

curatorial statement

1. Creative (practice as) research

Walter Benjamin may have felt that the art work became democratized in the age of mechanical reproduction but forty years later in 1976, for Rosalind Krauss (*The artworld*) *has been deeply and disastrously affected by its relation to mass-media. That an artist's work be published, reproduced and disseminated through the media has become, for the generation that has matured in the course of the last decade, virtually the only means of verifying its existence as art.*¹

And so it seems in demonstrating to our peers, and most importantly to the University that determines on the basis of 'ticks' in columns whether to continue to employ us, that our work has value. This value can only be demonstrated by what the outcome of our creative research is not: a catalogue with framing essay/s which 'situate' the work, the appointment of a curator, the reviews and advertising generated and the importance of the institution in which we exhibit; these are the measurable outcomes of our 'creative research'. A phrase which, as Paul Carter notes *ought to be a tautology, in the present cultural climate is in fact an oxymoron. A research paradigm prevails in which knowledge and creativity are conceived as mutually exclusive (...) a narrowly reductive empiricist notion of research, which (insists) on describing the outcomes in advance...*²

But in Australia today a publicly funded art school is viable only in the context of a larger tertiary institution, and only then by offering many different courses in ever increasing numbers of combinations and flavours, many of which are necessarily vocationally oriented, or appear as such. In this outcome driven product oriented context, haunted by the spectre of 'The Industry' and OHS considerations, the potential for exploratory, experimental and speculative creative practices and research in order to materialise ideas, and opportunities for critical engagement and a critique of the dominant paradigm are rare indeed.

But persist we must and persist we will. With this exhibition and the accompanying texts, in the catalogue, on the website and through a publicly accessible on-line discussion forum (<http://truthbeauty.info/conversations/text-object>), I hope to have facilitated at least some conversations and 'material thinking' to use Carter's term, by insisting on adding the layer of the exploration of collaborative processes to what can often become the solipsistic creative research that takes place within the odd beast that is the twenty first century art school in regional Australia.

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2. Art vs life

The most devastatingly brilliant exhibition I have ever been to was Sophie Calle's *Mas-tu vue* in Paris in 2003. Mostly I enjoy the childlike state to which I am reduced by my almost non-existent French when I am in Paris but Calle's work is to a significant extent an invitation to a conversation. It is an almost literary body of work and very few concessions are made to non-French speakers. Here and there you find a room brochure with less than perfect English translations of selected excerpts; the most startling of which in the Pompidou was in the room containing *A Woman Vanishes* (2003) where Calle warns the audience that she may be observing them, and classifies visitors according to various animals:

Four ways of visiting an exhibition by J.F.Barbier-Bouvet
The ant goes methodically past every picture wall, careful not to miss anything. Its approach is docile submitting to the indications or logistics of the exhibition with an obvious desire to learn. The butterfly zigzags around the show flitting from one picture wall

to another. Like the ant, the butterfly follows the order of the exhibition but asserts its will by sampling where its fancy takes it. The grasshopper advances by leaps. When it sees something of interest far away, it heads straight to it. Its movements are totally free. Indifferent to the logic of the exhibition it reacts only to the points that strike a chord. The fish slides along. It can slow down or speed up but it almost never stops. The fish keeps its distance contenting itself with grasping the spirit of the exhibition. ³

I walk very quickly through the gallery relying on my intuition to locate good work. I am sure this method causes me to sometimes miss works which are good or great, but life is short and I have a very fine nose. I am half fish, half grasshopper. So maybe that makes me a crab: I move sideways and sometimes, rarely, I stop. I hide under rocks. I too like to sit in corners and watch the way people look at art works :

there is one section in the art gallery of new south wales where the curators have allowed two large windows. it is right smack bang in the middle of a room full of very valuable but extremely dull australian paintings which are of interest mainly as historical curiosities. it is these two windows to which everyone is instantly and irresistibly drawn and in front of which most people spend much more time (and have more to say to each other) than in front of any of the artworks. it seems it is not just that the harbour and the war ships and the bits of grass which can be seen from the windows are more interesting than the boring little landscapes and people in the paintings, but right here right now it is just so damned obvious that art can't compete with life : real light and real people in real time.

there are blinds though, which can be drawn across : real life is not on permanent exhibition.

