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left to right: Deborah Kelly, *The Magdalene* (Pencil) 2012 (detail), archival print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper with collage, 206.5 x 112 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulias, Sydney; Photograph: Alex Wisser; Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #1091*; arcs, circles and bands (room) 2003 (detail), painted room on 4 walls, Art Gallery of NSW. © Estate of Sol LeWitt.

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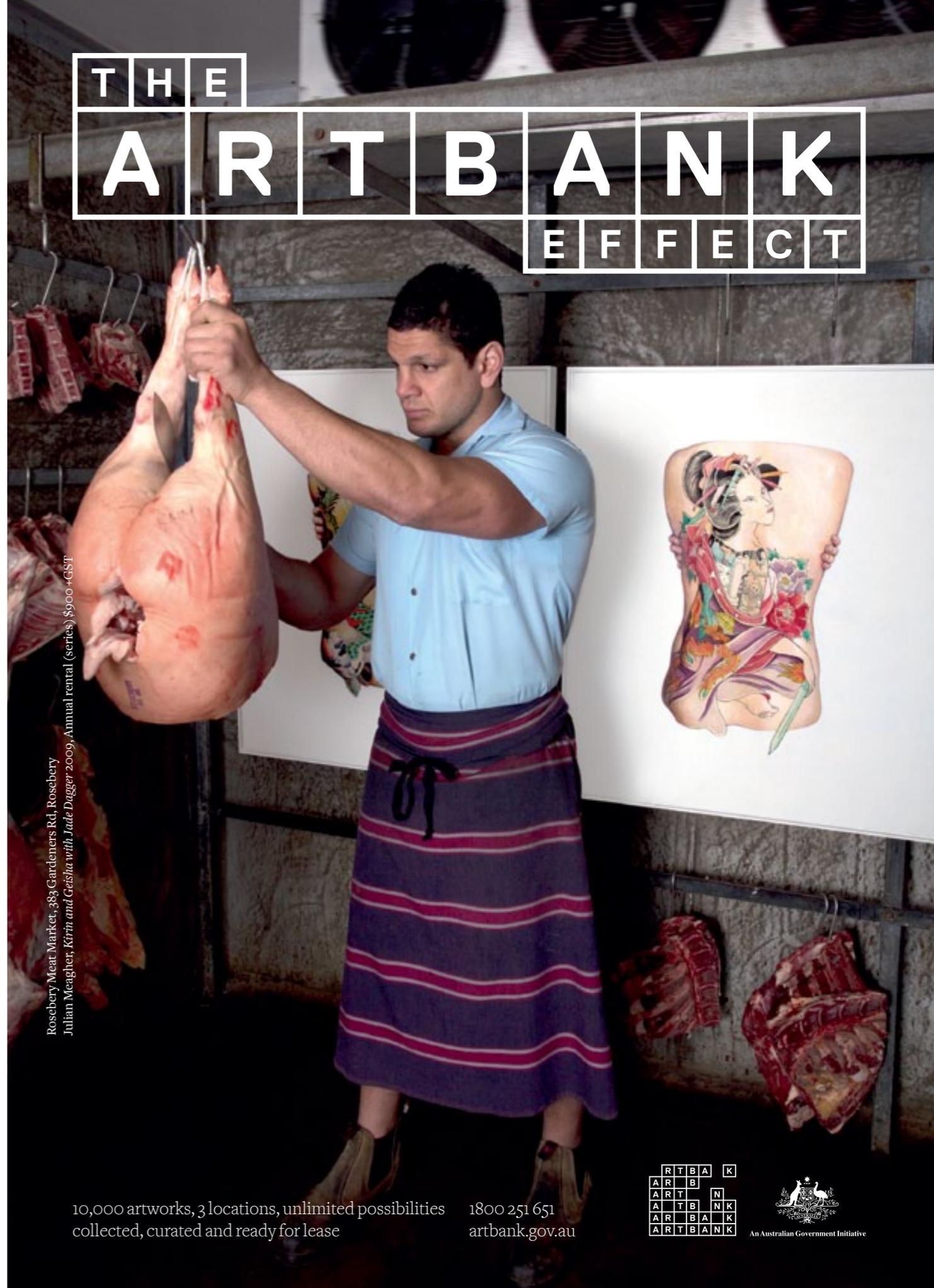
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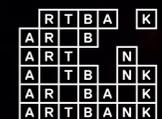
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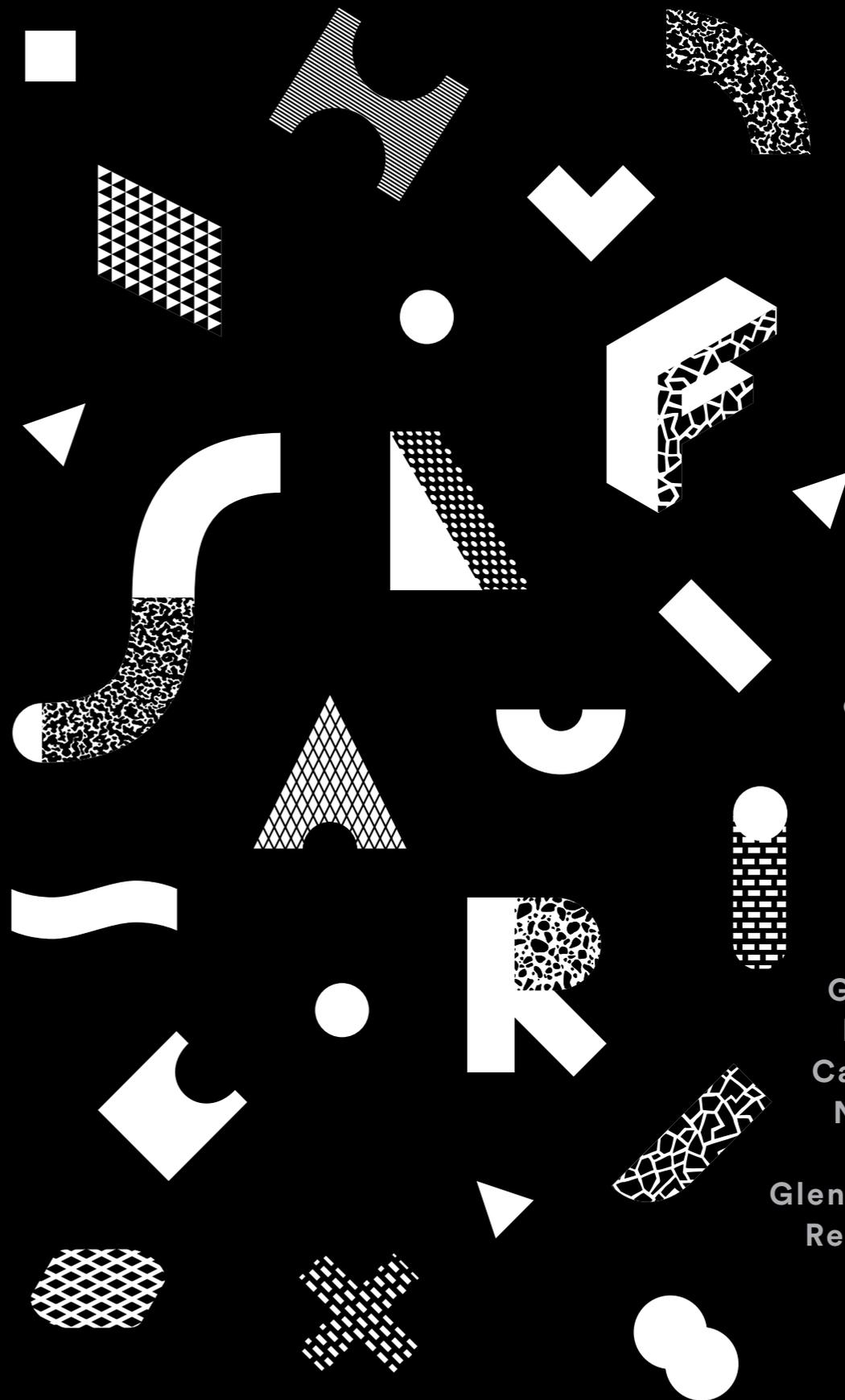
Pia Van Gelder, *Tetrasynth*, 2013,
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- 18 **FOREWORD**
- 19 **CONTRIBUTORS**
- 20 **TOMORROW YOU WILL NOT RECOGNISE US**
AMELIA GROOM
- 30 **BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE/
J. M. COETZEE:
PARALLEL TEXTS**
ALYS MOODY
- 42 **EMBARRASSMENT,
GLITCH, POETRY**
ASTRID LORANGE
- 50 **THE MINIMALISM,
HESSIAN AND STEEL
OF DALE HARDING**
DARREN JORGENSEN
- 54 **JOHN GERRARD:
EXERCISE**
MATHEW ABBOTT
BADEN PAILTHORPE
- 60 **AN INTERVIEW
WITH JUAN A. GAITÁN.**
ROBYN STUART
- 66 **RESTORING POLITICS,
THE POLITICS
OF RESTORING**
IVÁN MUÑIZ REED
- 72 **CURATING THE
CURATIVE: TALISMANIC
TENDENCIES IN
CONTEMPORARY ART**
LISA SLADE
- 76 **THE THIEF'S DIARY.
AN INTERVIEW WITH
MOYRA DAVEY**
STELLA ROSA MCDONALD



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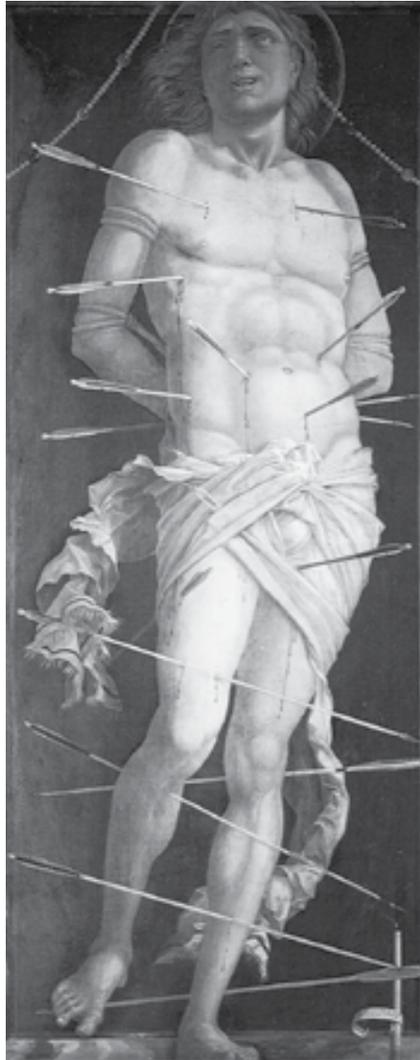
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Collected over the following pages are the works of ten writers. To each writer we provided a provocation loosely centred around the idea of *restoration* – and if this issue were to have a uniting theme, *restoration* would probably be it, especially if you allow for a version of *restoring* that encompasses *re-story-ing*: new stories emerging from the ruptures that appear in the old. From the literal cracks in the surface of Malevich's *Black Square* to the glitches and slippages of the digital, the works in this issue no longer look towards conserving or preserving, but rather towards reclaiming, recalibrating, renewing, renovating or otherwise revelling in states of entropy and decay.

Of course, much of this is political: the chance to imbue objects with new stories implies that we can set aside versions of history that are no longer palatable. As Juan Gaitan suggests, we are seeing a “disavowal, a need to remove the 20th century, perhaps with the sense that it prevents the forming of an affirmative collectivity”. And as Iván Muñiz Reed writes, restoring (or the choice not to restore) “indulges in the same vices as the writing of history, giving us the power to build upon the meaning of an object or to change its meaning altogether, skewing and distorting to our will.” Indeed, Astrid Lorange describes the “certain kind of pleasure” elicited by the “dissolution of the fantastic seamlessness of representation”. There is pleasure, too, in the fact that certain relics are crumbling, certain ‘embarrassments’ are fading into static or dust. The 2013 exhibition *Living in the Ruins of the Twentieth Century* presented that notoriously troublesome century, pockmarked by wars and genocides, as one of “false starts, obsolete technologies and unrealised utopias”. Perhaps there is even a desire to view the entirety of the 20th century as a kind of systemic glitch, an accident, a mistake.

Another dominant theme that emerged for the writers within this issue is that of poetry, literature and art and the relationships between them. A history of these relationships is presented in Alys Moody's essay *Parallel*

Texts, via the example of the collaboration between Belinda De Bruyckere and JM Coetzee: “art and literature can be restored to each other—and re-storied by each other—secure in the specificity of their own mediums”. Elsewhere in the issue, Mathew Abbott responds in verse to John Gerrard's *Exercise*, and Stella Rosa McDonald and Moyra Davey discuss aspects of the writer/artist relationship.

Visually, we begin this issue with *Black Square* and finish with a white page from Moyra Davey's *Burn the Diaries*. In doing so, we also attempt a kind of restoration: from darkness to light, dusk to dawn. This is not to suggest that we have reached an endpoint, but rather a reference to the cyclical nature of both history and imagery – and to implicate the reader in the act of repetition.

MATHEW ABBOTT lectures at Federation University Australia. He is the author of *The Figure of This World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology*, available from Edinburgh University Press. Australian Poetry published *wild inaudible* in 2012. Mathew is currently writing a book about the philosophical significance of the films of Abbas Kiarostami.

MOYRA DAVEY (b. 1958 Toronto, Canada) has a 30-year artistic practice across photography, writing, and video. In 2014, the Camden Arts Centre, London, will mount a large-scale survey exhibition of Davey's work, and Davey will also have a solo exhibition of new work at MUMOK, Vienna, which will then travel to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. In 2013, Davey had solo exhibitions at the Tate Liverpool and Presentation House, Vancouver. Davey's work was included in the 2012 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art and in the 2012 São Paulo Biennial. Her work has been included in recent group exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, among many others.

JUAN A GAITÁN is curator of the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. He is trained as an artist and art historian at University of British Columbia and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver. From 2009-2011 he was curator at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, and from 2011-2012 adjunct professor in the Curatorial Practice Program at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. He is currently based in Mexico City and Berlin.

AMELIA GROOM is a writer living in London. She recently edited an anthology on TIME for Whitechapel Gallery's Documents of Contemporary Art series of books. www.ameliagroom.com

DARREN JORGENSEN lectures in art history in the Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts at the University of Western Australia. He usually publishes on art from remote Australia, including the Kimberley and Western Desert, but also tries to keep up with science fiction and contemporary art more generally. He lives in the suburbs of Perth with his family.

ASTRID LORANGE is an Associate Lecturer at the College of Fine Arts, UNSW. Her book, *How Reading is Written: A Brief Index to Gertrude Stein* is forthcoming in 2014 from Wesleyan University Press. Her poetry books include *Eating and Speaking*, *Minor Dogs*, *one that made it alike* and *FOOD TURNS INTO BLOOD*. She is co-editor of the USA/AUS chapbook press SUS.

STELLA ROSA MCDONALD is a writer and artist based in Sydney.

ALYS MOODY is a Lecturer in English at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. She teaches and writes on modern and contemporary art and literature and is currently working on a book on the relationship between hunger and aesthetics in twentieth-century literature.

IVÁN MUÑIZ REED is a Mexican-born Sydney-based curator. He is facilitating a series of cross-cultural projects between his native Mexico and adopted Australian home. These projects aim to provide increased visibility to Mexican art and culture in Australia and to facilitate dialogue and exchange between artists from both countries.

BADEN PAILTHORPE is an Australian artist and curator. In 2013, he was the inaugural artist in residence at the Australian War Memorial. Baden's technology-based practice engages with the politics and cultures of the military industrial complex. Recent exhibitions include *Students of War*, Hors Pistes, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2014); *Cadence*, Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney (2013); and *RIPBM*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2012).

LISA SLADE is Managing Curator of the 2014 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art and Project Curator at the Art Gallery of South Australia. She also lectures in the art history program delivered by Adelaide University in collaboration with the Gallery.

ROBYN STUART is editor-in-chief of *Das Superpaper*.

20

Tomorrow you will not recognise us.

Amelia Groom

In 1915, Malevich published a manifesto that launched Suprematism as the ‘new realism’ and heralded a new temporality for art. By depicting clearly defined objects on the canvas, the old realists, Malevich claimed, “deprive their life of movement.”¹ The Futurists and Cubists had gone some of the way towards instilling movement in their objects. But since the “aspects of time in things” had become more important than “their essence and meaning”, the new realism needed to abandon objects altogether and arrive at the “zero of form” in order to paint the mobility and flux of modern life. Suprematism was founded on the notion that transitory forms are less recognisable than static ones, and movement itself cannot be shown adequately with discernable objects.

The hazy, vibrational quality in Malevich’s Suprematist paintings is not amenable to photographic mediation, but when they are experienced directly the forms refuse to be pinned down. Their geometrical imperfection charges them with the force of uncertainty, throwing them into perpetual vacillation. And the restlessness within the pictures was further emphasised by the way he presented them. Documentation of *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10* (1915) shows his canvases clustered over two intersecting walls, in a way that ensures multi-directional, dynamic relations between them. The irregular placement of these unframed paintings, some of which were still wet, throws all into a state of incompleteness and becoming. As is often observed, the *Black Square* appears at the ceiling in the ‘holy golden corner’, where the Christian icon would be placed in Russian homes. But in the painting directly next to it, the form is repeated – with difference. Another square appears in this adjacent canvas *on a diverging plane*, emphasising the quality of flight within and across the imagery.

In the years that followed this exhibition, Malevich maintained acute awareness of how the walls on which paintings are hung can themselves be treated as sites for dynamic compositions. After the 1917 revolution, he became a member of the Commission for the Protection of Monuments and of the Museum’s Commission. In 1919 he wrote

a text advising state museums to abandon “the old principle of separating works according to schools, trends, time and events” and to instead treat the walls of museums as “plane surfaces” on which works should be placed “in the same way that the composition of forms are placed on the pictorial plane surface”. Rather than grouping kindred works, he called for heterogeneous clusters: “If a series of similar works are hung on the plane surface we get an ornamental line and this cancels out the force that it should have had in the midst of various juxtapositions.”²

In his book on Henri Bergson, *Bergsonism*, Gilles Deleuze observes that approaching something from a temporal, as opposed to a spatial, perspective means dealing not only with how the thing differs from other things, but also with how it *differs from itself*.³ When considered temporally it becomes evident that the *Black Square* has been differing from itself since it came into being. Once a radical gesture of Modernity’s ostensible break with tradition, it was quickly canonised in 20th-century tradition as the icon of iconoclasm. A century later it’s a paradoxically crumbling relic of past futurism. The work was tautologically titled, redundantly reiterating what the picture blatantly was. But, over time, the *Black Square* has become more than (or less than) a black square, as its solid opaque surface has gradually cracked up, revealing other forms behind it. Red, pink, violet, blue and yellow-green geometric shapes are partially visible between the cracks, as are some dark letters in the upper right corner.⁴ X-ray photographs confirm an earlier composition on the same canvas, verifying that the more colourful and compositionally complex Suprematist works once thought to have come after the *Black Square*’s black square in fact came before (and underneath) it.

