

Art has a way of Breaking Through

Kathryn Keeble

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

This introductory essay attempts to represent the diversity of responses to the question asked of people either attending the Double Dialogues conferences of the last two years or who have written specifically for the DD19 journal issue. The question is 'Why do Things Break?'. The subsequent essays deal with the three abiding themes of literature, film, art and life: birth, loving/hating and death. Whereas some deliberately mould their artistic practice around personal experience of loss and survival, others approach the subject intellectually and seek to identify points at which models of art and Industry, political structures, Ideologies; medical practice and scientific paradigms begin to crack splinter and fragment. It was anticipated that participants engaged in this question would seek after identifying the cracks, to answer the question why did this break when it did? And so, the writers of the following essays commenced with all relevant questions.

Why do things break, fall apart, fall down, disintegrate, splinter, corrode, degenerate, devolve? What does it mean to break? What is involved in the act of breakage? Why the regard for the unbroken over the broken, order over chaos? Why the persistent thinking that the universe is ordered, perpetually stable and that a break is considered a failure? Surely twentieth-century science has demonstrated the specious nature of thinking of the world as an unbroken, fixed entity. Things break at the point at which they deform but from breakage, ideas mutate and transform. What of the dynamics of breakage? 'Cracks form at the atomic scale, extend to the macroscopic level, are irreversible, and travel far from equilibrium' (Marder & Fineberg, 1996: 24). After breakage, when something is split and cracked open, new rich veins appear. In a particle accelerator such as the giant Hadron Collider at CERN in Switzerland, physicists break up elements by smashing electrons and positrons together. The original particles are obliterated in the collision but at the moment of breakage, a new set of particles is created to take their place. If we follow this logic, we then can ask, can art come from break-down, collapse or failure? As Samuel Beckett once said, 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (Beckett, 1983:7).

The long twentieth century saw political breakups, world wars, revolutions, contested and broken master-narratives, and predicted utopian futures which evolved into dystopias. In the twenty-first century, we seem to be replacing totalitarianism with a toxic nationalism that demonises all those perceived as Other. As regimes are dislodged and countries broken up, over 65 million people have been displaced by persecution, conflict or war, equal to those displaced in the wake of the Second World War (UNHCR, 2018). A new threat, global terrorism, has emerged from the rubble of misinformed, misguided incursions by the West. It seems our political systems are broken; our solutions to problems no longer provide salvation. In all contexts — political, economic, religious, ethical, intellectual, social, sexual — the response of artists and thinkers has always been to alert the world to these crises. Think of the impact of such works as Picasso's *Guernica* in showing the world the devastation in Spain in 1937, David Hare's scathing critique of the events leading to the 2003 Iraq War, *Stuff Happens* (2004) or Caryl Churchill's controversial play highlighting the conflict in Gaza, *Seven Jewish Children* (2009).

What of systems? Disruption is challenging long-standing, traditional practices. Not least the ruptures caused by the pace of technological change and dramatic shifts in the movement of people, the flow of information and the globalisation of trade and economies. Disruption is disturbing:

[L]ong-established patterns in virtually every market and every sector of the world economy — indeed, in every aspect of our lives ... causing trends to break down, to break up, or simply to break ... our world will change radically from the one in which many of us grew up, prospered, and formed the intuitions that are so vital to our decision making' Dobbs, Manyika & Woertzel, 2015: 115).

In this first quarter of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves railing against those who claim the system of arts research is broken. We are facing a sustained backlash where politicians among others criticise the arts as lacking academic rigour and devalue arts research thereby undermining public confidence in arts funding. Ironically, at the same time, the Australian Prime Minister talks about creativity and innovation. Conversely, the data shows that Australian creators punch above their weight in terms of value to the economy; our creative industries contribute \$86 billion per year to GDP (ABS 2014). This is greater than the contribution made by the culture industries of countries such as the US, or Britain (Cuthbertson, 2014: 15). Artists, writers, performers and thinkers are never independent of the political climate, whether or not they are conscious of it. In an uncertain funding environment, where the academy is under attack, understandably artists, creators and thinkers feel under siege.

