Essay

DALRYMPLE AND THE POSSUM: RE/ENACTMENT AND THE UNCANNY IN THE VISUAL ARTS

Pat Hoffie

Julie Gough, *Force Gield*, dead apple tree, bricks, copy of 1825 Van Diemen's Land Magistrate's Report, timber, pages from *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History,* 2007, exhibited in: *Thresholds of Tolerance* group exhibition at the Australian National University School of Art Gallery, Canberra, May - June 2007.

This essay was written in response to thinking about what contemporary visual art practices of installation and performance might mean against a burgeoning interest in reenactment among historians. It was originally presented at a conference at the Australian National University convened by Professor Iain McCalman in June 2007. I am a visual artist, and as I read further about reenactment, I began to think about some of the pivotal questions it raised for visual artists, and in particular for contemporary Indigenous visual artists in Australia. In her "Introduction: What Is Reenactment?"[1] Vanessa Agnew writes,

> Reenactment's emancipatory gesture is to allow participants to select their own past in reaction to a conflicted present.[2]

The notion of emancipation – and of choice – still seems out of reach for so many Australians whose histories have been overwritten by more official accounts. Julie Gough is a contemporary Indigenous Australian artist whose research delves into history for clues about what might have happened in the past. This essay examines the way in which her installation practice brings events, places and people into the present.

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There are two commonly used ways of spelling re-enactment: one employs a hyphen – a kind of symbol-bridge that conjoins the prefix to the main body of the word while still maintaining a little distance. In this rendition of the word there is a preserved sense that there might be a little territory of in-between-ness in terms of the original event and its simulacrum.

The other way of spelling the word has ingested that junction. Instead, a performative possibility has absorbed the space between past and present tense. As if, perhaps, the past has been swallowed up, or overlaid by the active potential or presence of the present.

For the purposes of this essay I want to propose a third option: a sense of a process that suggests other possibilities. In this manifestation of the word, its two parts have been separated by a forward slash – a kind of sloping barrier that keeps the prefix and the trunk of the word apart, and which leans like a mirror reflecting back the problems inherent in attempts to re-stage particular aspects of the past.

And importantly, within the context of this essay, this somewhat awkward appropriation of the word is used to suggest the problems inherent when dealing with some aspects of Indigenous history in this country. As with that other re-word, reconciliation, it is difficult for many to see the practicality of a term that suggests the possibility of going back to – of returning – when any attempts at conciliation between non-indigenous and Indigenous cultures in this country have not yet occurred.

In such cases, it could be argued that there can be no possibility of re-enacting certain events that have been completely erased, denied or eradicated from written historical accounts of Australia, and to argue instead, that *enactment* is what might first be necessary before any performative re-staging of the event can even begin to be imagined.

Central to this essay is a description of an installation/performance/event where a process of re/enactment opened the way for enactments that had previously been denied.

Discussions of re-enactment share certain characteristics with certain practices of appropriation that have been evident in visual art in Australia since the 1980s. In his "Introduction" to the book *Radical Revisionism*, editor Rex Butler argues that a new wave of interest in the history of Australian art from both artists and art historians followed in the wake of practices that emerged during the 1980s, 90s and 2000s. Butler describes how this particular approach to history – represented in his two volumes *What Is Appropriation?* [3] and *Radical Revisionism* [4] – has only become possible *after* appropriation – as if, paradoxically, this history could only emerge after its sequel. He writes:

> It is a history that is interested in the art of the past only insofar as it is rewritten from the perspective of the present. It is a history that is explicitly constructed from the point of view of this present, that is understood to arise as an effect of what comes after it. It is a history, therefore, that sees the artists

> of the past speaking across what we might call 'time-like separated' areas to contemporary issues. In other words – and we should try to remain aware of just what is so extraordinary about this – it is a history that conceives of the artists of the past as though they were already post-modernists, already reacting in their work to the same concerns that the artist of today do.[5]

The interpretation of history Butler describes seems to fold the past into a *symptom* of the present. His version of history is one that doubles over the reception of both historical and contemporary events within an overview that employs a "*radical* revisionism". Butler is keen to identify his particular take on revisionism as employing a "certain ironic distance on our part towards it – is in part a survey of these re-readings" and by so doing to position his argument slightly to one side of the phenomenon of revisionism in general.

