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the lived body

the intervention of serendipity

This chapter explores the impact of the lived body on arts-practice-led research. My arts-practice attempts to articulate the female body, the lived body that is neither a-cultural nor a-historical, but rather determined and specific and reliant on the intervention of serendipity. It speaks of tension between the sublime and the corporeal, between the available tools of artistic practice and the desire to (re)present women's specificity.⁴⁴ I locate that specificity in the performative aspects of painting as tracing our bodies in the world; the performance of making; my emersion in the process of making and the integration of issues surrounding embodiment. The research responds to the role of complex narrative structures in positioning visual images of the body and engages with contemporary theoretical considerations that currently address the body.

The creative process ... realises (it releases) the inventiveness of matter in a way that eludes descriptions of reality couched in terms of simple concepts, one-to-one equivalences or (no less self-indulgent) free-associative poetic reveries. Finally, as posed, timed or emergent works, they give back to time its materiality, the sense of temporal process.⁴⁵

This sense of the temporal process of making is the purpose of this writing: writing 'of' rather than 'about' creative research. Clearly I am making a distinction here between the process of making and the resultant art object. This in no way means to trivialise the resultant works of art as objects. The artwork does however become an artefact or trace of the performative aspects of making. As Barbara Bolt states, "... through creative practice, a dynamic material exchange can occur between objects, bodies and images. Imaging in turn, can produce real material effects in the world."⁴⁶ It has been suggested that working in the studio acts as a rehearsal for how we come into 'an experience of the world'. The studio can be understood as an instrument of phenomenological subjectivity in the world. This is because our embodiment is premised on the mutually constituted agency of the self/other, or self in/of the world. In the studio, we rehearse the world through the body⁴⁷ performing the senses (site, touch and memory) and making them visible and tangible.

phenomenology

Recently feminist cultural critics and artists have turned to phenomenology, particularly the writings of Merleau-Ponty, in order to explore issues of embodiment, tactility and the relations of being in the world.⁴⁸ For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not just

44 Sarah Tutton, *op. cit.*

45 Paul Carter, *op. cit.*

46 Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2004, p. 8.

47 Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83.

48 Rosemary Betterton (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

something that goes on in our heads. Rather, our intentional consciousness is experienced in and through our bodies. With his concept of the lived body, Merleau-Ponty overcomes Descartes' mind-body dualism without resorting to physiological reductionism. For Merleau-Ponty the body is not a machine, but a living organism by which we go out into the world with all of our possibilities. The course of a person's life is lived through the body. We are our bodies, and consciousness is not just locked up inside the head. In his later thought, Merleau-Ponty talked of the body as "flesh," made of the same flesh of the world, and it is because the flesh of the body is of the flesh of the world that we can know and understand the world.⁴⁹

In the view of Elizabeth Grosz we have forgotten not just the body but all that makes it possible and limits its actions.

... the precarious, accidental, contingent, expedient, striving, dynamic status of life in a messy, complicated, resistant, brute world of materiality, a world regulated by exigencies, the forces, of space and time. We have forgotten the nature, the ontology, of the body, the conditions under which bodies are enculturated, psychologised, given identity, historical location, and agency.⁵⁰

The body is both transcendent and immanent. It is the "third term" between subject and object. This is not to say it is a gap or an interstice. It is an ontology of becoming which is active and hence emergent.⁵¹ It is something that is not the subject and is not the object; it is a third thing coming between them that connects them.⁵² I know that transcendent things exist because I can touch them, see them and hear them. Most importantly, I never know things in their totality, but always from an embodied perspective. I can only see things from a certain perspective because I am a body and yet, because I am a body, I can also experience the thing as being more than that partial perspective. The thing exists "in itself" because it resists my knowing it with total certainty. However, the thing exists "for me" because I always experience it in relation to my own body. My studio easels, for example, are something to stand or sit at and draw or paint on; they have been set for my height. Things allow for certain bodily engagements while closing off others inclusive of sedimented bodily gestures that are taught. In this sense, things are both transcendent and immanent; things as given to experience are each an "in-itself-for-me" always in a state of becoming. If we can understand this idea of the "in-itself-for-me," we can see how experience as it is given to us is always a subject-object dialogue.