For 20 years, *Double Dialogues* has celebrated interdisciplinary arts research through engaging in a determined encounter with all art forms and the writing about art. Without art, we are dehumanised. In her valedictory speech, the former chair of the British Arts Council, Dame Liz Forgan, made a moving appeal to restore arts funding in a time of austerity budgets:

The arts, the expression of our culture, are as deep a need in us as food, shelter, sex and security ... They are the way in which we communicate beyond the grunt and the whack ... Our universes of imagination, knowledge and capacity are enlarged and enriched beyond belief ... [through] the strengthening of the real connective tissue that is ... art (Forgan, 2013).

This edition of *Double Dialogues* entitled 'Why do things break?' does its part in communicating the importance of arts discourse by engaging thinkers, writers and artists to explore what it means when things break. It showcases the creative output spawned by two events staged to celebrate *Double Dialogue's* twentieth anniversary. The 'Why do things break?' symposium at the University of Adelaide in October 2016, and the subsequent international conference at the New York Opera Center in April 2017. The editors of *Double Dialogues* posed the following questions to provoke creative interrogation:

- Why do artforms change or break in the arts across time?
- To what extent do shifts in subject-matter break and restructure creative techniques?
- What is the role of thought and feeling in shaping/breaking/dissolving artistic forms?
- How does subversion of prevailing artistic ideals or standards shape/break/dissolve artistic practice?

The desire of the editors, as is the *raison d'être* of *Double Dialogues*, was to create interchanges between scholars and artist-practitioners in the visual, performance, and literary arts. To make connections, to explore contemporary undercurrents on what is a universal theme associated with the human condition; an age-old question that belies our understanding: why do things break? What is created through the emergence of cracks, system failures and the fracture of parts? If we apply a scientific metaphor to the theme of this collection, Newton's third law of motion — every action has an equal and opposite reaction — it follows that for every break there will be an equal and opposite creation. The heterogeneous essays in this the nineteenth volume of *Double Dialogues* demonstrate the richness, originality and complexity of arts discourse all the while shedding light on the central question: why do things break?

In the opening two essays of the collection, 'Thermodynamic Sonata' and 'In the Latitude of North, In the Longitude of East: the film,' **Anamaria Beligan** engages with why things break through multiple frames: political, historical and creative. In 'In the Latitude of North, in the Longitude of East: a film,' Beligan recounts the making of a documentary film at a Transylvanian psychiatric hospital, along with cinematographer Valeriu Campan, during Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorial regime. Here, breaking the rules in a totalitarian state had devastating consequences. In 'Thermodynamic Sonata,' Beligan cites the second law of thermodynamics, that energy changing from one form to another increases entropy, to tell a story of broken human history. Through entropy — unpredictability and disorder — Beligan traces her life to now.

Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu utilises his poetic eye to comment on Ceaușescu's broken Romania in 'That pain between the canvass and the paint'. Mihăilescu describes psychiatric hospital inmates undertaking ergotherapy — 'work treatment' — and equates this vision with Goya's which has been described as a 'drastic description of human bankruptcy' (Licht, 1979: 88).

In her essay, **Kathryn Keeble** explores the connections between Irish writers' Samuel Beckett and Brendan Behan. Beckett articulated a sense of end-of-the-world futility and hopelessness with a play, the world-shattering *Waiting for Godot*, 'made out of *inaction*,' without a climax or resolution, that ended 'with a whimper' (Phelps, 1992: 218).

Behan's anti-hero, anti-capital punishment classic, *The Quare Fellow*, launched him as the *enfant terrible* of the Irish and British literary worlds. In Keeble's short film *Paris, August 1948*, Behan and Beckett, both wresting ghosts from their wartime experiences and caught in the broken, postwar 'enormous prison' [Beckett, 2003: 369] that is existence, 'can't go on' and yet, 'must go on' (Beckett, 2010: 134).

Fissures that appear between the lines of a work and its translation offer a faultline leading to creative veins opening for **Kay Are's** 'Breaking Out'. Are offers a new perspective on what it means to break through, to open up space between two classic works: Jean Genet's 'What remains of a Rembrandt torn into four equal pieces and flushed down the toilet' (1958) and Jacques Derrida's *Glas* (1974).