Convoluted though this argument might be, the idea that certain aspects of the past can be re-activated in the present are also shared by advocates of historical re-enactment. Stephen Gapps argues that:

> The practices of historical re-enactment provide insights into the construction and activation of Australian historical sensibilities that are important in the configuration of other popular activities involving history. A bodily, sensory engagement with various forms of historical representation highlights wider attitudes to history. Such personal participation in history making illuminates relations between the self and history.[6]

A recognition of the importance of physical, sensory apprehensions of knowledge is also shared by contemporary artists who use installation and site-specific work. In such works the presence of the viewer and the context and site of the work are inextricable elements of the work itself. Such ideas emerged from developments in conceptual art, when the focus shifted from representation to investigations of how and where and for whom representations were made. As importance shifted from the image or object as the privileged site for analysis; the chosen materials, forms and contexts of presentation were reconsidered as symptoms of the meaning of the work rather than just as 'framing devices'.

And in turn, the institutions for the traditional exhibitions of art – the white cubes of contemporary galleries, the museums and public spaces – were also critically re-examined as institutional demarcations that could mediate, absorb, reflect and augment as well as inhibit and censor meaning. Many contemporary visual artists turned a sceptical eye to the very contexts of their exhibitions, raising questions, as part of their work, about the extent to which the exhibiting site inhibits or extends or transforms the reception of the work.

Julie Gough is an artist well aware of such complexities. As a contemporary artist of Indigenous descent, she often uses her work to pose questions about the ways in which certain forms of knowledge or experience or locations are privileged.

The authority of the art gallery and the museum, for example, seals in the 'legitimacy' of the work as critical practice in a way that off-site installations rarely do. The authority of written history, as another example, is accepted over and above inference or imagination. And the authority of the world of rational behaviour and explicable events is unquestionably more acceptable than the world of the uncanny.

In the next part of this essay I will discuss the process of installing a particular exhibition. There is a sense in which, for artists, this process is itself a kind of re/enactment – a practice where the ultimate destination is more or less an unknown. For many visual artists, the re/enactment of events gone before often involves processes of chance, serendipity and blind judgement that are necessary if aspects of the unimaginable are anticipated as an important part of the work.

The exhibition I will discuss, and the performance of its installation, are examples of a kind of re/enactment where unwritten history, unspoken truths and the presence of the uncanny emerge to prefigure as the subject of the work. I will argue that re/enactment in the visual arts is often a process of staging a set of variables, not to direct the action or the responses of the participants/viewers/re/enactors, but rather to perform the role of a framework from which experiences of the extraordinary might arise.

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On the night of Tuesday, May 8, 2007, Julie Gough began the task of completing her work titled *Force Field* in the Art Gallery of the Canberra School of Art. Julie Gough is an artist whose Indigenous family members originally came from Tasmania, and she saw the inclusion of her work as part of a larger exhibition, titled *The Limits of Tolerance*, as an opportunity to re-examine an historical event that had both deep personal relevance for her as well as social, political and cultural relevance for today.

The event she focused on involved one of her ancestors, Dalrymple Briggs, who had been employed as a 'native' servant in the home of a Mr Jacob Mountgarrett at Longford, Tasmania. A relative had brought Julie's attention to the life of Dalrymple, and the artist subsequently sought permission from the National Library of Australia to make copies of the handwritten pages of a Magistrates Report from 1825.

At the age of twelve, Dalrymple had been shot by her white employee. In the court case in Launceston that followed two weeks after the shooting, the child had claimed that the incident was a mistake – that her employee had really been aiming at a possum at the time and that she had merely 'got in the way'. Twelve year old Dalrymple's explanation of the attack did not match with the accounts of two witnesses of the event, but in the end, the case against the "fairly notorious" Dr Mountgarrett was dropped. Ten months later Dalrymple had left her place of employment.

As a descendant of Dalrymple Briggs, Julie was deeply saddened. She was also struck by the way in which the event reflected the way in which Indigenous agency has been obscured from written history in Australia. And of how, when included, it has been done so in a highly contrived and contorted way.