Against the brand of High Modernist discourse that insisted on the timelessness and autonomous ‘purity’ of works of art, the unfinished accumulation of time in the *Black Square* makes it into an image of teleological chasms and temporal complexities. Malevich referred to his *Square* as a “royal infant”, the “first step of pure creation” and “the embryo of every possibility”. As black is the absence of any colour, and white is the presence of all

colours, this polar distillation of the spectrum theoretically contains the raw digital possibility for any painting. Now, as its surface is being opened up by its necessarily entropic material support, new details are appearing from this pure potentiality. In defiance of the stated authorial intentions, this black square is gradually undermining its tautological title and un-becoming itself. As Modern Art’s most deified gesture of erasure undergoes auto-erasure, this celebrated assault on ‘the image’ is revealing the images it has always contained within itself.

Malevich was embedded in the culture of isms and manifestos, and their rhetoric of blinkered righteousness where time was treated as a competitive advancement into the future. “Remove from yourselves quickly the hardened skin of centuries”, he wrote in his Suprematist manifesto of 1915, “so that you may catch us up the more easily.” With Russia on the verge of revolution, the art of the future evidently demanded that all of the past be shed and left behind. Launching the nonobjective ‘new realism’ that was Suprematism, Malevich writes of his hatred of “pedlars of the past” and announces that the Suprematists were proudly “spitting” on the Futurism movement that they had defended only yesterday. They were out-futuring the Futurists – who had managed to paint motion, which meant “the wholeness of things *vanished*”, but since they didn’t fully do away with “copies of nature”, they failed to “destroy the world of objects”. Suprematism alone would give up on mimesis, “overstep the bounds of nothing” and arrive at the “zero of form”.

Despite this zealous rejection of figuration, he later painted many figurative works. By the early 1930s, the only acceptable style for visual and literary Soviet artists was Socialist Realism, which meant that works were to be “realistic in form and Socialist in content”. Malevich appears to have adopted the officially sanctioned aesthetic, with some reservations. He found ways to continue to work at the thresholds of known and unknown imagery, covertly maintaining some of the nonobjective principals of Suprematism. Returning to the motifs of simple country life that he had painted in his early years, his peasant figures were often clad

in costumes reminiscent of his proto-Suprematist designs for the *Victory Over the Sun* theatre production in 1913. Elements of Suprematism are also visible in his later work where bodies and the grounds on which they stand are rendered with geometric blocks of bright, boldly inaccurate colour, as in *Woman with a Rake* (1932). Figuration and formalism are intertwined in faceless portraits like this one, posing another challenge to the simplistic notion of linear development from one to the other.

This Socialist Realist self-portrait painted by the artist in 1933 might seem an irreconcilable betrayal of his earlier claims about freeing painting from the drudgery of depiction (his manifesto 18 years earlier declared any painting of a face to be a laughable and pitiful “parody of life” that must be left behind) – but it, too, prohibits easy categorisation. In the bottom right corner of this picture of himself, the painting is ‘signed’ with an easily missed, miniaturised black square. Here, Malevich’s emblematic *image of imagelessness* appears in place of the artist’s authorising signature. This insertion of his iconoclastic icon within the recognisable image is another reminder that the teleological schema of *figuration* → *abstraction* was a fantasy based on denial.

A photograph of the artist lying in state in 1935 shows a *Black Square* hanging directly above the corpse, with the Socialist Realist self-portrait right next to it. It’s a death-mask-esque photo memorialising the man before his burial, with the myriad – apparently incompatible – aspects of his oeuvre staged as part of the one legacy. It’s worth recalling the aforementioned advice that Malevich prescribed for state museums in 1919, where he cautioned against “the old principle of separating works according to schools, trends, time and events” and emphasised the “force” that things should have “in the midst of various juxtapositions”. The photograph shows various Suprematist, Cubo-Futurist and Socialist Realist works clustered together on the walls surrounding Malevich’s body. The paintings form a valedictory chorus of befitting disorder, resisting neat compartmentalisation and linear developmental narratives. There is

no operative antithesis between abstract pictures and figurative pictures here, but in the decades that followed Malevich’s death, the works that didn’t fit the fable of Modern art’s ‘progression towards abstraction’ were disregarded.

A few months after Malevich’s death in May 1935, Alfred H. Barr Jr., the founding director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, was in Europe preparing what would become his epoch-defining exhibition, *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Barr came across a number of Malevich’s paintings that had been hidden in the basement of a Hanover museum after the Nazis had denounced ‘degenerate art’. At considerable risk, he smuggled a selection of them out of Germany by rolling them up in his umbrella. The following year, the *Cubism and Abstract Art* show included some of these works by Malevich, marking their entry into the art historical discourse of the New World.

Malevich’s works would not be shown in the USSR until the 1980s; without Barr’s 1936 exhibition, the artist would certainly have been far more obscure, if not wholly forgotten. But the visibility the exhibition granted was also highly selective. It presented paintings by Malevich that were particularly reductionist – such as *White on White* (1918) – and, needless to say, the artist’s figurative and semi-figurative works were far from sight.

Throughout his career, Barr promoted a violently chronological reading of art. After becoming director of the recently founded Museum of Modern Art in 1929, he illustrated the museum’s ideal permanent collection with a diagram of a torpedo, helpfully equipped with propellers, flying forwards through time. Here, art that was ‘Modern’ was art that was shooting into the future. When it wasn’t a mechanical projectile, time was represented in Barr’s diagrams with the more archaic weapon of arrows – usually ones that shot swiftly and irreversibly through the early 20th century’s various avant-gardes. (Recall that the notion of the *vanguard* is itself another metaphor from warfare, initially describing the foremost part of an advancing army.) For his *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition, Barr devised a chronological flowchart that appeared on the cover of the

catalogue, where works of art are subsumed under capitalised labels and all lines lead unambiguously through four and a half decades towards one of two culminations: GEOMETRICAL ABSTRACT ART and NON-GEOMETRICAL ABSTRACT ART.

Malevich’s SUPREMATISM appears in this diagram as a direct link between CUBISM and NON-GEOMETRICAL ABSTRACT ART. But as part of his broad critique of High Modernism and its insistence on the artwork’s autonomy, the artist Lee Ufan praises what he considers to be Malevich’s true counter-progressivism, and resistance to clear chronology and categorisation, positing him as a heroic anti-Modernist who transcended his historical context in his artistic search for what Lee calls ‘the infinite’. In place of linear development, Lee writes, “Malevich’s art took unexpected turns and did not proceed straight ahead on the rail of modernism [...] After providing a glimpse of a closed, pure, autonomous space, he then ignored the trend of the age, reversing or combining internality and externality.” Any attempt at slotting him into the neat, fabricated narratives of Modernist Art, Lee insists, only proves frustrating: “When critics try to make Malevich into the father of abstraction they frown at his many words and actions and works that do not fit this characterisation.”⁵

While this is an important insight, critics shouldn’t bear the accusation alone. Nobody indulged more in teleological myth-making than Malevich himself. He was so determined to establish a progressive temporality for his work that he fraudulently backdated numerous paintings. Throughout his life he continually rearranged the sequence of things in order to slot them into a fabricated linear trajectory, one that advanced swiftly from Impressionism to Cubism to Futurism to Suprematism. When he later painted in the styles of Cubo-Futurism and Impressionism, he falsely dated them so that his earlier Suprematist works would appear to be the outcome of these experiments. He went to great lengths to establish the notion of the *Black Square*’s originary supremacy within Suprematism, despite the fact that he had actually painted polychromatic and multi-component Suprematist compositions before

it. Two years after the fact, he claimed that the Square’s origins lay in his set designs for the 1913 play *Victory Over the Sun*. He inscribed the back of the painting’s canvas with the date 1913, but by the end of the 20th century it had been established that the correct date was in fact 1915.

Malevich’s faked timelines frustrated scholars for decades, but the reality is that all timelines are fakes. Retroactively ascribed causality is always at play in linear readings of the past, and Barr’s 1936 chronological chart of Europe’s avant-gardes was also the sort of concoction that is only possible with the safety and simplification afforded by hindsight. In the chronology that Malevich invented for his oeuvre, and in the chronology that Barr mapped out for art’s arrival at abstraction, time is posited as something that advances forwards while acquiring and accumulating. The hubristic implication of this homogeneous temporality is that the more recent is logically more advanced, and the present is the rightful heir to all that has been earned. It’s a mode of thinking that celebrates all of the past’s progressions, but none of its digressions. It also depends, precariously, on things having definitive beginnings and endings.

According to the established art historical narrative, Malevich’s Suprematism movement was launched at the *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10* in Petrograd on 19 December 1915. But cracks have started to show here too. In recent years, historians have shown that the artist had in fact presented Suprematist works to the public a month and a half earlier, at the *Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art: Embroidery and Carpets from Artists’ Designs in Moscow*.⁶ Remarkably, this radical style of abstraction, which now appears as a standard entry in any art history textbook, was first shown at a needlecraft exhibition. Before presenting his Suprematist motifs as paintings, Malevich presented them as designs for applied art wares – specifically two scarves and a pillow.

Scholars have tended to shy away from Malevich’s involvement with various applied, domestic and commercial arts, but some recent studies have paid more attention to this aspect of his practice. Alexandra Shatskikh has found that in 1911 the artist

designed a bottle for a popular eau de cologne called Severny, by Novaya Zarya Perfume Factory, which stayed on the market until the 1990s.⁷ Malevich learnt embroidery and tating from his mother and he had a sustained interest in Russia’s decorative crafts and historical folk art. Charlotte Douglas writes that in the years following the launch of Suprematism, fabric and embroidery designs make up a large proportion of all the works on paper by all Russian avant-gardists.⁸ Following the *0.10* exhibition, Malevich formed the collective ‘Supremus’ with a majority women members, and they worked together on Suprematist clothing and embroidery designs.

Pursuits in areas of non-‘high’-arts were not a supplementary activity; they were an integral part of the Suprematism movement. The artists sought to do away with ‘art for art’s sake’ and focus on industrial manufacture that would enrich the lives of the masses. In 1917, only weeks after the Bolsheviks had overthrown the tsarist regime in the October Revolution, the *Second Modern Decorative Arts Exhibition* opened in Moscow. Douglas recounts that this exhibition included four hundred decorative artworks – including fabric lengths, handbags, collars, scarves, belts and pillows – that were designed by Modern artists and sewn or embroidered by Ukrainian peasant women. Many of them were Suprematist in style, and Malevich contributed geometric compositions for seventeen items including nine pillows and four handbags. As part of the exhibition’s public program, the Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky gave a lecture on the artistic significance of fabric design.

Textile and other applied arts are absent from Barr’s 1936 chart of art’s progression towards abstraction, but they have been sites for the development of complex nonobjective visual languages for many centuries. In 1971, The Whitney Museum of American Art’s exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts* drew remarkable comparisons between recent examples from the macho school of Abstract Expressionism, and the non-depictive use of colour and form in quilt designs by anonymous domestic artists and American housewives since the 19th century. Textile design and needlecrafts are also closely entwined with various European

avant-gardes in the early 20th century. Sophie Taeuber was teaching weaving and other needlecrafts at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich when she met her future husband Jean Arp in 1915. She taught him embroidery, and his contribution to the first issue of the Dada magazine was an embroidered work. Hannah Höch, another Dada artist, was also involved in crochet, lace and embroidery design as she was pioneering ‘Modern’ abstract formalism. Addressing craftswomen in 1918 in an article for the magazine *Embroidery and Lace*, where she worked as an illustrator, she insisted that embroidery, like painting, must develop its “feeling for abstract forms”.⁹ Rozsika Parker also writes of Sonia Delaunay’s work with textile arts as being intrinsic to the geometric abstraction she developed in painting after 1913.¹⁰

One of the biggest problems with the narrative of art’s progression from figuration towards abstraction – wherein correct spatial illusionism and all ties with the world of objects is finally overcome – is that the prescribed precedents of the ‘autonomous’ Modern artwork are precariously narrow. To claim that Modern painters ‘discovered’ the surface of the canvas and liberated their art from the illusionistic figuration that the Old Masters had pursued, is to disregard a myriad of other histories. Russian folk embroidery, Islamic glazed tiling, Australian Aboriginal bark painting, Chinese ceramics, Paleolithic cave art, Māori tattooing, Gothic stained glass windows, Ottoman miniatures, Zen calligraphy, Persian carpets, Viking runestones and innumerable other pictorial arts have long developed visual languages without concern for portraying objects with coherent, perspectival space. All of these dynamic traditions easily combine depictive and non-depictive elements, inviting us to look at the picture and its physical support as intrinsically intertwined.

Even in the absence of directly observed lines of influence and artistic lineage, many hallmarks of Modernist painting, such as the ambiguity between ‘figure’ and ‘ground’, are evident in many arts that predate it by many centuries. Excessively linear and causal readings of art inevitably caricaturise the things they select for inclusion, and deny the things that cannot be slotted into the chronological line-up. Such readings feed

into a patriarchal mode of storytelling that has excluded many things, including women's contributions. (The systematic exclusion of the female from the written history of art has instigated a dramatic revision of our inherited narratives – one that is gradually taking place – but there are of course many other biases and blind spots at play, and no history should posit itself as something watertight or final.) The interwoven histories of textile and decorative arts before the advent of Modernism, and the sensitivity that many early Modernist artists had towards the possibilities for abstract forms within these (largely unauthored) visual modes, cannot be adequately accounted for in chronological chart of neat labels and phallo-arrows.

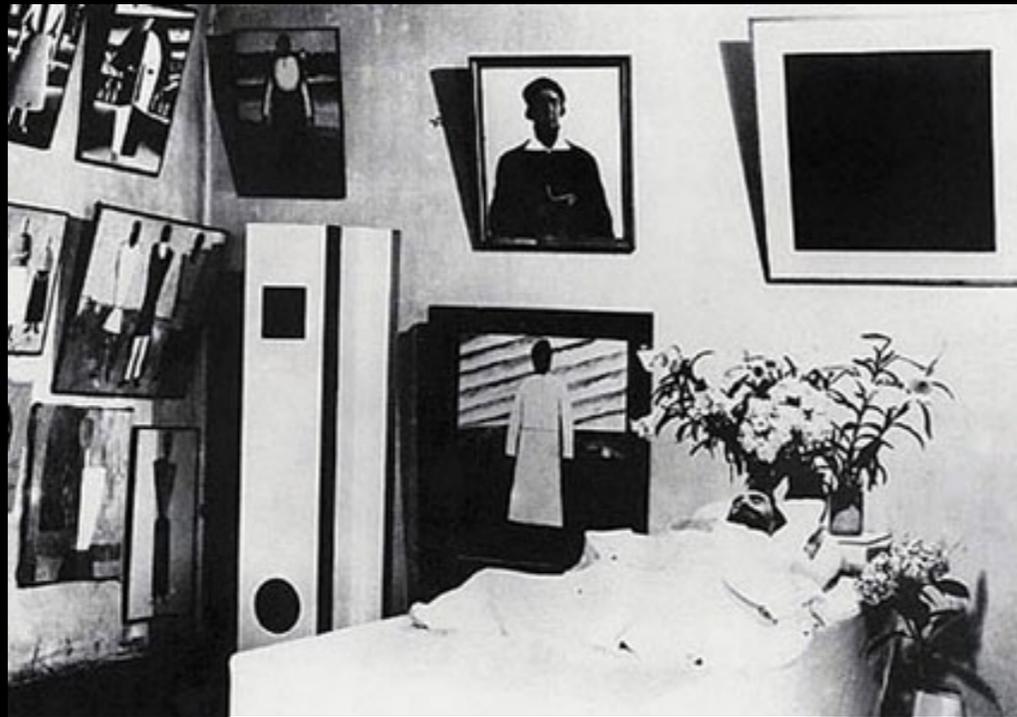
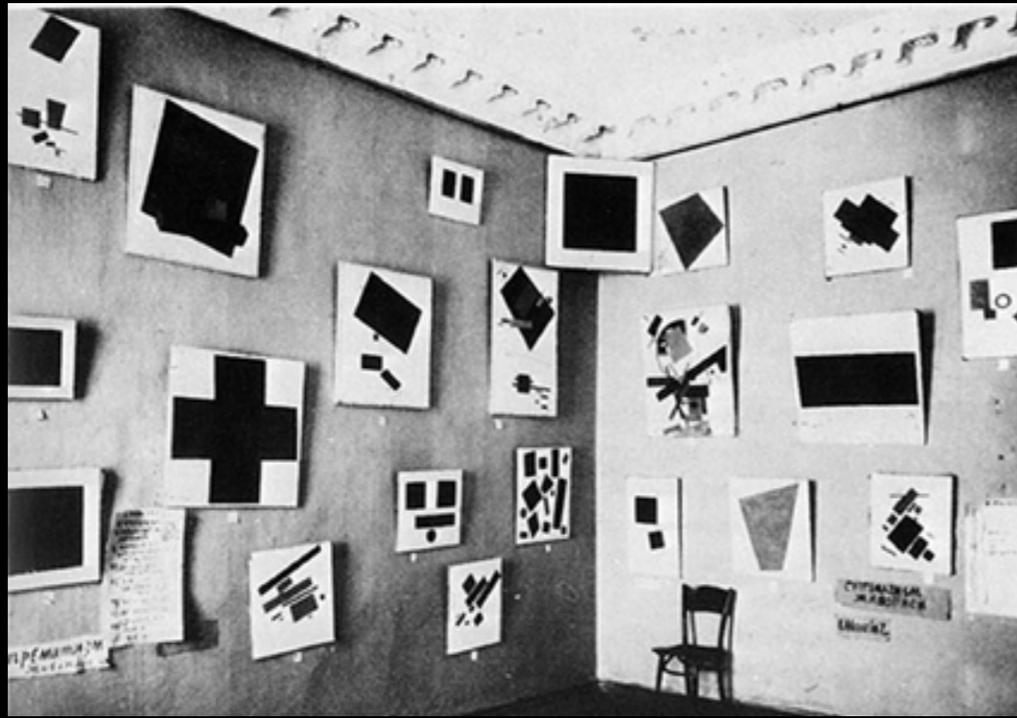
While straight pointy lines propel SUPREMATISM into the GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION half of Barr's infamous infograph, Malevich's forms are more fruitfully read as embodiments of geometry's failure. Surfaces are incomplete, angles are misaligned, edges are partially dissolved, and positions are imprecise. In the *Black Square*, the square is very slightly skewed so that while it replicates the square of the canvas that carries it, it also slips away from its material support and appears to hover without fixed spatial coordinates. The edges of the black area are fuzzy and frayed, adding to the form's fugitive quality. Rigid geometrical certainty also comes apart within the not-quite rectilinear confines of the Square, where multi-directional lines of rupture have gradually spread, and continue to spread, across the painted blackness, opening it up to the coloured imagery within it. Now, more than ever, the picture affirms how futile Modernity's dream of the *tabula rasa* was, since memory refuses evacuation and progress is always also regressive.

