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## **The Exegesis and the Shock of the New**

### **Abstract**

Central to all postgraduate research, is the expectation that postgraduate students make a major contribution to new knowledge in the discipline. In the developing field of creative arts research, "new knowledge" sits in an ambiguous relation to a pre-existing avant-garde tradition that valorises originality and the "shock of the new". Whilst, according to Robert Hughes, 'the idea of the avant-garde petered out in the institutionalised culture of late modernism' (Hughes 1981:6) and postmodernism has theoretically rendered originality and the author dead, I would suggest that the avant-garde "shock of the new" persists as a stain in institutional art education vision. In art discourse, the shock of the new has been figured as transgressive, an attempt to break the existing rules and create "shock". As "shock value" is undermined by habituation, artists increasingly have to ratchet up "shock value" in order to maintain the level of shock. But is this really the shock of the new?

Working with Martin Heidegger's notion of "handlability", I will argue that the "shock of the new" is a particular understanding that is realized through our dealings with the tools and materials of production, rather than a self-conscious attempt at transgression. In the "work" of art, we do not consciously seek the "new" but rather are open to what emerges in the interaction with the materials of practice. Through these material dealings, Levinas notes, 'we gain access to the world in an original and an originary way (Levinas 1996:19). The exegesis is a reflection on these "shocking" realizations.

### **Introduction**

Central to all postgraduate research is the expectation that postgraduate students make a major contribution to new knowledge in their research discipline. In the developing field of creative arts research "new knowledge" sits in an ambiguous relation to a pre-existing avant-garde tradition that valorises originality and the "shock of the new". Whilst, according to Robert Hughes, 'the idea of the avant-garde petered out in the institutionalised culture of late modernism' (Hughes 1981:6) and postmodernism has theoretically rendered originality and the author dead, I would suggest that the avant-garde "shock of the new" persists as a source of anxiety in contemporary art practice.

Further, I would suggest that this anxiety has come to infect institutional creative arts research.

In this paper I want to refigure understandings of originality and the "shock of the new" in terms of Martin Heidegger's notion of "handlability". I will argue that the "shock of the new" is a particular understanding that is realized through our dealings with the tools and materials of production, rather than a self-conscious attempt at transgression. In the "work" of art, we do not consciously seek the "new" but rather are open to what emerges in the interaction with the materials and processes of practice. Immanuel Levinas notes that through these material dealings 'we gain access to the world in an original and an originary way' (Levinas 1996:19). I propose that the task of the creative exegesis is to extend on existing domains of knowledge through its reflection on these "shocking realizations".

### **The Shock of the New and Creative Arts Research**

In a performance in 1977, Mike Parr chopped off his left arm. Understandably everyone was rendered speechless by this act of self-mutilation. The fact that many knew that Mike Parr didn't have a left arm, didn't appear to reduce the shocking effect. Every one, including his close friends, was overwhelmed by the event. In its capacity to produce a sense of speechless disbelief or shock amongst his audience, Parr's performance exemplifies what has come to be seen as the "shock of the new".

In the avant-garde, the "shock of the new" has been figured as transgressive, an attempt to break existing rules and usher in the new. Certainly the event created horror and rendered the audience speechless, but did the shock/horror of Parr's *Cathartic Action* (1977) create the new? I would suggest that this particular performance actually works with a particular formula that has come to characterize much avant-garde practice. This formula involves a conscious attempt, on the part of the artist, to create an event that puts the viewer in crisis.

The "shock" that puts the viewer in crisis can be explained by the Kantian understandings of the sublime encounter. According to Kant, the sublime encounter takes a particular form. In the face of terror or wonder, an observer experiences an eruption of feeling that overwhelms the senses and brings reason to its knees. However, while this horror initially disrupts ordinary perception and astonishes the senses, Kant believes that human reason is able to overcome and recontain this immense shock to the system. For Kant, the sublime encounter exemplifies the power of the rational mind to deal with overwhelming and seemingly unimaginable events. The problem with this pattern, as Mike Parr discovered from his latest performance work *Malevich*, is that the viewer becomes habituated, grows quickly bored and looks around for novelty, that is, the "next" new. I would suggest that, in their quest continually to put their audiences in crisis, artists tend to mistake novelty with the new. According to François Lyotard, a 'despair that nothing further will happen' (Lyotard 1984: 43) drives the avant-garde "shock of the new". It is this despair that puts the artist in crisis.

The obsession with the new that conditions avant-garde art practice has come to infect art school programs at both the undergraduate and post-graduate level. From first year art studies on, "originality" becomes a key criterion used in the evaluation of student work. At postgraduate level, this expectation becomes more explicit in the stated expectation that postgraduate research make an original contribution to knowledge in the field of research.(1) As a consequence students operate in a state of constant crisis in search of the new.

The question that this raises is simple. Can we or should we set out to find the new?

In this paper I argue that the quest for originality and the new, which underpins both contemporary avant-garde and creative arts research, operates according to a faulty logic. By definition the "new" cannot be pre-conceived. In the face of the seemingly limitless possibilities, practice cannot know or preconceive its outcome. Rather, the new emerges through process as a shudder of an idea, which is then realized in and through language. This languaging is the task of the exegesis.

