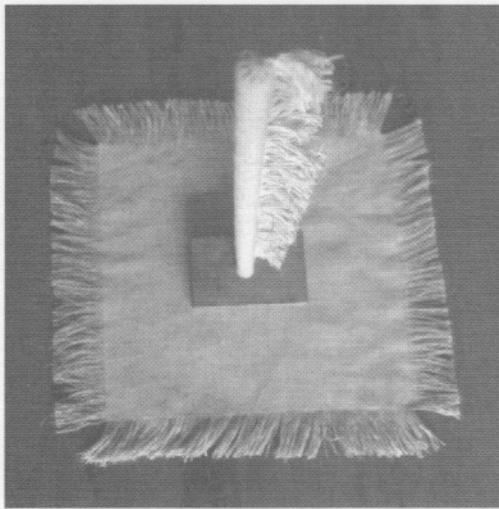


con:text

Curated by Chris Comer

Artists: Rhonda Crane, Jose Da Silva, Simone Hine, jewel mackenzie, Sebastian Moody, Archie Moore, Julie Pitts, Miles Blow and Chris Comer





"measuring up" belgian linen and measuring stick, 2005 jewel mackenzie

language vivisected?

Vivisection

Just as dissection is to cut or operate on a deceased animal, vivisection is to cut or operate on a living animal. Vivisection is often used as an umbrella term to include all types of experimentation on animals. It is interesting to note that the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines vivisection broadly as "animal experimentation," "especially if considered to cause distress to the subject."ⁱ

The cut maims and pains: not only the dissenting subject but, also, the originary subject.

Language is the house of power. It can, perhaps, be seen as the triumvirate of philosophy, theology and the law that has ordered our existence in western culture, in varying persuasions, since the fifth century BC. Language equates with reason and order. Language equates with originary binaries. Language is central to our sense of identity. The word, the logos, shapes our perceptions of reality, enables us to make meaning of different situations and, ultimately, controls the way in which we relate to, and read the world.

Yet, language and the subject perform. Think of cultural studies which has witnessed a paradigm shift from considering text and artefact based models of culture to models based on the notion of performance, where the performativity of culture foregrounds the processes of cultural construction rather than the effects. The metaphorical expansion of the term performance can be noted from 1959 when Erving Goffman in his study of social and individual performance, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", first adopted theatre vocabulary as the most suitable for the observation of intersubjectivity. For Goffman, the term, performance, was a metaphor for social behaviour as he tried to ascertain the ways in which we repeat ourselves in individual and social behaviour.

Think of dada, Fluxus and performance art where performance has often been the avant-garde's favoured mode of resisting the status quo. Performance dismantles textual authority. Language is the "defining limitation that performance strains against and wishes to explode".ⁱⁱ The non-theatrical conventions of performance art, with its emphasis on social and cultural transgression and rejection of textual and authorial sovereignty, make it an ideal medium to explore gender, race and notions of difference as fictional ontologies.

Think of gendered identity as performative achievements produced through the ritualized repetition of conventions: precarious daily re-enactments of ideal configurations that both sustain gender paradigms and are always out of reach. Theories of gender performativity challenge the tyranny of gender hierarchies as strategies for breaking up the text of mimesis and disrupting dominant gender codes.ⁱⁱⁱ Judith Butler has reworked J.L. Austin's theory of performativity as a poststructural critique of language, subjectivity and agency. Butler argues that the compelled performances of the socially sanctioned codes of gender may be



"False Friends" Multimedia, 2005 Archie Moore



"Untitled" Inkjet Print from Polaroid, 2004 Jose Da Silva

disrupted by the parodic repetition of such codes.^{iv} Such a parody allows for the possibility of resistance by "exposing the uncertain authority behind the process of gender inscription that necessitates the repetition of its law."^v

Gender theory addresses the diminishing possibility of individual agency in late capitalist culture. In our current service economy, where the primary commodity of exchange is labour power itself, the very act of serving or doing becomes itself fetishized. In such an economy, "the act of acting—not only becomes a thing, but in its newly intensified form of alienation threatens to erase the actor whose labour it is."^{vi}