The surrealist artist René Magritte, a great admirer of Italian artist, Giorgio de Chirico, considered himself 'a thinker who communicated by means of paint' [Foucault, 1983: 2]. The same must surely be said of the artist, **Deborah Walker**, who casts her thinking and painterly gaze at another artist admirer of de Chirico, Philip Guston, in 'Truckin' in the Piazza: Enigmas in Philip Guston's de Chirico City'. An exhibition featuring both Guston and De Chirico at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2006 acknowledged the 'anxiety of influence' any pairing of artists in understanding their work entails (Tumliir, 2006: 314). Here, Walker, while conceding Guston's self-confessed admiration for De Chirico, interrogates this proposition and reveals the schisms between these two twentieth-century artists.

Through representations of glitches in digital broadcasts in 'Instances of Anomaly,' **Ben How** creates a series of artworks underscored by disintegrations echoing an error in transmission. The images reflect a reality that is manipulated: able to be flexed and distended. These representations of a break in time defy disambiguation; their eerie, unsettling presence hark back to a lost and distant past.

In this audiovisual, creative piece, **Corin Spencer** questions what we mean when we say that something is broken. When it no longer fits the exacted form. What has given it its form? Is the expected form its 'natural' state? The expected form is what is prescribed, agreed or imposed. To break a thing is to free it from this form. The universe is broken. Formed from a singularity, the result of an explosive event of time and space, of all matter and energy projected unevenly outward from the single point of origin.

Gabrielle Everall's 'Break Down: I Thought I Would Die Like Deleuze' reveals how scarcely systems examine banal and everyday assumptions enabling a chasm to open up between what is said and its meaning. What does it mean to break the rules, to transgress society's conventions? Everall conceptualises trauma through recounting a harrowing tale. From this dark episode, a break in communication, art emerges from despair.

A luminary of 1960s counterculture, the psychiatrist RD Laing argued that a way to understand madness was to rethink assumptions about illness. Madness need not be all breakdown,' Laing argued. 'It may also be breakthrough. It is potential liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death' (Laing, 1967: 110). In 'A Nervous Break,' **Amelia Walker** applies a Laingian trope to understanding the role of memory in performance poetry.

Kevin Sarlow finds an outlet for sorrow, a direction for his rage at what he has lost and is losing: elderly parents, friends succumbing too early to disease, his own body as time wears away at its usefulness. In 'Brokenness and Restoration: A Lament,' Sarlow embraces an age-old redress for the mortal broken: a lament to a higher power. The lament is a direct discourse, a calling to God to account for earthly suffering. The lament gives 'voice to our sorrow, our pain, our grief, our anger ... It gives the powerless and broken ones their speech back' (Parry, 2012: 132).

What is left in the aftermath of the breakdown of authoritarian systems? Former Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev's freedoms of speech and expression, glasnost and perestroika, revealed what was possible and signalled the impetus for change in the former USSR. The brave new world of possibilities unleashed led to the 1991 disintegration of the Russian Federation. **Samantha Young's** *Razing Red Square* offers a new perspective on the impact of the end of Cold War hostilities and the often painful birth of the new Russia.

In 'Legal Rupture, Legal Order: Three Stories of Australian Riots,' **Lucy Houghton** examines three incidents, the Buckland riots, the Cronulla riots and an Invasion Day protest, separated by a century, which demonstrate a breakdown in the principle of *stare decisis* whereby past decisions are the authoritative precedent in deciding similar cases.

James Hayes's essay, 'There's No Escaping the Bay Window: Suburbia, Surveillance and Broken Lives in *Revolutionary Road*,' shows how Richard Yates' novel is also a critique of American postwar suburbanisation. Yates' protagonists, the Wheelers, find the system breaks down and their lives fall apart when, as Albert Camus posited in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, 'stage-sets collapse,' cracks begin to appear, 'a strangeness creeps in,' and a

seemingly innocuous world becomes an alien place (Camus, 1955: 10-14). A place where an unobjectionable architectural feature such as a bay window becomes an instrument of oppression and precipitates tragedy.

In 'Bad Mothers, Monstrous Women: Reimagining Transgression and the Maternal Body,' **Alicia Carter** investigates the fall-out for the 'maternal abject' in the wake of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). Carter breaks through the stereotype of the 'broken bad mother' with her own transformative myth.

