

3 Contemporary Practice

3.1 The absurd now

In a world where reality is affected by commercial media projection systems, digital entertainment envelops us, time is accelerating and events are repeating themselves, and the absurd, with its own mechanisms of senselessness and repetition, has become a poignant reflection of our times.

The virtual space offered by networked computer technologies has nudged aside linear dialogues and time frames, instead offering infinite possibility and endless exploration of this vast realm, so long as the user is in the mood for infinity and endlessness and continual probing while remaining sedentary in physical space.

Jorge Luis Borges understood the space/time hole that was gashed into our lives by technology, before its effect had been widely observed. The cyclical form and realms of virtual or dreamlike realities, which echo our condition, are explored in Borges' short story *The Circular Ruins*. The protagonist journeys to the circular ruins of a temple, to dream up a man in perfect detail, to be his progeny. These ruins represent, perhaps, some damaged logic circuit in his own mind, his own past or his reading of events and personal histories.

He knew that this temple was the place required for his invincible intent; he knew that the incessant trees had not succeeded in strangling the ruins of another propitious temple downstream which had once belonged to gods now burned and dead; he knew that his immediate obligation was to dream (Borges 2001: 43).

Further into the story reality and the nature of existence is questioned, the dreamed man becomes 'real' and in his father, the dreamer, attempts to conceal the fact that his son is a product of these dreams.

... by some means find out he was a mere simulacrum. Not to be a man, to be a projection of another man's dreams - what an incomparable humiliation, what madness! (ibid. :45)

It is at this point the dreaming man realises he is trapped in a kind of repeat event, a vacuum of history, and that he too is a product of another's dreams.

For what had happened many centuries before was repeating itself.... With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood

Jorge Luis Borges understood this space time hole that was gashed into our lives, by technology, before its effect had been widely observed.

(www.redescolor.ilce.edu.mx)



that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him (ibid. :46).

The American artist Bruce Nauman's interrogation of the human condition and his explorations into the meaning/lack of meaning in language call into question our own view of this 'reality' that we are spectators to. Nauman's work comes out of 'being frustrated about the human condition.' He acknowledges, in the face of pervasive human cruelty, that he can't change it, but it remains for him 'a frustrating part of human history.' (van Assche 1998:80).

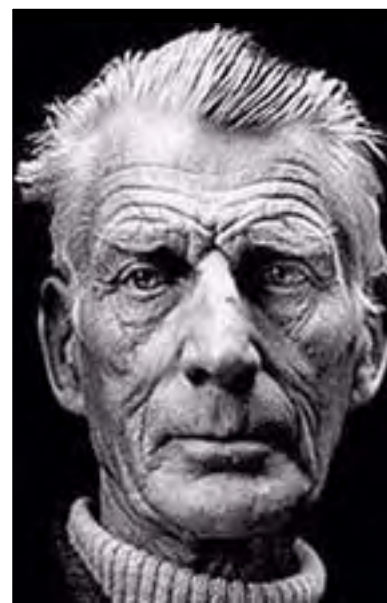
Nauman's works are executed in a wide range of media from sound to video, sculpture to neon lights, drawing to photography. He is not as concerned with the material as he is 'in the experience itself, in the encounter with the other' (van Assche 1998:13). These engineered encounters with the other 'direct one's attention to one's contradictory inner voices' encouraging the audience to explore that uncomfortable internal reflective space (Simon 1994:61). His video works *World Piece (Projected)*, *World Piece (Received)* from 1996 explore how media operates and how it is consumed, hence '*Projected*' and '*Received*.' *World Piece (Received)* explores the dialogue between viewer and TV set, and the dialogue between multiple sets. The pace of the work is accelerated, quite deliberately leaving the viewer little space for reflection, forefronting the 'hyper' of the now.