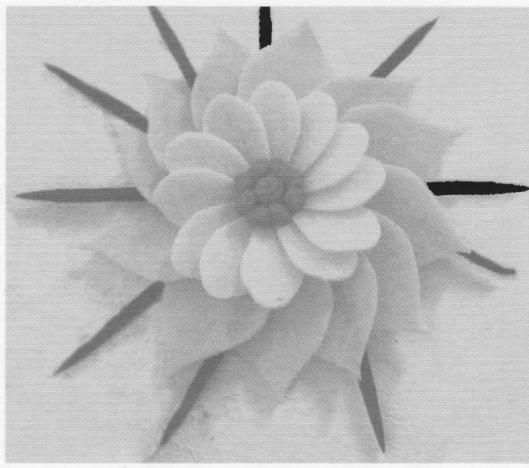
The trend towards the textualization of society in the last century may well have been the result of an anti-performative bias in the metaphor, culture as text, which insists that language can reflect the world. It is an insistence that creates an arbitrary distinction between words and the bodies that give them voice. Structuralism posited meaning as a "function of the rationality of elements within the deep structure of language (or culture) rather than any individual utterance or act of speaking (or living)."^{vii} The limitations of the metaphor of culture as text have necessitated the turn to the metaphor of culture as performance to address the problematic role of individual agency within contemporary social and cultural theory as a recuperation of the repressed representations of modernity.

The current emphasis placed on the performative construction of culture indicates a fundamentally altered sense of what "culture" is. Society can not set aside textuality, yet needs to draw it into dialogue with performativity to devise strategies that perform a productive interplay between them.

The artists in **con:text** perform a re-articulation and re-presentation of the cultural text of mimesis.

Simone Hine posits mimesis in traditional cinema and the fine arts as sites for re-inscription in "Production Still (composition one- repeat)". Hines' work references the culturally prescribed gender roles of women as evidenced in classic Hollywood cinema. In this video installation, the artist performs both the space of the gallery and the clichéd representation of the ideal woman: beautiful, mysterious and in need of protection. The set, constructed from paintings, creates a play "between two dimensional and three dimensional spaces". It is an obvious façade: a mirror to the video work that "draws attention to the process of creating both the installation and the video within it."

Archie Moore has been searching for false friends and he has found them in language. In **con:text**, the artist plays with context: the socio-cultural context of language and "meaning". Moore plays with his friends by grouping words that occur "in two or more languages that look and/or sound similar but differ in meaning."^{viii} In "False Friends (or Faux Amis)", we witness Sean Connery riding high on the road of success accompanied by his indefatigable, inflatable rabbit friend as they chant "Chant connerie". The



"Wallflowers" installation detail, scourer pads and textiles, 2005 Rhonda Crane

transliteration, "Bullshit song" underscores language's reliance on cultural context for meaning and refutes the purported rationality of language. The artist is accustomed to words that cut; vivisection causes distress and pain to the dissenting subject. As a result, the artist has become interested in the structure of language and the arbitrary connection between the phonetic element of language and its assignment of meaning.^{ix} By juxtaposing foreign languages with their literal English translation, Moore performs a renegotiation of language and meaning.

Similar to Archie Moore's work, Sebastian Moody is, also, concerned with the rules of grammar and the ambiguity of meaning. Similarly, the artist questions the construction of meaning as he performs the viewer in site specificity and the boundaries of intertextuality and experience. By involving the spectator in a compulsory re-reading, he forces us to question our own choices for the interpretation of meaning.

jewel mackenzie dissects the language of authority and relationships of power embodied in cultural practice through the medium of fabric. The corporate weaponry of pin-striped suiting is contrasted with feminine pink satin in a complex interplay with the symbols of wealth and status. The hierarchy of fine art practice "comes under close and critical scrutiny" in the artist's practice through the symbolic use of Belgian linen in the work, "Measuring up". The artist questions whether she "measures up" within this hierarchy as she kneels at the measuring stick of power as a female artist and as a dressmaker. Yet mackenzie, herself, wields the scissors and the steam iron as instruments of dissection/ dissolution as the artist returns the work, in this installation, to the dressmaker's workroom. "To cut is to think"^x is a cutting retort to the hierarchical art / craft debate and this work equates the first cut to the first brush stroke of the traditional fine artist or to the first frame of the video/ film maker. "Duelling boards" and "Iron maiden" threaten to perform acts of torture upon the terms of language that "oppress".

