

Traumatic acts and therapeutic structures: A few ideas in, around and associated with Stamm

by Jonathan Nichols & Amita Kirpalani

I

The idea of a 'traumatic object' is around and can be found lurking in conversations about dOCUMENTA (13). Between us this year, the language of trauma is closer to being caught up with what happens with art making and art writing. Which is slightly different.

As I read it, because I didn't see it, dOCUMENTA (13) used broader associative ways to identify traumatic objects: stories etc. (For instance, I suppose Lee Miller didn't pinch Hitler's toothbrush.) Association is key. Early on we introduced in Stamm [Jan Verwoert's](#) take on trauma and art making as to do with a mechanics of empathy, which is closer to the way I understand it.

The idea of place is important here. The traumatized object is something which suffers the pressure(s) of place. Outward as well as inward pressure. Stamm was established to apply the pressure of regular writing against exhibitions which occur largely within a few city blocks. Supporting this set-up is a collection of voices that clash, jar and don't quite align. Not to represent a cross-section, but rather to associate, since most of us are looking not only within but, crucially, beyond a particular local 'scene'.

II

Hal Foster suggested recently that we are fatigued with a rhetoric of avant-garde ruptures, breakings, tipping points and are now preoccupied with stories of survival and persistence. I'm seeing the vogue of 'old and new art' together as to do with seeking a clearer sense of temporality in art making (time and space). This is also though a retreat in part from contemporary practice. Hal Foster says the times are for changing, and 'radical new'—in the sense that he holds to modernist values—is not being looked to so much post-2008.

III

We've been talking about process as trauma and regularity as therapy. The same way an exhibition space offers a regularity of event and venue. I like the idea of the exhibition space operating as the office, rather than the studio operating as the office. Labour within the studio is trauma but the presentation of an object that has been produced in this context compounds the issue.

Heightened, compounded and, perhaps worst of all, very known: an exhibition space is mutable and contains a show, but as well it can impose its character, it's a mutable enterprise or can, on occasion, background a work in ambivalence. In the way that a gallery is a kind of stage for the art, the idea of the text is a stage too. It too can hold up an artwork and offer its own rescue. It can also shut it out and down of course and play the games of hierarchy: a counter-discourse of 'destruction' and destructive acts. A therapeutic structure, be it writing (as in Stamm) or an exhibition or gallery, can rescue the traumatic object.

IV

If writing more generally is proposed as a therapeutic structure, we might look at art and artists that further interrogate this idea of collaboration and direct reference to therapeutic, cathartic structures. Some favourite examples:

[The Telepathy Project](#)

[A Constructed World](#)

Nat & Ali's therapy session screen at Hells

[Sophie Calle](#)

[Marina Abramovic](#)

[Stuart Rinholt](#)

[Anastasia Klose](#)

[Chiara Fumai](#)

The greatest tragedy of President Clinton's Administration, Mike Kelley

[Otto Muehl](#)

[Mike Parr](#)

[Dani Marti](#)

[Rose Nolan](#)

V

Cairns. Little stacks of rocks, a kind of tourist graffiti that populates historical monuments and natural wonders. These are temporary markers of an individual experience. But there is deceit at play too. Technically this individual act is a collective experience and the residue, the cairn, undoes the 'naturalness' of the vista.

This style of publishing—a collective, monthly posts, 300-word count (rarely adhered to), with few other 'rules'—is its own little stack of different-sized pebbles. Perhaps to be knocked over soon after its construction, imminently dismantled. Marking the viewing, the experience. Sometimes contributing to it, sometimes littering. Balanced and not.



Kate Smith, Sutton Gallery, 12
October - 10 November 2012

The mind is a muscle: Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'

In April 2013 a workshop and showing of Yvonne Rainer's iconic performance piece, *Trio A*, will be held in Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. I plan to participate in the four-day workshop to be hosted by the VCA.

I was introduced to *Trio A* via YouTube a few years ago. I had spent the summer in Europe, house-sitting a friend's apartment and visiting with lots of artists. I was struck by just how strongly choreography and the relationship between object and

the moving body had returned to the centre of many young artists' practices.

Interestingly, my friend, who is a senior artist actively interested in the world and how people are thinking and making, had a new addition to his already extensive book collection—dance. I spent an indulgent month reading my way through a rich collection of catalogues, anthologies and monographs on the likes of Trisha Brown, William Forsythe, Pina Bausch and, of course, Yvonne Rainer. It was Brown's and Rainer's works in particular that engaged me: Brown's relationship to the visual translation of dance, authorship and the authentic revival of works, and Rainer's tough paring back of dance's theatre, her focus on the objective presence of the body and its movement, the stringent nature of her *No manifesto* (1965), and her revision of the relationship to audience.

