

Let's Have a WRITING ABOUT ART Problem!

Dianne Peacock *A Dreaded Sunny Day* and Charlotte Hallows *On Mysticism and the Death of Art*, West Space, Melbourne February 2005.

Let's Have a Problem was the title of Cobra Killer's opening song at their show at Revolver, Melbourne, December 2004.

Charlotte Hallows: Yes Cobra Killer prompted me to return to problems: modernism, art education and psychology – a mindset that there is a problem that must be fixed – to be human is to have a problem. I'm also reminded of Kathy Temin's early Problems and Robyn McKenzie's approach to these problems as a return to the infantile body, repressed by formalist purity and autonomy-kitsch and mess¹. Cobra Killer are quite infantile but also brutal. When we saw them at Revolver it was like participating in a ritual while engaging in wild discourse about cultural resistance and feminine transgression as a practice. You raised issues of a kind of neediness in artists in relation to writing and critical recognition. And we discussed this idea of "stuff" – art matter and emotional matter.

And another problem which has interested your research and writing concerns "animals in art". I have started to also consider the problem posed when animals make art in relation to how humans perceive them – monkeys, elephants etc.

And finally another problem we have recently raised: the fate of modern Afghan architecture.

So returning to writing – you are prompted by ambivalence toward writing, by the problem of the artist's statement and on writing and architecture as a critical frame for experiencing architecture. Reading is also a productive site and practice – heterogeneous, imaginary and expressive.

Dianne Peacock: I thought Cobra Killer wanted to make a problem of their relationship to us, the audience, in their wild business. What vixens!

I am learning about artists' written statements in the gallery by noticing how everyone else does them when they have an exhibition. Some strike me as narcissistic, others as an essential part of the work.

You say all these artists recently hit on you to write about their shows and that you have had to reject the implication that as a committee member of an artist-run space, you would write about artists showing there, including committee members. Did committee members ask you to write about their work? I thought reviewers were meant to independently select their subjects. Is there a difference between "writing about" and reviewing? It's as if we're all friends now, so it's ok. You noticed that writing about art is considered hot now. Is it hotter to write about art or about the artist? Is enthusiasm greater for being written about

than for reading what is written?

I counted 41 animals out of a total of about 420 works in the art at West Space's 2004 fundraiser show, that's about 10% animals, but I think people are gaining ground as subjects. Last weekend I saw some good portrait stencils of local gangsters Gatto and Williams.

I don't know about modern Afghan architecture, just that a friend of mine employed an Afghan refugee architect last year.

Hey Dianne.

Former committee members and partners of committee members asked me straight out to review their work. It seemed like a really unequal relationship with no consideration for anything creative, intellectual or ethical – just free publicity. At the moment the space is committed to writing about art but only for the promotion of its brand name.

Yes, I think writing about art is hot, which is interesting, when once artists used to hate critics and when artists used to hate writing and just wanted to make art. I have had artists tell me that they would never read writing about their art.

I supposed you have touched on notions of how we think of community and network.

I've recently been thinking about the pet dwarfs in Baroque palaces.

Dwarfs like in Tiepolo's Banquet of Cleopatra?

I was thinking of community and networking and the way it operates in the Melbourne art I encounter and in Melbourne architecture. What do you hope to find in the artist / critic exchange?

Yes, dwarfs who are present, visible but not equal participants in the spectacle of the court-performers. I think it also raises questions about friendship and hope? I have often seen the relationship between an artist and a writer as potentially cathartic and therapeutic for both parties – that they are able to speak and listen to each other-and voice their hopes. This is often a temporary exchange – not an ongoing relationship – a temporary community.

Is this about dwarfs writing? Artists now need to write for each other.

There are dwarfs in Ingmar Bergman's film "The Silence" – very grotesque and carnivalesque. They reminded me of Velasquez.

Hi Charlotte.

I want to talk about your installation and its artist's statement. Here goes:



Dianne Peacock *A Dreaded Sunny Day* (2005) West Space, Melbourne.
Photograph by David Marks.

I was intrigued by the combination of works in *On Mysticism and the Death Art* but couldn't understand why Trčka's Egon Schiele portraits, woolly pom-poms and images from punk record covers were brought together. I didn't know what questions to ask other than "why is that there?" The colours and subjects were striking. Some painted elements seemed unresolved. Large black tassels framed the two sets of canvases on a pair of dark purple walls, putting them in a place, into a decor together. I didn't get it until I read,

"The adolescent longingly invents spaces of compulsive possession: ungainly aspirations for art, fashion, style, travel, intoxication and love. This installation intuitively explores and produces associations with a number of interiors and histories..."

And it really did. Those associations flew thick and fast. The artist's statement provided about a dozen, and from there they proliferated.

You were reluctant to put an artist's statement near your work because you didn't want to sound like a wanker. I was pretty surprised. (Some artist's statements are pretty bad, especially those making claims about how the viewer will be affected by the work. I am tired of reading that I will feel confronted.)