Grappling with the contingent, temporal reality of things makes them less legible and, therefore, less easily known / categorised / mapped out / commodified. In order to be incorporated and instrumentalised by the hegemonic order, things need to first be identifiable; we should thus honour the authenticity and self-sovereignty that is possible where things move away from themselves, contradict their own names and go beyond what they can be identified as.

The *Black Square* is not a black square, and Suprematism doesn't really mark end of figurative pictures. Despite the totalising, progressivist rhetoric to which Malevich is still bound, his art reveals itself to be always incomplete, unpredictable and at variance with itself. His 1915 manifesto insisted that the "aspects of time in things" had become more important than "their essence and meaning". He came to contradict many of the principles and goals declared in this ecstatic text – but in doing so, he honoured its more nuanced and enduringly relevant implications. By going against what he said, he affirmed the value of inconsistency and inconclusiveness. Let's remember that the manifesto ended with this urgent exhortation: "We, Suprematists, throw open the way to you. Hurry! – For tomorrow you will not recognise us."

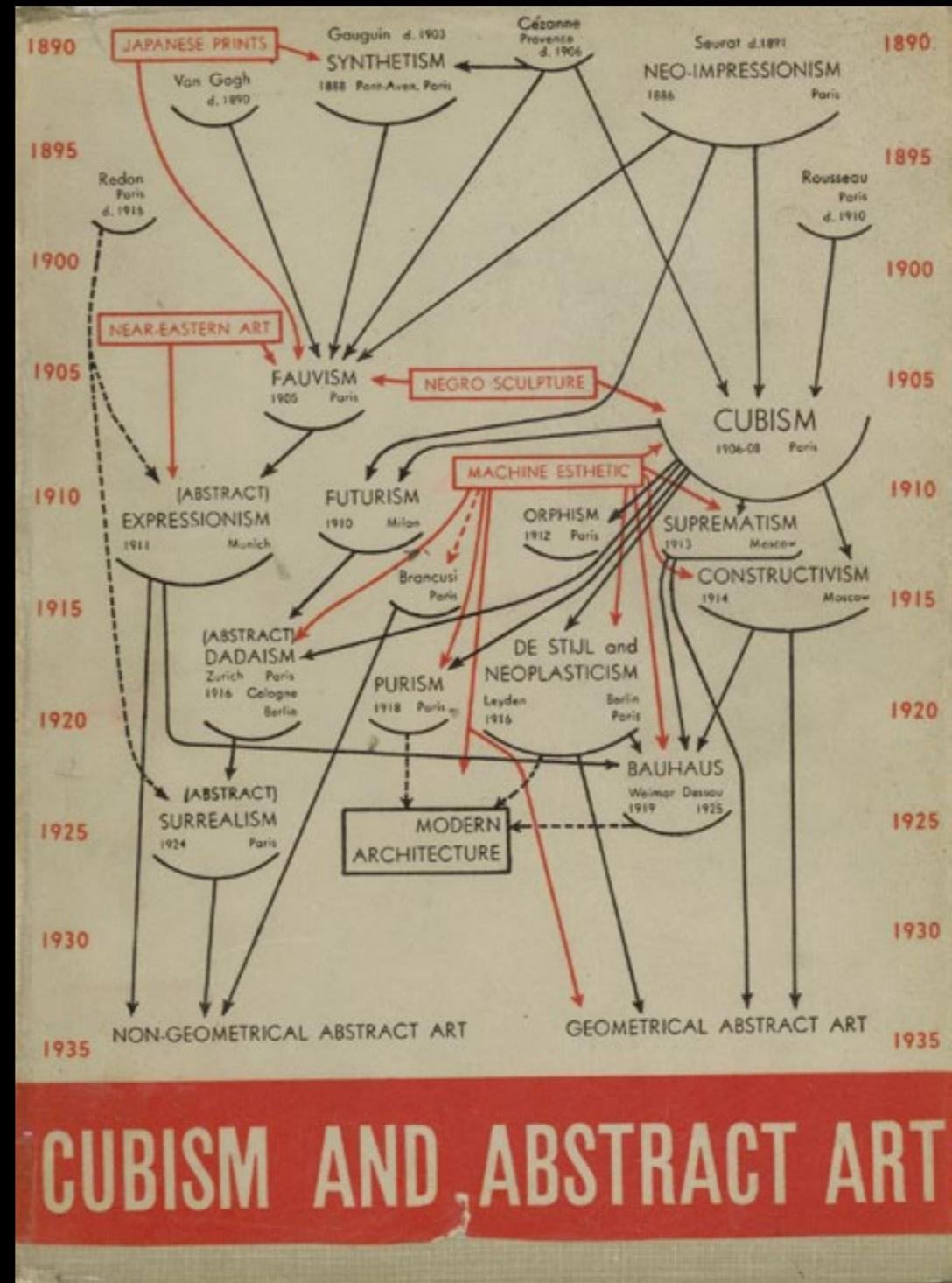
- 1 This and all subsequent quotes from the manifesto: Malevich, Kazimir "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting" in K. S. Malevich: *Essays on Art 1915-1933* Vol 1, trans. Xenia Glowaski-Prus and Arnold McMillin, ed. Troels Andersen (Borgans Forlag a-s, Copenhagen, 1971) 19-41
- 2 Malevich, Kazimir, "The Axis of Colour and Volume" (*Plastic Arts / Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo*, No. 1, Petrograd, 1919). English translation at DOCUMENTS on the Founding and Organisation of the Museum of Artistic (or Painterly) Culture Compiled by Patricia Railing via International Chamber of Russian Modernism (InCoRM) www.incorm.eu/documents.html
- 3 Deleuze, Gilles, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Zone Books, New York, 1991) 31-32
- 4 See Viktorina, Milda and Lukanova, Alla, "A Study of Technique: Ten Paintings by Malevich in the Tretiakov Gallery" in *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (exhibition catalogue) (The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Centre in association with The University of Washington Press, Los Angeles, 1990) 187-198; 194
- 5 Ufan, Lee, "Kaleidoscopic Catharsis" in *The Art of Encounter*, trans. Stanley N. Anderson (Lisson Gallery, London, 2004) 57-59
- 6 See Douglas, Charlotte "Suprematist Embroidered Ornament" in *Art Journal* (Vol. 54, No. 1, 'Clothing as Subject', Spring, 1995) 42-45. More recently elaborated on in Shatskikh, Aleksandra *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012) 85-98
- 7 Shatskikh, Alexandra, "A Cologne Bottle by Malevich" (In Russian) in (*ArtChronika* magazine) (#5-6, Autumn-Winter, Moscow, Russia, 2008) 100-110
- 8 Douglas Charlotte, *Op. Cit.* 43
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Höch, Hannah, "On Embroidery" in *Hannah Höch* (exhibition catalogue) (Whitechapel Gallery and Prestel Publishing, London, 2014) 72
- 11 Parker, Rozsika, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (The Women's Press, London, 1984) 192





Malevich's exhibit at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10* (1915)

Malevich lying in state below a *Black Square* and his 1933 Socialist Realist self-portrait in his apartment in Leningrad (1935)

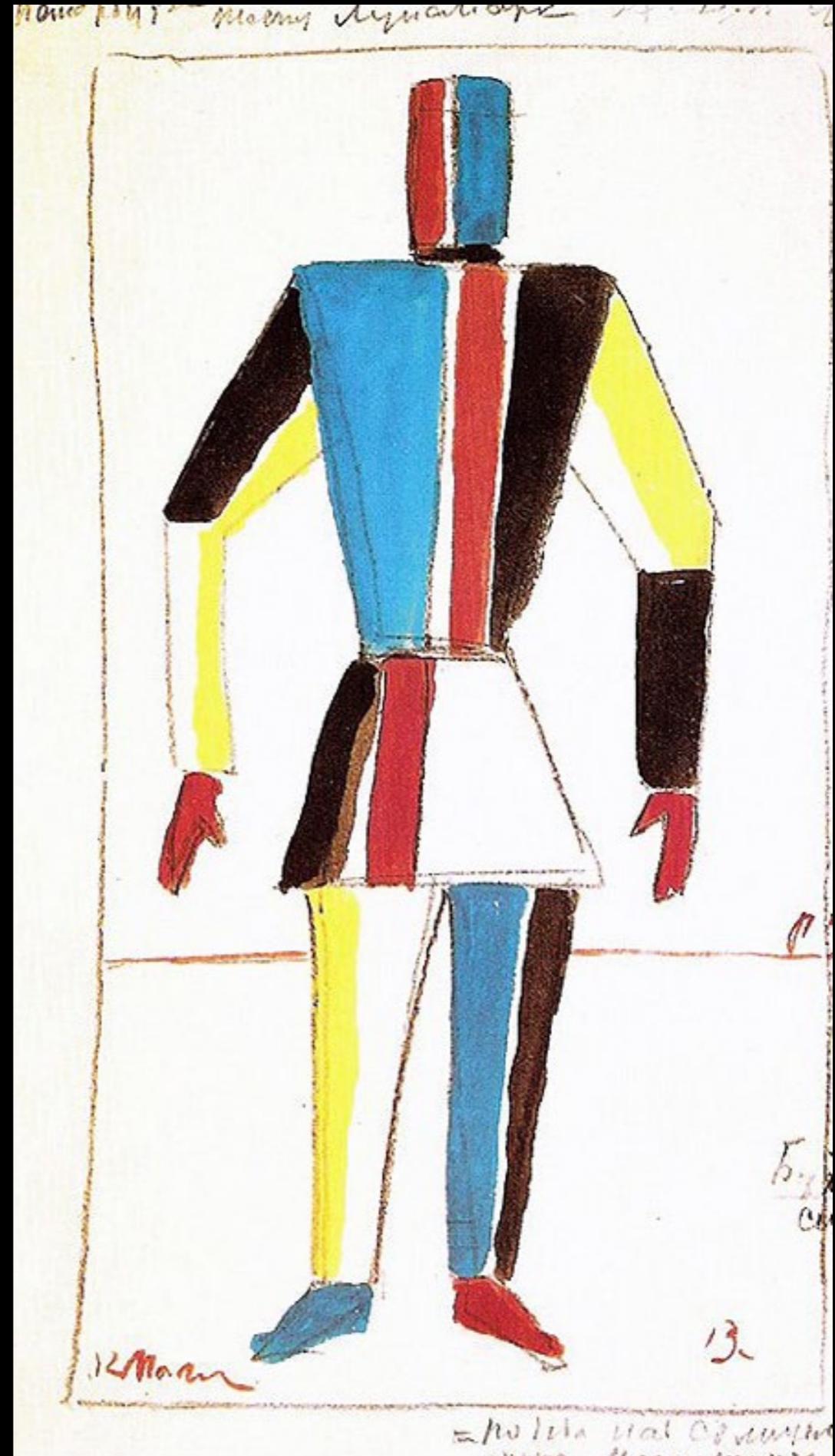


Cubism and Abstract Art, Museum of Modern Art, 1936, exhibition catalogue cover



• Kazimir Malevich
Self-portrait (1933)
Oil on canvas

Frosted glass
perfume bottle
designed by
Kazimir Malevich
in 1911
Collection of the author



• Costume design for a
strongman in the
opera Victory over
the Sun by
Kazimir Malevich

30

Berlinde De Bruyckere / J. M. Coetzee: Parallel Texts.

Alys Moody

In September 2012, Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere wrote a letter to South African-Australian writer J. M. Coetzee. De Bruyckere had just been selected to represent Belgium at the 2013 Venice Biennale and, in keeping with the convention followed by Belgian representatives to the Biennale, she was in search of a curator. She wondered whether Coetzee would serve in this role, not as a curator in the usual sense, “not to assist during the working process, or to help make any decisions, but as a source of inspiration.” His first task would be to provide a text, “something I can feed on, that I can digest for a while and spit out afterwards”, which would function as “a parallel text” her sculpture and his writing co-existing as “two separate worlds put next to each other that are somehow visibly connected.”¹ Coetzee agreed, and sent her an unpublished short story, “The Old Woman and the Cats.” De Bruyckere got to work on the installation, which she called *Cripplewood—Kreupelhout*, and which ultimately became a wax reproduction of a huge tree, bound in rags and pillows, painted in a palette reminiscent of human bones and flesh, punctuated with occasional splashes of red. The spectral presence of Saint Sebastian hovered within the prostrate tree trunk. Meanwhile, Coetzee and De Bruyckere stayed in touch, corresponding regularly as the work progresses. All this was collected in the catalogue, so that the collaboration and Coetzee’s original text stand in a paratextual or tangential relationship to the sculpture that emerged. In 2013, to coincide with the launch of the Biennale, De Bruyckere and Coetzee released a book together, *We Are All Flesh*, consisting of extracts from Coetzee’s works interspersed with images of De Bruyckere’s sculptures, all grouped around five loose thematic categories (scars / burning, firewood / wet / caring part / killing animals).

On first encounter, the exchange between De Bruyckere and Coetzee seems to be a model collaboration between artist and writer, even, if we can make the leap, a model encounter between art and literature. It’s only on closer inspection that the fissures emerge. Coetzee’s text, “The Old Woman and the Cats”, was never written directly for De Bruyckere and there is a suspicion, reading the letters, that De Bruyckere largely sets it aside in the

development of her own work. The relationship between the two “parallel texts”, it feels, is oblique; certainly, it is not traceable in any obvious parallel of content or subject matter, and the connections even on a thematic level seem attenuated, as though we strain both texts in seeking them out.

The letters reveal a similar awkwardness of fit. De Bruyckere’s are long (Coetzee often opens his replies by remarking on their length) and expansive, outlining her thinking and the practical and theoretical constraints and possibilities that she begins to see emerging. Coetzee’s replies are short and to the point, always opening with a summary of De Bruyckere’s latest letter, sometimes going on to suggest an allusion or image or reference for her to follow up. These allusions themselves seem to occupy an ungainly and unassimilated position in relation to De Bruyckere’s work. When he suggests that she might consider Daphne, a woman turned into a tree, she seeks out the story but initially seems at a loss as to how to incorporate it. When she begins meditating on the love expressed in caring for another’s body, he replies with imagery of “the shock of steel ... against bone and flesh,” an image that seems to wilfully violate both the optimism of De Bruyckere’s original letter and the assimilation of wood and flesh suggested by her finished sculpture.

If we are to imagine this collaboration as a form of parallelism, it’s a parallelism that emphasises not the companionship of lines travelling in the same direction, but the frustration of lines that never meet. But the fraughtness of the encounter between Coetzee and De Bruyckere is also productive, even exciting. Resisting the neat analogy that makes art into an illustration of literature, or literature into an explanation of art, *Cripplewood* highlights a space between art and literature that is joined by a web of relations and non-relations, a set of repulsions, rapprochements and quarrels that gives a vivid new spin to the old description of poetry and painting as “sister arts”. The project as a whole, in other words, might be understood as a testing or probing of this relationship, an open question about what kinds of links might be possible between art and literature.

Even to ask this question—let alone to leave it open—speaks to the uncertain state of the relationship between the two arts on the contemporary scene. It reveals a breakdown in both the pre-modernist understanding of art and literature as related by analogy and by their capacity to furnish each other with subject matter, as well as the weakening of the modernist resistance to the intrusion of literature into the visual arts. Since 10 BC, when Horace first instructed poets *ut picture poesis*—as in painting, so in poetry—art and literature have been bound together with the force of an ambivalent analogy. The strength of this analogy bred important genres that borrowed across artistic boundaries—ekphrasis in poetry; history painting, much more influentially, in painting—but it also proved central to centuries of art and literary theory, not only during the classical period but well into the Renaissance and beyond.

With Lessing’s 1776 treatise “Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Poetry and Painting”, an extended attack on modern uses of the *ut pictura poesis* analogy that argued that painting and (especially) poetry benefited from the parallel development of their own strengths, rather than from the moulding of either to the model of the other, the power of this analogy began to fracture. But it is modernism, particularly modernism in the visual arts, that most famously drove a stake between art and literature. For many modernist artists and their theorists, the answer to the question of art’s relationship to literature was, ideally, none. They imagined the history of the visual arts as a progression towards ever increasing abstraction, in which the “literary” dimensions were suppressed if not erased entirely, in favour of a renewed exploration of the possibilities and limits of the medium itself. Clement Greenberg, perhaps modernism’s most influential intellectual champion, was one of the most strident advocates of a “purity” in the arts that would keep literature and art rigorously separate. His 1940 revision of Lessing’s treatise, “Towards a Newer Laocoon” celebrates what he sees as the historically inevitable division of the arts: “The arts have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined.”² For Greenberg, the key to this segregation is the arts’ rejection of

“literature”, a word that for him implies the imputation of higher meanings to the word of the art (poetry, too, must reject literature in Greenberg’s formulation; novels are, interestingly enough, never mentioned). Even today, Greenberg’s understanding of modernism, if not his endorsement of it, remains dominant across the visual arts.

Modernist literature, on the other hand, was never so hardline about the exclusion of art. For one thing, as Greenberg himself acknowledged, the crucial concept of purity is, on the whole, much less pure in the hopelessly referential realm of words and meanings than it is in the more abstraction-friendly realm of paints on surfaces. Despite the influence of a purity model, especially within continental poetry, modernist literature largely remains a messy, referential thing, full of the detritus of modern civilisation, art, visual culture and all. In fact, modernist permutations of the *ut pictura poesis* model were key to many of the literary experiments of this period, from the supposed influence of cubism on Gertrude Stein, and the importance of Samuel Beckett’s art criticism in the development of his thinking about literature, to the inter-artistic mingling of the Bloomsbury group and the inter-artistic work of poet-writers like Wyndham Lewis. For all these writers, experiments in the visual arts offered a crucial, if sometimes rather murky, formal analogue to their own experiments in the literary realm. Greenberg’s modernist purity seems a curiously inappropriate heuristic for such art-inspired writers.

