

The Babylon Project: A Site Specific Artwork at Waverley and Fisher Libraries

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“The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel.”¹

This passage from Plutarch’s Parallel Lives marks the origin of what is most commonly referred to as the Theseus paradox. We see it applied today to the adaptive reuse of older buildings, the replacement of dying cells in the body and the anecdotal claim of a man possessing George Washington’s axe, only that both the head and the handle had been replaced. This provokes certain questions about reality. How much of a thing can we replace before it ceases to be what it was? How much can we trust the surfaces which we perceive? As important as these questions are, they all presuppose a passive nature of reality, a kind of kernel of true experience or objective authenticity at any given moment, waiting to be discovered or connected with. A reality we assume is hidden beneath the deck of Theseus’ ship, large enough and buoyant enough to keep us afloat. But as many of us know, especially those familiar with analytic philosophy and epistemology, reality is very seldom buoyant. It’s heavy cargo to carry around. And it’s not often lying patiently in wait for us. So how do we go about reconciling this inconsistency in the logic of Theseus’ ship? Fortunately, art finds these types of inconsistencies, these cracks among structures rather well, wedging itself between the gaps in the ship’s hull with the potential of adhesion or separation, simultaneously revealing the nature of what lies beneath the surface. Another complementary resolution to this dilemma is aptly articulated in a famous Groucho Marx line:

“He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot, but don’t let that fool you. He really is an idiot.”

Sometimes a ship is only a ship. The hidden passive reality only a fabrication, hence it’s buoyancy. But one that keeps us on course. It makes up our social contracts on common sense and ethics, a civilised discourse which we all subscribe to (some more than others). As Slavoj Žižek might say, it is a belief that mediates our desire for ‘a blend of economic liberalism with a minimally authoritarian spirit of

¹ Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives. with an English Translation by. Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press. London. William Heinemann Ltd. 1914) 1

community'². It also houses our hopes and dreams, our fears and anxieties towards our given circumstances that we, knowingly or not, attribute to it. But beyond these limits we must take a leap of faith. We assume the untameable and elusive nature of our hidden fabrication. We assume a passive reality *a priori*, but submit to something persistent in our being that denies the objective reality or collective wisdom and by such a virtue, surpasses and changes it. It is an impetus that emanates from our cultural substrates and reaches out to our subjectivity. No matter how hard we try to endure or avoid it, produce or destroy it, it catches us off guard and inscribes on us a duty to act. Our duty as artists is that of the Athenians: to locate and help replace old pieces of wood from time to time to redefine the tangible surface of our ship. Because surfaces tell us so much more than we are often willing to admit. In this way, you might say that arts foremost aim is the production of a space where the *persistence of the real*, if you will, can emerge anew from unexpected and exciting avenues. This facilitates a welcome encounter with our deep seeded feelings of dissatisfaction to change the hue of the filter through which we are accustomed to viewing life. All the dissonances of our lives – failure, depression, incompetence, apathy and heartache – are re-framed to be endured and even enjoyed, often simultaneously.

My first conscious encounter with such a sense of persistence came from my visit to the still geographically divided capital city of Nicosia in Cyprus, the home of my paternal lineage. The Turkish invasion and parallel civil war culminating in 1974, produced no victors and history was left to be written by the city itself, especially along the city walls. Gunfire wounds are still physically evident in the skin of the cities facades, much left unattended, making the weight of this city's history even more immediate and pervasive. The Cypriot people have never since been allowed respite from this trauma. Many of them have wilfully incorporated the conflict into their character, this cultural and political disruption that deprives them of cognitive mapping and free movement throughout their own land, to both beneficial and detrimental effect. While at the University of Nicosia I was told a well-known joke among Cypriots on this very issue.

A German, American and Cypriot each travel to Africa on separate research expeditions to learn about different families of elephants. After 20 years of tireless work, the scholars return to present their papers.

The German presents his paper: The Migration Patterns of the African Elephant

The American presents his paper: The Mating Habits of the African Elephant

Finally the Cypriot presents his paper: African Elephants, and a 20 year history of the Cyprus Conflict

² Slavoj Zizek, In Defence of Lost Causes (Verso, London, Verso 2008) 2

This was the first time I consciously processed the importance of the co-dependency of tragedy and comedy. It provides a space where contradictions between our expectations and perceptions of life are welcome. The Cypriot's inability to discard his inherited cultural burden is only matched by the absurdity of the situation. Providing there is a state of recognition or translation – which is a topic for further discussion – playfulness and humour harbour a particular skill in relieving us of the debilitating baggage we carry, often by revealing our faults and trials as triumphs through this sort of absurdity. It suspends us between our conflicting realities, where neither can claim superiority. This conflict of realities bears a similarity to Jacques Derrida's term, *pharmakon*³, from the ancient Greek to describe both poison and remedy. This condition is all too apparent for artists, as we frequently encounter the fine and meandering line that our art struggles to navigate but nevertheless suffers out of a belief in something in art that transcends and decontaminates amongst the standard hierarchies and foundations of society, something that can be recognised beyond the sum of its parts. This is why art exhibits a tendency to portray worlds and perspectives that are false, obscure, fanciful or mischievous. Because it has faith that in appealing to what could arguably be called a universal relation to nonsense. Life doesn't always make sense, nor does it need to. So why should art. Kant famously pioneered the incongruity theory of humour, proposing that we laugh when confronted with our own inadequacy. By extension we could posit that a tragi-comic approach to reality grants art the ability to identify problems as false problems. In other words, problems with solutions waiting beyond the passive reality we ascribe to them. This brings me to the contemporary library and the indeterminate future that awaits it.

