This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30003268

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2005, Double Dialogues
Look down, Look up: Barbara Bolt’s Art Beyond Representation

George Raitt

Deakin University

Overview

I review the thinking of Barbara Bolt in her recent book, which is informed by Martin Heidegger’s theory of art. Bolt argues that it is in the flux of art practice, where the artist responds bodily, with hands and eyes, to the encounter with the materials of practice, that visual art produces real material effects. That is, through the praxical encounter, art does not merely represent, it performs radically. Bolt thus argues for a materialist ontology of the work of visual art. I examine what Bolt means by ‘real material effects’ and ‘radical performativity’.

In developing my own project on the poetic response to visual art, particularly portraiture, I have freely adapted Heidegger’s theory of art to propose that the poet responds to the visual encounter in a manner similar to that of Heidegger’s preserver, by restraining usual knowing and looking. In this way the poet facilitates the emergence from the work of visual art of truth about being and earth, as defined by Heidegger. In my forthcoming article ‘Ekphrasis and illumination of painting’, I argue that the poet, like the artist, restrains seeing-as and operates in a mode approximating mere seeing, as these terms are defined by Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

In the present article I propose to examine the role of looking down and looking up in non-representational art, and in particular Bolt’s ‘oil stain paintings’ exhibited in the Forty-five Downstairs gallery in Melbourne in conjunction with the launch of her book.

I propose to expose some blind spots in the thinking which underpins theories derived from Heidegger. I will examine the way ‘representation’ has been constructed in twentieth-century thought, and will argue that Heideggerian truth and Bolt’s ‘real material effects’ result from the privileging of perception over knowledge. I will examine, with particular reference to portraiture, Bolt’s assertion that the referent can be rehabilitated in Western thought and traced in ‘real material effects’. I will argue that ‘representation’ is an unstable process occurring within and outside signification, and that this very instability enables us to confidently predict that all art produces ‘real material effects’, or in other words, Heideggerian truth.
'Look down, look up: Barbara Bolt's Art Beyond Representation'

Barbara Bolt's Recent book (2004) *Art Beyond Representation*, informed by the writings of Martin Heidegger, offers a fresh reading of the limits of representation as we usually understand it. Bolt argues that it is in the flux of art practice, where the artist responds bodily, with hands and eyes, to the encounter with the materials of practice, that visual art produces real material effects. That is, through the praxical encounter, art does not merely represent, it performs (Bolt 2004:187-189). Bolt thus argues for a materialist ontology of the work of visual art (Bolt 2004:190). My response to this work exists within a context of my own research which is focussed on the poetic response to visual art, particularly portraiture. Like Bolt I have drawn on and adapted Heidegger’s theory of art to propose that the poet responds to the visual encounter in a manner similar to that of Heidegger's preserver-by-restraining usual knowing and looking. In my forthcoming article 'Ekphrasis and illumination of painting', I propose that the poet, like the artist, does this by restraining seeing-as and operating in a mode approximating mere seeing, in the sense that Heidegger and Wittgenstein use these terms (see Heidegger 1973: 189-190, Wittgenstein 1953: 195-198).

In this way the poet facilitates the emergence from the work of visual art of truth (aletheia) about being and earth, in the sense Heidegger uses these terms. I call this non-representational truth. I am interested in whether this corresponds with Bolt’s ‘real material effects’.

Heidegger’s theory, and my adaptation of it for my project, contain a number of assumptions about the world which, if not acknowledged, may be regarded as ‘blindspots’. I propose to examine some of these significant assumptions, and how my theoretical approach departs from Heidegger’s theory. I also propose to examine some of the ways in which Barbara Bolt’s theoretical approach departs from Heidegger’s theory and to examine what may be blind-spots in her approach. Finally, I will consider whether her book and the accompanying exhibition of her paintings have implications for art practice as it applies to the creation of particular art works.

Let me start in the National Gallery at Canberra, to which I took my children in 1999. Walking dully along the corridor in the maze of gallery spaces I turned a corner and looked up to see Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles* in the glare of spotlights. The sheer size, colour and energy bundled within it caused me to stop and look up in awe. My children walked past, merely commenting ‘What a mess’.

