Resuming The Dialogue: Rhizomic Actualisations

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Since 1996, we have organised conferences on the discourse of the arts. The conferences have, in turn, led to a journal entitled Double Dialogues, the first of which was in hard copy under the sole editorship of Ann McCulloch and has been distributed internationally. After innumerable obstacles, we decided to situate articles, essays, exhibitions, and the like, from both these conferences and contributions related to our themes from interested parties, on-line. This refereed electronic journal deals with the discourse and practice of the arts, ranging across the visual arts, film, multi-media, dance, music, creative writing and theatre. Our decision to do this is manifold, but one of the reasons has been determined by our wish to become part of a global debate. We recognise that our interests are ones that are being experienced within academic institutions and art-centres world-wide.

Before exploring the central theme of this Issue, perhaps we ought to contextualise it in terms of a journey over the last six years and into the future.

Issue One: Theme of Bifurcation of Art and Theory

The first Double Dialogues Issue—originally in hard copy and soon to be placed on-line—was centred upon the presentation of papers at conferences emanating from the practical expression of the arts. In other words, alongside this performative dimension there was a discourse concerning the most appropriate ways of representing the art-form in words and/or whether, indeed, there should be an attempt to do so. This theme in the initial print version of the journal focusses on questions about what can be regarded as research and about the relationship between traditional academic practices and more 'rhizomic' treatments of subject-matter across the arts.

In dealing with the question of what is research in the arts, contributors took varied and oppositional positions. Jacques Delaruelle, for example, argued as follows about the boundary between the theoretical and the practical:

There is no denying that most thinkers who are worth their salt are also performers. To embody one's thoughts is a necessary aspect of both research and teaching. We need to live our ideas and nothing could be less indifferent than the telling of certain stories by means of which we try to transmit our values, our knowledge and whatever insight we may have. It is indeed inadvisable to establish strict boundaries between theoretical and artistic disciplines, yet it is necessary to distinguish between their respective method and vocation.

Nevertheless, Delaruelle’s final position was one of "setting theory and practice apart" which was, in his view, necessary:

The reason why the link between theory and practice must be drawn is that the mutation of thinkers into performers, or its opposite, implies a loss of concern for the invisibility of thought which is symptomatic of a society having reduced the whole communicative process to a kind of visual happening. In the Society of the Spectacle prejudices and received-ideas of the most trivial kind are predominant.

Interestingly enough, the majority of contributors from the performing and visual arts, even when claiming otherwise, were largely rooted to discussions of their artistic processes or to theories relating to the experience of art-making, but ultimately were not able to make a "rhizomic" fusion of the two. However, there were exceptions. Anna Gibbs, for example, had...
essential and utterly misleading distinctions between subject and object, between representations and the world, between the body and language, and between theory and fiction.

Her work became

a kind of ficto-criticism, or theoretical fiction - a fiction which undertakes its own critique, provides its own process of self-reflection, and is at the same time an intervention into a field of argument.

By contrast, Mark Minchinton resisted any need for performers to discourse their works in words. Their performances, moreover, constituted research. As he pointedly questions matters:

How would you feel if you had compiled data and made analysis for a bridge and then someone said, Okay, now dance the bridge?

In the visual arts, Elaine D’Esterre saw her paintings as an expression of a revision of the way women are portrayed in the western canon of oil painting. Her paintings "disrupt the patriarchal symbolic iconography of male-artist-as-god by redeploying the matrific symbols of Minoan art."

Apart from such lines of inquiry, there was a concentration upon issues of assessment of the arts and, more particularly, how institutions at large dealt with the relationship between the practical and the discursive. Debate was at its starkest when Anne Marshall argued for ways of apparently accommodating institutionalised forms of research whereas Judith Pippin immediately attacked the Australian Research Council’s definition of it. To be a contender or simply "to play the game," Marshall includes the pragmatic realisation that moneys will never be forthcoming if we feign ignorance about issues of methodologies, documentation of the creative process, and theoretical framings. From this perspective, the principles of research can be construed as much the same regardless of the discipline. Thereafter, she demonstrates in detail how this might be managed by re-visiting how artistic practice and discourse can be re-configured without slavishly operating in terms of the traditional paradigms of scientific research or the latest French philosophising: "there are other ways."