Trio A is a significant work for any artist working with movement. A short work, originally five minutes long, it is a task-oriented performance; a sequence of single movements, one following the other fluidly but without repetition. The piece is executed without regard for the audience. It has been performed in both theatre and gallery environments and adapted and interpreted by dancers and non-dancers alike. Rainer has in fact titled the work under a number of iterations that have allowed her to include film, written and spoken word in its presentation (for example, *Trio A geriatric*, where Rainer verbalises those actions she can no longer physically perform), and be performed forwards, backwards, in cycles and by others.

A few months ago I read an article (*October*, no. 140, 2012) by an American scholar, Julia Bryan-Wilson, who has written extensively on *Trio A*. The article detailed her accidental participation in a *Trio A* workshop held at the University of California in 2008 and the challenge of relating to the work in a physical rather than cerebral manner. Her article struck a chord with me. I realised I am excited about becoming part of the *Trio A* alumni yet terrified of being an actual participant. I've become so used to relying on my brain that I'm anxious about relying on my body. Perhaps it is that reduction that is at the essence of Rainer's piece: that space where the mind becomes just another muscle in the body.

Yvonne Rainer, [Trio A](#), 1978, video, 10:30 minutes.





Eyes wide shut

In building a figure from clay we might start from the inside—the kernel of vital organs perhaps—and work our way outwards. This process would mean that each substrate, each increasing layer, would be felt into being by the fingers. Classical sculpture (or drawing, or painting) insists that any figure is first and foremost a volume that is supported by an inner structure; a musculature that defines the form of the outer surface that the eye perceives. Understanding the ‘inner’ layer thus allows the correct depiction of the ‘outer’. This is why artists of the Renaissance undertook to record the anatomy of the human body as a surgeon might; by peeling back subsequent layers and analysing the contingency of each part upon the whole.

But this kind of analytical approach only takes us so far. You might argue that even depicting something exactly as it appears to the eye is a gross distortion of

how things really are, or at least how things are really perceived. So what if we followed a similar process, but one where a kind of visual feeling took precedent over analytical description? Start from the centre and work outwards again, but this time your eyes are closed and only touch guides the unwinding of material into form. The figure (or drawing, or painting) is only completed when it feels right rather than when it looks right. Limbs might distort, the geometry of space might become skewed, faces generalise, features only partially form. But at one level what we are left with might be a closer approximation of what we set out to achieve.

‘The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain closed up in the separate life of each consciousness.’

This is a quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty writing (in 1945) on Cezanne. In the piece he tries to describe what he saw as Cezanne’s ‘doubt’—that gnawing feeling of failure, or sense of an as-yet unattained ideal which pushed him ever beyond the immediate work at hand. You might argue that Cezanne was a painter who always had his eyes wide open, that he tried to record faithfully what the eye perceived. But in doing this he moved past how the world logically appeared, attempting instead a synthesis of seeing and feeling which embedded him in his subject. Merleau-Ponty quotes him as saying: ‘The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness’.

Two current exhibitions set me thinking in this direction: Naomi Eller’s ceramic works at C3 and Brent Harris’s new works at Tolarno. Both artists seem to want to achieve a synthesis between seeing and feeling, to unwind their ‘figures’ from their material ground as though discovering them for the first time. Part of me wants to call this tendency ‘re-classicism’, because in it we recognise something not only fundamental to the creative process, but also a striving to find archetypal forms that underwrite all things. Unsurprisingly both artists make reference to grand Biblical drama. For Eller, Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden provide a meta-narrative which suggests all human struggle, big and small. For Harris it is the Stations of the Cross (and in this series the Fall in particular) which call him to ponder mortality. ‘What happens next’, he seems to be saying, ‘can’t be described, but it can be felt’. If this sounds bleak it’s not. Humour and wonder animate each exhibition. In both, the act of uncovering inner worlds is revealed as one of necessary lightness.

Naomi Eller, *Nothing is set in stone*, [c3 contemporary art space](#), Melbourne, 21 November - 9 December 2012.

Brent Harris, *The Fall*, [Tolarno Galleries](#), Melbourne, 21 November - 15 December 2012.