I wanted to know how it felt to paint like that. My experiment was limited by the size of my roll of canvas, about 5 feet wide, and the tubes of artists' acrylic in my possession. Pollock used large canvasses, up to 7 feet by 15, and large cans of ready mixed paint. I had to mix my paint to get it to the right consistency to flow, and did not have enough to let it drip slowly off the brush as he is shown in photographs to have done. However, I did manage to flick and throw the paint and watch a variety of lines, wiggles and splatters take their place on the canvas.

I worked up a sweat under the effort of circling the work repeatedly trying to cover a white canvas with colours, only to find there is some geometric law that means the more paint you throw the less likely it is that you will cover the remaining white spaces. So I graduated to preparing a coloured ground to eliminate white space.

What did I think about when commencing a painting? I have never painted landscapes, but for some reason I began to think about landscape and to choose colours from a landscape scene in my mind. Unlike Pollock, I had to clean up the floor after each work.
I was soon forced out of doors to paint, with either heavy paper on a temporary plywood board, or a stretched canvas, on short trestles about knee high set on the grass in my backyard. I found myself painting in the glare of the summer sun, finding that I had to call for help to carry the work indoors to prevent it overcooking in direct sunlight or, occasionally on an overcast day, having to move the work indoors quickly when it started to rain.

Working in this way on the horizontal, with my head down, became an absorbing task, concentrating on mixing colours, getting the flow right, being amazed at the way the colours mixed and mingled on the canvas under their own force after they left the brush.

Painting out of doors meant that a collection of small leaves, insects and even small downy feathers appeared in the work, although I had not noticed them while I was working. I carefully varnished these into place when the paint was dry. Varnishing restores the glistening appearance and intensity of colour which is lost when acrylic paint dries.

Standing back admiring each finished painting, I wondered how Pollock worked out which way was up. I certainly had no conception of verticality when circling the work throwing paint, and the perspective view of a horizontal work in progress is quite different from how we view a work hung vertically. So I set the finished work on the easel and kept turning it until I felt it was the right way up.

When I stand back and look at these paintings in the vertical position, I see and respond to the work as a whole. Even when I look at reproductions of Pollock’s paintings in a book opened flat on my desk, I see them in the same way. Yet I feel drawn into them, studying close up the pattern of colours created as the paint has fallen, spattered and mingled through its own force and the forces imparted by the artist as the paint left the brush. This I can do with reproductions of details of Pollock’s paintings, and because I know that paint is applied as a fluid, even though I know they were made and dried long ago, I perceive them horizontally.

Do I know Pollock or his painting better as a result of these experiments? I believe so, and I feel that some of these insights may apply to Barbara Bolt’s ‘oil stain’ paintings, on exhibition at the time of writing at the Melbourne art gallery Forty-five Downstairs. These paintings are created by applying oil paint in emulsion on a horizontal ground and letting the emulsion slowly evaporate, mixing and settling pigments in the process. I would guess it involved pouring different coloured emulsions at various stages in the drying process. Each pool of coloured emulsion billows like clouds, with a natural separation line where the fluids have come to rest. Another viewer at the exhibition and I speculated that the method could be described as a ‘controlled accident’. Why do I feel this need to know how the painting was created?

I asked Barbara Bolt what she thinks about while she works on a particular painting. She told me that she thinks about the feeling of the colours, for example, whether they are warm or cold, and how the different pigments respond to the thinning emulsion, which determines how they flow when poured onto the canvas.

I asked about the common response of viewers I encountered at the exhibition: the works can be seen as landscapes at sunrise or sunset, with the billowing patterns resembling clouds, and foreground patterns resembling reflections on a body of water. Barbara Bolt replied that the viewers respond in this way because most of the paintings exhibited have a ‘horizon line’ not so much a line as an area separating patterns above and patterns below, which she has added intentionally. She says that the paintings play
between figuration and abstraction. It is this interplay that is important in the theoretical approach set out in her book, and in my own thinking.