Even Bill Hart and Rod Wissler, when examining the institutional constraints upon the creative arts, remind us of the familiar difficulties associated with what is termed "new knowledge"—perhaps facetiously bracketed by Wissler as "Intellectual Property." Indeed, Hart ends with a mantra listing the "essential ingredients for success" in procuring research funds with:

* have a compelling project, something that needs to be done now, that is essential to someone
* persistence, it may take several years before the project is successful
* study the system, it has its own internal rules, logic and language
* chat up your assessors, expert assessors who give you a good rating are what get you the grants.

However, in fitting "the round peg of the creative arts into the square hole of traditional academic research," the thought occurs: are we not in danger of commodifying the arts?

In response, Pippin acknowledges that, according to the very language of funding bodies, performing arts practice is deemed unresearchable and the performance unassessable. Pippin’s paper argues for

the possibility of a new epistemology of performance arts practice and...a series of validation hypotheticals

which, by implication, challenge the old reliance upon knowledge being tied to "the postulation of a real world or of an objective observer." What we need to do is:

Introduce an alternative understanding of "knowledge and the knower," identify a distinct "interpretive community," and [then] positivist rules for validation no longer hold.

We move, in Pippin’s terms, towards recursive, yet generative, forms of validation. Yet, in light of the above, readers now are confronted with the questions: Who had it right? How...
Issue Two: Theme of Rhizomic Actualisations

What strikes us at the present is how this debate became superseded in the next conference. Here, there was a dramatisation of a 'rhizomic' fusion between art and its discourse. Mark Minchinton, in his keynote address, "The World Is Turning to Pus," argues that he has tried to operate from the premise that research and pedagogy are not neutral tools used to discover and transmit 'facts' about the world and performance, but machines that intervene in and construct the world and performance.

At the same time, he warns us that
to be a researcher, rather than an intellectual/artist, is to be subject to a whole range of increasingly professionalised disciplinary mechanisms.

As a result of this, Minchinton remarks that

I can only think of debates about methodologies as masks for unspoken desires, usually the desire to tear someone apart, or, in more polite terms, the effort to hold on to positions of privilege, to establish disciplinary compliance, through invoking a rhetoric of professionalism.

In the wake of this meltdown of traditional humanities' discourse of the arts, other presentations invoked this kind of 're-territorialisation.' Also noticeable in the presentations to be explored was a global interest in inter-disciplinary issues concerned with gender, ethnicity, class, and post-colonialism. Alison Richards, for instance, in her "approach to the sometimes overwhelming task of attempting simultaneous exposition by means of discourse and practice," resolved it in "Going/Not Going (Japan)" by attempting the "immediately more authentic" task, "in an existential sense," of putting her "own body into the question." By so doing, she enacted and problematised cultural difference in movement, words, and music. More specifically, Richards wanted "to know what happens to the fragile things, the meanings that become lost in translations," that is, "to explore the limits to embodied understanding" in the supposed "binary opposition between the idea of the 'Oriental' and the 'Occidental' performer."

Brendon Stewart, drawing on the philosophy of complexity theory, anchors his documentary making amongst the migrant working-class of Sydney, Australia. He almost immediately realised that he was curious not in some objective academic way entirely, but more so as a person whose cultural space was being radically altered by an obviously foreign cultural phenomenon.

Even more so, Stewart appeals to the imagination as pivotal in the exploration of not merely of the roles played by the artist, but of the possible worlds able to be occupied:

Am I an artist just playing at being an academic or am I an academic just playing at being an artist? When Alice stepped through the looking glass, she entered the realm of imagination. Looking at oneself can be a genuine source of reflection, but Alice was not content simply to see herself. She wondered what the world on the other side of the glass was like. In pretending, in imagining, the solid glass gave way and Alice was in that world on the other side of things.

