



1/ Kachina Koyemshi Mask, 1900-1950.
Hopi or Navaho, cotton, earth, feathers, 47 x 33 x 33cm.
Image courtesy Musée du quai Branly, ©
National Museum of Ethnology Leiden

Articulating care: writing, curating and the forces of art

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curator : L., supervisor
der. curatus: L., well looked after; carefully prepared; anxious
der. curare: L., to arrange, to see, to attend to; undertake;
procure; regard
der. cura: L., concern, worry, anxiety; task, responsibility
'curate' [noun]: late 14c., 'spiritual guide', from curatus: one
responsible for the care (of souls)

waking the dead

Before the opening of Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art in January 2011, my husband was at work in the Museum preparing an Egyptian mummy for exhibition. He and several of his co-workers joked about 'the curse' and what it meant to be handling such an object. Shortly thereafter, several of the preparators succumbed to swine flu. Was this the 'mummy's curse' or mere coincidence? Was its power activated because it had been prised apart? Tough luck the preparators' intentions were to *protect*, not to rob, the object. Such an incident rejuvenates and challenges beliefs and disbeliefs around the meaning and powers attributed to artefacts.

I have attended exhibitions of ceremonial or funerary objects where I wondered whether the display was an adequate container for the forces held, or hinted at. One

room of funerary figures in a recent ethnographic exhibition in Canberra was genuinely frightening. It was not just the fierce expressions of the masks and sombre lighting.

Ushering my spooked seven-year-old out of the room, I wondered at the lack of warning at the exhibition entry. But what could the warning have been? 'Beware, angry faces and straw hair', or, 'Things immensely difficult to comprehend herein'? I had a sense of dormant shells waiting for some sort of force to move in. In retrospect, the only way I myself could have survived the room's intensities was to be categorically unaware of them – a blithe hobby fossicker amongst landmines.

My visit to the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, in 2011 was a different experience. I walked for hours amongst the vast collection of woven cloths, carved masks, spears and adornments representing tribal customs from all the continents. These were also 'dormant shells', but not displayed as if expecting an imminent visit by spirits. In the section devoted to West African traditions, I found my way into a low, cave-like space. Inside was projected a film of a shaman enacting ceremony.

I am like a young pup lifted by the neck, gently shaken and safely placed, slowly learning something new.



left: Barkcloth: N'mah neyorwi, *Eromanga*, Vanuata, 19th century, barkcloth, black dye, hand painted, 182 x 96cm.
Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

right: beaded covering for a mummy, Egypt, Third Intermediate Period, c. 1069 – 664 BCE, glazed composition beads on linen thread, 75 x 38.5cm.
Collection: Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia. Image Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart



Installation view of current exhibition at musée du quai Branly, *Les Maîtres du Désordre (Masters of Disorder)*, 11 April to 29 July 2012



1/ Jacqui Stockdale, *Lady Rabbit*, from the *Familija* series, 2005, digital print, 57 x 40.5cm. Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart. Image courtesy the artist.

2/ Jacqui Stockdale, *Colonial boy*, from the *Familija* series, 2005, digital print, 57 x 40.5cm. Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart. Image courtesy the artist. Both works are showing in *Theatre of the World*, MONA, 23 June 2012 to 8 April 2013. www.mona.net.au

The film quality is sparse, the figure semi-visible, as if only half-perceived by the camera. The songs and interpolations are barely audible; subtitles translate only a few of the words. The ceremony is not desiccated or dismantled through analysis. I am neither at risk, nor is the subject over-exposed.

I sense an intention to simultaneously *reveal* cultural practice *and protect* it as well. I am moved enough to remember it well, but have not been pressed to understand beyond my own experience. I am neither muted by seeing the film, nor have I been leaked secrets I cannot hold. I leave the room both humbled and enlarged, and left *peaceful* (in my lack of understanding) as well. Neither my experience (nor the cultural practice, I think) have been colonised.

the role of a critic

In our own culture, the pressure for an arts critic to 'understand' and to explain *what* s/he understands is tied up in contradictions. The first contradiction is usually this: how can one *not know* what one sees? The second is, can we be paid for happily not knowing? The third is, how can we be paid to write conclusions with good judgment (*judicious* implying 'common sense') if one does not know what one shares? Is our success as writers a sign of the success of the art about which we write? (And are our failures too the failures of the arts we criticise?)