Repetition, cyclical behaviour, actions frozen and reiterated and absence of meaning are elements that Nauman invokes in much of his work, all these are explored by the absurdist movement in literature. The central writer in this movement is Samuel Beckett. Absurdism explores notions of futility of an existence, which one is either trapped within physically or existentially. There are close thematic parallels between the absurd movement and Dada in the fine arts. These strands are extended in Nauman's work. Nauman 'openly acknowledges' Samuel Beckett's and the absurdist influence in his own work which 'tend to function less as conventional works of art and more as behavioural models forcing participation from the viewer' (Shaffner 1997:19). Meaning and the mechanism for its construction within society and artworks themselves is another pervasive theme. Absence of meaning too can be an essential strategy:

Withholding meaning is a defence against getting sucked dry by communicating with an individual or public that cannot or does not reciprocate. However to refuse to say something is also a way

Bruce Nauman 'openly acknowledges' Samuel Beckett's and the absurdist movement's influence in his own work (ibid.).

(www.jimpoz.com)





Bruce Nauman's 1968 piece
Slow Angle Walk.

(www.mediakunstnetz.de)

of saying it; it points toward an idea by pointing in the opposite direction indicating implicit presence by explicit absence (Simon 1994:61).

Nauman uses language in much of his work, deploying a logic that betrays the construction of meaning, a logic that is often infinite, shifting and nonlinear. Nauman told Jane Livingston about his 1968 piece *Slow Angle Walk*: 'My problem's to make tapes that go on and on with no beginning or end. I wanted the tension of waiting for something to happen, and then you would get drawn into the rhythm of the thing...' (Shaffner 1997:19).

Nauman's looped or cyclical shifting logic is informed by the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, a thinker whom he remains openly indebted to. His 1966 piece *A Rose Has No Teeth* is a direct quote from Wittgenstein's 'philosophical investigations' where Wittgenstein has pursued 'an illogical premise to its self evident and absurd conclusion' (Simon 1994:21). Wittgenstein's seminal work *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* (1921) set out to solve all the problems of philosophy. The logical probes flows thus:

2.223 In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality.

2.224 It is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false.



Ludwig Wittgenstein.

(www.individual.utoronto.ca)

2.225 There are no pictures that are true a priori.

3 A logical picture of facts is a thought.

3.001 A state of affairs is thinkable – this means we can picture it ourselves.

3.01 The totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world (Wittgenstein 1961:19).

But can we surmise, eventually from 3.01, that a picture of the world represents the totality of true thoughts? I'm not sure this is a reversible logic condition. This stream of logic and the reversal of it, are the kinds of spaces Mark Wallinger navigates in his work.

The world has been stood on its head and in order to read its truth you need to have a mirror or to stand on your hands, or to play the soundtrack backwards, or slow down the images. What we see is not to be believed and needs above all to be corrected (Durand 2001: 31).

This quote about Mark Wallinger's 2001 contribution to the Venice Biennale speaks about these contemporary existential probes, where a mediated reality may require corrective, analytical or reverse viewing techniques. These reading techniques, mirroring, upside down, backwards or slowed down, speak about a digitisation of vision, these kinds of filters are generally available in the digital film editing software, used by the media industry, which ultimately speak about manipulation of reality.

Wallinger uses reversal of both time and language in his 1997 video work *Angel*, shot literally in the bowels of the earth - at the foot of the escalators at London's deepest tube station at

Still from Mark Wallinger's
Angel 1997.

(www.artnet.com)





Islington's Angel. In order to realise this work Wallinger had to learn Psalm 16 in reverse and speak it while on the final step of the escalator, a kind of treadmill. To the left and the right around him 'souls of the damned and the redeemed' alternately ascend and descend. In this work Wallinger plays the absurd character *Blind Faith* - a kind of visionary who doesn't see, a preacher or prophet, a blind man to lead the blind. Time is reversed in the final showing of the work and the initially reversed language mostly corrects itself, however the obscuring of meaning by this corrected reversal calls into question the manner in which reality is to be read from that which is constructed. In this case he is referencing belief systems but he is invoking other bodies or systems where power resides.