On the event of a retrospective exhibition in 1982, New York's Museum of Modern Art celebrated sculptor, Louise Bourgeois, 'as one of the country's most important artists' (MoMA, 1982: 1). Bourgeois had a deeply troubled relationship with her 'bullying, belittling, betraying' father (Wallach, 2010: 126). In 'Chipping In: Breaking Open the Image of the Father,' with reference to Bourgeois, **Cynthia Troup** endeavours to make sense of grief and memory following the sudden death of her own father.

Alex McCulloch recounts the trials and tribulations of getting a ground-breaking and inspiring art project from the drawing board to the walls of the Sydney CBD in 'Industry and the Arts: Breaking Points'. A melding of disparate publics — the corporate world of capital and the avant-garde world of street art — almost broke him and called on all of McCulloch's negotiating skills to realise this artistic vision.

Did these writers answer the question: why do things break? The answer is definitely not! Because this is a question that we must ask but anticipate an inability to find ultimate answers. When the crack shows we mend or seek to re-invent; when relationships flounder we rarely can identify an unambiguous cause; when new laws are made, we agree the time is right for change but the reasons are multiple and often contradictory. And yet, it is agreed, change involves breakage which in itself most often heralds new positive vision but it also, in challenging personal, political and artistic pasts, breaks down things once held sacred which linger as shadows over the present.

Looking back through the past issues of *Double Dialogues* heralds a foreseeing of what the future holds and the brave new worlds that will open up. These volumes are portals that intersect the past and the present, generators of new writing on creative practice, new thinking, new production of art in all its forms and genres. This is what is so special about *Double Dialogues*, the breadth of individual approaches by practitioners and thinkers working in shifting and melding universes of praxis and deliberation of the deep structure behind art, writing, media, performance in all forms and genres. In this, the latest issue 'Why do things break?' the legacy continues.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014). 5271.0 – *Australian National Accounts: Cultural and Creative Activity Satellite Accounts, Experimental, 2008-09*, ABS, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/5271.0Main%20Features32008-09> [accessed 24 February 2018]
- Beckett, Samuel (1983). *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press)
- Beckett, S (2003). *Trilogy: Malloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder)
- Beckett, S (2010). *The Unnamable*, Steven Connor (ed) London: Faber & Faber)
- Camus, Albert (1955). *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books)
- Cuthbertson, Debbie (2014). 'Culture industry a wealth-creator – Economy – Sector contributes \$86 billion a year to GDP,' *The Age*, 13 February, p. 15
- Dobbs, Richard, Manyika, James, & Woetzel, Jonathon (2015). *No Ordinary Disruption: The Four Global Forces Breaking All the Trends* (New York: Public Affairs) ProQuest Ebook Central [accessed 1 March 2018].
- Forgan, Liz (2013). 'A Farewell to Arts and a plea to Michael Gove,' lecture, British Museum 14 February, retrieved 24 February 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/liz-forgan/farewell-to-arts-and-plea-to-michael-gove>
- Foucault, Michel (1983). *This is not a pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- Laing, R. D. (1967). *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (London: Penguin)
- Licht, Fred (1979). *Goya: The Origins of the Modern Temper in Art* (New York: Universe Books)

Marder, Michael & Fineberg, Jay (1996). 'How things break,' *Physics Today*, Vol. 49, No. 9, pp. 24-29, <https://doi.org/10.1063/1.881515>

Museum of Modern Art (1982). 'Louise Bourgeois,' *MoMA*, No. 24 (Fall), pp. 1-2

Parry, Robin A. (2012). *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press)

Phelps, Gilbert (1992). 'Literature and drama,' in *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain: Modern Britain*, Vol. 9, Boris Ford, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Rutherford, Jennifer (2017). 'House of Flowers' in *The Best Australian Essays 2017*, Anna Goldsworthy ed. (Carlton: Black Inc.)

Tumlir, Jan (2006). 'Enigma Variations: Philip Guston and Giorgio de Chirico, Santa Monica Museum of Art,' *Artforum International*, No. 4, p. 314. Academic OneFile EBSCOhost.

UNHCR (2018). *Figures at a glance: Statistical Yearbooks* <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html> [accessed 2 March 2018]

Wallach, Amei (2010). 'Towering Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010),' *American Art*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 126-129.

Published

September 4, 2018