Within art itself, the modernist consensus began cracking almost as soon as it had been articulated. By the 1960s, postmodernism was purging art of purity, creating hybrid forms that violated not only the divisions between the arts, but even the more sacred distinction between art and popular culture. The growth of performance art, video art, installation work and conceptual art further encouraged the dissolution of Greenbergian segregation. Today, it is vanishingly rare to find contemporary art practitioners or theorists who are willing to embrace modernism as they understand the term: abstract, autonomous, preoccupied with the fierce defence of the medium’s boundaries and the single-minded burrowing into its formal possibilities. To contemporary artists

and thinkers, this modernist model feels not only outdated, but downright irresponsible.

But while the adversarial relationship promoted by modernism might have waned, a range of institutional, economic, and literary- and art-historical developments have kept the two arts insulated in quite different spheres. In the place of avant-garde circles that consisted of practitioners and theorists drawn from across the arts (and beyond), both the contemporary art world and the contemporary literary scene have become more specialised and more sharply divided. At the same time, universities have become important employers of practitioners, particularly creative writers, bequeathing the disciplinary divisions that have long marked academic theory and criticism to a new generation of writers and artists. Mainstream contemporary art and mainstream contemporary literature are both producing exciting new works, but they do so from within largely discrete worlds, each the result of drifts internal to their own histories and to their own institutional pressures.

Despite this divergence, there are signs of the emergence of a mutual curiosity, capable of producing exciting points of convergence. Some radical forms of contemporary literature, especially poetry, are yielding experiments that push literature into art, from collaborative, interactive and performance poetry that shades readily into performance art, through to various mutations of visual and concrete poetry which pass into the visual arts by way of design and typography (the latter itself a legacy of modernist experimentation). At the same time, contemporary art has shown a renewed interest in the possibilities of narrative, a trend that critic Mike Brennan has called “neo-narration”. In formats ranging from installations to (perhaps most influentially) documentary film, a range of contemporary artists are producing works that claim to tell a story, often drawing heavily on the narrative experimentation that has transformed modernist, postmodern and contemporary literature. These turns in both literature and art point towards an appetite for new forms of entanglement between art and literature that draw on what is cutting-edge and innovative in both.

The fraughtness of the collaboration between J. M. Coetzee and Berlinde De

Bruyckere is a by-product of this tangled history, a history that their work seeks not to overcome but to incorporate. In the incommensurability between Coetzee’s and De Bruyckere’s contributions, *Cripplewood* dramatises the unresolved rapprochement, still riven by artistic modernism’s isolationism, of art and literature. At the heart of this encounter is a hesitation over the role of narrative in De Bruyckere’s sculptural works. Like contemporary artists working with forms of “neo-narration”, De Bruyckere, in her selection of Coetzee as curator and collaborator, reveals an impulse to re-engage art with narrative. Coetzee is an innovative choice in this regard, a writer whose non-fiction is heavily narrative driven, but who is known for his experiments with narrative form and narrative voice, a tendency that has earned him a reputation as one of literary modernism’s most important contemporary heirs. In fact, the documentation surrounding *Cripplewood* seems to breed narrative, as Coetzee’s text constellates with the Saint Sebastian narrative, De Bruyckere’s discovery of the tree on which her sculpture was modelled, and the story of the creative process itself, preserved in the letters between artist and writer. But the artwork itself expels these stories, relegating them to a catalogue whose relationship to the work is tenuous, tangential. The result is a project underpinned by contradictory impulses: by a desire for narrative that it shares with history painting and neo-narration alike, on the one hand; and, on the other, by an insistence on separation and incommensurability that recalls Greenberg’s modernism, as Coetzee and De Bruyckere, seeming to speak to each other, each burrow down into their chosen medium.

In fact, the most obviously narrative component of De Bruyckere’s sculpture comes not from Coetzee at all, but from Saint Sebastian, whose spectral presence haunts the felled wax trees of the installation. With a palette reminiscent of bones, De Bruyckere’s tree takes on an uncannily human quality; it becomes a metamorphosed Sebastian, absorbed into the tree into which he pressed himself as arrows rained down on him. Read this way, De Bruyckere’s sculpture implies its own fantastic narrative, a story of metamorphosis that appears nowhere in extant accounts of Saint Sebastian—although, as Coetzee points out in the letters,

if we are thinking about the metamorphosis of man into tree, we might also think of Daphne, a nymph whose father freed her from Apollo’s pursuit by turning her into a tree.

The shadowy presence of Saint Sebastian is also the shadowy presence of his representations in art history. For De Bruyckere, Sebastian is a way of referring to and incorporating Venice, whose artists produced dozens of images of the saint, believed to protect against the plague, in the aftermath of recurrent outbreaks of the dreaded illness during the medieval and early modern periods. In this guise, Sebastian is one of the great figures of Venetian history painting, a clear example of the thin boundaries between narrative and art during the period. The Chiesa de San Sebastiano—a 16th-century church built to give thanks for the passing of the plague and containing paintings and frescos by Veronese—features perhaps the most famous example of this trend, in a cycle of paintings behind the choir that depict the narrative of the saint’s life. De Bruyckere’s sculpture, evoking this history, incorporates the attenuated modern echo of this rich medieval and early modern narrative.

But the attenuation is not hers alone. In fact, Louise Marshall suggests that one of the definitive characteristics of post-plague Sebastians of the Quattrocento is the emergence of a new image-type, which she calls the “martyred Sebastian”, whose chief characteristic is the removal of narrative action in favour of “an isolated representation of a suffering saint” and a static image of his “pierced *yet living* body” that violates narratives of the saint’s torment (in all extant versions, Sebastian is dead when the archers leave him).³ This anti-narrative Sebastian is typified by one of Venice’s other famous paintings of the Saint, Mantegna’s *Saint Sebastian* (1490), held in the Ca’ D’Oro, and it is clear from De Bruyckere’s descriptions of the saint—closely observed accounts of the frozen Sebastian pierced by arrows, analyses and interpretations that seem to turn this isolated moment around and around in her mind as though she is pacing before a sculpture of the scene—that this figure of timeless suffering is the Sebastian she imagines and the one she hopes to evoke.

De Bruyckere’s echo of Saint Sebastian relies on the accretion of narrative resemblances and links, the layering of Daphne’s metamorphosis,

Sebastian and the tree, plague victims turning to the saint, and the countless artistic representations of all three. Narrative is buried within this accumulation of images, but it is visible only in its effacement. In place of fully developed stories, De Bruyckere works with images that retain just the suggestion, the faint memory of the narrative that led to it. At the same time, they are bound together, not by narrative links—there is no clear reason why Sebastian should have become a plague saint; no causal connection between De Bruyckere’s fantasy of Sebastian’s metamorphosis and Daphne’s transformation into a tree—but by a network of analogies, metonyms and associations. This network entangles art with literature, history and myth, binding them together in eccentric ways without subordinating any one to the others. In this sense, it provides an acausal and non-narrative model for literature’s relationship to art, a way of weaving them together that also preserves intact and untouched the specificity of medium and of form.

The logic that links “The Old Woman and the Cats” to *Cripplewood*, however, lacks even this associative or metonymic development. On the one hand, we have an encounter between an old woman, living alone in a small Spanish village, and her son John who has come from the US to visit her. Mother and son argue about the dozens of cats the old woman has been feeding: he wants to know why she does it, at risk of alienating the villagers to no obvious benefit; she struggles to reply, emphasising the cats’ alienness, their absolute difference from humans, before citing, eventually, an encounter with a cat in the process of giving birth. “The cat in the culvert made an appeal to me”, she concludes, “and I responded. I responded without question, without referring to a moral calculus.”⁴ On the other hand, we have a wax cast of a tree, painted to look like bones, with the memory of Saint Sebastian hovering in the background. Between these two texts, there is no possibility of the shifts and slippages that implicate Sebastian in De Bruyckere’s sculpture: no shared images to pivot off; no historical or geographical echoes to seize upon.

What then is the logic that holds them together? De Bruyckere, writing after the sculpture’s concept had been established,

claims that “The Old Woman and the Cats” is “a major element that I want to translate into my sculpture. Not visibly, perhaps, but tangibly.”⁵ If Sebastian is the visible translation, operative in the sideways movement of images through art and narrative, what does it mean to describe De Bruyckere’s engagement with Coetzee’s story as a “tangible” translation? It implies that the relation is visceral, rather than analytic, highlighting that what makes these “parallel texts” parallel is their shared evocation of the immediacy and drama of the visceral, embodied encounter between an individual human and the unruly demands of the natural world. Both the alarming merger of human and tree in De Bruyckere’s sculpture, and the old woman’s submission to the cat’s demand in Coetzee’s story draw their subjects out of human society into a liminal space, governed by the body, between human and nature. Both texts—uncanny, discomfiting, arresting—seek to register this dislocation physically, on the bodies of their subjects, their spectators and their readers.

Both of the sculpture’s spectral narratives—Sebastian and the tree; “The Old Woman and the Cats”—generate from within themselves the terms and the logics that link them to De Bruyckere’s work. The metamorphosis of Sebastian into tree generates a sliding, metonymic structure that produces a web of constellated images endlessly morphing into each other, visible in the ambiguously human-vegetal form of the sculpture itself. Similarly, the old woman’s inexplicable submission to the ethical demand of the cat implies an encounter between two incommensurate beings—or two “parallel texts”—that generates an affinity not justified by any obvious links, any clear forms of connection, but by a tangible, embodied experience of mutuality. In both cases, *Cripplewood* implies that understanding the relationships between art and literature, image and narrative, sculpture and story requires different modes of reading, viewing and interpreting. In allowing these modes to be generated internally by each individual encounter, the collaboration emphasises the specificity of each individual work of art and the varied and complex strategies required to discuss art and literature in the same breath.

But whereas Sebastian functions as source material and intertext, Coetzee, as *Cripplewood's* official curator, has quite a different relationship to the project. While the narratives surrounding Saint Sebastian offer a repository of images and ideas for De Bruyckere to draw on, the role of narration in curating is more complex and more central. Although there are numerous curatorial strategies and approaches, one of the most prevalent is the notion that the role of the curator is to provide a narrative that can weave the individual works together, subsuming them into a larger explanatory backstory. Narrative in this context often combines a hermeneutic or conceptual function with a pedagogical one, helping to interpret the works, to locate them within an overarching conceptual framework, and to assist the gallery visitor in learning about and understanding both the works and their position in art history.

Coetzee's curating of *Cripplewood* plays with the common belief in the narrative function of curation. Like any good curator, Coetzee offers a clear narrative, meant to inform and underpin the exhibition. But as we have seen, the relationship between curatorial narrative and artistic work in *Cripplewood* is oblique and opaque. Far from offering an interpretive schema or a conceptual frame, "The Old Woman and the Cats" opens a whole new set of questions about the exhibition and introduces a whole new set of thorny interpretive questions. By privileging the autonomy of the curatorial narrative, by insisting on its status as a discrete "parallel text", Coetzee and De Bruyckere explore the potential for narrative-based curation to function as a literary act in its own right, even as they undermine the imposition of curatorial interpretive frameworks on individual works of art. In this sense, by making curating into a literary act, they simultaneously inaugurate it into the tense history of the relations between art and literature. What they produce is a kind of modernist curation, one which rejects the imposition of "literature" onto art in the form of curatorial narrative, even as it broadens the scope for the kinds of cross-pollination and narrative experimentation beloved of literary modernism.

We Are All Flesh, the book that was released to accompany *Cripplewood*, extends De

Bruyckere and Coetzee's experiments in curating and in the interface between art and literature. Combining a selection of extracts from Coetzee's published works with images taken from De Bruyckere's, it functions as the sculptor's "curation" of the writer's body of work, and of the intersections between his work and her own. De Bruyckere doesn't attempt a narrative frame, preferring instead to constellate passages from the novels, binding them together under large imagistic figures, in a way that recalls the network of images and fragments generated around Saint Sebastian. Her curatorial strategy is image-driven, relying on the fortuitous juxtaposition to illuminate works in new ways.

At the same time, though, *We Are All Flesh* is a kind of dismemberment. It takes Coetzee's narratives and tears their momentum from them, fixing characters and scenarios so that the reader meditates over them, pauses and re-reads and turns them over like objects or like poems. Passages that were previously woven into stories, exchanges that illuminated character, meditations that sprung from events, all are stripped of their contexts, made into objects in their own rights. This is a violence that makes the original texts precious in new ways. It shines a light on the elegance of Coetzee's prose style, on the sharpness of his imagery and the clean precision of his thought. In the forced dwelling on short passages, Coetzee's writing becomes more visceral, denser. This most cerebral of authors is revealed as having produced a body of writing that chimes with the viscera and rawness of De Bruyckere's images in a way that echoes and magnifies the "tangible" translation of the "The Old Woman and the Cats" into *Cripplewood*.

The price of this new attentiveness to the material quality of Coetzee's words is a deformation of genre. Although drawn entirely from Coetzee's published novels and memoirs, these texts, reduced to their component parts, are no longer novels, even if, seen from the right angle, read by the right reader, they remain parts of novels. Narrative and character fall away and, in the absence of references that would help the reader to link extracts to novels, these passages float free of the stories that produced them. They are, we might say, de-narrativised. Of course, the narratives and characters don't

disappear: the power of these passages is, in part, the power of stories forgotten, of the image or insight haunted by a history under erasure. But if De Bruyckere's curation prunes Coetzee's words of all but the most spectral of narrative, it offers an alternative way of bringing art and literature into dialogue through the curatorial act, linking the two arts not through the promise of narrative but through its effacement, through the seeking out of images and ideas capable of constellating around, resonating off, the sculptures she sets alongside them.

As a whole, *Cripplewood's* production and curation of artworks (and the documentation that surrounds them) hesitates between two models. On the one hand, it embraces a modernist separation between art and literature that is traversed and undone by the intervention of the "tangible" – a model that predominates in Coetzee and De Bruyckere's collaborative relationship. On the other, it generates metonymic networks that use images and themes to move laterally between and among texts and artworks, a model typified in *We Are All Flesh* and in Sebastian's relation to *Cripplewood*. Narrative functions in both cases not as a guiding thread but as a subordinate element, one which is both necessary and necessarily suppressed in any mediation between art and literature. Where Greenberg feared the imposition of "literature" for its presumed dominance of all other art forms, *Cripplewood* suggests the prospect of a wary but less antagonistic relationship, in which art and literature can be restored to each other—and re-storied by each other—secure in the specificity of their own mediums.

- 1 Berlinde De Bruyckere and J. M. Coetzee, *Cripplewood—Kreupelhout* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 29.
- 2 Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon", in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 32.
- 3 Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy", *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1994): 496
- 4 De Bruyckere and Coetzee, *Cripplewood—Kreupelhout*, 22.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 45.









42

Embarrassment, Glitch, Poetry.

Astrid Lorange

Most of these emails land in my spam mailbox, but some of the most creative actually reach my inbox by embedding Markov-generated phrases in the subject line, from field, or body of the message. One recent email from a Canadian online pharmacy placed a long gibberish URL ([click here!](#)) ending with the phrase “into the bulky cumbersome pressure suitmarkov.php” in the body of the message. Googling reveals that “into the bulky cumbersome pressure suit” is a phrase from the science fiction book *Voyagers* by Ben Bova, whose main character happens to be named, of all things, Markov.

– Angela Genusa¹

In the last few decades, studies of minor affects and minor aesthetic categories have made important contributions to contemporary philosophical inquiry and critical theory. This history includes the reclamation of shame by queer theory (notably in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work) and more recently with the twin historiographical tracts *Ugly Feelings* and *Our Aesthetic Categories* by Sianne Ngai. Such work is part of a broader interest in affect theory and, to cite Sara Ahmed, the “cultural politics of emotion”. Particularly in the case of Ngai, it’s also to do with the nuance of late-capitalist engagement with modes of production, distribution, and consumption – the aesthetics of engagement in hypernetworked, diffused, centre-less and radically fluid informational and material contexts.

Work of this kind excites me for two reasons. Firstly, because (as Ngai so wonderfully argues in *Our Aesthetic Categories*) aesthetic experience can no longer be described in definite, monumental, canonical, historical terms – it is too informationally dense, too smeared across planes of access, too yoked to the violence of economic interest. Aesthetics is registered contemporarily as a differentiated but often illegible agglutination of content. We respond to it differently – the new sublime is a kind of trilling, manic boredom. Work like Ngai’s aims to account for this new attentive mode. Secondly, I’m excited by the paradoxical largeness of minor interventions, blips, hacks. My excitement is political. Lately, I’ve been

considering the odd efficacy of embarrassment as a form of intervention – the way that the quick, rippling, flush of embarrassment can sometimes occasion a little glitch that reorients and reframes affective and aesthetic experience.

Shame, as figured by Sedgwick (and her many readers and correspondents), is an affective imposition of political marginalisation. Her reparative project was to emphasise the emotionality of such marginalisation, in order to both delegitimise the assumed authority of normative political identification and to suggest a way of inverting, or hacking, its negativity. To be shamed for, or to be ashamed about, are socially determined and politically enforced affects – politicising shame is a strategy of defiance. Humiliation, as Wayne Koestenbaum has recently written, is a three-way relation: the one who humiliates, the one who is humiliated, and the witness. That humiliation requires a witness is key – the affective clout is in seeing and being seen. I posit embarrassment as something different to the political and relational modes of shame and humiliation. Embarrassment is a quick, objectless, ambiguous affect, a flash of the ego that causes a glitch of excitement or confusion. Because embarrassment is ambiguous (I might be embarrassed by something or someone I love, by knowledge I have unwittingly acquired, by the largeness or smallness of an achievement, by the sheer fact of existing), its energies are unpredictable and indeterminately focused. Embarrassment does not lend itself easily to a theory, or to a politics. It is impartial (in the sense of being not-whole as well in the sense of having investments elsewhere). Where there is embarrassment, there is always something else – embarrassment is a small mirror, or valve, or hinge, or skip, complicating its attachments and figurations.

When someone introduces me as a poet, or when I call myself one, I feel embarrassed. This is not a lament – I like the embarrassment. To be a poet is an embarrassing thing, and that’s the best reason I can think of to continue being one. To be embarrassed is to admit to an overflow of smallness – a confounding paradox that compels one to try to minimise the volume of minoriness. This is why I think being a poet is so embarrassing – poetry, the minor art, does a roaring negative trade on visible smallness.

When someone introduces me as a poet I imagine my new acquaintance involuntarily recalling a hatred of poetry in high school, the way verse is taught as if a punishment, or the bleak lines inside a greeting card. I imagine them imagining me, serious in my labours, hunched over, lost in metrics, metaphorising the world. I imagine them imagining me introducing myself as a poet, in a way that seems purposefully important, or grandiose. People are embarrassed by the idea of poetry and so poets are already and pre-emptively embarrassed and embarrassing.