Wallinger works often play on established binaries such as 'humour and pathos,' 'irony and sincerity' 'popular and sublime' pushing the boundaries of what could be regarded as established or normative views, within an English culture that is both steeped in tradition and fiercely contemporary. It is this space between what is established and what is new within this context that Wallinger has developed this particular oeuvre of sympathetic satire.

Regis Durand writes about his work being 'based on freedom of individual and political conscience'. (Durand 2001: 1) Wallinger has developed a talent for deploying iconography that has 'the densest distillations of ideas and ideologies like cultural zip files' (O'Reilly 2005:84). He invokes a God's eye view of the electric chair in his work *Promethius* (1997), explores public transit spaces and imbues them with religious significance in *Angel* (1997) and *Threshold to the Kingdom* (2000). He uses a live horse in *A Real Work of Art* (1996), all these layered symbols situate the struggles of the past in the space of the present in a manner that is both readable and efficient, facilitating the audiences experiences of these works and bringing particular fevers into view.

3.2 The Aesthetics of Post Production

Post production refers to that phase in film video and digital media production when the raw material for the product has been captured and now must be processed into its final form. Traditionally, in film for example, it would refer to that stage where footage is edited, the sound effects and voice-overs are added along with the musical score to yield the final product as seen by audiences in cinemas.

With the development of digital technologies a lot can be achieved in this stage, such as special effects, image and sound manipulation and virtual character development, to the point that it is no longer a mechanical finishing stage but an intrinsic part of the creative process. Digital technologies have become increasingly affordable and easy to use. Post production tools used to be the sole domain of the industries that could afford them, but are now widely available and easy to use by anyone with a computer and some knowledge of computer applications.

As a result many fine artists, including Douglas Gordon, Kendell Geers and Candice Breitz, use varying forms of postproduction in their practice. This is not merely a case of being technologically enabled, it represents a shift in the manner in which the projected world is viewed, as a result of being able to participate in it rather than merely spectate it. Nicolas Bourriaud argues that this eradicates the 'distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work' (Bourriaud 2002:7). He continues: 'the artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions' (ibid.: 14). This 'infinite chain' reflects the infinite space that the virtual world brings to our attention, making us more aware that we are merely part of human progress and not its splendid end result.

The revision of cultural artefacts represents a re-evaluation of modes of seeing, constructing, projecting or operating, within an increasingly mediated culture. Post-production techniques offer the means to question the very structures of our liberal capitalist system such as time, the media, the structures of power, the status quo and the construction of identity, while using the predominantly established language of the mainstream media and entertainment systems to do this. It is a widely understood language and its translation into artistic mode is seamless. There is a certain subversive (and satisfactory) symmetry that exists by using the predominant projected language to interrogate its own form. Guy Debord labled this 'political use of Duchamp's reciprocal readymade' *détournement* and regarded it as the sole strategy in generating works (ibid.: 30).

Douglas Gordon has produced a series of works using Hollywood 'film noir' movies as his raw material. The intentions he inserts into the original works move them away from the specific narrative intentions of the original films. 'Gordon's intervention diverts us from the usual pattern of watching movies, where real time is nullified in the spectacle; he infinitely postpones the ca-



A still from Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*.

(www.rochester.edu/visible-culture)

tharsis associated with this genre of entertainment' (Monk 2003: 60). Gordon probes a range of issues acting upon contemporary culture such as control or manipulation of time, repetition and cycles of existence, existential probes into the dualistic space of the modern psyche. Most notable is his work *24 Hour Psycho*, where the original Alfred Hitchcock movie is slowed so that the action takes place over 24 hours and not the 104 minutes of the original. The overall effect on time and narrative is dissociative and yet somehow the slowness concentrates the iconographic nature of the classic cinematic form while being essentially iconoclastic. It is this space that his works navigate, calling into question our readings of the original works and indeed the broader culture itself. Phillip Monk writes

Gordon's intervention focuses our attention first perceptually, through an initial distraction where our expectation of the original film are not met, then conceptually as we fully enter the perceptual and psychological distortion that the projection plays out. This dissociative effect links all Gordon's interventions and binds formal structure to thematic intent (Monk 2003:62).