At the same time, however, he provocatively teases out the implications by which disguise ignites the imagination into new research practice:

Is this not what Helen Demidenko did? The 'Demidenko effect'. If I had invented Mahmoud, an ethnic filmmaker, would it not make it easier to thieve and to use trickery, cunning and magic. If Mahmoud were my alter ego, my Helen Darville, my Iraqi refugee, would I not have sabotaged the distance between self and the other?

In so far as complexity theory makes central that which has been excluded from traditional research paradigms, Stewart invokes a new way of seeing. As he concludes:

In my 'double dialogue', I have tried to structure an inquiry into ethnicity. I want to share with you the possibility, no, indeed, the great validity of thievery, trickery, espionage, and so on, that we have with the materiality that is
Forthcoming Issues -

"Industry & the Arts" (Issue Three) and "Culture Wars" (Issue Four)

In what follows, let us briefly explore themes that emerged in two conferences which will act as the basis of forthcoming Issues Three and Four. These themes can be best captured by the notions of art across cultures and art in the face of money and power. Yet the arts are not simply a document of sociological patterns or trends. Artists will always create from some deeper imaginative source to think beyond fixed meanings or interpretations and thereby become a power for 'becoming.' To that extent, we invite our contributors to think beyond traditional humanities models that primarily work within closed systems of thought. After all, are works of art confined to known worlds? Are they not in a state of constantly creating new worlds? If so, it is time to abandon old theories formerly attached to art production!

Theme of Art Across Cultures

The next perspective that will emerge in Double Dialogues' contributions self-consciously turns in part upon the cultural globalisation of artistic practice. Nowhere will this be more graphically captured than in the presentations by Paul Monaghan and David Wright. Monaghan recounts his experience in Bulgaria when he was the manager of the play "Inje." "Inje" was an international co-production in 1995/1996 between the Melbourne group, Hildegard, and the Theatre Department of the New Bulgarian University (Sophia). His performance paper, "The Space In-Between: Four Languages in a Swamp," explores why the experience of cultural intercourse produces a lead ball for a baby! Problems centre upon four kinds of language relevant to the production: spoken language (ordinary communication with "the issues of translating" between English and Bulgarian); theatrical language (where "concepts and practices used by theatre-makers" proved "as unintelligible to other theatre-makers as can spoken languages"); cultural language (defined as "all the factors which inform and differentiate" a people whether done "consciously or not"); and, finally, individual language ("the somewhat artificial construction of self, a system of features, behaviours, and the learned habitual rules for interactions with others that define a person," but which "cannot be blamed on cultural difference" even when "often [trying] to hide behind "the shibboleth of national identity" "). The experience, for all its potential personal benefits, demonstrates for Monaghan the sheer impossibility of decontextualising or transporting the situated worlds of theatre:

"Inje," as created in Bulgaria under the dominant influence of the Bulgarian team, was not a piece that was translatable. It couldn't be separated from its cultural context without dying. Despite the easier conditions in Australia [when performed again]...the meeting of cultures and people in the space between did not happen.

If Monaghan sounds a pessimistic note, a plea for the recognition of the local, David Wright strikes a different chord. Against the background of western actors training in the methods of Peking opera, Wright "found a congruence in new relationships." Here, he quickly discovers that, in place of language, "explanations of the performance tradition...was largely confined to physical explanations." Even more so than Monaghan's encounters with eastern Europe, the "tradition was passed from body to body." In Peking opera, repetition of physical action is regarded as a way of absorbing information. There is a deliberate attempt in this form of training not to engage the actor in thought. It is the body which enters most fully into this research process. As the body learns, so the body changes as a result of the new knowledge that has been absorbed.
most fully into this research process. As the body learns, so the body changes as a result of
that learning. When subsequently scripting his own work based on four Peking opera
character-types, Wright found he was "identifying" with them rather than "relating to them as
representatives of an exotic form": "I was," realises Wright, "writing my experience as
thems." Empathy or detachment? Double Dialogues has never shied from the paradoxes
arising from becoming a spectator or becoming a participant in both artforms and artistic
discourse itself.

