7.9 Cubic Metres

A gallery within a gallery

Interviews

Eliza Tan and Matthew Mackisack discuss *The Turning* (30/05/09)

Eliza: All right Matthew, could you tell us a little bit more about this piece, [*The Turning*] and how it came about, how it was made?

Matthew: It started off with just making the zoetrope, the object, and wondering what it could mean, how it could be applied. I was interested in the way that cinematic illusion is formed and thought that making a kind of a model of it might be a way to examine it.

And then when it came to the installation here, I was thinking about this, as you say, this kind of sacramental nature of the white cube and how there might be some equivalences between the kinds of illusion formed in cinema and in the gallery, within the rhetoric of the church and religious experience.

Eliza: We were having a conversation previously about the provision of interpretive text for exhibitions, more as a kind of mediating device for audiences. Of course there has been a lot of debate as to whether or not these interpretive texts are really necessary at all?

In fact they kind of force a set of perceptions of a work or an exhibition on an audience. So in this case we have decided to remove that and instead to allow the informative text that you wrote to stand in it's place. So what did the process of writing this piece, this text, mean for you?

Matthew: I was interested to find a way of contextualising the installation. So I suppose to begin with it was a sort of a self-interpretive text, as in interpreting what I've done, and trying to expand the meaning, but trying to do that in an oblique way, to create a narrative situation in which this work might arise.

Its about this character who researches the visions of Lourdes and finds that the experience is shared through the body of the person having the vision - its communicated, this ineffable experience is communicated through Bernadette's body.

This character thinks that this, what Levinas calls "face to face experience" is under threat from a kind of modernist secularism. And then he proposes this situation, this apparatus, to compensate or combat that threat to belief.

He proposes - in a weirdly ahistorical way - he proposes the gallery and the cinema, cinematic experience, as loci of belief, as ways to instigate it and control it.

The thing with interpretive texts, they often try to academicise, if you like, the art work. So this is doing that ironically, and trying to point to that validation which can work both ways - it refers in the text to his role as a Jesuit priest which is to validate this miraculous experience. Validation seems to be the role of the text, and other texts.

Eliza: What are some of the philosophical and literary strands that influence your work?

Matthew: The thing that makes sense is a phenomenological attitude - as an attention to lived experience - but also hermeneutics, how that experience is constructed, affected by, derived from language.

For Paul Ricoeur, for example, poetic language can lead on to new planes of experiences, an emancipatory effect. I'm interested in that in terms of is that possible? Because I see these contexts for belief as being ones that are, there's this balance between an emancipatory change of perspective and one that is defining a perspective. So there is possibly, you could call it a dialectic between the realms of the given and controlled and the forward looking and possibly utopian. Because in the gallery and in the cinema, in the church, anywhere meaning is made, interpretation is actually being narrowed, its not all about free interpretation and free exegesis. But there is still possibility that that interpretation can be made free, a free act. And that's the ongoing critical interest.

Eliza: So do you mean poetic language in terms of rhetoric or do you relate both?

Matthew: Yeah, oh, I see. Yeah. Ricoeur talks about poetic language - after Aristotle - as being basically metaphoric, that in combining two meanings you produce a third and through this third level you can arrive at new knowledge. But then, rhetoric, as in persuasive language, ideological language, could even be the opposite, it could actually have a specific intention to constrain meaning and in doing so pinpoint the subject and locate the subject. This is why glossolalia is interesting - by not being linguistic it seems to sidestep these risks.

Eliza: That's what's interesting in relation to your piece, the field recording you took of people praying in tongues. At some point we spoke about Derrida mentioning that all speech is a form of prayer. Then that form of speech, that form of prayer almost coerces the other party to whom you are praying …. to answer, whether or not you receive an answer is another matter but, is there anything you want to say about…

Matthew: Yeah, the question that demands an answer … glossolalia, speaking in tongues, is interesting in terms of the extent to which it's willed or not by the speaker. Apparently its valid if its not willed, if its experienced as a voice coming to them from elsewhere then that validates it. By applying it here, I was trying to evoke that sense of group experience, the way that something can be urged involuntarily through the group. When I recorded it, it was fascinating to see how it took place - you would have this person leading the prayer at the front and they would start speaking in tongues and then the congregation seem to copy them, gradually spreading out from the front. There is this sense of a private experience, the most private and subjective experience, made public somehow, maybe not it but the idea of it passed on, like I tried to suggest this with Bernadette's witnesses in the text.

But I suppose I'm talking around it, it all comes back to how much volition and how much of the self we have in these situations - we start talking about subjectivity.

Eliza: I suppose meaning is very porous as well, there are porous skins of meaning and a lot of it takes place through a process of osmosis without society, the culture that feeds us the images we see.

Matthew: Yeah, that osmosis is interesting because, with materialist accounts of self that dissipate the subject, leaving it only evidenced by its history, by societal structures, the actual phenomenological lived self is abandoned, so to find ways of talking about that is part of the intention of this installation as well.

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Eliza: Is art, like religion, about the testing of belief or alternatively about the tempering of disbelief and unbelief?

Matthew: It's easy to generalise but … most aesthetic and religious experience is not concerned with testing belief - it wants the opposite. And so historically you can make all these connections; the church of high art, mediating priest-like curators and that sort of thing.

It is critical art that tests belief - it is an important connection in that there's a responsibility that comes with aesthetic language and religious language, in that you are constructing subjectivities and that's why you need this critical attention to it. The *7.9 Cubic Metres* construction points to or allows you to take a critical - and physical - distance and begin to have an awareness of how we are being constructed through rhetoric, be it aesthetic, religious or ideological. It might end up that the languages are different but serving the same purposes.