Experiencing something as something is inescapably dependant on an interpretative paradigm of that experience that makes it available as experience. That paradigm is not however, simply a closed world-view in itself within which an individual is immersed and inescapably confined. Rather the individual always already experiences the limits and breakage points of that interpretive framework and while the limits and breakage points are experienced, they resist total sublation into reflective knowledge. This is not to call into question this limitation, but rather to emphasize it with the support of the point that institutes reflexivity and as a result retroactively also installs a moment of the pre-reflexive.⁵³

49 Brent Dean Robbins, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, <http://www.mythosandlogos.com/MerleauPonty.html>, 25 March 2007.

50 Elizabeth Grosz, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

51 Elizabeth Grosz, *op. cit.*, p. 280, n 13.

52 Elizabeth Grosz, Helen McDonald, Philip Rothfield and Sue Best, "Art and Deleuze: A roundtable interview with Elizabeth Grosz", *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Art*, Vol. 7, Number 2, 2006, pp. 4 - 22.

53 Annika Thiem, *Narrative Performativity: Theorizing Imaginative Remembering in Judith Butler's Concept of Subject Formation*, <http://web.mit.edu/philos/wogap/ESWIP02/Thiem.pdf>, 25 April 2006.

Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between the pre-reflective and the reflective. When we reflect on experience, what we reflect on is viewed as hard-edged and defined; as having specific dimensions and clear meanings. This reflected experience can be determinate and hard-edged only against an indeterminate, ambiguous background. Experience begins in the pre-reflective, and reflection is always an abstract derivative of this elemental, pre-reflective, lived experience (the ready-to-hand). For Merleau-Ponty, lived experience is prior to abstract reflection; it is pre-thematic. We live it, but don't explicitly think about and calculate what we are doing. When I am most typically engaged in a task, I do not reflect on the task, and this mode of ready-to-hand engagement is the basic, experiential ground which makes reflection possible. Whenever we reflect intellectually on experience, we have to go back to the lived world of our experience prior to that reflection.⁵⁴ The lived world of my experience is one that engages in arts-practice-led research. I take notes and photograph sequences in the studio but when I am immersed in the process I am fully engaged. Pre-reflective experience of the studio and in the studio is an embodied occurrence.

Meno's paradox

When I begin to make a series of work, I begin by utilizing various multimedia information gathering techniques such as sketches, drawings, collages, photographs and preparatory studies (see chapter 2, *the impact of serendipity*). My research is usually directed by previous studio research. I do not know exactly what it is that I am looking for. I do not know exactly what it is that I am looking to describe. I wonder if I would recognise the thing even if I found it. How would it be possible to describe a process in enough detail when the process being described is indeterminate?⁵⁵ Apparently this conundrum has a long history and has been written about extensively. It is known as Meno's paradox. Meno's paradox comes from the dialogue between Meno and Plato in Plato's Meno. Meno poses a dilemma to Plato: "But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you found is the thing you didn't know?" Meno's Paradox raises the frightening prospect that we could be immersed in an ocean of evidence and would not recognize it for what it is.⁵⁶

Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomenological epistemology and ontology can be seen as settling the dilemma of Meno's paradox. It does so by showing clearly how both empiricism and rationalism fail to do so. Merleau-Ponty writes: "Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism (rationalism) fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching."⁵⁷ Instead, Merleau-Ponty begins with the everyday, lived engagement with the world (the ready-to-hand) and what he finds is that we originally experience things as rich and multi-determinate, always within a context. Things as we experience them are discovered through a subject-object dialogue. In order to understand how Merleau-Ponty understands this subject-object dialogue, we first need to understand, something which Merleau-

54 Brent Dean Robbins, *op cit*.

55 This is not to say that I cannot envisage many of the defining characteristics of the research parameters, i.e. size, shape, scale, media, theoretical and conceptual underpinnings etc.

56 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Colin Smith (Translator), *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge, 1992, <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~dresher/Menoabs.html>, 2 May 2005.

57 *ibid*.