*sydney winter 2007*⁴

When I used to teach people who wanted to become artists I would say to them: The ratio of bad to good art is about ninety nine to one, but it's the one percent which is good, that makes it worthwhile. Your job is to locate that one percent and contribute to it. I met someone who, upon discovering I have a doctorate in fine art, became very keen to go to an art gallery with me. I guess if you have a doctorate in something useful like podiatry, people keep asking you to look at their feet. I said: You might be disappointed because I tend not to spend a lot of time with the art works. I am actually more interested in books and cakes and so especially in a large public gallery you are more likely to find me in the bookshop or the restaurant. I also told her about the one percent but perhaps she thought I possessed the power to make the ninety nine percent seem less boring to her. But no doctor and no curator that I know of, has supernatural powers.

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3. Create, curate or perish

I am not an experienced curator, but I have spent most of my working life thinking and talking about, and looking at art; and arranging ideas, texts and objects in spaces, temporal spaces, two and three dimensional spaces, real and imaginary. During the last decade and a half I have also created spaces for those objects and ideas, many of them virtual.

Rather than a traditional curatorial statement I was hoping to simply reproduce an e-conversation about collaboration and curating with two of the artists in this exhibition, Julie Montgarrett and Ruth Hadlow, after a real life conversation about these topics in Wagga in the freezing courtyard of the

School of Visual and Performing Arts during Ruth's Artist in Residence in the winter of 2008. However as I write the conversation is proving very interesting and continues to unfold, or to be more accurate, to fold in on itself, the time frame has proven a barrier.

I began:

i really think the term curator is somewhat too grandiose a term for what i have done here in this show which is simply to set a parameter and some sort of (very wide) theme. in addition i have had some conversations with some of the participants about their collaborations as they were thinking about them and working on them, and encouraged them to have conversations with each other. but i haven't been in a position to invite or not invite artists because it is a show by staff of the school of visual and performing arts and i could not exclude people simply because i did not find their work or their ideas interesting. politically that would just not be feasible. secondly each member of staff was free to nominate who they wanted to collaborate with. some people chose to work with another member of staff, others decided to work with other people in the community, one member of staff even chose to collaborate with his two year old child. what did w.c. fields say? don't work with children and animals?

i suppose william wegman would argue that he is collaborating with his weimeraners, but are they collaborating with him? i would have thought agency is one of the basic requirements for collaboration. can a beekeeper be said to be collaborating with the bees to make honey?

*also there will be works in the exhibition which i would not have included if i was truly curating it. so i am not sure that i am wholly comfortable with the idea of being called the curator, to claim to have curated the show. nevertheless a number of very interesting works and processes have emerged in response to the theme and as a result of the parameter that only works which were collaborations would be included. so i feel very positive about that.*⁵

But back to spaces: I have made numerous websites, but I have a problem with the idea of information architecture. 'Information' is one of those generic terms popular in late capitalism which implies quality and desirability; and doesn't architecture sound grandiose? Even more so than 'curator'. Which brings us to the more recent innovation of 'web curator'. I guess it would be difficult to attract applicants for the position of web monkey.

*In the 1970s (...) in The Production of Space (Henri Lefebvre) argued that space is produced through the enactment of social relations. Space, according to Lefebvre, is created by the flows and movements of relational networks—such as capital, power, and information—in, across, and through a given physical area. A building, in Lefebvre's reading, is a map of the interactions of the people who inhabit it; an architect is not a builder in an otherwise empty wilderness, but an observer, chronicler, and shaper of the networks that exist around her—in short, a map maker.*⁶

In Lefebvre's terms an exhibition and each of the works in it, are an index of a complex set of relationships. Bourriaud⁽⁷⁾ too is interested in reading art works as the products of relationships, between humans, between spaces and between objects. This methodology can be equally effective in a range of creative contexts, which is especially relevant to us as practitioners and didacts in an environment where objects are made and designed and texts are produced in a range of mediums.

This seems to open up the possibility of a creative discipline which straddles design, art, philosophy and architecture. It explores relationships between people, objects, texts and ideas. It is by necessity collaborative and can find expression in a myriad of different ways: a website, an installation in an art gallery, a building and so on; or in something far less tangible which does not sit easily in any spaces or contexts which we are familiar with.

