, poetry, the poetics of space and story telling all correspond with the trawling practice of artistic research, and perhaps an inclusion of these areas of language into the process of academic translation would create an open field where interaction between the forms would become more possible. However I would always argue like Beuys that art without an area of theory runs the risk of falling into a fatal historic trajectory. Art work is not produced in a vacuum, the existence and necessity of the art object must constantly be under question otherwise any text will run the risk of becoming the inaccurate translation of the inessential object.