Poetry is embarrassing because one can never be sure what it gets up to. Poems are emergent, aberrant forms that, once written, continue to write themselves. Poets don’t write poems, per se, they’re just people that are willing to be responsible for what poems do. It’s embarrassing to admit that: to say, I don’t have any idea what’s going on but I’m willing to take the blame. It’s also interesting. I’ve said it elsewhere, and it bears repeating, that my version of a politics of writing is to be willing to be responsible for language while acknowledging that I never possess it. So the embarrassment is just part of that position, its wobbly and error-prone footing. It’s a pre-emptive embarrassment, embarrassment before the fact. To be a poet is to be both easily embarrassed and unfazed by embarrassment, to find the pleasure of and in the embarrassing.

A poem is anything that is said to be, or read as, or composed as, or misrecognised as, a poem. The only thing that makes it distinct from other forms of language is this fact – what Veronica Forrest Thompson called “poetic artifice”. Whenever there is poemness insisted upon, there is a poem. This insistence (emphasis as its own kind of artifice) requires, or perhaps even elicits, a particular focus on form – the processes and practices that inhere as form, the material conditions and possibilities of formation, and the formal differences of diverse entities. With such focus, the smallest and most minor details are key: a poem can turn on a single character. When something is read as a poem, everything is overly emphasised. The emphasis is intensive; the poem is pure potential stress.

When I first became interested in poetry, in pointing to things I called poems, I was also

and not at all coincidentally going to a lot of noise-related events. People doing things with sound, people doing things with noise, people doing things that made me think hard about the aesthetic and philosophical differences between sound and noise – mostly I’ve felt more of an affinity with these people than with the majority of people writing poetry. Affinities are good like that – you can have them outside familial groupings. My affinity was based on what I perceived (and continue to perceive) as a shared concern with the material-specific emergence of forms and systems, patterns and one-offs, glitches, harmonics and disharmonics, as well as a shared pleasure in the abstraction of media. In the case of language, this means the ways that language acts apart from, or in excess of, communicative or associational means.

One of the key conceits in experimental sound-based or media-specific art is the glitch. A contemporary word, glitch refers to a “spurious signal” in a system, or, more generally, a “sudden short-lived irregularity”. In one of its first known usages, “glitch” describes a “minute change in voltage”, tiny and unexpected enough that “no fuse could protect against it”. This is key: a glitch is so small that nothing can predict or prevent it. It happens within, so to speak, and of its own material. At the same time, it happens outside of, or apart from, its material’s normal or dependable states. Insofar as we can accept glitches as inevitable, maybe even natural aberrations, we cannot know a particular or singular glitch in advance. That glitches happen we can be certain of, but how and why they happen we can never be sure. Perhaps because of this foundational paradox – being both expected and unexpected, inevitable and irregular – glitches have become objects of inquiry and materials for aesthetic experimentation, particularly in electronic arts. The glitch has become a way of making, rather than a risk inherent in making.

For the last few decades, glitchy works have emphasised the emergent and decentralised agency of complex systems – deprivileging the role (or perhaps simply the autonomy) of the artist and privileging the convergences, resonances, interferences, and intensities of different entities that constitute an art object

or event. Glitches cannot be safeguarded against, but they can be encouraged or amplified by jamming, speeding up, slowing down, overloading, under-regulating, cross-wiring, jump-starting, bootlegging, hacking, rewriting, mashing up, stripping back, reversing, undoing, or flooding the system, tool, program, material, or device. Setting up the right conditions for glitches is not the same as orchestrating or predetermining glitchwork. However, depending too much on likely glitch-related outcomes is a risky move and can lead to pseudo-glitch affects or preplanned glitch-like blips that reveal themselves as fake as soon as they materialise. The ripe scene for glitches is ambient, indistinct, half-glimpsed – a willingness to misuse or overuse.

As Caleb Kelly has written, glitchy works occasion, whether directly or not, a “cracking” of media – by breaking down or breaking open, the medium becomes at once the focus (topos) of a work, as well as a point of auto-deviation. Aberrations draw attention to, and divert ideas away from, the specificity of a medium and its material-conceptual objectality. One way of describing post-war 20th-century art practice and its subsequent rippling across 21st-century modulations is to say that this almost-paradoxical gesture – intensification through dysfunction – is the signal motif and lasting gesture. More contemporarily, and as part of the so-called “new aesthetic” of digital culture, the emphasis has shifted from evental or performative instances of glitch to indexical and archival efforts in which glitch is catalogued and gallerised. Banks of unintentional glitchworks from Google Books, Google Earth, Google Street View, etc., elicit a certain kind of pleasure – the pleasure of the dissolution of the fantastic seamlessness of representation. The near-perfection of a digital image is always trumped by the embarrassment (that word again, to which I will return later) of its failure to be properly perfect. As anyone who’s trawled through OCR scans will tell you, seeing words rendered as noise is pleasing – a disruption of habitual legibility and an invitation to outsiders, euphemisms, puns, uninvited guests. Glitches are wrinkles, jokes, reminders, omens, ego checks. They are nuggets of inside knowledge, rare glimpses.

Like poetry, glitch trades on artifice. It denatures.

**oange astare
o lawe, o stareat
outcat lode hamapdne**

**leslac igowersoas
artest not a leslac**

**dignti
cher waeret, deit
thadonas**

– David Melnick, from PCOET, 1975

In his mid-20th-century handbook of semiotics, Jonathan Culler writes on the apostrophe, the poetic figure of the exclamation, the address, or lament, or appeal. In the lyric tradition, the apostrophe is a vocative departure – “O moon!”, “Ah love!” – and the suddenness of its puncture, writes Culler, is “embarrassing”. Apostrophes are embarrassing because they “complicate or disrupt the circuit of communication”, causing confusion about who or what is being addressed, and what role the reader plays as witness. The “minor embarrassment” of the apostrophe, he continues, “may be taken as a sign of a larger and more interesting embarrassment which leads literary critics to turn aside from the apostrophes they encounter in poetry”. Culler’s thesis is that literary critical prose writing is embarrassed by poetry’s vocative artifice – so much so that it represses poetic apostrophe in its descriptive accounts and analyses of texts. Apostrophic irruptions are embarrassing to the literary critics, Culler argues, because the prose conventions of criticism harbour an “innate hostility toward voice”, that is, the normative and rule-governed writtenness of critical prose is embarrassed by the performative and affected vocality of the poem’s “speaker”. Culler’s example reveals multiple, ambiguous embarrassments. The embarrassment of being embarrassed by a performative, emotive irruption. The embarrassment caused by the conflicting claims of written (normative, rule-governed) language and the notion of voice (non-standard, context-dependent). The embarrassment of a poem trying to

represent the affective suddenness of speech, and the embarrassment of the literary critic who thinks they can describe a poem via interpretive means. The interference of the apostrophe is a glitch for the critic, who, by registering the glitch as a form of embarrassment (is the critic embarrassed by the poem or embarrassed on behalf of the poet?) fails to register the poem’s glitch stylistics.

The internet is an inconceivable archive of language – composed and collated, endlessly distributed, indexed. The high-capitalist parataxis of language rolls out in torrents of poemlets. In the context of so-called “conceptual writing”, the task of the poet today is not to compose original material but to find a way to navigate through the clogged up materials of a radically fragmented language environment. Poetry as editorial practice is poetry as conceptual insistence, emphatics, catalogue. This work is interested in questions to do with the performative labour of composition and the material conditions of language production. If the lyric poem’s signal of embarrassment is the apostrophic exclamation, then for the conceptual poem it is the proposition. The conceptual poem is a staging of an impossible premise and the pleasure is in its hubris and failure: its claims are inordinate, obstinate, or else boring, useless.

J. Gordon Faylor, poet and editor of Gauss-PDF, a website that publishes digital content, is an exemplar of contemporary glitch. Faylor’s glitchworks are subtly so. His early work, consisting for a large part of individual book projects readable as either PDF or a print-on-demand hardcopies, collects the barest possible material of poetic interface – marks, transliterated noise, thickets of information, tables, repurposed archival tags. Under the pseudonym Carton Trebe, Faylor has published slim volumes of commercial hysteria composed entirely from spam banks. At readings, he performs work written specifically for the event, taking into consideration any recording processes and the media format of archival materials. The material, consciously figuring its translation into data, applies its own metatags. For the most part he uses “found” language, another way of saying that his compositional practice is that of a reader or indexer. In a sound work called

*Privation F Dec Release*², Faylor anticipated the use of SoundCloud by the editor of *Lateral Addition*, a publisher of audio material. In particular, Faylor anticipated the waveform animation and the experience of watching (and commenting on) a track as it plays back. The piece, ostensibly an edit of a recording over two days in his Chestnut Street, Philadelphia apartment, features barely legible ambient noise (mostly from the process of sound recording), a body (nose sniffs, shoe squeaks, occasional walking), a streetscape, doors closing and opening, and a single piece of music. The text accompanying the sound file reads:

Iteration · December 8-10, 2012 · Philadelphia

Counter-variation · Strict partial order · Samples · Apartment · Two rooms subdivided into four sections, connected by another · Two to four doorways · Peavey bass amp · Water · Vans

Outline/blurb assigned numbered coordinates · Comments referencing room sections, objects occasioned, faulty time coding: Lateral-addition – Abd · Lament metanalysis

Nonrandomized domestic recordings: four linear tracks, seven breaks · Contingent irregularities – exception: three guests arrive · Additive objects and/or surfaces substitute, account for one another’s duration – obfuscatory spatial treatments · Per lack of attention, nonproportional proximity the rooms the podcast · Admeasure · Aural minimalism in lieu of fiction · A man hissed from behind the door · Terminology · Regressive link · Discourse: “just me walking around” inference – preemptive, unsystematized save f trials of these spaces, their interchangeability, section lengths “two arbitrary silences, facilitating sound for rec,” imposing experiences, rites, approaches · Walking to and away from · Inability to construe systematization (e.g. weather) as voiding aesthetic games, I sunk my head only

a little out of disappointment · Amount

The guests annex media · Andy Martrich : Iona (BlazeVox, 2012), Once : “The Empty Deck” (N/A, 1981), Trisha Low : Purge (Troll Thread, 2012) · Discretionary approaches of interaction and abandonment – compulsive wandering, browsing, setting down of

Attempts 40 seconds 8:00-13:00 · 50 seconds 22:00-25:00 · Bonus two more eclipsed segments

The head’s bowed – but only a little bit – in disappointment. The bowed head is one, or *the*, signifier of embarrassment. The embarrassed body is a body being recorded as it reads two texts, walks between parts of a room and the rooms of an apartment. As the name of the piece suggests, something is being withheld or denied. It’s a work of extended subtlety, the almost-illegibility of what’s possible to record, the unevenness of capture in a playback, the isolation of being at home, the silent effort to read, the shock of a stop-start edit. *Privation* is very differently glitchy than Faylor’s textworks, which tend toward the more showy kinds of wonk – letters and wordforms skewed, run-ons, fragments, broken code, misspellings, and so on. The glitch of *Privation* requires guesswork – small, shadowy errata that either register as, or fail to be registered as, sound. A recording of a non-recording, or else, the soft traces of failing to make the right content, the bowed head of the unseen body, shut-off intimacy.

In Adorno’s militantly anxious (anxiously militant) *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), embarrassment is a recurring theme. Pure enjoyment is philistinism and so a kind of embarrassment, but to lack any pleasure in art is also embarrassing, since without a degree of pleasure, it is difficult to apprehend the point of art. The “culinary”, of course, was the height of embarrassment for Adorno – by his account it is embarrassing to be guided by the base and wayward desires of taste, it is embarrassing to want to consume or dabble or fritter. His anti-culinary rhetoric denigrates the role that the treat, the morsel, the scrap, and the snack play in aesthetic experience. A champion of snacking, Michel Serres

theorises the culinary in his parabolic study of relation, *The Parasite*. In French, *parasite* has three meanings – the first two correspond to the word’s English meanings, namely, the biological parasite and its social analogue. The third, however, is not at all reflected in the English word, and is translated as “static,” or “white noise”. In French, the one word, *hôte*, is used to describe both the guest and host positions of a parasitic relation. For Serres, the parasite accounts at once for differentiation, interference, deviation, and novelty: “The theory of the parasite brings us to miniscule evaluations of changes of state. It installs unexpected chains where small causes or very tiny differences are followed by zero effects or by effects of return and better resistance or by immense catastrophic effects ... [the parasite] multiplies wildly with its smallness; it occupies space with its imperceptibility”. The parasite—noise—is an essential part of any relation, message, transmission, or communication. It is a “little troublemaker” – a glitch, an irregularity, an anomaly that ineradicably alters the scene.

For Freud, parapraxis – so-called “slips of the tongue” – provide a critical link to the unconscious and its repressed memories and unacknowledged desires. His thesis is that the sudden interference of a different word, wrong name, inverted initial, or anagram is a material effect of the unconscious and so one of the only ways to get a foothold on pathology. In particular, for Freud, the slip of a proper name is meaningful – glitching a name is never an accident. The nominative, like the vocative in Culler’s example of the apostrophe, is risky. To get it wrong can be a disaster – a catastrophic embarrassment. In 1956, the sociologist Erving Goffman described embarrassment as the projection of “incompatible definitions” of the self. To be embarrassed is to get one’s own name wrong, or else, to name oneself in a way that is untranslatable. To project a version of yourself onto a surface that fails to register you properly, or that warps you into some nonsense. Embarrassment in this sense is not an internal phenomenon, but an affective bounce-back, an error in transmission. If for Freud the embarrassment of names is in calling the wrong one, for Goffman it is saying one’s own name, presenting the self to a disinterested or hostile

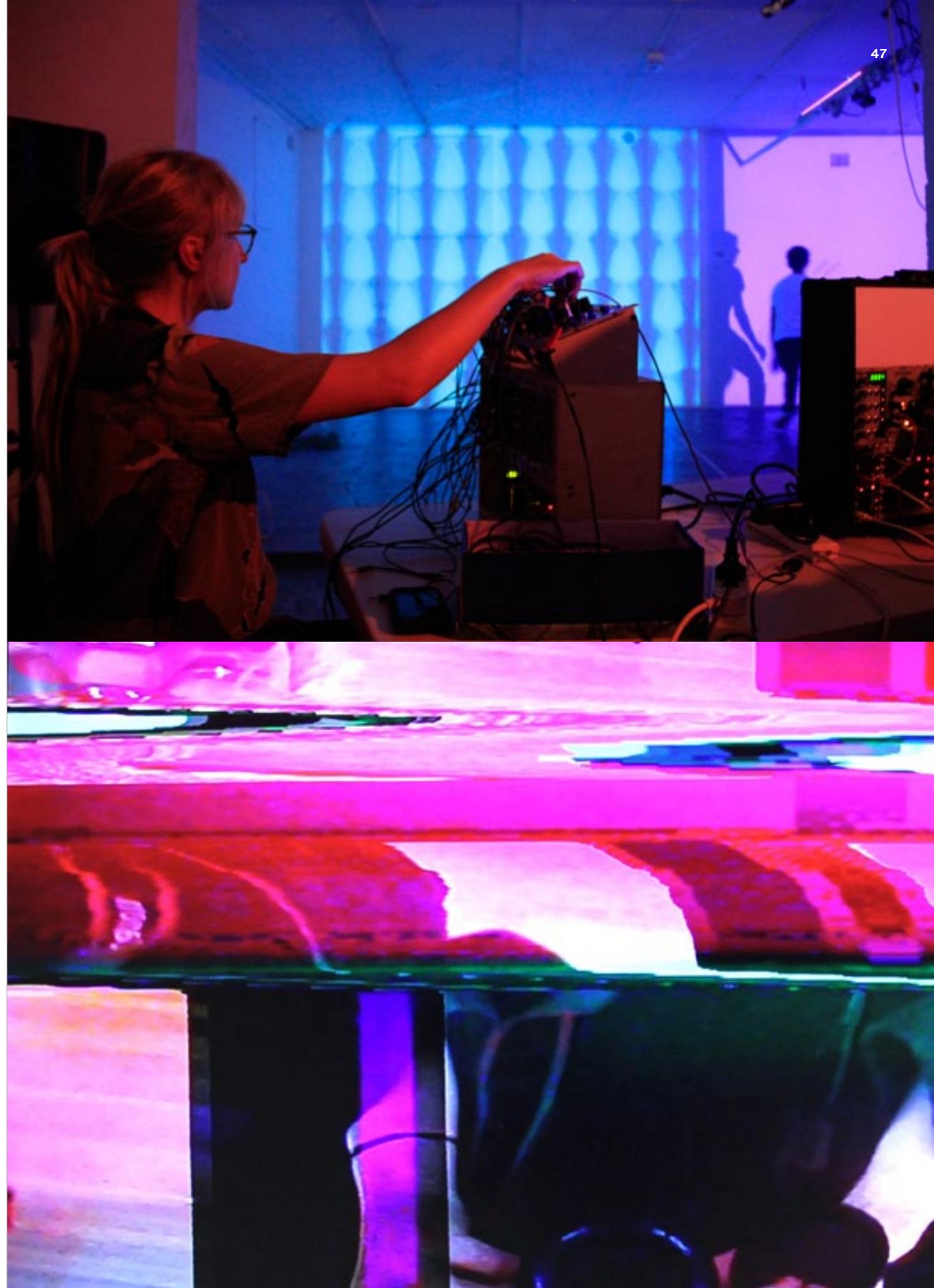
other, having to repeat a name that sounds less convincing each time, or else, trying to find a name that answers an unfair question.

While writing this essay I have been writing, as part of a broader project on embarrassment, about crushes. I began with the assumption that a crush was an inherently embarrassing thing to have, all the more if it’s unreturned. At the end, however, I have changed my mind. A crush is the least embarrassing form of love. Either because they normalise embarrassment through the sheer excessiveness of their own transparency and melodrama, or because they are willful annihilations of the ego, crushes invert the force of embarrassment. Rather than turning towards the self, the crush turns away from the self. Somewhere here, between embarrassment, glitch, poetry, and aesthetics, there’s a thesis emerging. It seems to be saying, on the one hand, that embarrassment, a minor and passing glitch, is a good thing – a thing that yokes one to the world, that registers the stakes, that impresses the body, that regulates our selfishness. On the other hand it’s saying, paradoxically, that a little embarrassment can turn out to be a much more radical, perhaps even transgressive thing: to be embarrassed is to become attuned to one’s relation to the world. Poetry, since it is interested in gesture – to point to, to repeat, to cite, to break over a line – is above all a practice of being embarrassed and in going on regardless.