Naomi Eller, 'The Fates: Nona', 2012, ceramic. Photo: John Brash



Naomi Eller, 'The remnants of Eve', 2012, ceramic. Photo: John Brash



Naomi Eller, 'The formation of Adam & Eve', 2012, ceramic. Photo: John Brash



Naomi Eller, 'The flight of man', 2012, ceramic. Photo: John Brash



Naomi Eller, 'The

Fates: Decima', 2012,
ceramic. Photo: John
Brash



Naomi Eller, c3 contemporary art
space, 2012. Photo: John Brash



Brent Harris, 'The Fall', 2012.
Photo: Andrew Curtis



Brent Harris, 'The Fall', 2012,
monotypes. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Brent Harris, '#81' from the series 'The Fall', 2012, Monotype. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Brent Harris, '#37' from the series 'The Fall', 2012, monotype. Photo: Andrew Curtis

Sadie Chandler: Café society

Figures and faces have always been a feature of Sadie Chandler's iconography. From her varnish-obscured portraits of an anonymous, genteel European ancestry to her pre-*Mad men* mad women strutting their stuff, and the latest forays into the group portrait as social document, art and life converge.

Most recently, Chandler worked on the *Moreland portraits*, a public art project in the Victoria Mall, Coburg, in October 2012. A related work is *North*, a 10 x 3 metre papered wall of drawings for North Cafeteria on Rathdowne Street, North Carlton, with opening hours more generous than your average art gallery or temporary art project.

Here, taking time out from the business of life, one can enjoy the view of people coming and going alongside those fixed to the wall more permanently. Going soft in the heat of a sultry afternoon I feel a bit like the mad woman in *The yellow wallpaper* disappearing into the background. Familiar figures and faces pop up in a seemingly endless array of frames, all different but somehow the same, reduced to an all-over signifying, simplified line. These figures stand tall, full frontal or in side view, cut-off like a portrait, or semi-inclined, stretched out like an odalisque or participating in some kind of action. With their pointed gestures, striking poses, look and dress and all the right accoutrements, a life in pictures is played out before my eyes.

I recognise a lot of them from art history: a Picasso portrait, a cubist still life, a Matisse interior (the one with the goldfish), a de Chirico scene in a Renaissance town square and what looks like a flagellation or some other dire scene from the Bible. There are culinary delights, scenes from nature, house portraits, people portraits, a boy dressed as Superman. Some of them more serious: a person standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square, a statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled, a random person lying dead in the street and lots of women crying. This is a society portrait with everything possible brought into the frame. There's genre and gender, and current affairs, and lots of art references to go on. And then there is the line, always the line, like studies in motion, composition, expression, and that characteristic Chandler curlicue flourish.

And here she is—the artist in person—joining me for cake and coffee. I just love

that it's Saturday.

Sadie Chandler, *North*, 2012, [North Cafeteria](#), 717 Rathdowne Street, Carlton North.



Sadie Chandler, 'North', 2012, ink on paper pasted to wall, North Cafeteria, Carlton North, with the artist

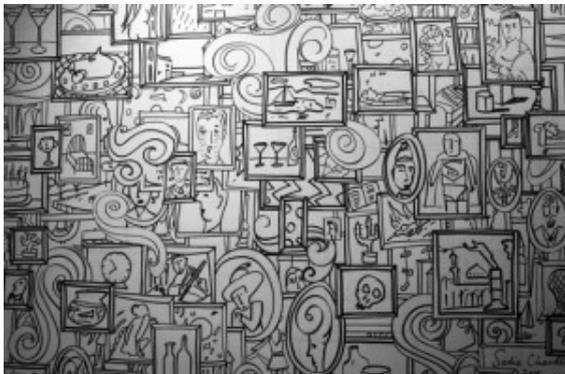


Sadie Chandler, 'North', 2012, ink on paper pasted to wall, North Cafeteria, Carlton North



Sadie Chandler, 'North', 2012, detail featuring a couple of Chardins

still lifes, a Cindy Sherman woman standing (top right) and another Cindy Sherman of a crying woman on her bed (bottom left)



Sadie Chandler, 'North', 2012, detail featuring the Mona Lisa (top right), the toppling of Saddam Hussein (bottom right) and a Matisse nude (bottom left)



Sadie Chandler, 'North', 2012, detail featuring a man in front of a tank at Tiananmen Square (middle left) and an Ingres reclining nude (top/middle left)

Eat, clay, love

Yoko Ozawa rides her bike to Northcote Pottery, and rides home with a 5-kilogram bag of clay. Placing the clay on the table next to her throwing wheel, Yoko sketches small shapes in a notebook alongside recipes for glazes.

Yoko prepares a ball of clay, kneading it to release pockets of air. This is the beginning of a relationship with the clay. Different clays have unique temperaments. While some clays are happy to be beaten, mashed and squeezed into large figures, other clays require a more delicate touch and sensitivity but enjoy spinning on the wheel being pinched and caressed into shape. Learning how to work with the clay's personality takes time and a lot of touch.