My introduction to Heidegger’s theory of art was as serendipitous as my meeting with Pollock’s *Blue Poles*. I picked up a copy of *Poetry, Language, Thought*, attracted by the reproduction of a Magritte painting on the cover. Since my research concerns ekphrasis, the literary ‘description’ or of or a literary response to a work of visual art, I was excited by his ekphrasis in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ on Van Gogh’s painting of *Old Shoes*, and by his associative thinking in imagining the shoes in use in the field by a peasant woman. It did not worry me one little bit that the shoes might not have belonged to a peasant woman. I have no experience of the rural world in which Van Gogh worked, and my first association on reading the passage was with old leather bushwalking boots, which enable us to keep our grip on earth in extreme places and yet separate us from it. While noting various criticisms of Heidegger’s particular example, Bolt too concludes that his thinking opens us to the possibility of experiencing the painting in a different way (Bolt 2004: 104).

I was relieved that Heidegger was not interested in the aesthetic value of the work of art, as that was something I felt incompetent to judge. Heidegger’s dismissal of the artist as ‘genius’, and his proposition that the artist is inconsequential in the process, like a passageway, resonated with me immediately. I find this thinking tremendously liberating for art practice because it suggests that intention is irrelevant, and as a corollary, that non-representational truth can emerge despite the intentions and world view of the artist. That is, I would argue, art on a biscuit tin still arises from the interplay between world and earth and can release non-representational truth.

The crux of Bolt’s project is to examine the ‘experience of being like a passageway’ (Bolt 2004: 105). As she notes, there is no reason why artists should not be thought of as preservers, who ‘suspend our usual way of looking and thinking about the world’ (Bolt 2004: 107). Bolt argues that it is in the flux of practice that ‘the artist becomes like a passageway that allows for the emergence of art’ (Bolt 2004: 115). Yet does she go so far as my corollary above? Bolt gives a conditional answer by proposing that art in a modern technocratic society ‘can only reveal non-representational truth if it operates in ‘multiple and differential relations’ (Bolt 2004: 121-122), that is, both within and beyond representation. I argue that art always operates within and beyond representation, and would contest Bolt’s conclusion that ‘nothing can guarantee’ such an outcome or ‘predict it in advance’(Bolt 2004: 184).

I have come to the view that Heidegger’s theoretical approach is underpinned by the privileging of perception over knowledge, and that if we do not acknowledge the impact of this assumption on his theory of art, it will be a blind spot that will affect our application of the theory. Bolt appears to come to a similar view, when she says that Heidegger privileges non-representational truth over representational truth (Bolt 2004: 121). I will consider below whether this privileging remains embedded in Bolt’s thinking, and my own, and how this may affect our conclusions about the work of art.

I remain troubled by Heidegger’s qualification that his theory applies only to ‘great art’, and his ability to undertake the analysis without the actual painting. As Julian Young has observed, the Van Gogh painting is ‘largely irrelevant’ to Heidegger’s theory (Young 2001: 22). Similarly, Young points out that Heidegger describes preservers in such a way that we may infer they are ‘an entire culture, a people’ (Young 2001: 51).While I am inclined to simply adapt Heidegger’s theory and apply it to particular paintings and particular poets viewing and responding to them, Barbara Bolt undertakes a detailed examination of Heidegger’s thinking and argues that he has binarised the ontological,
which deals with the being of beings, and the ontical, which deals with beings (Bolt 2004: 122; 189). This is a crucial step for her project, which concerns art practice and the creation of particular art works. However, I remain skeptical about theory’s ability to prove itself, and consequently doubt that reasoning is necessary or sufficient to justify this adaptation of Heidegger’s theory. I am not convinced that Bolt has entirely bridged the gap between theory and the creation of particular art works, and will consider further below whether theory can suggest strategies the artist can use in creating a work of visual art.

Young also points out that the origin of the work of art has ‘no intrinsic relation to the theory of truth’ and that Heidegger later moved away from characterising the origin of the work of art as the primal opposition (urstrüit) between world and earth in favour of truth as ‘happening’ (ereignis) (Young 2001: 64). I believe it is difficult to study ereignis and to derive suggestions for art practice unless we can explain and predict such ‘happenings’. Accordingly, I am happy to adopt the dialectic of world and earth as part of my theoretical framework as this enables us to study possible influences. I believe that Bolt’s approach problematizes art practice as ereignis, albeit in the flux of art practice, and I would like to consider her analysis further in terms of the dialectic between world and earth.

