

WRITING AND THE VISUAL ARTS

Leoni Schmidt

“Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbours, neither of whom is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other’s domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders...” (Gotthold E Lessing, 1776/1965: 116) ¹

The relationship between “the seeable and the sayable, display and discourse, showing and telling”² is complex and contentious. With reference to the writing of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze,³ WJT Mitchell discusses some of the issues in “Word and Image”.⁴ He points out that the relationship between word and image is an “ancient problem in the study of the arts and in theories of rhetorics, communication and human subjectivity”⁵; while Horace’s statement *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry) is one of the most durable dialectical tropes in Western thinking.⁶

Mitchell argues that “the potential for the shift ‘from word to image’ is always there [and that a] similar potential resides in visual images. In the act of interpreting, or describing pictures, even in the fundamental process of recognizing what they represent, language enters into the visual field.”⁷ Precisely because of this two-way shift and its potential for the collapse of the visual and the verbal into one another (or the domination of the one over the other), the relationship between writing and the visual arts needs constant vigilance and critical scrutiny. Within the current context in which *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics (Art)* is published for the first time, such critical scrutiny is alive and well and various positions can be discerned.

In *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (2004), Paul Carter argues that making is material and cannot be translated into words. He writes: “Material thinking occurs in the making of works of art... Critics and theorists interested in communicating ideas about things cannot emulate it.”⁸

In *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (2005), Graeme Sullivan discusses the re-emergence of the “artist-theorist” in the contemporary context of the visual arts and writes: “...the image these days is [an extremely] loaded text that carries all sorts of references and inferences... Therefore, institutional and discipline traditions [e.g. art history and critical theory] not only serve as interpretive communities that extend the outline of the art experience, but are also sources from which the artist actively draws as the locus of art making expands to embrace theories and practices.”⁹

In “Scrutinising Studio Art and its Study: Historical Relations and Contemporary Conditions” (2005), Elizabeth Grierson refers to the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas where he advocates for a “radical generosity” between different practices cognisant of their otherness and their movement towards each other: “a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.”¹⁰

In *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (2005) Ernst van Alphen writes: “Art

is a laboratory where experiments are being conducted that shape thought into visual and [other] imaginative ways of framing the pain points of a culture...the...visual and verbal [are] means by which artworks and artists practice cultural philosophy.”¹¹

Contributors to this first issue of *Scope (Art)* share an experimental context in which writing is one mode for the exploration of ideas and the reflection on practices. Clive Humphreys considers the act of embodied looking in the drawing studio and the problematic and crucial role of life-drawing today; while Peter Belton explores connections between the formal device of the structural ellipse in the European landscape tradition and his own drawing in New Zealand. The politics of the landscape is highlighted through Lee Houlihan who traces a journey of discovery of her own whakapapa (genealogy) between Pākehā and Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand alongside her ceramic works. Jenny Bain explores the effects of colonisation on the landscape through her self-curated exhibition of textile work as represented in her artist's pages.

Peter Stupples contributes an article on his curation of "War and Peace", an exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2006. Current considerations and options for the curator of public shows are considered. Michele Beevors reviews a recent exhibition by co-sculptor Scott Eady and in doing so, her writing opens up larger issues concerning the 'fallible masculine' and the demise of the cowboy figure so eloquently portrayed in films by John Wayne.

Scott Eady himself contributes artist's pages performative of the vagaries of a gun-toting mentality; and this page can be interactively accessed through the online version of this issue. Ambiguities of gender are considered in terms of the connections between skin and photographic practices by Kate Mahoney; while Ana Terry logs her installation project as an activity of sensory archaeology through which wall covering becomes a skin enwrapping the histories of a space. Leoni Schmidt writes alongside this project and considers acts of seeing; architecture as a critical practice; histories narrated through form; and the particularities of jute as a covering material.

Lynn Taylor inserts her print-making practice into the seafaring history of Aotearoa/New Zealand and uses narrative and poetic formats in her artist's pages to reinforce the movement of the writing between past, present and future. Such a movement across time is also discernible in Michele Beevors' review of an artist's residency taken up at Otago Polytechnic School of Art by fellow Australian artist, Leslie Matthews. A sentiment for the past and an erasure of labour as sometimes manifest in jewellery and in the format of the Antiques Roadshow run parallel with a nostalgia for the days before the current conservatism and rampant capitalism in the writer's home country.

Marie Strauss' artist's pages also traverse time as she connects her current drawing, painting, photography and ceramic sculpture through themes of violence and horror with her earlier context as an emigrant from apartheid South Africa. Working across the boundaries of disciplines is also evident in Michael Morley's article where he considers the relationships between sound and painting.

For Alexandra Kennedy it is the specific practice of painting engaging reflexively with its own demise or 'endgame' which is of prime importance; and Craig McNab revels in the specificities of photography in his book review of the award-winning *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*, edited by Lara Strongman (2006).

In an artist's travel essay, Rodney Browne provides a spate of images to underscore the ubiquity of the photographic image in our era where iconic art monuments such as the Acropolis are experienced through the mediation of the quick digital snapshot. In contrast, Lyn Plummer's travel essay on the Semana Santa in Spain lingers lovingly on the materials deployed in this ritual.

The concluding article in this issue is jointly presented by Bridie Lonie and Qassim Saad. Whilst situated in New Zealand, they 'travelled' near and far to consider the context, effects and implications of the cartoons of Mohammad first published in a Danish newspaper. Respect for cultural difference is integral to the argument and performed through the conjunction of the two voices without collapsing into a mythic unity.

Visual images abound in *Scope (Art)* and sit (mostly in colour) next to the written word. The writing is sometimes *about* the images; often *like* the images; in some instances written *alongside* the visual; or making a point *with* the studio work. The journal hopes to encourage writing and making, word and image, history-theory and studio practice in various combinations and permutations, without being prescriptive. It seeks to involve the community within Otago Polytechnic School of Art, whilst issuing an invitation to its multifarious communities of practice outside the School to also become involved in contributing to its pages and online interactive possibilities.

Foucault says: "[I]t is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say."¹² Certainly the relationship between word and image is an 'impossible' one and will never be simple. But, in writing alongside the image or in making alongside the word, we do not have to seek resolution for the problematics of this ancient conundrum. It is in the productive tension between word and image, making and writing, practice and theory, theory and history, where new understandings can happen. The editors hope that *Scope (Art)* will play its own modest and incremental role in furthering such possibilities.

- 1 Gotthold E Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Fotheringham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1776/1965), 161.
- 2 WJT Michell, "Word and Image", in Robert S Nelson and Richard Schiff (eds), *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 47.
- 3 See Gilles Deleuze, "The Visible and the Articulable" in Sean Hand (ed. & trans.) *Foucault/Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); and Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
- 4 See endnote 2, 47-57.
- 5 Ibid., 49.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 47.
- 8 Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004), xi.
- 9 Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (London: Sage, 2005), 173.
- 10 Elizabeth Grierson, "Scrutinising Studio Art and its Study: Historical Relations and Contemporary Conditions", unpublished paper presented at "Eye-Site: Situating Practice and Theory in the Visual Arts" (AAANZ Conference, University of Sydney, 2005), 5.
- 11 Ernst van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xiii.
- 12 Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 9.