Rhonda Crane also employs the precise cut of the dressmaker in the art versus craft debate. In a "deliberately low tech application", the artist performs the domestic duties of the female, "still being carried out, in the main, by women in society", as artist. Her surgical equipment is composed of kitchen scourer pads and sponges that, in her desire to escape the duties of domesticity, become transformed into "art as critique". "Wallflowers", the artist's installation in the stairwell, also references the plight and lack of power of the female relegated to the sidelines of traditional social events. "Frieze", however, inside the "white cube" of the gallery, symbolically acts as code to the female outside the art hierarchy. The artist subverts the tropes of Modernism with her use of "feminine", contemporary, non-traditional materials.

Jose Da Silva's "Polaroid and C-Prints" underscore the repetition and performance, ad nauseum, in acts that are made to constitute sexual identity. Da Silva is specifically interested in how sexual identity is traumatically forged in gay male porn and, ultimately, how trauma underscores the construction of gay male subjectivity. By "capturing the body as powerless and passive, Da Silva turns that very powerlessness on



"Showday" Photographic image, 2004 Julie Pitts & Miles Blow



"performing words" Digital video still, 2005 Chris Comer

its head by complicating the way we look at ourselves looking at sex."^{xi} These disturbing images portray the subject as violate as Da Silva documents himself during the process of being penetrated, "captive and rendered seemingly powerless" by the manner in which his sexual identity is coded by social, political and medical trauma within a hegemonic normalcy. "The captive body here becomes a figurative spectacle, a site for all kinds of projection."^{xii}

Julie Pitts and Miles Blow perform an interesting twist on the perception of reality, agency and meaning in our age of technology and global slickness. **con:context** to the artists means their own context: **the**ir daily, collaborative situation of creating Australia's first feature length, stop frame animation on the **smell of** a cliché with home made technology. Their reality is fantasy. Their escape is an escape from **fantasy** into the "real world" where the stories they are compelled to concoct from their observations, send them **scurrying** back to their reality in which the protagonist is voiceless.

The stereotypical representation of the female subject's lack of voice is performed in Chris Comer's "performing words". By refusing the metaphorical cut of language, the artist refuses to place **meaning** in the utterance alone. She refers, instead, to the register of emotional and experiential knowledge. **Seen as** a problem of representation, the female voice has been bound within traditional, mainstream cinema in a textual model that holds the female voice insistently to the interior of the diegesis. The male subject, **by** contrast, assumes a position of apparent discursive exteriority by identifying him with mastering **speech and** vision. The interiority of the female equates with discursive incompetence and lack of control.^{xiii} **By depicting** the female as voiceless, the artist refutes the assumption that meaning is a function of verbal **signification** alone.

Chris Comer

ⁱ http://www.veganvanguard.com/vegism/experiment_lexicon.html

ⁱⁱ Walker, J.A. 2003. Why Performance? Why Now? Textuality and the Rearticulation of Human Presence. *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16: 149.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gabriel, B. 1994. Performing theory, performing gender: critical postscript. *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 54: 237.

^{iv} *ibid*, p.162.

^v *ibid*, p.163.

^{vi} Walker, J.A., *op cit*, p.170.

^{vii} *ibid*, p.156.

^{viii} All other quotations are from the artists' notes to the author, 2005.

^{ix} McKenzie, Robyn. 2001. *Art and Research*.

^x Germano Celant, 1996.

^{xi} Mudie Cunningham, Daniel. 2004. *Captive Bait*. *Artlink*, 24: 2.

^{xii} *ibid*.

^{xiii} Silverman, K.1988. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, pp. 53-54.



"Communication" house paint, 2005 Sebastian Moody

Cover Image: "Production Still (composition one-repeat)" Digital image, 2005 Simone Hine

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