World is the culture of a given people, and earth is roughly the earth without us. In Being and Time, Heidegger did not distinguish earth, but included the environment or the world around us (umwelt) within several possible meanings of ‘world’ (Heidegger 1973: 93).

I have wondered about the limits of earth. Heidegger considers that earth is self-secluding and only appears when perceived and preserved. I argue that light is part of earth. The light of our sun can only be perceived by the human eye as reflected light (unless seen through optical filters such as in a sextant for measuring the sun’s altitude). Moonlight, starlight and various forms of terrestrial light can be perceived both directly and as reflected light.

I agree with ‘critique of Western metaphoric of light as illumination’ (Bolt 2004: 132-133), however, for different reasons. I consider that light in itself is unlikely to reveal non-representational truth about earth because it is earth. I am troubled by Bolt’s concept of ‘Australian’ light, particularly as it is constructed as the glaring midday sun (Bolt 2004: 124). One thinks of Noel Coward’s line ‘Mad dogs and Englishmen, out in the noonday sun’. This is not an entirely frivolous comment, since the sun moves continuously, a movement that is perceptible over a few minutes, and the effects of sunlight on landscape change continually from sunrise to sunset. We should not forget that we have 24 hours each day to perceive landscape.

Earth, I believe, is related to world, and must be local to the culture in question. I would argue further that earth for Kalgoorlie is different from earth in my home town on the outskirts for Melbourne, and variations in earth are, if anything, implicated more deeply than Bolt’s book may suggest.

Bolt argues that looking down at the ground was a response by Indigenous Australians to the glare of Australian light, and that looking up was a response to ‘the induction of Indigenous Australians into enlightenment ways of seeing the land’ (Bolt 2004: 135-137). I believe that looking down and looking up are implicated in a deeper way in art theory and in Barbara Bolt’s ‘oil stain’ paintings. As I have found, in looking down on a flat canvas, primed white, the reflected glare of sunlight can be seen as nature’s way of telling us not to worry too much about where to throw the paint. I have found that
looking up places individual graphic marks in the context of the work as a whole, just as, when navigating unmarked landscape, which I have done many times bushwalking, it is necessary to look up to discern geographical features. When we vertically hang a work created flat on the ground, are we not changing the work of art?

I have also wondered whether we are part of earth. To the extent we are culturally constructed, we are part of world. However, to the extent we are composed of matter, then I argue we are part of earth.

Bolt discusses the way in which thinkers from the Enlightenment to the present day have analysed ‘representational thinking’. I believe that we ought to review how ‘representation’ has been constructed from time to time.

As I have done many times while thinking about representation, I look out from the window on the world in front of my desk. I see trees and shrubs tinged with bright green spring growth, an old eucalypt with orange-tipped new growth, the red flowers of the bottle brush, yellow flowers of the wattle. Branches and leaves sway and flutter in the occasional breeze. I hold my head perfectly still and close one eye then the other, noticing things move position as my perspective changes. I cannot describe for you everything I see, nor could a camera with its single lens capture it all. I pause for a moment imagining the grainy blur you get when a photograph is enlarged, and the square pixellation of an enlarged digital image, and wonder about details that are lost in photography.

In the time it takes to write this, the trees in the garden become still, but now trees in our neighbour’s garden are swaying in the breeze. The light has changed, the sky seems a duller grey, an almost imperceptible drizzle drifts and swirls about the treetops.

What I have seen in one moment cannot be transposed into words, or pixels, or a photograph or a painting. I argue that a ‘representational’ image of this scene will not correspond with the external world and correspondence cannot be verified. No one can occupy my viewing position while I am in it. Once I move, what I have perceived is gone and can never be completely recovered. I propose that representational paintings are replete with ‘mutations’, that is, respects in which the painting changes the perceived external world. Some changes are deliberate due to selective and compositional choices of the artist, some unintentional due to the passage of time as the work progresses, the physical limits of brushes, materials and simply accidents.

