The Contact Zone

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> *Autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expressions—these are some of the literate acts of the contact zone. Miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning—these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone. They all live amongst us today in the transnationalised metropolis… and are becoming more widely visible, more pressing… (and) more decipherable to those who would have ignored them in defence of a stable, centred sense of knowledge and reality.*[1]

The title and theme, or as the curator prefers to call it, the 'conceptual framework' of this year's *Biennale of Sydney* owes much (albeit without acknowledgement) to the American anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the "contact zone", coined in the early 1990s. According to Pratt, the contact zone is "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict." Pratt borrows the term 'contact' from linguistics, where it refers to improvisations among speakers of different languages whose need to communicate, usually in the context of trade or colonialism, results in the development of pidgins and creoles.

Pratt's notion has been applied in a wide variety of disciplines and practices, from pedagogy to museology and even in international aid work. One of the earliest uses of the 'contact zone' was in the context of university cultural studies, to capture the dynamics of the classroom, where every student had a cultural stake in the content under consideration, but where the power relations between those purportedly promulgating knowledge and those directly affected by that knowledge were radically uneven. Pratt and fellow American cultural anthropologist James Clifford also applied the notion of the contact zone to the museum. In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997), Clifford urged the museum to become a contact zone in which the collection would be "part of an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship" between the culture that produced the objects, and the members of another culture who came to view them.

The contact zone is a space of transculturation, wherein members of subordinated or marginal groups selectively use materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture to invent unique new forms. The contact zone is also a space of autoethnography, wherein people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Autoethnography does not aim for an authentic, original voice, but entails a self-reflexive dialogue with the way the authors, as marginalised people, have been represented by and to the dominant culture—as 'other', 'exotic', or 'primitive', for instance. Such accounts are usually addressed both to the author's own community and to the metropolis, and commonly mirror back to the 'rulers' an image of themselves that they suppress. As both these strategies suggest, a contact zone treats relations among colonisers and colonised not in terms of separation, but rather emphasises "how subjects are constituted in and by their relationship to each other. It stresses co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power."[2]

In the contact zone, no one is excluded and no one is safe. The zone is marked by pain and incomprehension—discomfort, anxiety and confusion are necessary for learning about others. But the contact zone also promises wonder and revelation, mutual understanding and new wisdom. It harbours potential changes of mind and culture. It is interactive, improvisational, and includes codes that the 'dominant' and the 'marginal' share. The practices we might encounter in the contact zone, Pratt suggests, include storytelling that identifies with the ideas and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaboration; an emphasis on oral histories; and engagement with suppressed aspects of history. Writing, or making art, in the contact zone might entail autoethnography, bilingualism, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue and vernacular expressions, as well as miscomprehension, incomprehension, and absolute heterogeneity of meaning.

These very strategies are evident in many of the works in this *Biennale*, if we conceive of the works as such, and the exhibition itself, as a contact zone. We as viewers participate in the contact zone: in the best of the works, we are made acutely conscious of

our own cultural perspectives, our own language, and how the privilege of our position (as citizens of a wealthy Western nation, as English-speakers, for instance) cuts across the experience of the artist and the content figured in the works. Just as the artist engages in improvisatory acts of autoethnography or transculturation, so too does the viewer. The result may well be incomprehension: that is one risk of the contact zone. But the promise is revelation and new wisdom.

Take for example Jayce Salloum's video installation *everything and nothing from the ongoing project, untitled* (1988–2006). Part one: everything and nothing comprises an interview with the political activist Soha Bechara, imprisoned and tortured in Lebanon for many years before settling in Paris. The title comes from her description of a survival strategy she and her fellow prisoners developed, of crafting little sculptures out of 'everything and nothing' like tin cans and thread. She recounts how the guards' wilful destruction of these objects felt akin to the rape of one's land.

Particularly affecting in this video is the contrast between the assured, matter of fact tone of Bechara's retelling and the faltering style of the interviewer, the artist himself. To recall Pratt's contact zone, it is the interviewer—the Westerner wielding the power of representation—whose grasp of language is weak. His Arabic is non-existent, his French infantile and tentative, often hybridised or literally and awkwardly translated from the English. Salloum improvises to meet Bechara at a place not designated by him nor his culture, and in that lack of assurance he invites his subject to patronise him ("Your questions are very sweet", she tells him at one point) and fill the cultural space with her story.

The strategies of the contact zone are also in play in part 2: beauty and the east, a compelling video montage of interviews in English, with some of the most articulate cultural analysts of the break up of the former Yugoslavia. "It is in the West's interest to have conflict in the East so as to project it out of its own identity, so as to say, 'We are beyond it, it is they who have it'", observes one. "The walls in our heads are much more dangerous than the wall in Berlin", observes another. "The new walls are just as closed. For immigrants to Fortress Europe, there is no freedom. Before political change, we engaged in the fiction of our imagination. We didn't live in the here and now, we rather lived in metaphors. No one visited the museum, because we lived in one", observes one woman. She is now all too grounded in reality, but for another it is only through magnifying his illusions that he can maintain the energy for day-to-day survival. The participants engage in incisive political and cultural analysis, but this is always grounded in personal reflection and feeling. Blood cannot be simply a metaphor for violence—it has been personally shed. Hatred is not an abstract concept used to explain conflict—it has been personally experienced. Cultural analysis comes by way of personal loss: "I've seen this city die… all the people you love have gone somewhere else, the only ones left are zombies." Or, "I have this dead language: it lives somewhere, but where? English is on the stage alone. Everything around it is in the shadow… deep in the shadow is my Russian." This personal, individualised tragedy invites empathy in a way that a national or cultural tragedy finds far more difficult.