- 1 Speaking about her work *Spam Bibliography* in an interview with Kristen Gallagher, <http://jacket2.org/commentary/why-spam>
- 2 <https://soundcloud.com/lateral-addition/abd/s-3B10u>

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Pia van Gelder
Pia van Gelder at *Noiseball*
Presented by Serial Space, 2012
 Photo: Kate Blackmore
 Image courtesy of the artist

•
***You or Me?*, 2011**
Closed-circuit video set-up:
two pin-hole CCTV cameras,
signal splitter, LCD monitor
 Image courtesy of the artist





••
Vicky Browne
The Man Machine (2013)
Installation view, UTS gallery
Mixed media, 65 x 65 x 30cm
Courtesy the artist and
Galleries pompom, Sydney

50

The Minimalism, Hessian and Steel of Dale Harding.

Darren Jorgensen

Dale Harding's *Of One's Own Country* (2011) is a ball of old fashioned steel wool, designed to unravel from the wall over the course of its exhibition, a single strand falling onto a narrow plinth below. There is not much to this humble performance, one that is easily lost amidst the general noise and scale of contemporary exhibitions. The work, according to Harding, has its roots in some of the darkest parts of Australian history. The ball of wool is designed to look like pubic hair, and commemorates the experience of Aboriginal women in domestic service in Queensland. Harding's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother worked under the infamous *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Sale of Opium Act* of 1897, an act that was not much short of genocidal in its treatment of Aboriginal people.

In *Breaking Boundaries* (2012) a row of partly burned surveyors' pegs sit like giant matches along the wall. Here too the artist speaks of his work as both personal and historical. The pegs refer to Harding's childhood on a farm, and their place in marking out the land for profit. *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls* (2013), a series of miniature hessian sacks with collars sewn into them, could well be mistaken for oversized dolls clothes, their petite forms showing off Harding's craft skills. Here too the artist uses the work as a means of explaining his own family history, and Aboriginal history more generally. His grandmother was forced to wear a hessian sack as a punishment for resisting the sexual advances of a whitefella. Harding has attempted to redeem this horrific experience in the work, by sewing soft, feminine collars onto this tough material.

What sense can we make of this disjunction between these artworks and their explanation? How is it that these works appear to sit so easily within a contemporary art context, while their artist's reasoning proves both so crucial to understanding them and disruptive of their easy place within

contemporary art? One reason comes from the artist himself, who explains that:

These histories and these pieces of inherited knowledge often don't extend beyond the family unit and the wider Aboriginal community and I consider it a privilege to be able to use my Nanna's stories to be able to try and lessen some of that burden on the Aboriginal community and our families. They are really nasty, often hurtful stories and so I consider it is quite important work to try and unearth these stories and share them with the wider community and make sure they aren't just carried on the backs of us!

Certainly there is a sensitivity at work in Harding's translation of these histories. Soft wool is sewn onto the hessian collar of *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls*, as if the artist and grandson is trying to atone for the horrors of the past.

Yet there is also something all too self-contained about Harding's explanation, as there is for much of the reasoning behind Aboriginal art. For there is more at stake in an aesthetic experience than the redemption of history, more at play in creation than either the personal or the political. The disjunction between an artwork and its information goes back at least as far as the 1950s, when the New York School of painting marked out the end of Anglo-American modernism. Who could say what a Jackson Pollock, let alone a Barnett Newman or a Clyfford Still painting is really about? Coming in their wake, conceptualism and minimalism took advantage of the vacuum in artistic meaning that the New York School created. Their strategies for installation and information, their use of everyday materials and language, put the impetus for interpreting art into question.

Conceptualism and minimalism remain two of the more dominant languages of contemporary art, but they remain apolitical

languages. In his work, Harding uses their strategies to introduce new issues, new problems to the institutions that exhibit them, without falling into ambivalence. Harding's significance lies in the way that he turns the conceptual/minimal paradigm into Aboriginal art, and conversely, politicises conceptual and minimal strategies for art making.

In Australia, two events were pivotal in both inaugurating and separating Aboriginal art and the sophisticated kind of installation art are familiar with today. In 1968, the National Gallery of Victoria featured a radical display of abstract geometric painting in its exhibition *The Field*, a display that would introduce Australia to American style radicalism in art. Three years later, in 1971, the Papunya painter Kaapa Tjampitjinpa shared the Caltex Art Award with another, non-indigenous artist in Alice Springs. These events effectively marked the institutional beginnings of two art movements that would come to dominate the Australian artworld over the coming decades, and yet remain distinct from each other in every other way.

Harding's work does not synthesise these different movements, or resolve the rift between them, but instead emphasises their distance from each other. The way that he creates a disjunction between clean installation works and Aboriginal information begins to unravel the doubled pretence by which contemporary art came into being in Australia. The journey to visibility in the artworld was much harder for Aboriginal artists than those following in the footsteps of 'The Field'. For by the 1970s in both New York and mainstream Australia, art had come to be considered to be a harmless occupation. In New York in 1970, Hans Haacke installed a polling booth in the seminal 1970 conceptual exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The booth protested the conservatism of Nelson Rockefeller, who was not only running again for Mayor of New York, but was also a billionaire trustee of MOMA itself. Yet by this stage, art

had lost its avant-garde qualities, its ability to stage political dissent. For while in the 1930s, Rockefeller had censored and then destroyed a Diego Riviera mural that featured a picture of the revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, by 1970 Rockefeller was no longer concerned about art's powers, and let the Haacke installation sit.

The equivalent of Rockefeller's censorship in Australian history took place in 1974, when the Honey Ant mural that sat on the walls of the school at the Papunya settlement was painted over. The destruction of this collaboration by the old men of the settlement symbolises the way that desert iconography was still regarded as politically dangerous by white Australia even as late as the 1970s. Since this moment, information has been of the utmost importance in the Aboriginal art movement. Papunya Tula Artists began to disseminate what are now known as certificates of authenticity, documenting the meaning of the paintings they sold, in order to preserve the political valence of their imagery. Kaapa's painting *Gulgardi* (1971), winner of the Caltex Art Award, became known as *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardi*. The politics of Aboriginal art became located not so much in the artworks themselves, which were often visually unparseable to white viewers, but in the information accompanying the artworks. And this information came with a moral authority, from people who had experienced the brunt of settler violence and their families.

It is through this multiple history of contemporary art, which appeared in Alice Springs, New York and Sydney at about the same time, that it is possible to think through Harding's work. For he is one of many young Aboriginal artists who have been through the art school system, who have learned the visual languages of a post-conceptual era of contemporary art, and uses these languages to point back to Aboriginal information. For Harding this information is the history of his family, and the history of Queensland. In Harding's earlier *Unnamed* (2009) this

information is more visible in the art itself. Here he recreates a breast plate or king plate that was worn by Harding's grandmother until her late teens at the Woorabinda Government Settlement. Harding's great-grandmother also wore one. These women were known by a code that was written into these plates, and on *Unnamed* the artist has beaten W38, his grandmother's code, into the metal.

Yet even here, despite its thorough Aboriginality, Harding's work is not unlike that of the very non-Aboriginal New York practices of the 1960s. The minimalists Carl Andre and Donald Judd used bricks and metal in homage to the industrial base of the American economy. These artists recognised that art should be sufficient to the silos, skyscrapers and smoke stacks all around them. Harding is also embedded in a history of materials, using hessian, metal and wire that runs through the labour and race history of settler Australia. The vintage steel wool in *Of One's Own Country* recalls the experience of scrubbing and servitude, while the hessian of *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls* is tied to children and sheep, colonial schools and shearing sheds. Yet these works also carry with them the ambivalences of minimalism, and remind us that galleries themselves are still cleaned by people who work with steel wool, people whose labour is not discontinuous with the Aboriginal labour of the 19th and 20th centuries. Just as the minimal revolution in American art aspired to the brute magnificence of American industry, so Harding's work commemorates working lives in the margins of Australian society.

¹ Interview with Dale Harding. GOMA TV. <<http://tv.qagoma.qld.gov.au/2013/05/29/dale-harding-artist-interview/>>. Accessed 30 January 2014.



•|
Dale Harding.
Unnamed, 2012.
Lead and steel wire, 26 x 35 x 3 cm.
Queensland Art Gallery Collection.
Courtesy of the artist.

|•
bright eyed little dormitory girls, 2013,
approx. 190 x 35 x 3cm.
Hessian sack, mohair wool.
Image courtesy of the artist

54

John Gerrard: Exercise.

Mathew Abbott

Exercise

The cloud at the center of exercise:

What you call body, we call arabesque.

Situate from satellite

Finite sets on separate ground,

“The dissolution,

The unbinding it prohibits.”

When we get to the chopper

To rehearse a field maneuver,

We see we are not

Wired for

Formation freefall.

At speed a human is cryptic.

Stress entrains

Scales of silica

As the pan gets

Nowhere, exactly.

Once in the light

Already in the stricture:

Two lines of figures

Dance about strategy

55

John Gerrard: Exercise.

Baden Pailthorpe

John Gerrard is very particular about the terminology used to describe his work. They are not video or films works, but rather systems that reference locations, dates and events. The movement in the images is coded and generated from a simulator engine that ‘runs’ the work. They never loop, even if there is repetition, they are *iterative*. The subjects and material in the work are described as portraits, even down to tiny plants and shrubs that never appear in detail, but are painstakingly reconstructed from reference photographs.

For *Exercise (Djibouti)*, Gerrard used a found image from a military archive that depicted US troops in a beautifully formal, almost theatrical composition in the desert of Djibouti, where the US has a major special forces and drone base. Using this photograph and satellite imagery, he travelled to Djibouti and searched for the exact location where this training exercise took place. Once there, he documented the site in immense detail to later reconstruct the entire scene in three dimensions. This is combined with accurate weather patterns, seasonal and other climactic information for the area to create the ‘event-portrait system’.

The subjects in the work are based off detailed 3D scanning and motion capture (mocap) sessions of three British Olympic athletes. These athletes were asked to run in a figure of eight until they were exhausted, a total time of approximately 4 hours. This information was then used to program the 3D models of the athletes in the final work. Rather than copying the characters, they are *instanced*, another term from 3D modelling that Gerrard insists upon.

So in a sense, the ‘real’ in the work exists as a trace only, a kind of digital haunting. Yet it is almost *realer* than the original reference in that the experience of the original event was always mediated. This portrait system is more detailed and intense than the original, whatever that is. In any case, Gerrard’s work forces a shifting in the conceptualising of the real and of the moving image.

John Gerrard, *Exercise (Djibouti)*
Screen Space, Melbourne
Curated by Baden Pailthorpe
14 March - 26 April 2014
opening 13 March, 6-8pm



•|•/•

John Gerrard
Exercise (Djibouti), 2012
Simulation. Digital still.
Image courtesy of the artist,
Modern Art Oxford, Thomas
Dane Gallery, London and
Simon Preston Gallery, New York.



60

An Interview with Juan A. Gaitán.

Robyn Stuart

The Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art is a surprisingly young Biennale, and much that's been written about it emphasises its experimental, laboratory-like character. It was established in 1996 by Klaus Biesenbach, who led the first Biennale along with Nancy Spector and Hans Ulrich Obrist. This year, the Berlin Biennale is curated by independent writer/curator Juan A. Gaitán, whose curatorial statement describes a focus on the city of Berlin itself, and on counterpoising the empirical and the authoritative approaches to history and historical becoming. Three months out from the opening, I asked Juan some questions about history and restoration.

Robyn Stuart: I wanted to start by asking a few questions about history; you've spoken about the history of Berlin as being very important in the development of the Berlin Biennale. The Biennale will draw upon the 18th and 19th centuries – histories that have been buried deep underneath the trauma of the 20th century. Why is this?

Juan Gaitán: The centre of town, or Mitte, has been thoroughly reconstructed according to the idea that Prussian architecture, that is, the architecture of the 18th and 19th centuries, marks the last moment of unity in the city. This architecture, in other words, is perceived as the common heritage of both East and West and of course you can see there is a certain obscurity in this. The latest development in this direction has been to 'reconstruct' the Stadtschloss, now renamed the Humboldtforum, but they are only reconstructing three of the four original facades of this building, the rest will be an entirely 'new' thing – I throw the word new into question because it looks like any museum interior of the past 20 years. Counterpoising this historical architecture is a timeless or *untimely* one of the present and future, a 'postmodern' architecture for lack of a better word. It is thus that, as Philipp Oswalt already pointed out at the beginning of the 2000s, the 20th century is disavowed, hidden

from the view of those who visit the city centre. Thus the biennale is less about exploring these pasts than about examining how they form part of a current cultural and political program.

While I'm on trauma, I also want to ask about the art world's fascination with re-performance and re-staging. You described it as a reaction to the collective trauma of the events of the 20th Century. Do you see this repetition as an attempt to understand the nature of the fracturing that occurred in the traumatic moment and to somehow repair it, or is it more of a self-flagellating impulse?

There is that aspect of re-enactment that indeed has something to do with reparation; there is also the one in which there is collective affirmation, as when a nation re-enacts its famous battles. I think what we are facing here, however, is more like a total disavowal, a need to remove the 20th century, perhaps with the sense that it prevents the forming of an affirmative collectivity and its thrust into the future. In the art world, to answer that part of the question, the fascination with restaging and re-enactment has also two variants: one has to do with memory, for example Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave*, memorialising the 1984 UK miner's strike; the other variant is more esoteric, and refers to events within the history of late modernism and early conceptualism in art. This variant is less interesting to me, though it has its shining moments.

An orthodox view of history is that it's written from the perspective of the victors. Walter Benjamin and his followers conceived of it his more starkly: "Fascism is, quite literally, a philosophy of history as victory." How are you thinking about the relationship between the dominant voice of history and the fractured nature of individual histories?

Hmm... I will try to formulate an answer that doesn't go on and on: I think that in the end what we have is the display of History, or a

certain history on display. At least here, in Berlin-Mitte, we have a certain history being staged, and it is like watching a giant re-write the narrative of a city by replacing the iconography of the 20th century for that of the earlier and subsequent periods. It is less the victory of a great warrior or king and more that of a capricious child who gets what he wants because no one wants to hear him cry anymore. If there is a dominant voice of history, it has already been cast into the museum-space of the city centre and, as such, it is already placed in a space of contemplation, with the implication that the tourists and visitors of the city are captive to that narrative but not necessarily the subjects of it. Insofar as we are all to a large extent subjects of the 20th century, its absence in the city centre amounts to a displacement of our subjective will and bond.

The restoration of images, monuments, buildings and so on is particularly fraught in a place like Berlin. For a while it was avoided altogether, leaving great bare spaces behind. Do ideas about restoration form part of your framework for the Biennale?

Ha! This should teach me to read before writing! I guess the previous replies already answered this question to a large extent. I will only say that already once a friend questioned my use of the word 'restoration', which I use because there is a desire for continuity that seemingly reverts to monarchical structures. Even in politics we see today that presidents and prime ministers are elected eternally or want to be elected eternally. This is not an exclusively German issue, it happens all over the world. I only take Germany as an example because it is where we are now.

In a recent interview you spoke about two dominant ways that we represent the world: through monetary value and through images. Both of these are so integral to how we understand things that there's often a great reluctance to let them fail or disappear

– hence major banks get bailed out and images/archives are painstakingly restored and maintained. What are the implications of 'saving' things from failure or obsolescence?

Your question makes me realise that I was only looking at this phenomenon superficially, from the point of view of the image – the banknote, for instance, is an image on paper, yet it has an integrity that is beyond its nature and which cannot be destroyed. Or, to put it differently, it is the only instance in which the image is not a representation of itself, so that tearing a banknote cannot be perceived as an iconoclastic event, for the value that it represents is not contained by the image or in the image's physical integrity. This also has to do with the fact that destroying a banknote only affects the pocket of the bearer. It is thus no more than an idiotic act. But you ask about restoring archives and banks: what parallelisms can we draw here? I suppose if we indeed subscribe to this idea that the world is entirely controlled by these two forms of representation, monetary and iconographic, then we are talking again about continuity, about the desire to prevent things from revealing themselves to the point where a direction of change might become visible, imaginable.

"Restoration belongs to a kind of economy of memories, which are traded and valued by competing sources." What do you think about this?

Well, if we use the word Restoration in the historical sense of the restoration of the English monarchy then we are in trouble. But of course restoration is a word in the dictionary and it can mean many other things outside of the Anglo-Saxon milieu. Without knowing where you've drawn this sentence from I would assume it means that we restore (image archives and banks) because our struggle over them and their forms of representation isn't over, or that we need them in order to continue this discussion, or that we might be willingly caught in a byzantine discourse that we refuse

to exit. But of course the sentence you cite implies that restoration is but a result, and not an impulse: the result of a group of individuals discoursing around certain things. This is not too far from Foucault's notion that discourse is a sort of public conjuring of spirits and that it is through discourse that we summon that which discourse claims to set itself against.

Does restoration imply a preference for a particular moment in history?

Yes, it seems so; restoration requires specificity, historical or otherwise.

Quite often in the restoration of buildings/ images, the object being restored may never have existed in a 'finished' state. Alternatively, perhaps it was designed with its eventual ruin in mind (e.g. Albert Speer's *Ruinenwerttheorie*). In that sense, does restoration imply a fictionalised history? Does it matter?

It is totally fictional in my opinion, it is a great fiction that, insofar as it is made in large scale, imposes itself on us as truth.

Another thread of the Biennale is labour – can you talk a bit about this theme?

I was using the term 'geography of labour' to indicate the impossibility of representing labour. The exhibition proper in the biennale is structured around two approaches to the image, one in which it is treated from a phenomenological point of view – how does the image function, how is it made, and perceived – and another point of view that is functionalist – what can the image *do*? These are two forms of approaching the issue of representation, one (the former) in which first one wants to establish a firm ground for the image to function, the other (the latter) in which one wants the image to function already. In terms of this functioning of the image, it is caught in a world of unrepresentables: labour, violence, despair, hunger, and so on; there is no

iconographic language for these that doesn't require textual explanation. Thus, I think it important to use an unrepresentable category, 'geography of labour' to indicate the limits of the image.

The first work of the Biennale – Angelidakis' *Crash Pad* – is already open. How will the space be used?

Quite pragmatically, it is a meeting room. We organise small gatherings there with different topics. The last instance was a meeting with musicians who are involved in a project that Tarek Atoui is leading with the Ethnographic instrument collection in Dahlem. But the place itself is an installation. In having all these references to the East, it is meant to remind us that not so long ago Greece was part of the East, its culture and ideology were Eastern-bound, and that it took the invention of Antiquity and a few Europeanised Greeks to come and turn it all around. The Ottoman period is one in a long period that is ignored in Greek historiography, just as the invention of Antiquity is the great myth that articulates the restoration of the Prussian buildings around Mitte.

**The 8th Berlin Biennale
29/5 - 3/8/2014
www.berlinbiennale.de**





8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art presents:
Andreas Angelidakis
Study for Crash Pad, 2013
Crash Pad, 2013
25/1-3/8/2014
Installation view
Photo: Uwe Walter
Images courtesy of the artist and
The Breeder, Athens/Monaco

66

Restoring politics, the politics of restoring.