I argue that painting operates simultaneously within and outside signification, and that representation itself shares what I call, for want of a better term, this instability. I believe that this is acknowledged by Bolt and a number of thinkers she cites. Bolt repeatedly cites Elkins to the effect that graphic marks ‘are simultaneously signs and not signs’ (from Bolt 2004: 166). She cites Mitchell to the effect that a painting does not ‘represent something, except incidentally’ (from Bolt 2004: 170).

I suggest this instability also applies to the concept of ‘performativity’ which Bolt develops in her book. In Butler’s theory of performatory speech acts, performativity constructs subjects, and conceals its own operation (Bolt 2004: 150-152). However, Bolt distinguishes a ‘radical’ or ‘monstrous’ performativity which subverts the normalizing effects of performativity (Bolt 2004: 151-153). Bolt argues that we experience a work as an ‘act of actual concurrent production which produces an image that is both a sign and “not a sign”’ (Bolt 2004: 179).

I have wondered whether Heidegger’s associative thinking is working within
representation or outside it. Like Bolt, I have worked with the Peircean semiotic framework of icon, symbol and index as modes of signification (Bolt 2004: 179). In Figure 1 below I have applied these modes of signification, by way of schematic example, to portraiture, which is the subject of my research. I tend to think of representation as synonymous with signification. However, Barbara Bolt appears to treat representation as limited to mimesis, that is, iconic representation, and argues that indexical representation (where sign and object are linked causally or contiguously) takes us beyond representation (Bolt 2004: 179-180).

I have called this figure a ‘cell’ because I think the depicted boundaries are like cellular membranes through which things may pass, and the missing component of this organism, the referent, is like the stem cell that can differentiate itself into any other cell or tissue desired by the organism.

As I have suggested above, the relationship between a painting and what is signified according to any of the modes of signification is unstable, and meaning polysynsemous. Heidegger’s associative thinking may take us through the membrane of signification to non-representational truth about being and earth, but this is apparently constrained by our capacity to understand that which by nature is undisclosed and unexplained. I am undecided whether the outer membrane may be permeable.

Figure 1

As Bolt points out, twentieth-century thought has overturned the view that representation is a ‘reflection of reality’ (Bolt 2004: 16, footnote 3). However, I seriously doubt whether representation is capable of that achievement. Bolt defines ‘representationalism’ as a ‘mode of thinking that enables humans to express mastery over the world’ (Bolt 2004: 12). She says that ‘representation’ is the vehicle to effect ‘this will to fixity and mastery’, and that Heidegger sought to critique it (Bolt 2004: 13).

Bolt discusses Derrida’s argument in defence of representation that there is ‘an internal movement within representation [that overcomes] the presumed and stultifying fixity of representationalism’ and she argues that there is a ‘movement from representation’ (Bolt 2004: 14; my emphasis). Bolt argues that Derrida’s differénce is ‘a condition within representation’ (Bolt 2004: 34-37), and is to be distinguished from Deleuze’s difference, which ‘operates in a different register and against the grain of representation’ (Bolt 2004: 40). As I have indicated above, I prefer Derrida’s position, as I believe there is an instability operating within representation.

I believe that in Bolt’s book, representation is constructed in a dialectical relationship with radical performativity (Bolt 2004: 140-142). I am not convinced that this dialectic in itself is illuminating. I want to examine what Barbara Bolt means by ‘real material effects’, and whether these can be analysed in terms of world and earth. Are they of the same nature as non-representational truth? If they are the same, is this the outcome of a common problematic, or blind spot, in the thinking of Bolt and Heidegger?

‘Real material effects’ appear to be the outcome of radical performativity, in which ‘the outside world enters the work and the work casts its effects back into the world’ (Bolt 2004: 10). ‘Real effects’ appear to be related to the casting of radical performativity into a dialectical relationship with representation (Bolt 2004: 136, 154).

Bolt argues that ‘the index has real material effects’ due to the ‘causal relation between
the thing and its sign', which 'takes us beyond the sign to the facts of matter' (Bolt 2004: 179-180). Earlier, Bolt has argued that ‘performance produces signification and signification in turn has real effects' (Bolt 2004: 146). I would argue that this reflects the instability by which the image operates both within and outside representation.