Ponty brought to phenomenology: the idea of the lived body. As Grosz states:

My body occupies a privileged position insofar as it is a moving center through which I gain access to and perception of all the other objects and is thus a continually reorienting framework through which objects are contained or represented in a field surrounding it, a context.⁵⁸

I know when I have found what I am looking for because the world is already charged with meaning in relation to my body. Things begin as ambiguous but become more determinate as I become bodily engaged with them. Then again, I do not already know what I am looking for, because the world transcends my total grasp. At any given time, the world as it is accepted includes not only what is revealed to me, but also what is concealed⁵⁹. Documenting and describing the arts-practice-led research in which I have been engaged, relies on my writing about what was and is revealed and concealed simultaneously. That is, the writing requires me to write about my emersion in the process of making as an essential element of the methodology alongside documenting the processes engaged-in by that emersion.

painting is performative

Performative research is described by Brad Haseman as “expressed in non-numeric data, but in forms of symbolic data other than words in discursive text”. Included in this definition are material forms of practice.⁶⁰ Barbara Bolt uses the writings of Deleuze on ‘linguistic performativity of the artist’ to disrupt visual language and visual narrative. She argues the case that matter disrupts visual language. It is this disruption she suggests that sets the visual language stuttering and vibrating. The distinction between paint’s presence and the materiality of paint provides us with the vocabulary to begin to elaborate such a proposition. Paint’s presence constitutes the way the content is ordered and presented, as such; it is inextricably linked to the meanings we derive from the work.

Gilles Deleuze stated:

If language imitates bodies, it is not through onomatopoeia, but true reflection. And if bodies imitate language, it is not through organs, but true reflection... In collection... there is a double transgression space -- space of language by the flesh and of flesh by language.⁶¹

This refers not to the limits of language but to an outside of language. A space where the body interacts with the language system which shifts the notion of performativity from one in which the body is inscribed by language to one where the body becomes language. In this reconceptualization, the sign is reconfigured by the tempo and throb of the body.⁶² Painting is one such performative act.

Characteristics of painting exceed the purely visual and relate to bodily senses of touch, rhythm and gesture, as well as various modes of vision. These modes of vision are not meant to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life, aiming not at an illusion nor at reality/realism or mimesis but at a corresponding visual narrative. A painted piece of work emerges as a response to a story not previously

58 Elizabeth Grosz, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-165.

59 Brent Dean Robbins, *op. cit.*

60 Brad Haseman, “Rupture and Recognition: Identifying the Performative Research Paradigm”, in Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 150 - 151.

61 Barbara Bolt, “Painting is not a Representational Practice”, in Rosemary Betterton (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 45.

62 *ibid.*

told. A retrieval that speaks to the way I walk around in the world, a retrieval of the self and a movement towards others.

Painting is a complex practice that engages with the psychic and the somatic; it is ongoing and relational and, at the same time, located in specific times and places. This implies a shift away from our former understanding firstly, on a focus on painting primarily as a system in semiotics analysis, to a concept of painting as having an indexically fickle relation to the world: it is simultaneously both a trace/artefact of making and a material presence. A second shift is from thinking about paintings solely as an 'object', towards an understanding of painting as an intersubjective process: a practice of materialization involving the play of objects, bodies, materials, technologies and discourses. And within Western culture, this practice is always gendered.

I use painting as a way of reflecting on and understanding my place in the world. This involves engagement with perceptive and bodily memories encompassing the production of works that are embodied, sexed, gendered, has a race, class and historically situated subject. Situatedness of knowledge has been a crucial concept in recent feminist theory. While these ideas are not new, in the context of painting, they offer a powerful means of disrupting existing aesthetic and political categories.⁶³

Barbara Bolt writes of her experience of painting (and I agree) as: the painting taking on a life of its own, a life that seems to have almost nothing to do with her conscious attempt to control it. The work takes on its own momentum, its own rhythm and intensity. Within this intense and curious state, in the fury of painting, rules give way to the pragmatics of action. The painting transcends itself and becomes a dissembling present. In an act of concurrent actual production, it exceeds the sign and becomes simultaneously sign and not sign⁶⁴.