After placing a cone of clay in the centre of the wheel, Yoko pushes the pedal with her foot to start the clay spinning. Yoko's fine fingers and focus of mind allow her to throw very thin walls that rise to form traditional Japanese teapots, small trees and other vessels for domestic use or wonder.

Yoko stamps her initials on the bottom of each piece and the raw objects dry together on her wooden shelves before meeting up with other Northcote locals for a bisque firing. They return home, get a treatment of glaze and return for a final stoneware firing.

Finished pieces come home and rest in different parts of the house. One wide black vessel (*Moonlight* vase) with a second internal wall sits by a window and at night reflects the light and image of the sky and moon outside. Yoko's tree vases gather en masse to create a forest on the dining room table. A small green insect passes by to inspect the lovely curve of a stump teapot. Yoko delights in these collaborations with nature. Plants or moss outside are welcomed inside to mingle with her creations. Recently her work has taken its shape from the bantam chickens that dwell in her veggie garden.

Yoko's work can best be enjoyed with a cup of tea or some onigiri at Kappaya café at the Abbotsford Convent where an installation of her ceramic light shades hang permantly.

[Yoko Ozawa Pottery.](#)



Yoko Ozawa, 'Moonlight' vase.
Photo: Olga Bennett



Yoko Ozawa, tree vases
and dish. Photo: Olga
Bennett



Yoko Ozawa, moss in a little milk
jug. Photo: Olga Bennett



Yoko Ozawa, stump teapot. Photo:
Olga Bennett



Yoko Ozawa, a chook and the eggs.
Photo: Olga Bennett

Being there—experiencing the art of Louise Bourgeois

I was at a gathering the other night where I mentioned that I was planning to write my next Stamm piece on the current Louise Bourgeois show at Heide.

‘Oh God, blah blaaah ... the mother, the father, the nanny ... how many articles have I read about that!?!’

‘Nooooooooooooooooo!’ I say, ‘I’m going to write about how I *felt* about seeing the work’.

‘Oh yessssssssssss ... what?’

'Well, for a start, how great it is to see something in the flesh.'

Anyway, I can't remember the rest verbatim but really that's the gist, isn't it? Rhetorical, I know, but I think the reason that so many people admire and engage with the art of Bourgeois is not specifically because of the narrative that she says is mostly the basis for the work's inception. It is our, the audience's, often visceral and thus extremely personal response to it that really gives the work its gravitas. It has the concerns of the individual and the universal in its measure. Or maybe I am being vain about the human race. I can see the spiral starting to turn ...

The Bourgeois work shown at Heide has an addendum show that sits not quite alongside it, but next door, and is a grouping of work by Australian artists (also an audience) responding, 'speaking to' the art of Louise Bourgeois. The catalogue, which addresses both exhibitions, contains essays by the Australian artists. Some are more formal than others. My favourite was Patricia Piccinini's. It put a lump in my throat the way Louise Bourgeois's art did. It was personal, like the sculptures made of worn towels that Bourgeois had used until threadbare to dry down her body and perhaps the bodies of her family. Piccinini writes of her aspiration, or, perhaps more accurately, her admiration of the practice of Louise Bourgeois, of her solace in finding the work of a woman artist in the wake of so much art by men, a woman's art that in all its contrary devices was 'just as strong, just as magnificent as the massive works that surrounded it ...', whose work touched her 'emotionally in a way these other works didn't'.

The most poignant thing I felt about seeing the show was seeing the work up close. Understanding its tactility, detail and the scale; identifying the types of fabric in the cloth works: bathroom towels (hers), deconstructed clothes (hers again) and reconfigured vintage vestiges, ribbed jersey pulled inward as an orifice, the particular waffle weave used in thermals to keep you warm now constituting bodies headless in an embrace (with a prosthetic leg attached to boot). I admired the tenuous poise of the *Spider/Mother* sculpture under which I stood. I scrunched up my eyes as I squeamishly squinted at needles puncturing spools of thread and then there was the stitching all over bodies and heads, and the weave in a damask of text. I relished my relationship to the materiality of the objects themselves, a feeling that could never be experienced through an image alone.

[Louise Bourgeois: late works](#), 24 November 2012 - 11 March 2013; [Louise](#)

[Bourgeois and Australian artists](#), 13 October 2012 - 14 April 2013, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen, Victoria.



Louise Bourgeois, 'Couple IV',
1997, fabric, leather, stainless steel,
plastic



Louise Bourgeois, 'Spider', 1997,
steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric,
rubber, silver, gold, bone



Louise Bourgeois, 'Knife figure',
2002, fabric, steel, wood