Iván Muñiz Reed

Loosely translated from the words of Jorge Luis Borges, “The past is clay which the present shapes to its will, endlessly.” And yet we are all firmly complicit in the exact opposite relation, that the past determines what we are today. This paradox often leads us to ignore what is most valuable: the present and our potential to act on it, to effect change. It is in the now that history is written and in this process, we decide which things are good to keep or restore, while others we neglect and allow to perish. Under this rubric, there is more to restoring than safe-keeping objects from the past. Restoring is, in fact, a political act – it indulges in the same vices as the writing of history, giving us the power to build upon the meaning of an object or to change its meaning altogether, skewing and distorting to our will. Perhaps this is relevant now more than ever, as we are operating within a ‘post object’ context where the emphasis has shifted from the physical to the immaterial or conceptual.

Mexican artist Fritzia Irizar is well aware of our capacity to sculpt the present by retelling the past. In her 2014 exhibition at talcual, *Prospecting Towards a New Territory*, Irizar presented a series of objects alongside photographic and written documentation, arranged in displays reminiscent of a natural science or anthropological museum. Among these objects, for example, are five ‘archaeological’ pieces of unclear authenticity presented as both photographic prints and as objects buried within the gallery floor. Towards the centre of the room, a group of small rock-like samples are laid inside a vitrine, each accompanied with what appears to be a taxonomical tag categorising the specimen. When we look closely, the origin and antiquity of the objects become uncertain, an ambiguity manufactured by the artist to blur the boundaries between science, history and fiction. The rocks reveal themselves as mere plaster representations of a single meteorite held in the Science Centre of Sinaloa, recreated by a group of school students from their memory of the comet, nothing but subjective accounts of the meteorite’s objective truth. The artist creates

a tension between historical truth and fiction, exposing the malleability of the past and the porosity of the foundations of modern and scientific discourses which are often thought of as impermeable. For Irizar, objects are more than concrete evidence of the past, they are also vessels in which we pour the memories and meaning that constitute our ‘agreed’ truths.

The powerful relationship between objects and the past is also beautifully articulated by Tercerunquinto – a collective from Mexico composed of Julio Castro, Gabriel Cázares and Rolando Flores – through their obsession with walls. Their work investigates the socio-political dimensions of the act of construction (in a spatial/architectural sense): walls acting as the most basic divisive unit, creating not only physical, but ideological boundaries within the built world. The collective have raised, knocked down, shot at, hid behind and restored walls, testing the limits between private and public space and the impact that these systems have on individuals. In the work *Restoration of a Mural Painting* (2010), the collective restored a faded wall painting on the façade of a small house in San Andrés Cacaloapan, a rural town in the state of Puebla. The painting was a remnant from a political campaign from the year 2000, urging people to vote for the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) presidential candidate, Francisco Labastida. This type of campaign advertisement on walls, or ‘political graffiti’,¹ can be seen all over Mexico, especially in rural areas. The signs are fairly inexpensive to produce (often parties will offer a small amount of cash to paint directly onto people’s homes) and given the low levels of literacy in those areas, the bold graphics and colourful signs are effective in creating familiarity with party branding. The mural they chose had specific meaning; it marked a crucial moment in Mexican history when the PRI was defeated after having been in power for over 71 years. The PRI was perceived by Mexicans as a deeply corrupt party which had unjustly held on to power, and in multiple past elections they were known to bribe large swathes of voters from

low socio-economic backgrounds with bags of food and cash. Hence this election marked what appeared to be an important step towards a true democracy.

It’s neither the wall graffiti nor its subject matter that is at the core of the work, but rather the act of restoring itself and its symbolic potential. It is as if the careful and rigorous re-tracing of lines and colour could evoke that moment of unity, triumph and hope. The process is the work; it becomes the work as they construct a social memory, shifting the emphasis from past to present. In addition, their decision to restore a vernacular object could also be seen as resistance towards the grandiloquence inherent in the modern principles of Mexican muralism.² Far from grandiose, the collective’s restorative actions were quiet and solemn, and could easily go unnoticed by passers-by.

Earlier, in 2008, the collective made another work that shared a similar sense of understated poignancy. The piece was commissioned to commemorate of the 40th anniversary of the Tlateloco Massacre - the killing of student and civilian protesters as well as bystanders by the military that took place on October 2, 1968. An accurate death toll was never revealed by the state; the military swiftly washed the blood off the streets and gave false reports to the media, grossly underestimating the amount of victims to avoid bad publicity in the lead up to the Olympic games of ‘68. To commemorate this trauma in Mexican History, Tercerunquinto worked together with a team of restorers to remove a large marble coat of arms embedded in the architecture of a state building on the site of the Massacre, “executing a sensitive and careful act of ephemeral vandalism.”³ For one day only, October 2nd, the building was stripped of its heroic emblem, leaving the empty trace of a circle, like a scar on the building’s façade. The following day the patriotic marble pieces were carefully reassembled, covering the scar, as if nothing had ever happened.

There’s a recent work by Teresa Margolles in which the complexities of restoring also

became apparent, but, in this instance, were prompted partly by accident. Margolles’s piece was shattered in transit from Mexico to the National Museum Cardiff in the UK, and, horrified by the incident, the museum assigned a team of talented restorers to painstakingly reconstruct each of the shattered tiles, slowly gluing shard by shard together as if it was an ancient object of incredible value. As suggested by its title, *32 años Levantamiento y traslado donde cayo el cuerpo asesinado del artista Luis Miguel Suro* is a section of the tiled floor where the murdered body of the artist Luis Miguel Suro fell, extracted and transported into a gallery. As a device to create awareness for the reality of violence and social injustice in Mexico, Teresa’s voice comes through loud and clear. That aside, there are other forces operating within the work. Speaking to a colleague about the freight incident, Margolles was surprised and even touched to see the talented restorers treat the work so carefully:

“and so the two restorers, with tweezers and a brush, are doing a magnificent job in silence. It makes you want to cry. The respect for the work and the memory.”⁴

What makes the piece a worthy object of rigorous restoration is not the value of the tiles themselves but what they signify: the loss of a real human life by the hand of another. Luis Miguel Suro was a close friend of Margolles, so her dismantling of the tainted floor and restoring it for an audience is almost a public act of healing. It’s no surprise that Margolles was awarded the prestigious Artes Mundi award, which is given to artists that engage with the human condition and social reality.

Despite the differences in approach and context, the artists mentioned above share a desire to restore or rearticulate past experience, questioning its weight, perhaps in the hope that with every brush-stroke and every tile repaired, we can make sense of our uneasy condition of existing only in the present, endlessly.

1 Taiyana Pimentel on Tercerunquinto, 2010

2 Taiyana Pimentel on Tercerunquinto, 2010

3 Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Towards a New Anarchitecture*, Ediciones Corunda, Mexico City, 2008

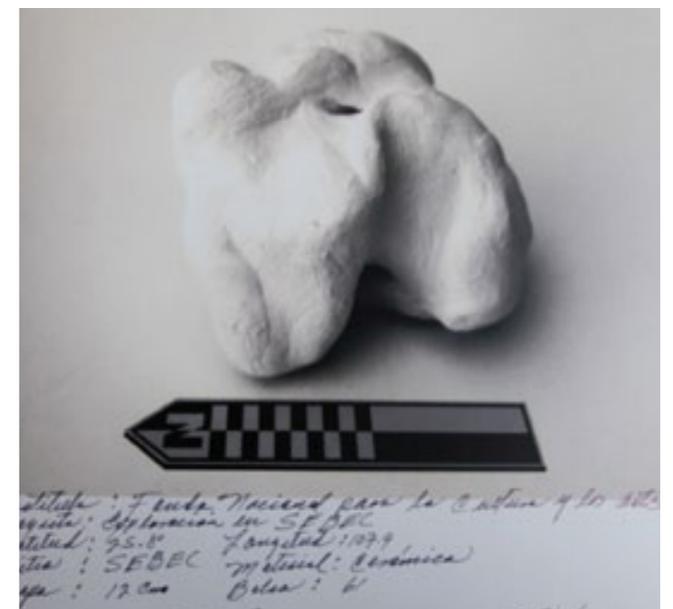
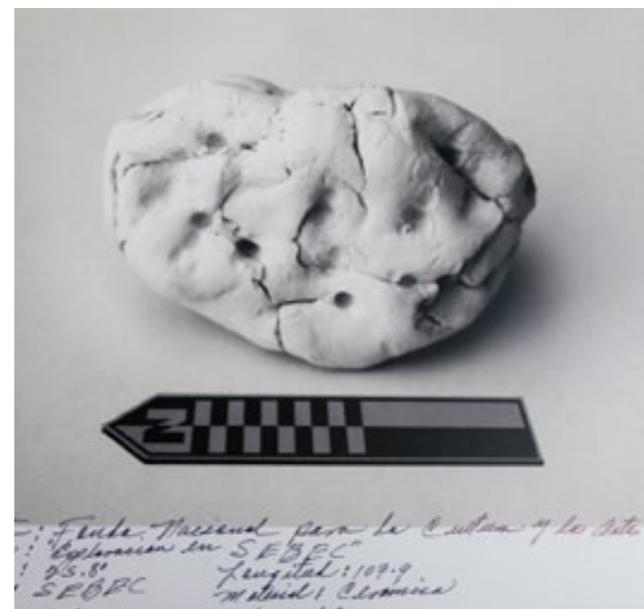
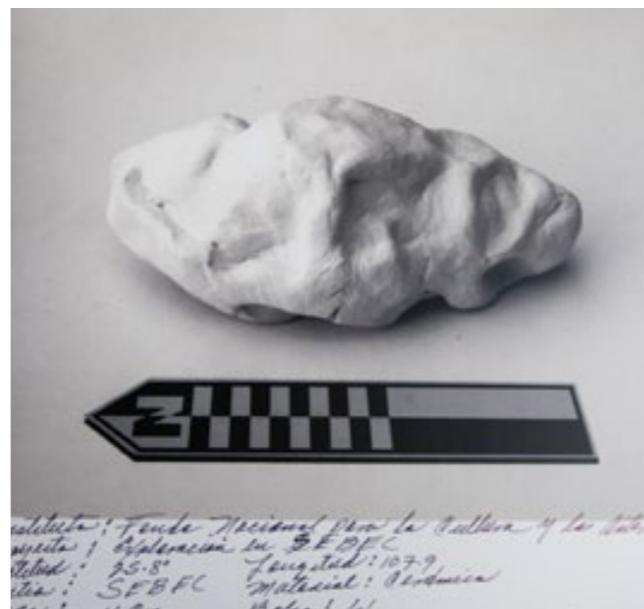
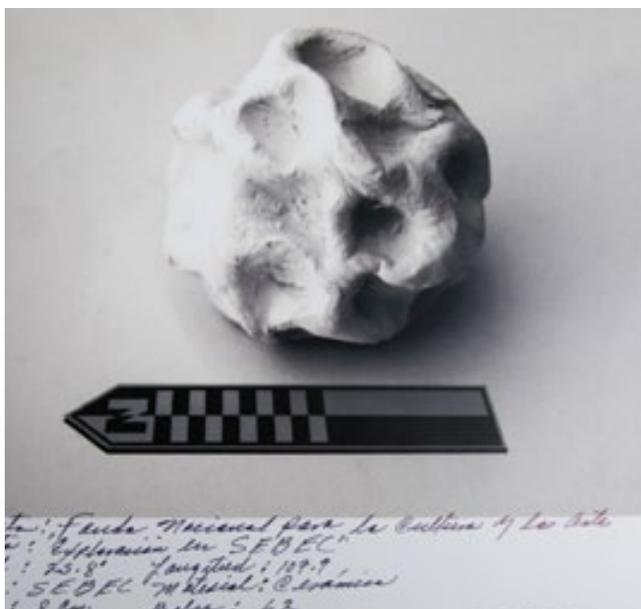
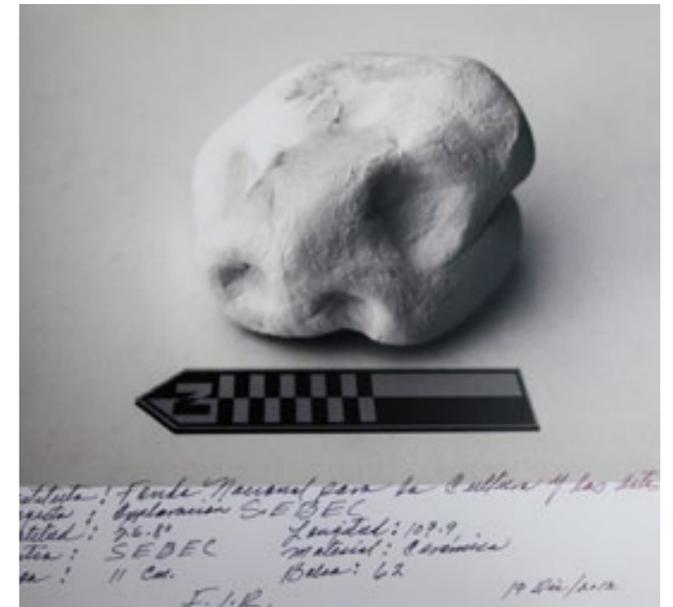
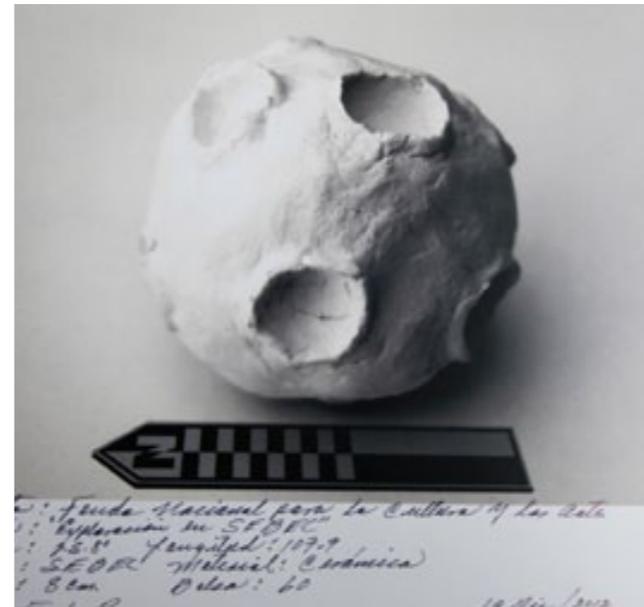
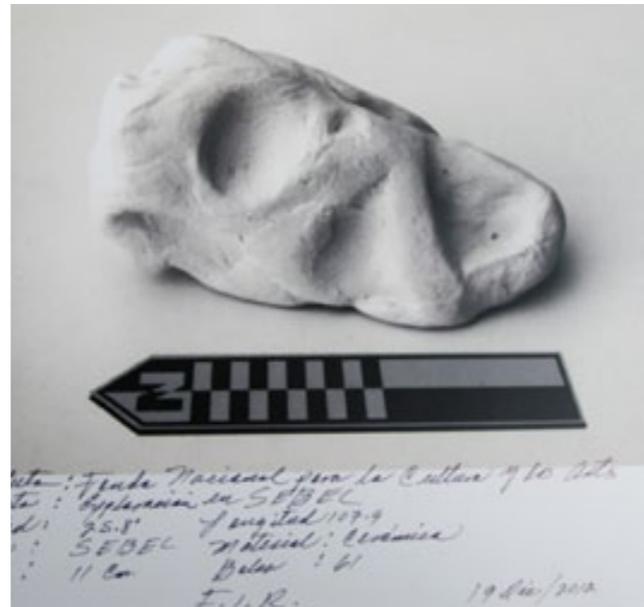
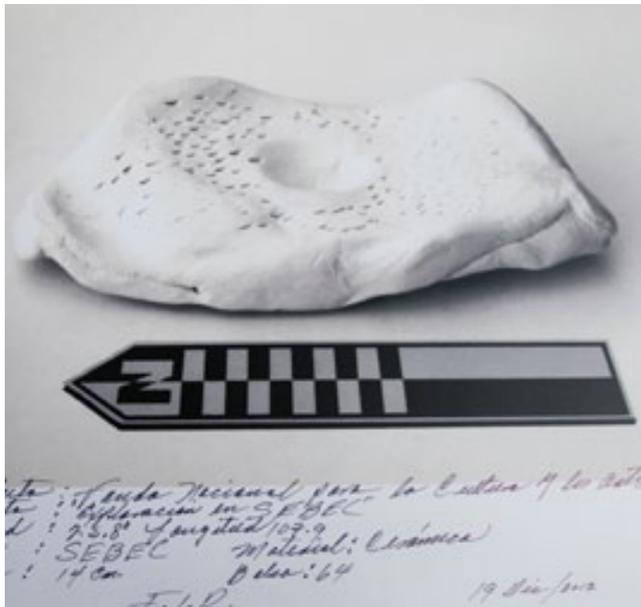
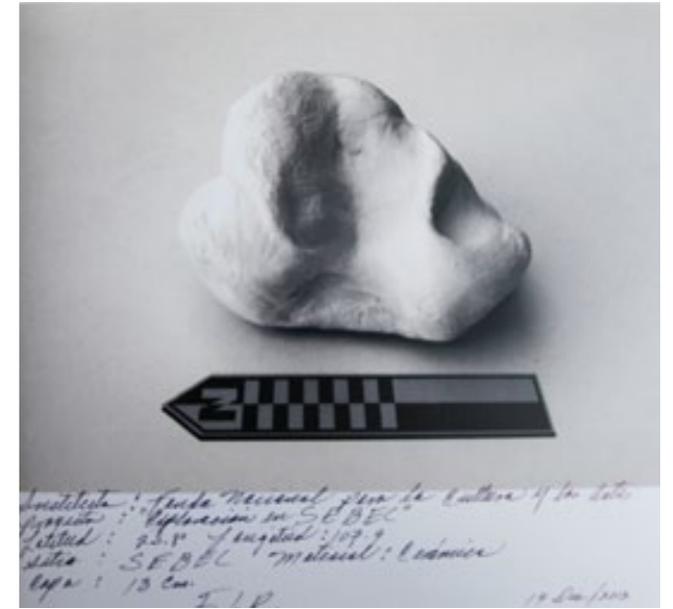
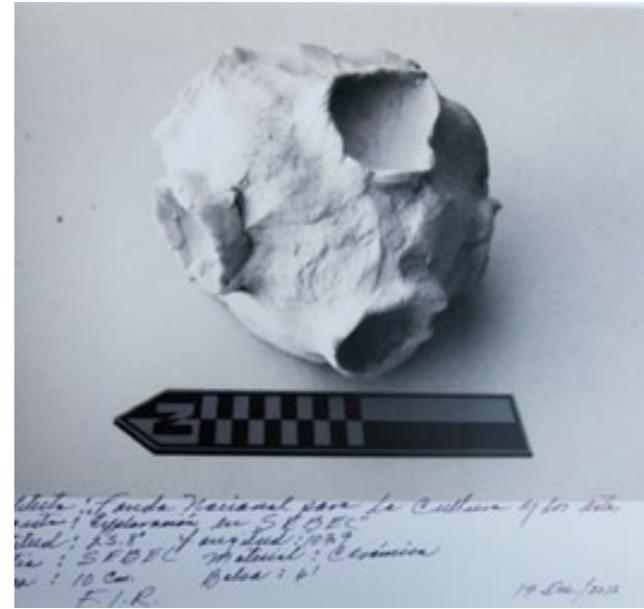
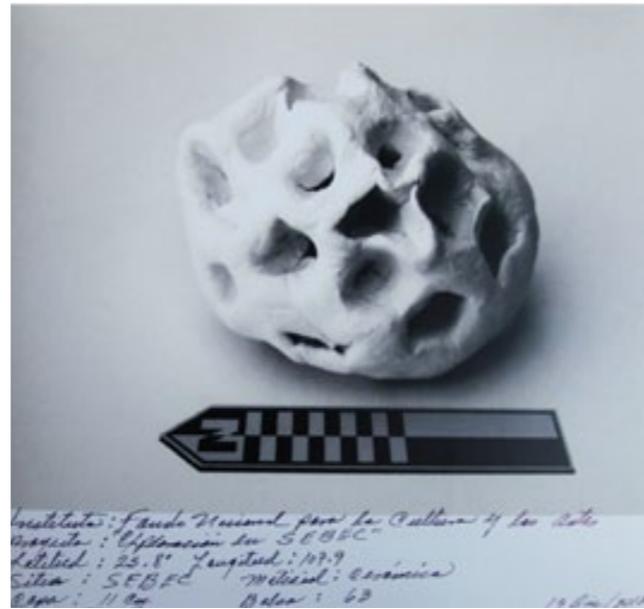
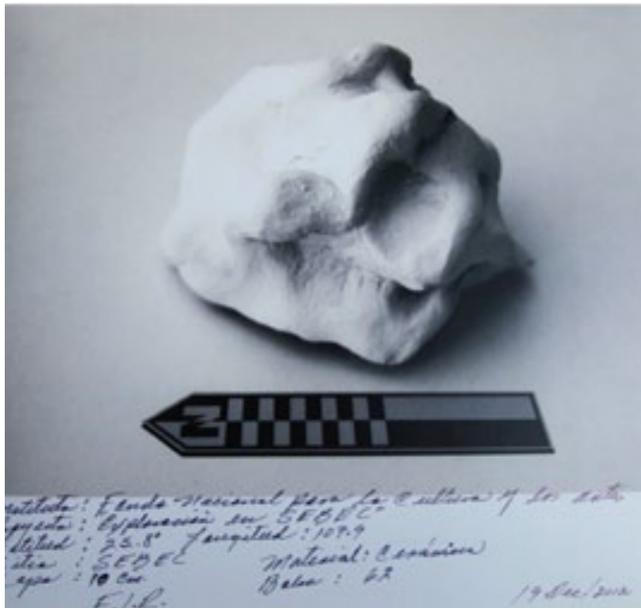
4 Teresa Margolles in conversation with Lorena Peña Brito, ‘Periferico’, *Das Superpaper*, Issue 25, 2012, pg 28