Theme of Globalising Art - Money & Power?

Implicitly, it might be argued that what we have been doing so far is to engage debates that
underpin the shift to globalising art, to asking ourselves where are the arts situated in terms
of politics, money, and power to take three public facets of globalisation. As stated above,
two the conferences which followed—"Art & Industry" and "Culture Wars"—dealt with these
‘demons.’ Is art subversive? Or, is it inevitably trapped within economic and political
constraints however these are manifested from place to place? The first of these
conferences was not only looking at industry’s support of the arts, but the extent to which art
works hand in hand with industry. Our visual arts exhibition played with this idea: from
paintings which were produced by the ‘state of the art’ technologies to advertisements
proclaiming their artistic status; from art entrepreneurs who spoke of selling acclaimed
works of art to the captains of industry at the behest of the artists to displays of jewellery
which made ambiguous any distinction between commodity and craft, commodity and art;
from paintings and cartoons satirising the relationship between money, art, and politics....

The accompanying papers were indeed diverse. There was the problem, for example, of
Ian Ferguson, then a doctoral student, who needed industry support to create a machine
that produced fusion of previously unfusible metals—seen as being of great value to
industry than just to his sculpture. Pivotal to presenters’ concerns was the uneasy
connections between art, industry, government, and censorship. In going cap-in-hand to
industry and government, how subversive can art ever be? The underlying assumption here
is that art should not only interpret the world, but change it. Again, as Anne Marshall
disclosed, the 2000 Olympic Games’ juggernaut brought about a collusion between money,
power, and the arts. Even the outlying reaches of Penrith underwent a cultural
transformation, but only in accordance with Olympic economies and dictates. The question
she confronted was: when money speaks, does art move? Furthermore, through Pauline
Cady’s ugly Snuff Puppets and Wendy Rule’s alternative vision of the sacred, the
marginalised expression of the arts was visited. To what extent, we were forced to ask,
must art compromise and yet sustain its integrity?

Susan Jordan, by contrast, worked with industry to create her artform, "The ‘Avery Ford’
Car Ballet" under the title of "Who Tunes the Car?" In the background of her choreographic
presentation was a video of the original choreography designed for outdoor performance
in Wellington (New Zealand) with eight dancers and eight new Ford cars. Jordan
was looking for a solution of how to fund her art. Sponsored by Avery Ford and subsidised by
Creative NZ, the central government’s arts funding agency, the calculations amounted to
little more than $NZ4.90 per person unlike her previously subsidised theatrical work at
$NZ144.00 per seat! Her critical reflections ended by exploring the tensions and
prejudices associated with successful, corporately funded art. Indeed, she asks, is
financially successful, popular and entertaining art for a mass audience ‘bad’ art? Did it
‘sting’ the mind, did it provoke thinking, or did it invariably indulge a male icon of consumer
society? In her press release at the time, Jordan said, "I wish to comment on the place of
the car in society with colour, music, nifty gear changes, lots of laughs, and the swishest
windscreen wiper moves in town." Then, within the Double Dialogues context, reflecting on
her ambiguous position as an arts practitioner, she cited Pulitzer Prize winning composer
Morton Gould, "I am sorry I write something a lot of people like. I’ll try never to do it again."

The most recent ‘Double Dialogues’ conference provided the opportunity for political
analysis of where the arts are situated in relation to wider culture wars that exist on a global
level. In concluding with this conference, we shall end with a metaphorical romp questioning
the very notion of ‘globalising art’ in several ways. As implied above with Anne Marshall’s
depiction of art and the Olympics, we were firstly asking, is ‘globalising’ to be understood
here an adjective or a verb? Is it something that art does or something that is being done to
art (and by whom)? Issue Four takes the Faustian compact in areas of the arts not
previously explored, the technological, the digital, the indigenous, the political amongst
others.