It breathes, vibrates, pulsates, shimmers and generally runs away from me. The painting no longer merely represents or illustrates reading. Instead, it performs. In the performing of imaging, life gets into the image.⁶⁵

materiality

Materiality, on the other hand, is the insistence of the medium within the operation of the work's meaning. It is the operation of matter that causes the disruption of the traditional categories of interpretation. Materiality produces the means by which the visual language and visual narrative are disrupted. Paint works by staging an appearance and becoming present. In staging an appearance a material transfiguration is involved. In arguing for a productive materiality in painting, I suggest that in the interaction between matter of bodies and the materiality of paint that a visual stutter is enabled (see chapter 1, *terms of reference*). Accordingly, matter's insistence does not only include the materiality of the media, but also includes the matter of the artist's graphic performativity and the matter of the thing itself.

How energetic can matter be? How is it possible to suggest that matter's insistence includes the matter of the thing in itself? Here we can draw attention to the relation between the sign and the reference. How can an image exceed its structure as representation in a

63 Rosemary Betterton, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

64 Barbara Bolt, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 - 3.

65 *ibid.*, p. 1.

radical material performativity and perform rather than stand for or signify its reference? Is it possible to configure a matrix in which a painting is both a sign and an act of simultaneous tangible production?⁶⁶

According to Barbara Bolt in visual and semiotic terms, this would mean the unrepresentable, the unpicturable, the inconceivable and the unseeable, impinging on the seen and represented. It operates as a pressure on, or pulse in, the seeable. The insistence of the dynamic object constitutes a key energy of the painting and so painting is not just the coded immediate object, there is also the pressure of the dynamic object. In this way the dynamic object prevents the painting from being reduced to; just a sign. Pierce's theory of semiosis and transformation relies on this pressure from outside the immediate object. In imaging, the dynamic object insists that its presence is felt. Its pressure and vibrations erupt as the work of painting.⁶⁷ Conversely, such specificity is in danger of remaking works of art in anthropomorphic form and ignores precisely how, as material objects, they interact with the viewer. This kind of viewing is neither disinterested nor instantaneous, but directly dependent upon the embodiment of the viewer⁶⁸.

embodied viewing

In order to see the artwork not only as an object, but also as a part of an intersubjective event, viewers who can move in space are needed rather than a disembodied line to complete it. This signifies a more complex relationship involving viewing. Relationships between the visual and tactile in which ideas of duration and 'touching with the eyes' are made explicit in the reciprocal relationship between vision and touch are offered to the viewer as an event.⁶⁹ In other words, the codification on which the artworld insists when viewing work impacts on the works on the wall or in space. They "mean" in a different way. This is not to lessen the experience of that object or to de/object the artwork or to trivialise the exhibition or the exhibition power of that artwork. It is another phase of the process, a phase in which the viewer moves around the object/artefact. Of course; this is also a performative act.

... to shift the viewing relationship from instrumental to embodied, thereby reinstating the significance of corporeality to knowledge. Corporeal theory, bearing the material traces from place to place, does not resolve as a unity. The specificity of sexual difference, as the trace of particular bodies and embodiment (not 'the body'), leaves its mark on aesthetic practices giving them potential to recover sensory hierarchies and materialise the 'inter' or in-between. Materialising this 'inter' space has radical ramifications for both the articulation of female subjectivity and for the interpellation of subjects-in process.⁷⁰

Concepts of materiality do not simply act as frameworks by which art is explained more proficiently, nor do artworks simply supply helpful illustrations that make complex theories more accessible. It is the interface of the body and discourse, the correlation between the senses, the physical and the conscious, the reconfiguration of corporeality beyond the logic of the subject-object partition and the critical realigning of representation that find their most keen and amplified form⁷¹.

66 *ibid.*, pp. 46-7.

67 *ibid.*, p. 49.

68 <http://www.lyndalladams.com/2007/film/install01.mov> gives an example of embodied viewing by Taw Adams-Flynn.

69 Rosemary Betterton, "Susan Hiller's painted work: bodies, aesthetics and feminism", in Rosemary Betterton (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 83 -- 84.

70 Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

71 *ibid.*, p. 94.