### **Heidegger and Handlability**

How, in the face of the indeterminate, do we come upon this shudder of an idea? Radically, Martin Heidegger argues that it is not consciousness that forms the basis of our understanding. Rather, consciousness proceeds from understanding and this understanding is predicated upon our dealings in the world. For Heidegger, the drama of human existence is orientated around the possibilities that being-in-the-world throws up. Faced with what is thrown up, Levinas suggests that 'possibility must be seized in its very possibility' (Levinas 1996: 24-25). This way of being thrown forward towards one's own possibilities is a crucial moment of understanding.

Heidegger argues that we do not come to "know" the world theoretically through contemplative knowledge in the first instance. Rather, we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling. In this formulation, notes Don Ihde, a praxical engagement with tools, materials and ideas becomes primary over the assumed theoretical-cognitive engagement (Ihde 1979:117).

"Art" can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice. It is not just the representation of an already formed idea. In this matrix engagement with tools or technology produces its own kind of sight. The kind of "sight" through which we come to know how to paint, to dance or to write, Heidegger terms circumspection (*Umsicht*). For Heidegger, it is through circumspection that the "new" emerges. In this way, says Levinas, 'we gain access to the world in an original and an originary way' (Levinas 1996:19).

### **The Catastrophe in Creative Practice**

Heidegger's theorization of handlability and understanding is premised on a capacity to let go of preconceptions and seize possibility in its very possibility. However, shedding preconceptions is a very difficult state to achieve. As Deleuze notes:

They say that the painter is *already* in the canvas, where he or she encounters all the figurative and probabilistic givens [*données*] that occupy and preoccupy the canvas. To try and remove the figurative givens is a very difficult thing. (Deleuze 2003:48).

In creative arts research, this "battle" is initiated at the outset, in the writing of the research proposal. Researchers are expected to conceive an outcome in advance, and identify the significance and innovation of the research proposal. Intentionality sets in place preconceptions about what the work will do. Thus in creative arts research, a battle ensues between the preconceptions established by intention and what emerges in the working process. All too

often preconception wins out. The concept dominates over what is emerging in practice.

So how do we get beyond preconception? How can we be open enough to possibility in its very possibility? Deleuze suggests that in order to break through the givens, a catastrophe has to occur (Deleuze 2003:46). This catastrophe can be exemplified in Francis Bacon's painting process. Bacon explains that in order to shed the figurative and probabilistic givens already in the canvas, he will commence painting by throwing paint or by making random and accidental marks on the canvas:

Very often the involuntary marks are much more deeply suggestive than others, and those are the moments when you feel that anything can happen... The marks are made, and you survey the thing like you would a sort of graph [diagramme]. And you see within this graph the possibilities of all types of facts being planted (Bacon quoted in Deleuze 2003:49).

Deleuze notes that these marks are no longer either significant or signifiers: they are a-signifying traits. He continues:

They are traits of sensation, but of confused sensation. And above all, they are manual traits and not conceptual ideas. It is here that the painter works with a rag, stick, brush, or sponge. (Deleuze 2003:48)

Deleuze argues that it is at the point closest to catastrophe that we abandon ourselves to conceptual "logic" and rhythm kicks in. Whilst we are thinking too much, responding with our intellect, we do not attend to the rhythms that constitute the creative process. In this state of catastrophe, says Deleuze:

It is as if the hand assumed an independence, and began to be guided by other forces, making marks that no longer depend on either our will or our sight. These almost blind manual marks attest to the intrusion of another world into the visual world of figuration. The painter's hand intervenes in order to shake its own dependence and break up the sovereign optical organization: one can no longer see anything. (Deleuze 2003:49)

This abandonment to conceptual logic doesn't just happen in the visual arts. As a theoretician, Derrida has detailed his own catastrophe:

By accident, and sometimes on the brink of an accident, I find myself writing without seeing. Not with my eyes closed, to be sure, but open and disoriented in the night; or else during the day, my eyes fixed on something else, while looking elsewhere, in front of me, for example when at the wheel: I then scribble with my right hand a few squiggly lines on a piece of paper attached to the dashboard or lying on the seat beside me. Sometimes, still without seeing, on the steering wheel itself. (Derrida 1993:3)

According to Deleuze, the catastrophe provides the turning point, which allows the emergence of another world into the work (Deleuze 2003:49). In the chaos or catastrophe a rhythm emerges. It is a germ of order or rhythm. He comments that it is 'a violent chaos in relation to the figurative givens, but it is a germ of rhythm in relation to [a] new order' (Deleuze, 2003:49). This new thing "happening" is the shock of the new.

I've talked a lot about practice in this paper and a little about the mechanics of the exegesis. However this is precisely the point. This paper, like the exegesis, is concerned with those realizations that emerge out of the chaos of practice. The task of the exegesis to produce movement in thought itself. Such movement cannot be gained through contemplative knowledge, but rather must take the form of concrete understanding. This concrete understanding, as I have shown, arises in our dealings with ideas, tools and materials of practice. It is those shocks that constitute the shock of the new. This constitutes the possibility of creative arts research.

## Notes

1. At Monash University, the Faculty of Art and Design has questioned the use of the epistemological criteria of new knowledge in relation to art-making. In setting out criteria for evaluation, they have opted for the criteria of cultural significance. Return to paper.

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