There is a sense in which Julie Gough's work for this exhibition has been erected on the site of her own doubt and misgivings – doubt that her ancestor Dalrymple was telling the truth, doubt about whether the existing frameworks of justice could ever 'hear' through the child's claims, and doubt about the possibility of "deliberate recordings" ever to be about anything other than "substantiation, power and culpability, or lack of."[7] In terms of traditional accounts of Australian history, there is no place for Indigenous people to call home.

The artist's initial desire to erect a work that challenged the traditional idea of the home and hearth as a place of safety and comfort led to what might logistically have been an impossible dream.

However, as serendipity would have it, nature had intervened in the preceding months, and the title of the work – *Force Field* – may have been used to describe the atmospheric conditions that unleashed one of the worst hailstorms ever to have hit the city of Canberra. The storm damaged several buildings in the city, including the roof of the art gallery in which the installation was to be sited. As a result, the parquetry floor beneath the hole had been left badly damaged, and the Gallery agreed that the building of a cement and brick hearth directly onto the floor would be permissible under the circumstances.

However, the artist intended the title of the work to relate to a system of pressures other than the atmospheric, as she states:

> The title *Force Field* notes the pressure to accept written history as fact, when it holds layers of meaning and nuance particular to time, place, authorship.[8]

The centrepiece of Julie's work was erected in the middle of the vast room: a solid, stolid brick fireplace from which sprouted the slowly decaying trunk and branches of a leafless apple tree. The empty coldness of the hearth and the naked starkness of the dying tree filled the room with a chilling, vaguely sweet-smelling *ennui*. And fixed, page by page to the wooden mantelpiece above the hollow grate, were copies of the handwritten script taken from the Magistrate's Report of 1825.

Before the cold blocks of that hearth the artist assembled a gridded white floor covering – diligently pasted pages of "a history book I personally detest"[9] and that "targets Tasmanian Aborigines as 'makers of their own demise'."[10] The pages of Keith Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* were laid out like a white territory over which any viewer committed to closer scrutiny would have to travel in order to get a more intimate experience of the work.

Through these simple components the artist establishes a performative arena in which viewers are invited, by implication, to also perform the role of participants. We are called upon not only to use our sense of sight, but also our sense of smell, our tactile senses, and also our sense of judgement, for there is clearly a portentous lacuna between the printed documentation that provides the groundwork of the installation and the handwritten evidence of the Magistrate's Report of 1825.

The artist stops short of recrimination. As re/en-actors of this event we are presented with a dead tree in a hearth – an apple tree, a metaphor for the tree of life and the bearer of the fruit of original temptation. And we are also given a platform from which to reconsider the past, and the present: beneath our feet are the black and white words of a contemporary historian, and before us are the officially recorded words from the bureaucracy in the past. The two forms of evidence given through the written word leave no immediate sense of disjuncture. And in terms of the material evidence – the solidity of the bricks and mortar, the presence and smell of the dying tree, the veracity of the printed texts – there is no sense of dislocation.

And yet the experience of the work leaves one vacillating, imagining that there is a sense of unfinished business. Feeling that the subject matter of the entire set-up might just have left the room.

Artworks work on allusions, associations. If we are literate in art history, we may be reminded, instead, of other fireplaces where anything is possible, where other disconcerting apparitions have occurred in the midst of apparent normalcy – the projectile tube of René Magritte's train in *Time Transfixed* (1938) as it launches itself into the grey emptiness of domestic familiarity, for example.

And beyond the cultural associations, the fireplace is the site where the dying flames transform into shapes and wraiths that quiver and dance, and shimmer and seduce; as the wood is engulfed and the ashes spin and spiral, new forms and imaginings are suggested in the flickering light. The sense that this grate has never yet felt the heat of such flames is evident in the unblemished nature of the bricks.

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As has been mentioned, several aspects of this installation bear similarities with the experiences of historical re-enactment. As with historical re-enactment, there is a kind of twin focus at play: one focus asks the audience to maintain an awareness of the here and now while at the same time we are asked to think through the details of another history, about another time and space. Alexander Cook describes the experience of historical re-enactment:

> The value of the exercise relies on the premise that the unscripted activities and responses of the participants will shed light on the original situation – often with minimal guidance. The directorial process is essentially reactive.[11]

This can be compared with the role of the artist when she sets up a scenario where gaps in time and gaps in interpretation form the liminal walls of a kind of maze through which the viewer/participant/re/enactor must make their own choices in navigating the experience. That is, there is no definitive set of guide-lines through which the re/enactment can take place.