As the East struggles to write its autoethnography—to represent itself from the inside, as Marina Grzinic puts it—it has become adept at inverting the privileged terms of the West, challenging preconceptions of what is something as opposed to nothing, what is shit as opposed to sublime. We may misencounter this analysis cum testimony, find ourselves unable to comprehend what this people experienced. This is part of the risk of the contact zone. Or we may be reminded of our complicity in this system of value in our inter- as much as intra-national relations. We may even be confronted with how we too are regularly cast as shit in the global value system, how our cultural specificity has been increasingly compromised.

Pratt writes of misencounter and misapprehension as common experiences in the contact zone. Charles Merewether specifically favours art works that "expose" the misencounter with history that can occur in the contact zone, work that acts as a corrective to the suppression of that misencounter by the "monumentalising force of the historical archive". For Merewether, this way of working is tantamount to action as distinct from representation.[3] To engage with "the idea of agency and transformation of images", Merewether suggests, is radically different from contemporary art as a practice of transcription or translation.[4] This view resonates strongly with Nicholas Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics, coined to describe artistic activity that seeks to generate relationships with the world rather than only represent it, where the role of the artwork is to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real. Bourriaud's relational aesthetics are remarkably consonant with certain aspects of Pratt and Clifford's contact zone, with its emphasis on interaction, improvisation, openness and absolute heterogeneity of meaning. Together, these approaches provide a useful context to consider the work of a number of artists in this exhibition, including that of Tom Nicholson.

My Place, The Second Sex, The Bell Jar, Man Alone, The Beauty Myth, The Third Way, Essay Writing for Students, The Human Condition. The book titles—in pairs, enlarged and hung salon-style—are rich in connotations. Some represent the canon of Western literature, or Australian literary identity; others stand for technical know-how, or the West's self-criticism; some sting you with personal memory, take you back to the moment of first reading. Title pages also evoke the delicious promise of first opening a book, when its adventure and knowledge are all before you, elegantly compact and self-contained. Yet, this associative musing is pulled up short by a wall text, handwritten in graphite that recounts in brief some of the atrocities suffered by the people of East Timor at the hands of colonisers. Among these is the direct context for this work, namely, the systematic burning of libraries and schools by Indonesian forces in the wake of the 1999 United Nations ballot result for independence. *After Action for Another Library* (1999–2001/2003/2006) by Melbourne-based Tom Nicholson is one manifestation of a long-term project that saw the artist gather books—those specified by the East Timorese Student Solidarity Council—and donate them to the University Library in Dili. The artist photographed the books' title pages in search of a way to create a material record of a political action that did not rely on conventional documentary language. In Bourriaud's sense, the work itself includes not only the humanitarian action of donating the books, but all the relationships which that action mobilised: between the donors and donees; the artist and both; the donors and their books; the donees and their books, lost and returned; and within nation States and individuals; the artist and his audience; that audience and the people of East Timor; that audience and their own passion for reading; that audience and their national government and so on. Nicholson's action operates as a contact zone, where stakeholders in the recent events of East Timor can actively haggle over meaning, cultural significance and historical consequences.

The strategies of the contact zone place emphasis on interaction, on activating the viewer's interpretative faculties—conceptual as well as somatic—through creative configurations of common languages. What makes Mona Hatoum's *Mobile Home II* (2006) so effective is its ability to physically disorient the viewer, such that his/her bodily coordinates shift for a vertiginous second in empathy with the forced movement of people the piece addresses. Humble, domestic objects familiar to all, such as washing basins, handkerchiefs and kitchen stools, are gridded in formation by garrotte-tight wires held in place by metal crowd barriers, which also resemble institutional bed-heads. Silently and imperceptibly at first, the objects move along a preset trajectory, then stop, triggering another set of objects in motion. The movement is inevitable and rigid, but also destabilising for the viewer, as what appears to be fixed is fluid, what appears to be in relationship to one object gradually shifts its allegiance to another. With great formal economy and elegance, Hatoum creates a contact zone that invites the viewer to consider what 'home' is if it is forever moving, if it does not offer a sense of control over its daily unfurling.

Ai Weiwei's *World Map* (2006) also seeks to activate the viewer's bodily register. A room-sized map of the world cut from sections of cloth and stacked a thousand layers high, the work juts into the viewer between waist and breast height, threatening to topple at the edges. In his rendition, the smaller and more peripheral a territory, the more vulnerable it is to being set adrift from the point of central ballast, from the critical mass. The materiality of this map, its body-scale and its irresistibly tactile edges—whose subtly toned layers recall soft sandy bluffs—grant the work a poignant fragility and a powerful beauty, the effect of which is necessarily to evoke the ecological question, the desire to save and protect.

To conceive of the artwork or exhibition as a contact zone heightens the potential for the transformation of viewer into active participant, not only in the interpretation of meaning but also in the generation of new knowledges. The corollary of this is the potential transformation of the artist into cultural agent able to generate new relationships, in particular between the audience and the content of his/her work. In this *Biennale of Sydney*, the best works—of which Salloum's videos, Nicholson's action/installation and Hatoum's and Ai Weiwei's sculptures are examples—are able to approach the realisation of this double potential. In the contact zone, no one is excluded and no one is safe.

Notes

[1] Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone' (originally published in 1991), excerpted in David Bartholomae and Anthony Petroksky (eds), *Ways of Reading*, New York: Bedford/St. Martins Press, 1996: 356. The full essay is available online: www.class.uidaho.edu/thomas/English_506/Arts_of_the_Contact_Zone.pdf

[2] James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Massachussetts : Harvard University Press, 1997: 213

[3] 'The Practice of Action: An Exchange Between Charles Merewether and Tom Nicholson, 2006

[4] Charles Merewether, 'Taking Place: Acts of Survival for a Time to Come', *Zones of Contact* (catalogue), *Biennale of Sydney*, 2006: 45

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