Let us return, by way of an example, to a work by Sophie Calle, *Hotel* (1982). The work is exhibited as a series of photographs with large text panels:

Wednesday March 4, 1981. 11:20a.m.

*I go into room 30. Only one bed has been slept in, the one on the right. There is a small bag on the luggage stand. A beautifully ironed silk nightgown lies on the chair that has been pulled up near the bed: it clearly has never been worn. Everything else is still in the traveling bag. All I see there is men's clothing: grey trousers, a grey striped shirt, a pair of socks, a toilet kit (razor, shaving cream, comb, aftershave lotion), a dog-eared photograph of a group of young people surrounding an older woman, a passport in the name of M.L., male sex, Italian nationality, born in 1946 in Rome, his place of residence, five foot seven, blue eyes. The bathroom is empty, so is the closet, but in the drawer of the night table I find: a box of Panter cigars, a fountain pen, airmail stationery, a leather box with the initials M.L. On a piece of paper is the address of a Mr. and Mrs. B. in Florence, a wallet with five identical photographs of a blond woman and a wedding photograph showing the man in the passport in a tuxedo and the blond woman in a wedding gown. There is also an old bill from the Hotel C., dated March 4, 1979, in the name of Mr. and Mrs. L for the same room, number 30. Exactly two years ago, M.L. spent the night in the Hotel C. with his wife. He has come back alone. With the embroidered nightgown in his suitcase. His reservation was for last night only. He is leaving today. I'll do the room later.*⁸

I am not sure how the University's Ethics Committee would deal with a proposal for a research project where "*the artist takes a position as chamber maid in a hotel and photographs the guests' opened luggage, laundry, contents of bathrooms, and the rubbish bins, noting details gleaned from their diaries and letters.*"⁹ Yet there is no doubt the process employed by Sophie Calle produces the most startling art works. It seems to differ from other well-respected academic disciplines such as history or archeology mainly in that their subjects are

dead. At the same time we must also beware of taking (what she says about) her work at face value. As her collaborations with the novelist Paul Auster demonstrate : Sophie Calle is also interested in fictions.

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4. An invitation to a conversation

Why collaboration? Already most of what happens in and around an art school is necessarily collaborative. Being located in Universities, as all but one Australian art school was forced to be in 1989 by John Dawkins (to whom we can also be grateful for the introduction of HECS), we have to collaborate on a range of policies and issues with the University and the Faculty of which we are a part. Needless to say not all members of the Academy in disciplines other than our own, necessarily understand, or are sympathetic to, the nature of our research and practice, and its outcomes.

Secondly we collaborate internally, with staff, both general and academic, and of course with our students, since teaching and learning can only take place if there is a willingness to engage in dialogue, to have conversations. The exchange of ideas is fundamental not just to creative research and practice but to all research, be it in the arts or in the sciences; and perhaps that is why at the end of the day, it is appropriate for an art school to be part of a University.

For those members of staff in the performing arts and in design, collaboration is often a necessary evil in their discipline areas, however as individual practitioners, perhaps because creative people are by nature often reclusive and/or individualistic; or because so much of our daily work in the University involves negotiation and compromise, when we retreat into our studios or work rooms we welcome the

opportunity to act and think as intelligent independent units. But in all cases it is with whom you collaborate that makes all the difference.

*Historical situations, always new, unveil man's constant possibilities and allow us to name them. Thus, in the course of the war against Nazism, the word "collaboration" took on a new meaning: putting oneself voluntarily at the service of a vile power. What a fundamental notion! How did humanity do without it until 1944? Now that the word has been found, we realize more and more that man's activity is by nature a collaboration. All those who extol the mass media din, advertising's imbecilic smile, the neglect of the natural world, indiscretion raised to the status of a virtue — they deserve to be called collaborators with the modern.*¹⁰

'Collaboration' can have a number of meanings and certainly during and after the second world war, as Milan Kundera points out in the quote above, a sinister connotation. To be a collaborator is about the worst thing you could have been accused of in the decades following the war in Europe. But in terms of creative practices, collaboration can also take many forms, as discussed by Neill Overton in his essay elsewhere in this catalogue. As we can see in this exhibition, a collaboration can result in a single, synthetic or composite work to which each collaborator contributes equally, or in two or more discreet works placed together under one title.