After securing a residency with the Waverley Artist Studios in Bondi I became intimately bonded with the studio space which, prior to its operation as an arts school, was itself a library, established in 1914. So as I adopted my studio I was constantly inundated with thoughts of displaced, altered and discarded knowledge. As a curator as well as an artist, I try to remind myself of the terms etymology – to curate literally means to care for objects, from their display to their storage to their restoration. I felt a strange need to take care of knowledge that was no longer present, and by extension say something about the books unifying quality of ignorance. Not only that, I wanted the work to emit a sense of care for our own fragile bodies. It soon became clear that a project was due in Waverley's current library on Denison Street.

The first thing I thought about was how the threats towards the traditional library could be playfully incorporated in a dialogue about the changing approach to access and treatment of public knowledge

³ Jacques Derrida, *Play: From the Pharmakon to the Letter: from Dissemination* trans Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 166-167

Derrida also uses the term *sumploké* (once again from Plato's *Sophist*) which – to use Heidegger's term, recounted by Max Statkiewicz [Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *The Visible and the Invisible in the Interplay between Philosophy, Literature and Reality*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002) *Resemblance: Play Between the Visible and the Invisible*] – is to address something 'as other than what itself is'; and this requires 'a play of masking and unmasking'. It could be said that my artwork takes advantage of both terms, dealing with the duality of intention and identity emphasised by the *pharmakon* and the constant concealing and revealing of those identities that is best illustrated by the *sumploké*.

and information. So in classic Athenian style I searched for gaps in the ship – old timbers to replace - points of dissatisfaction related to Waverley Library, and libraries in general. The type of library I grew up with was well and truly gone. The people were still there, but now everyone sat at computers, only a handful with books in their laps. As young children played on the bottom floor, I wondered what kind of library they would be using during their high school and university days. How long before the contemporary library didn't require bookshelves? I imagined books slowly disappearing from the shelves as they became undervalued, electronically reproduced or otherwise removed. I had found my sense of dissatisfaction. The already absent and endangered books would be the catalyst for my new work which would span two of Sydney's public libraries – Waverley and the University of Sydney's Fisher Library. But an active role to compliment this passive outlook was missing. For that I used the thing that stood in place of these books - dust. Moving through the library shelves, basement archives and even car-park storage rooms, I personally collected copious amounts of dust – this amalgamation of human skin cells, textile fibres, plant pollen, animal hair, minerals and paper fibres. It marked the excess of an interior existence. It was the detritus of human inhabitancy of a physical space. It was like picking up discarded knowledge and experience. I then cast the dust in a resin mixture into moulds of books. Once set, these traces of the libraries use stood in place of their absent counterparts as tangible significations of the persistence of human involvement with the archiving and curation of information about our lives.

Each library has its own history and audience demographic and in turn I tried to approach the project appropriately. At Waverley Library - whose visitor basis is more proportionally tilted towards the general public as opposed to Fisher Library which is predominately populated by tertiary students - books sat among plaster casted elements of the body caught in the act of reading and self sourced books that were listed on the libraries directory of missing books – the Babylon Project gets its name from one of these books, David Maoulf's *Remembering Babylon*. Two wall-sized posters, depicting the cover images of these missing books and selective quotes, provided visitors, particularly children and their parents or caregivers, an opportunity to share memories or speculate about their storylines and lessons. There was also a participatory element in the form of a visitors log encouraging visitors to write or draw their interpretations or insights about these book covers next to their respective images, factual or otherwise. Some chose to write about the movie adaptations of books, others recounted their childhood experiences, and a select few decided to comment on the aesthetics of the covers alone.

In contrast, the display throughout Fisher Library's vitrines comprised of a less literal display. The top floor contained a commissioned series by Jack Stahel, a self-proclaimed 'imaginary scientist'. His found object assemblages presented alongside meticulous pen and ink drawings gave the sense of a pseudoscientific experiment, more aesthetically and conceptually stimulating than objectively informative. The majority of the middle vitrine contained my own drawings of individual dust particles from the library shelves imaged with assistance from the Sydney Microscopy and Microanalysis department of the university. Dust fragments suspended on a dark background took the shape of

deformed creatures or mysterious objects. Both familiar and alien. And to complete this iteration the resin-cast books filled the lowest level. In opposition to the idea of a library as a single compendium of accrued human knowledge these installations embraced its relative inadequacy. In a way the works laughed at their own ignorance and in so doing encouraged the library to do the same. The library is a living thing subject to fault and success, shame and pride, in some ways as much as any human being.

Today's library is destined to change. It is not defined by its books but by its curation of human exchange and collected knowledge. The digital competitors pose a dilemma but not a mortal threat. The library is destined to embrace e-books, community programs, skills teaching and special events to name a few. Perhaps even at the expense of the books we love so dear. But as artists our ideal is not to map the practical trajectory of the library – though this may be a result of our work - but the cultural, social and phenomenological ones. From my perspective we anchor the body and the community to these magnificent chameleon-like – and importantly physical - structures we call libraries where a dialogue between our two mutually opposed realities can take place and where people meet to share their reality with others.