There are many examples of South African artists working with found footage, the use of which has particular resonance geographically, perhaps because of the widespread re-use or redeployment of cultural artefacts within the creative disciplines as a whole. From the use of pop cultural iconography juxtaposed with the gritty proto-urban reality of the 'struggle township' or place of siege in the art works by Willie Bester, to the widespread re-use of packaging and other promotional artefacts within the manufacture of crafts and interior design, South Africans have long had ways of revising and taking ownership of the flotsam and jetsam of consumer society and ways of reconfiguring this mundane detritus.

In the fine arts there are many practitioners working specifically with found mainstream movie material. However this is perhaps a more inadvertent element that links their work rather than something that is fundamentally thematically binding. Kendell Geers used found footage from *Bad Lieutenant* and *The Exorcist* for his 1998-99 video installations *TV Shoot*. Geers frames it thus: 'I have witnessed firsthand the expediency of morality in South Africa, the easy changing of sides and positions without guilt or remorse. What was good is now simply bad and bad is good' (in Williamson & Jamal 1996:58). What is acknowledged is a regionally developed and persistent, but not specific, culture of appropriation, an underlying anarchic behaviour, resulting from a pervasive disrespect for anything institutional. A past where be-

A Still from Kendell Geers' *TV Shoot*.

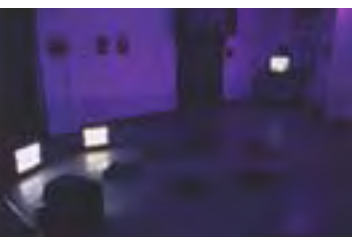
(www.artnet.com)





Candice Breitz's *Diorama* uses found footage from the popular TV series *Dallas*.

(www.seattleweekly.com)



Stills from Candice Breitz' work.

(www.shugoarts.com)



Top (www.shugoarts.com)
Right (www.johnen_schoettle.de)

trayal, exploitation, control and abuse has left a certain residual cynicism within the populace, and an ability to smell imperialist behaviour, even when it is camouflaged in the most elegant prose.

Another South African artist, Candice Breitz has widely used found footage in her practice, which interrogates the language of global media systems, notions of celebrity, the mediated images of gender, and our engagement with a projected popular culture. She questions the constructed language of popular culture, focusing on spoken language and the projected meaning inherent within it. Her work *Diorama* uses footage from the TV series *Dallas*, that ran from 1978 until 1991. The on screen characters are trapped in absurd repetitive states, Jock Ewing for example repeats, 'my barbecue, my house, my barbecue, my house...' The viewer is not offered any kind of narrative relief and 'is left to ponder the relationship between personal memories and social memories shared as consumers of the global media (<http://www.artpace.org/aboutTheExhibition.php> accessed 10-02-06).

Breitz retains a dystopian view of the role media plays in constructing reality (Hunt 2000:84). She also talks about fine art becoming the 'research arm of the fashion and entertainment industries' (ibid.). The use of found footage, for her, is a creative strategy that acknowledges the commercialization of 'narratives of resistance' while perhaps still being able to point out the 'limitations' of consumer culture (ibid.).

Breitz's work probes the boundaries between individuality and 'role specific behaviour' as suggested by the media. How much of who we are or what we think comes from projected norms and how much of it is a result of personal reflection, in an age where time is a precious commodity? Who retains the luxury of identity and who reflects the thoughts that have been projected by popular opinion? Breitz explores notions of violence within language, where language projected has become a discreet yet powerful mechanism of control.