But it is always the result of a conversation. Conversations are almost always improvisational and collaborative in nature since it takes at least two people, thinking and responding to each other, to have a conversation. Thus my idea for the curatorial process for the exhibition was simple, open-ended and above all collaborative, inviting artists to collaborate, to participate in a conversation and to exhibit an index of relationships thus formed.

I knew before I started, that the curatorial process is fraught

with difficulties. As Ruth Hadlow points out : *The curator is often the broker or conduit between the artist/artwork and the audience/public sphere. One needs to be attuned to the politics of the opportunity, savvy enough to play the particular roles required, while at the same time remaining faithful to the ideas and intentions of one's work. It is a difficult balancing act.*¹¹

At the same time, like Julie Montgarrett, I experience many acts of curatorship like I do most artworks : as assertions, rather than as invitations to engage in dialogue : *The process of curation appears to have moved away from a role of conduit/broker as Ruth said aptly, in most cases to one of leading dictator with delusions of grandeur. The role of curator as an astute observer/critic/collaborator/aesthetic/cultural director has become increasingly subverted into one of individual ambition to escalate personal career profile via the preferable elite marketing vehicle of 'art exhibition'*¹² Where, in Ruth Hadlow's words, *are those curators with a subtle ear and eye, who seem to be able to keep an eye on what artists are doing and listen to that over a period of time, putting exhibitions together based on the ideas at play in the artists' work rather than their own?*¹³

Audiences too collaborate with the artist/s, since like conversations, it takes at least two people for art to 'work'. This exhibition is an invitation to audiences to engage in a dialogue with the artist, and to respond to the dialogue between the curator and the artist/s.

So here is a map of some of the conversations that have been going on during the last year or so in and around the art school in town, and beyond. I hope some of them are worth joining in with.

I would like to thank: The exhibition participants, the staff of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, in particular Cath Bowdler and Stephen Payne; Neill Overton and Anna Poletti for their insightful catalogue essays; Katrina Flaskas; Kate Lynch and Patrick McNamara for their work on the website; Chris

Orchard for assisting several exhibition participants; Scott Howie for designing the catalogue; the Faculty of Arts for assisting with the catalogue printing costs; and the Acting Head of the School of Visual and Performing Arts Professor David Green for giving me the opportunity to curate the exhibition.

As for the works in this exhibition which have (one of) my name(s) attached to them, I faced a different kind of problem: I decided to stop making art at the end of 2005. So for this exhibition I handed over an unfinished tentative fragment from 2002 to one collaborator, and an unfinished tentative non-artwork to another. I also collaborated with

another artist, an old friend from my own art school days, with whom I have been having conversations about art for twenty years, by providing a title and a framing text for a fragment from real life which he told me he had decided to make into an art work. I learned from Sophie Calle that a text can form an integral part of an art work, can make or break an art work, can *be* an art work.

Hence *text/object*.

Dr Johannes Klabbers
October 2008

¹ Rosalind Krauss. 1976. *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism* October, Vol. 1, Spring, 1976. p59

² Paul Carter. 2008. *Material Thinking*. Melbourne University Press. p7

³ Quoted by Sophie Calle *A woman vanishes* (2003) Room brochure *M'as-tu vue* Pompidou Centre Paris December 2003.

⁴ Author's diary entry July 5th, 2007. (Unpublished)

⁵ Ruth Hadlow, Julie Montgarrett and Johannes Klabbers. 2008. *On curating and collaboration*. <http://tinyurl.com/oncuratingand> (accessed 22.9.08)

⁶ Aaron Rester. 2008. *Mapping Memory: Web Designer as Information Cartographer*. <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/mappingmemory> (accessed 27.8.08)

⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud. 2002. *Relational aesthetics*. Paris: Les Presses du Réel.

⁸ Sophie Calle, *Hotel* (1982). http://www.guggenheim.org/artscurriculum/lessons/movpics_calle.php (accessed 22.9.08)

⁹ http://www.guggenheim.org/artscurriculum/lessons/movpics_calle.php (accessed 22.9.08)

¹⁰ Milan Kundera. *The Art of the Novel*. 1988. p125-126

¹¹ Ruth Hadlow, Julie Montgarrett and Johannes Klabbers. 2008. *On curating and collaboration*. <http://tinyurl.com/oncuratingand> (accessed 22.9.08)

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*