Rather, in this installation, there is a sense that the option of any original enactment in the past has been elided. And that what we are left with are the very gaps, emptiness and silence on which the work has been constructed.

For the bricks of Gough's installation have been laid on the foundations of a lie, or, rather, on an axis at which the possibility of truth has been elided. Gough does not permit us to retreat from the presence of the present even for the briefest sojourn into the past… Rather, she insists that we are highly conscious of the *staging* of reality – of the way in which even the most apparently solid, timeless props are only ever built on contingencies and contiguities. And in this space, the authority and permanence of things seem all the less so: the question about whether the Magistrate's Report was able to accurately investigate a young Indigenous girl's experience one hundred and eighty two years ago seems to slowly unravel. And the words of the historian recorded on the gallery floor continue the legacy of writing out the silences.

And so, in a way, this installation is a work about wraiths and hauntings: things that may never have taken place at all, words that only ever suggest, but

which fail to actually or accurately describe; feelings that never coagulate into substantial matter, but which hang in the air like a fug of torpor.

It is, therefore, not about what can be performed. Not about what can be enacted. But rather it is about what might be sensed, or alluded to, or intuited.[12] It is an installation about those things that lie just outside any 'proper' – or official – understanding of what experience actually encompasses.

This terrain of experiencing art is frequently fraught with many strange surprises. Julie Gough's own tale of the making of the work is laced with accounts of chance and serendipity, of things that have surprised her in terms of the way they have 'come together'.

Perhaps the most telling tale of all lies in her account of the night prior to the opening of the exhibition, when she was engaged on her hands and knees methodically gluing down photocopies of the Windschuttle treatise to the floor of the gallery.

Alone in the cold darkness of the vast room and completely immersed in her work, her concentration was taken by a small shadow that passed by her to shamble its way across the Windschuttle text and stopped near the beginning of the book. The artist was surprised, but did not rise, and the little creature continued its sailor's roll across the text in front of the fireplace from left to right, stopped slowly to look up at her, and then continued on its way unperturbed.

The artist is the first to confess her fatigue at the time, and the fact that, combined with her presence alone at night, this granted the event an air of portent, but the presence of the little possum, as if from the very words of Dalrymple's account, bestowed a magic to her experience of the work that has been worked into the re-telling by all who have heard the story.

Fanciful? Perhaps. An irrational side-line to the historical issues that are central to the work? Maybe.

But if we agree with the artist's claim that her work, like so much important contemporary work, is "often about unfinished historical encounters"[13] then perhaps it is also possible to understand this event as yet another example of those unwriteable encounters that make the re-encountering and re-imagining of history so important.

1 Vanessa Agnew, "Introduction: What Is Reenactment?" in *Criticism*, Summer 2004, 46 (3): 327-339 (© 2005 Wayne State University Press, Detroit, M1 48201).
2 Ibid., 328.
3 Rex Butler, ed.(Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 1996.)
4 Rex Butler, Rex, ed., 2005, *Radical Revisionism: An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art* (Brisbane: IMA, 2005).
5 Ibid., 9.
6 Stephen Gapps, "Authenticy Matters: Historical Re-enactment and Australian Attitudes to the Past", in *Australian Cultural History*, 23, 2003: 105-116 (© APT Network and the author).
7 Artist's Handout, Australian National University School of Art Gallery, Canberra, 9 May 2007: 2.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Alexander Cook, "The Use and Abuse of Historical Reenactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History", in *Criticism,* 46 (3), Summer 2004: 489.
12 "Reenactment thus emerges as a body-based discourse in which the past is reanimated through physical and psychological experience." Vanessa Agnew in *Criticism*, 3327-339 (© 2005 Wayne State University Press, Detroit).
13 "Julie Gough: If History is a Picture Puzzle How do I Know all the Pieces Fit?" Interview by Anna Kesson, in *Thresholds of Tolerance*, Caroline Turner and David Williams, eds (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre and School of Art Gallery, Research School of Humanities, Australian National University, 2007), 51.

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