Drawing on the thoughts of Deleuze and others, Bolt argues that radical performativity occurs where the sign system de-forms or 'stutters' (Bolt 157-159). Bolt suggests that the artist can produce a 'visual stutter' by painting 'perception itself' (Bolt 2004: 161). Through this process, Bolt argues that material effects are produced 'in the interaction between the matter of bodies, objects and the materiality of the paint' (Bolt 2004: 162).

I believe it is in regarding bodies, objects and paint as 'matter', or earth, that we may think of the production of 'real material effects' as being of the same nature as the emergence from the work of visual art of truth about being and earth, in the Heideggerian sense, which I have called non-representational truth. In several passages, Bolt suggests an interplay is operating between the human and divine planes that appears similar to the interplay between world and earth (Bolt 2004: 136-140).

I want to explore now the implications of holding that art produces real material effects. Bolt argues the result 'is to cast into doubt ... the generally held view that there is a gap between the sign and its referent' (Bolt 2004: 168). As my project concerns portraiture, I am very interested in Bolt's suggestion that, if we can bridge this gap, a portrait becomes more than a representation of a person, it 'actually becomes the person in some peculiar way' (Bolt 2004: 163). While I have to admit that I began my project on a hunch that ekphrastic poetry responding to portraiture might help us recover the referent, as Bolt notes, this is radical in Western thought (Bolt 2004: 163). Prior to reading her book, I would not have dared to argue this possibility.

Bolt notes that 'representation' implies the inevitability of the absence or loss of the referent (Bolt 2004: 155). She observes that the referent is bracketed out by Saussurean semiotics but in Peircean semiotics the referent 'is an insistent force which puts pressure on and deforms the sign' (Bolt 2004: 174-175). I infer that it can be argued that the referent, like the stem cell alluded to in Figure 1, differentiates and insinuates itself into painting when graphic marks operate both as signs and not signs, that is, through the instability of representation.

If I focus on the possibility that non-representational truth may emerge from a portrait, I find it hard to believe that there are enough truths about being and earth for different truths to emerge in respect of all possible portrait sitters. Bolt's provocation opens this up. However, where this may take us is not clear. While Bolt notes that Peirce's concept of the index was developed to theorise the relationship between a photograph and the depicted object (Bolt 2004: 181-182), following her earlier critique of Western metaphors of light as illumination, we may question whether the role played by light in this process reveals or conceals. Further, when one applies indexicality to painting, as Bolt does in theorising 'real material effects', it is the body of the artist that is alive in the work. How do we differentiate between the traces of the bodies of the artist and sitter in portraiture?

As I have noted above, Bolt suggests that the artist can produce a 'visual stutter' by painting 'perception itself' to create a disjunction within the sign system (Bolt 2004: 161). For me, this resonates with Heidegger's concept of the preserver, who restrains usual knowing and looking. In my forthcoming article I have argued that this involves the artist restraining seeing-as to operate in a mode approaching mere seeing. On this view, I argue that the artist's intention, knowledge and world view are ultimately irrelevant to
the emergence of non-representational truth. While Bolt suggests that 'knowledge' as well as matter is implicated in the artistic encounter, I infer from her conclusion that the outcome is 'unpredictable and uncontrollable' that she may hold a similar view (Bolt 2004: 50, 78).

Bolt does not develop the 'visual stutter' as a practical strategy for artists, and she ultimately concludes that 'nothing can guarantee [radical] visual performativity, or predict it in advance' (Bolt 2004: 161). This suggests to me that her theory has not bridged the gap between the ontological and the ontical.

I remain troubled that non-representational truth, and real material effects arising from radical performativity, are simply the outcome of privileging perception over knowledge. This underlies the distinction between seeing and seeing-as, or as Bolt notes, the 'dualistic conception of vision ... eye and mind' (Bolt 2004: 44, 126). As Bolt has observed, there is an underlying issue here concerning logocentrism. Are we left with nothing if we withdraw this privilege? If we accord it are we guilty of harbouring the 'natural attitude'? I argue that one way out of this impasse is to treat perception and knowledge, representational truth and non-representational truth, with indifference, by recognising representation as an unstable process. I would argue that, when we consider 'representation' as an unstable process within and outside signification, this very instability enables us to confidently predict that all art produces 'real material effects', or in other words, Heideggerian truth.

REFERENCES