•/
Tercerunquinto
Restauración de una pintura mural/ Restoration of a mural painting, 2010
Documentation of the process
Image courtesy of the artists

/•
Tercerunquinto
Desmantelamiento y reinstalación del Escudo Nacional /Dismantling and relocation of the National Emblem, 2008
Documentation of the process
Image courtesy of the artists

•//•
Fritzia Irizar
Untitled (Prospection in SEBEC), 2012
16 photographs and 16 plaster sculptures in vitrine
Each photograph 12.5 x 25.3 cm
Image courtesy the artist and talcual gallery, Mexico City





Curating the curative: talismanic tendencies in contemporary art.

Lisa Slade

Touching wood to prevent an unfortunate outcome, although increasingly difficult in this age of synthetic wonders, surely remains one of the most commonly performed gestures of self-restoration. Grounded in the object and in the everyday, such apotropaic, or 'bad luck averting' acts are performed by eye, body and mind. These acts of exchange, of communication between the world and the individual, remind us of the potency of our pagan origins. Artists have long been interested in magical acts of restoration – one need only conjure Joseph Beuys' reparative *I like America and America likes me* where reconciliation with a coyote signified a healing process for artist, animal and by metaphorical extension, nation.

A talismanic tendency runs through *Dark Heart*, the 13th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. Uncovered in the work of Caroline Rothwell, Fiona Hall, Julia Robinson, Del Kathryn Barton and Julia deVille, the talismanic, it seems, has a particular appeal for women artists, at least in this exhibitionary context. For Sydney-based Caroline Rothwell art has the power to be curative. In a series of large PVC sculptural paintings made entirely through acts of cutting, where no material is removed but all retained to create sculptural weight and form, Rothwell continues her meditation on climate change. In their black-and-white starkness and narrative power works such as *Cascade* (2013) bear an uncanny resemblance to medieval woodcuts, the type created by artisans to warn the masses against the abuses of nature. Also exhibited in her installation *Climatic* are a series of cast metal and PVC sculptures. These climate machines appear to perform certain restorative tasks on the environment, and take their cue from geoengineering technologies such as cloud-seeding machines. Rothwell's alchemy continues at the Santos Museum of Economic Botany in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens from 11 April where small botanical style drawings

made from car exhaust perform a type of homeopathic magic.

Adelaide-based Fiona Hall continues her collusion with the world of found objects in her installation *Out of my tree*. Reprising and extending her penchant for cuckoo clocks (seen in the 2013 survey exhibition *Big Game Hunting* at Heide Museum of Modern Art) Hall's cuckoos are harbingers of environmental doom. As an adjunct to its Bavarian origin, an Antipodean reading of the cuckoo clock leads us to the parasitic breeding habits of the migratory channel billed cuckoo, which forces Australian native birds to throw their babies from their nest and foster the cuckoo's own young. Overlaid onto the clocks and other objects is the skull. This recurring motif is an emblem of our fleeting existence, a *memento mori*, but the skull also functions apotropaically as a symbol of our resistance to death. This imagery from *Out of my tree* will form part of her work for the 2015 Venice Biennale.

Also based in Adelaide, Julia Robinson has been commissioned to create an interactive space, one where the *beholder* (as opposed to an ocularcentric *viewer*) is invited to participate in the invention of amulets. Ladders, brooms, bread and salt are among the apotropaic elements that Robinson employs in her sculptural practice, which is hinged on a type of sympathetic magic where seemingly inert objects can act upon each other and their users. These objects are recast through the aegis of Robinson's craft as powerful agents, embodying our superstitions and anxieties, as well as our abiding animism. Robinson's practice is predicated on exchange and on touch – this contemporary art installation becomes a ritual space for artist and beholder, bound by the unassailable and shared drive for self-preservation.

In Del Kathryn Barton's *the heart land*, an inverted central female figure gives birth to, and at the same time springs forth from, a tree. Intuitively reclaiming the motif of the *femme arbre*, who enchanted the Surrealists, Barton

also introduces and repeats the dark heart of the exhibition's title. Appearing in the centre of the painting and in the exposed chest of an onlooking marsupial, the heart appears as both charm and oracle. Barton's arboreal goddess and her human and animal witnesses signify the prescience of nature and urge us to do the same. Across more than nine metres, every part of the picture plane is alive, animated by tendrils, particles, feathers and webs of colour.

With a talent for the 'dark art' of taxidermy, Melbourne-based Julia deVille manipulates the beholder's emotions, anxieties and expectations. In her newly commissioned work *PHANTASMAGORIA*, kittens and other picture book pets are presented in the black lace styling of the Victorian period, an age enchanted with death and the associated rituals to keep death at bay. Sourced ethically by the vegan, nature-loving artist, her taxidermy sculptures are presented as children's toys in a space transformed to resemble a child's bedroom. DeVille recalls a childhood surrounded by imaginary animals and for her the taxidermy children's toys possess amuletic power, offering comfort and protection.

While an interest in the talismanic and the curative is not confined to the contemporary, an increased engagement with these themes and forces can be witnessed in the 2013 Venice Biennale *The Encyclopedic Palace*, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, in Richard Grayson's constellation of exhibitions for the 2014 Adelaide Festival titled *Worlds in Collision* and in the associated keynote by American author and educator Erik Davis on object-oriented animism. Finally, through Director and Curator Nick Mitzevich's curatorial proposition *Dark Heart*, the 2014 Adelaide Biennial also proffers the talismanic.

The 13th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art
1 March – 11 May 2014
Art Gallery of South Australia
Curated by Nick Mitzevich



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Fiona Hall
Out of my tree, 2013 – detail
Mixed media installation
dimensions variable
© Fiona Hall, courtesy the
artist and Roslyn Oxley9
Gallery, Sydney
Photo: Clayton Glen



|•
Julia Robinson
Legs eleven, 2010
Adelaide, flywire, fibreglass,
fabric, fixings, thread, timber,
vinyl, plaster, chair, belt
90 x 100 x 60cm
South Australian Government Grant 2011,
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
© Julia Robinson, courtesy the artist
and Anna Pappas Gallery

•|
Julia Robinson
Untitled, 2013
Trousers, timber, thread
130 x 70 x 15 cm
© Julia Robinson, courtesy the artist
and Anna Pappas Gallery and is an
Associate Artist of Greenaway Art Gallery
Photo: James Field



76

The Thief's Diary.

Moyra Davey
in conversation with
Stella Rosa McDonald

Moyra Davey's latest essay 'Burn The Diaries' begins with nothing. Blankness. It's an appropriate start for a text that explores the shared logic between art and life. To say Davey's métier is the how and the why of reading and writing, is not to diminish the complexity with which she does it. Like the reader of a horoscope Davey relishes the chance assembly between her own life and the life of the book.

Through parsing the writer Jean Genet, 'Burn The Diaries' forms a fragmentary, diaristic self-portrait. Davey plays with the equivalence between things: living and writing, photographs and diaries, time and debt. At the same time as her work is informed by her experience cryptically it is not about it. Chris Kraus once wrote that for Davey, "Life, isn't personal!"

***Burn The Diaries* appears in an artist's book of the same name, alongside Davey's photographs and an essay by the writer and translator Alison Strayer. With the video *My Saints* (2014), a sort of visual iteration of her essay, and 150 of her *mailers* (photographs she folds, posts and then exhibits), *Burn The Diaries* will be exhibited at MUMoK, Vienna, in February of this year.**

Stella Rosa McDonald: Your works often have a host, a writer whose work you use to get you going: Walter Benjamin in the video *My Necropolis* (2009), and now Jean Genet in *My Saints* and "Burn The Diaries".

Moyra Davey: Your image of the 'hosts', the writers like Benjamin and Genet, is very accurate. In other pieces, like "Notes On Photography and Accident", the hosts are Sontag, Benjamin, Barthes and Malcolm. In the video *50 Minutes* the hosts are Vivian Gornick, Natalia Ginzburg and a few other people, Baudrillard and Freud. I use my reading as a springboard for making video and writing and for photographs.

My Saints started out with an image of light, of almost blinding white sunlight, and

that's why I picked up on the Genet passage from *Prisoner of Love*, about the blankness of the page and his idea that the whiteness of the page was more truthful than the characters on it. I started to think about the page when it gets totally blown out on the elevated subway in New York, and I made that connection.

I was initially going to narrate the text for this video, like I did in *Les goddesses* (2011) and *50 Minutes* (2006), but I realised the moment I started that that was impossible. I had to take a break from that style and way of working. That passage from *Thief's Journal* in which Genet describes watching a man he has stolen money from frantically search for it] was kind of like a puzzle to me, gnawing at me, somehow, unconsciously. I gathered other people, friends and family and got them to do the talking because I needed to take myself out of the picture. When I was videotaping them I wasn't wearing headphones so I was concentrating so much on the image that I wasn't hearing what they were saying. And some of them are saying really complex things. When I was editing it, I realised how much I love to watch people think and talk, and it was only in the editing process that I really got to listen and hear what they were saying. It was almost like the latent image in old school photography; you'd take a picture and you'd have to wait a certain amount of time to develop the film.

In *Forty-One False Starts* Janet Malcolm, writing about the painter David Salle, says:

To the writer, the painter is a fortunate alter ego, an embodiment of the sensuality and exteriority that he has abjured to pursue his invisible, odorless calling. The writer comes to the places where traces of making can actually be seen and smelled and touched expecting to be inspired and enabled, possibly even cured.²

I was thinking about your relationship with the writers you use in your work. I

thought of it as a parasitic relationship, but that's incorrect, you're not a parasite.

I am a parasite.

For me the Malcolm quote hints at their compatibility, at the commensalism between the two forms.

It's a stark contrast when you compare the writer to the painter. I think that writing and photography for me, at the moment, flow. I don't feel any blockage, but that hasn't always been the case. It's a big cliché, 'the tortured writer'. I think writers will never stop thinking and writing about it. Maybe in some way it can even become this starter motor for writing. It's a paradox - joy when writing is going well and despair when it's not. It reminds me of something Chris Kraus said, "It is the most perfect thinking and writing, responding to somebody's art."

Video is another story. There's something about it now that's always very anxiety making; I'm not very techy, I just started picking up video cameras and shooting. At least when it was tape you had something, now everything is so immaterial. So I have this pretty big anxiety about video and it's made me think twice about the joy of it.

I think a lot about writing, but I always feel like a fraud because I'm not a writer who has a regular daily practice. But I read. I love to read and I always start from notes. I have tonnes of notebooks. I love to think about the Marguerite Duras model of writing; you sit down before the blank page and you have no ideas, no pre-conceived notions of what it's going to be. Maybe it's even a modernist notion. In her little book *Writing* she says, "To be without a subject for a book, without any idea of a book, is to find yourself in front of a book. An immense void, an eventual book. In front of writing, live and naked ... I really want to try that one of these days."

In Genet's *The Thief's Journal*, morality is inverted: betrayal becomes devotion for example.

In *My Saints* your subjects discuss Genet's text, often in relation to their own integrity.

When I first showed Gregg [a subject in the video] *My Saints*, the first thing he said was, "You betrayed us." I didn't know what he was talking about. "But it's okay," he said, "because it's in the spirit of Genet." Gregg's reaction was very visceral. But I'm not a very analytical person; I figure things out after the fact.

You talk about cannibalizing experience in "Burn The Diaries", and you worry about your motives for writing about Susan, your friend who has died. Your essay symbolically connects her life to your excess of personal diaries, and her death to their usefulness. On the question of what to do with your diaries you write: "I think of burning, but I prefer the image of burial and water, as either of these seems slightly less absolute in the sense that the book might survive, albeit in an altered form..."

On some level you're always using people. Janet Malcolm has written a lot about that. She has this great line that for the subject of the interview it's a sort of narcissist's holiday because they get to open up, but then they're betrayed when they see themselves in print. And maybe that's going to happen to me with you! But it's a part of the contract. I just heard Joni Mitchell on the radio saying that being interviewed guarantees misunderstanding. I picked the parts that were useful. There's a problem in thinking that maybe I've cannibalised each of these people a little bit.

I felt uneasiness the whole time I was writing "Burn The Diaries". But I thought it was interesting to think about in relation to Genet's *Funeral Rites*, an incredible book where he talks about the business, and impossibility, of writing about the dead but for him, the absolute necessity to do it. He looks at it really squarely; he's not someone who would ever admit to any feelings of guilt in that regard.

How hard is it to decide the value of experience in its transmission from life to art? I always think of Clive James saying that at his own mother's funeral he found himself thinking, "I could use this".

That's the big question behind the whole genre of "auto-fiction" which I got to know through Alison and a group of writers in Quebec who write about their lives but call it fiction. It comes up as an ethical question; you're using people, their pain and struggles, the minutiae of their lives. It's a weird paradox where you get to this point where, like Pradeep says [in *My Saints*], everything becomes fodder for your work.

In relation to the confluence of life and death you write about in 'Burn The Diaries', I like how Alison dryly notes in her essay that the paper mill in Ottawa, where you both grew up, also produced matches³.

I didn't even get that until you pointed that out. That's how subtle and dry Alison can be. Alison is an incredible interpreter. Like in *My Saints*, the way she talks about her misreading of the Genet passage and spins off from the idea of the character looking for his pack, to looking at his pack (his genitalia). She's extremely analytical; she can take any piece of writing and find all the unconscious elements of the text.

You are a prodigious quoter. George Baker likened you to Duchamp:

Here is an artist who seems to emulate Marcel Duchamp, with his laziness and his dust... one whose artistic process seems an extended languishing – a flânerie of books and articles and films – an almost passive consumption of other products, in the hope that they might spur an image...⁴

I am a prodigious quoter. I guess I feel a bit guilty about that because there is something parasitic about it. But it's the only

way I can get going, by starting with somebody else's words. But maybe that just comes from loving reading. Reading has always functioned as a springboard for me. I am lazy but I'm also industrious.

Cutting books in half and reading them out of order is a refrain throughout "Burn The Diaries" and *My Saints*. Is this cutting a form of editing as a reader?

I do it to read on the subway, to just throw something that doesn't weigh a tonne into my bag. That's where I do my most focused reading; there seem to be fewer distractions. Reading the last five chapters in reverse is a bit like editing. It doesn't bother me that someone would watch my video that way, or read something I wrote that way. I guess that would horrify certain artists and writers. The way I work is so much in fragments that maybe it lends itself more to someone picking up a piece or two and not reading it sequentially from beginning to end.

**Moyra Davey
Burn The Diaries
21.02. -25.05.2014
MUMoK (Museum of Modern Art) Vienna**

- 1 Kraus, Chris. "Description Over Plot." *Where Art Belongs, Semiotext(e)*, 2010, 52
- 2 Malcolm, Janet, 'Forty-One False Starts', *Forty-One False Starts: Essays on Artists and Writers*, Text Publishing, 2013, 17
- 3 Strayer, Alison, 'Dialogue in a Spare White Room', *Burn The Diaries*, , Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna; The Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania and Dancing Foxes Press, Brooklyn, New York.
- 4 Baker, George, 'Some Things Moyra Taught Me', *Frieze*, Issue 130, April 2010



•|•
Stella Rosa McDonald.
Untitled (The Studio), 2013.
Pigment Inkjet print on
Archival Galerie pearl paper.
Courtesy of the artist.

•|•
Moyra Davey,
Detail from *Burn the Diaries*, 2014.
All images courtesy of the artist
and Murray Guy, NY.

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