I went to architecture school (Deakin) when the word wanker was thrown at anyone who spoke about their work for more than five minutes. Some Melbourne architects are known for heavily referential work. Their architecture and its exegeses attract severe criticism from architects who like to appeal to truth and purity. John Macarthur had to remind us that the public are happy for complex public architecture to require a guided reading². Many people are only too happy to strap on the headphones and be guided through the references and complexities of a blockbuster show at the National Gallery or an ancient building overseas. He went on to say of the Aussie Baroque National Museum of Australia by Ashton Raggart McDougall, "If anyone

is being mocked by the architectural references it is architects who think that the meaning of buildings can be self-evident and exist without interpretation."³ It seems obvious really, that a bit of writing shouldn't hurt, but I was glad he brought it up. It is too easy to be called a wanker here if interpretation of your work requires a bit of reading.

The statement for *On Mysticism and the Death of Art* was full of references. On reading, the works suddenly became a part of this wider (and specific) world that you reference, beginning with the domestic interior and ending in the slaughter of animals. Then there is the use of interiors to suggest associations between art and art making.

The installation occupied the floor but only two of four walls, creating a scene that could be regarded in a single view, i.e., it wasn't a roomful. The statement was on one of the other walls. The two paintings of Cossi Fanni Tutti and the swastika are striking: red figures, green background, and black swastika. The paintings are on a beautifully dark purple wall and are hung with black tassels. One is much neater than the other; the second swastika is less geometrically pure and has paint dribbles. It seems that one is a swastika as symbol and the other could be a version of it redrawn by someone on a wall or on his or her school bag, without seeking to get it right like a Nazi would. Swastikas as punk provocations by Vivienne Westwood and others were rather rough versions too. Kids used to draw them on the desks at school if they wanted to be really naughty. This was in the late 1970's.

Trčka's portraits of Egon Schiele show this guy who could be a bit stoned. You say he could be many things, including a punk. You have painted what



Charlotte Hallows *On Mysticism and the Death of Art* (2005) West Space, Melbourne. Photograph by Irene Hanenbergh.

might be a decorative motif over his mouth, so he is mute. In our associative discussions it turned into a decorative moustache. That idea, as opposed to the work, recalls an adolescent practice of drawing moustaches on pictures of girls. On the topic of moustaches, I imagined a link between the emerging fashion of young men's moustaches and all those pale animals appearing in art and graphics over the last few years. I'm particularly thinking of those animals drawn with continuous lines, floating across paint. This association might be due to the way you can see the skin behind the thin hair of the moustache, and how those paintings are comprised of lines that trace out a little being over a patchy background.

Despite my many references to adolescence, I don't mean that the work is adolescent. Its use of the applied interior (an idea which has this adolescent hold) taps into a powerful way to gather the work together and proliferate associations and readings.

Macarthur regarding readings of the geometry and architectural historical references of the NMA:

The sense that these alternative readings provoke is, as in Baroque architecture, that culture is the act of proliferating meaning in the face of disorder. If one begins, as the Baroque did, with the fact that just about anything can come close to meaning something and that the most carefully wrought cultural artifacts fail to reach true significance, then the consequence is clear. One must either admit to the meaninglessness of existence or pile up stuff deliriously, without fear of contradiction or repetition, in the hope of the miracle of meaning.⁴

My artist's statement was pretty pragmatic. Its main job was to explain something about the medium because I figured that, with the exception of architects, few would know what dye-line printing was. I had this urge to be helpful. I also wanted to talk about shadow

diagrams. Then I scored a little review in *The Age*, where Penny Webb said that *A Dreaded Sunny Day* was a text dependant installation. Her view contrasted nicely with that of my architect mates who were overcome by the smell of dye-line and became nostalgic for their work experience days. Here smell overtook the visual; forget about the written. The other aspect to producing the statement was that the same piece of paper could accommodate an acknowledgement that I received an art grant from the City of Melbourne. This was preferable to having a speaker at the opening or a banner in the gallery. Even though it was printed and folded and there were copies to take away, it was a statement and not a catalogue. I have noticed you are meant to get a close friend or lover to write a little essay if you want a catalogue!

So, what is your view on the role of the artist's statement in the gallery?

I thought your work expressed dualistic impulses: modernist autonomy and self-sufficiency and also a mechanistic, carnivorous violence – dystopic but also feminine. There were memories and stains in your work associated with wall paper and domesticity – not the magazine version.

The obvious criticism of the artist's statement is whether it manages to produce what it says is happening. De Certeau comments on the writing of history:

"The bewitching voices of narration transform, reorient, and regulate the space of social relations. They exercise an immense power, but a power that eludes control because it presents itself as the only representation of what is happening or of what has happened in the past... through the subjects it selects, through the problematics that it privileges... it too arms and mobilizes a clientele of the faithful."⁵

Another aspect of the "Writing about art" problem relates to the writing of art history which at present appears archaic and redundant as an institutional discourse – a repressed heterology.

Last night I was so tired I slept straight through a Neil Young film, Greendale.

Thank you.

Wow! Thank you.

Charlotte Hallows is an artist and writer. Dianne Peacock is an architect and artist. Both are based in Melbourne.

Notes

1. Robyn McKenzie, 'Kathy Temin – Infantile Terrible, Object Relations & the Problem Child', *Art & Text*, No. 45, Sydney, May 1993
2. John Macarthur, Australian Baroque: Geometry and Meaning in the National Museum of Australia in *Architecture Australia* March/April 2001, pp. 48-61.
3. *Ibid.*, p.56.
4. *Ibid.*
5. De Certeau, Michel, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* trans. Massumi (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986) p. 207