The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty

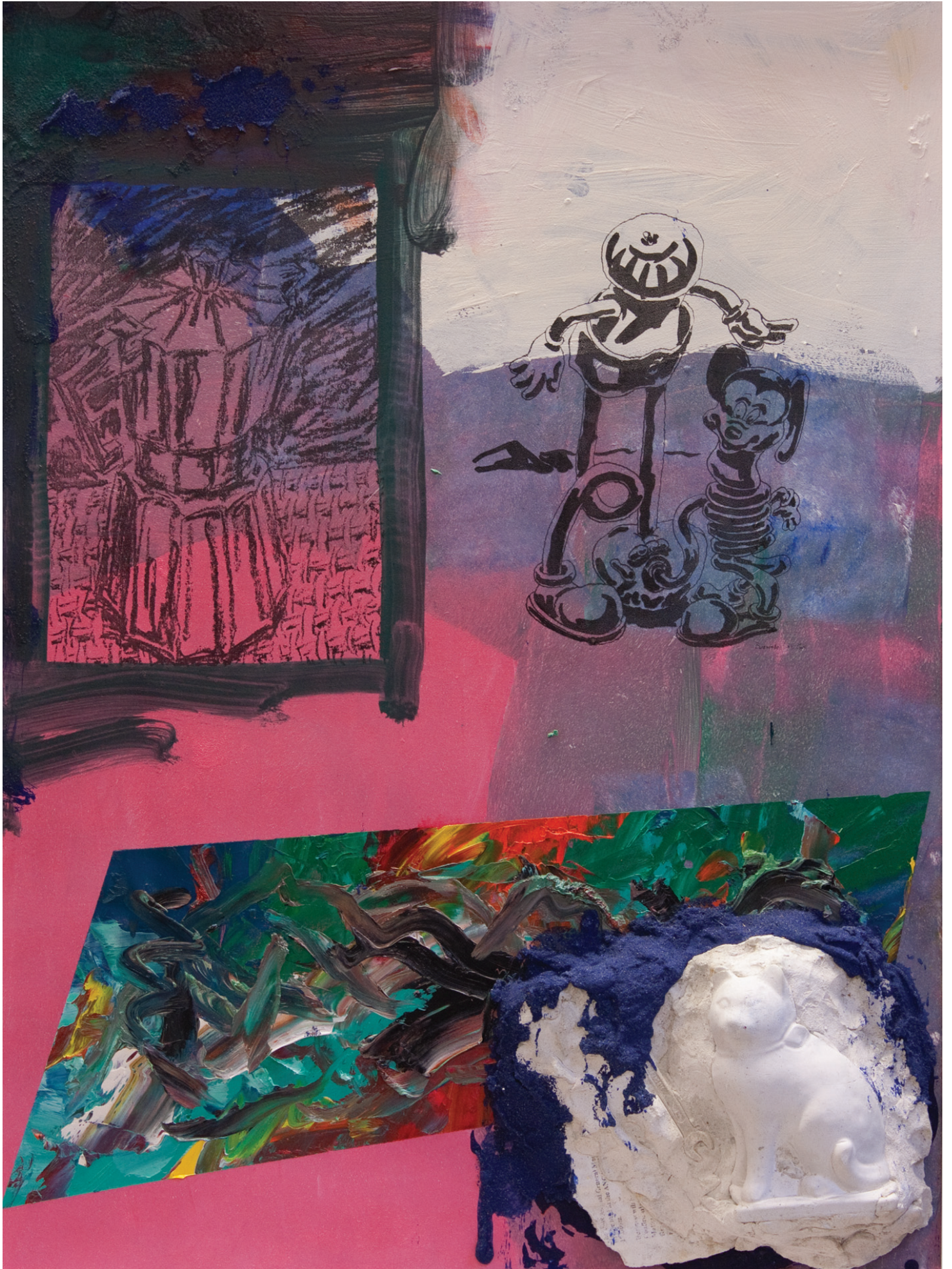
observes that speech is an active task that 'never quite succeeds'. Even if one's writing remains inconclusive, describing or documenting the impact of a work of art/artefact on our sensory being is rife with dangers, none the least of which is misinterpretation, overstatement, or homogenisation. But the task need not *fail*. Any gap between sensation and experience ('what is true') and what is describable (the 'pressure to narrate')¹ is not insurmountable, but what language is true *to* can move beyond mere linguistic coherences.

a core dilemma: writing/art

How does one write about art? That's what the magazine has been struggling with – probably quite disastrously, in the end – for twenty-two years.

How does one write about something that is basically mute?²

Although video and performance art – hardly 'mute' forms – were already in strong currency in New York by the 1980s, the youthful new editor of *Artforum* magazine, Ingrid Sischy, did raise a significant point in this quoted interview. *If* art objects are without speech, then how does a writer/interpreter/curator *speak for them*? Is this what s/he has *imprimatur* to do? In 1984, Sischy described the magazine as 'nervous inside itself' – a deliciously anthropomorphic comment reflecting the anxiety arts writers often feel, practising their craft. Apparently, Sischy would sit through the wee small hours with her writers as they struggled with



Bernard Hardy, *Cat and Mouse*, 2010, acrylic, silkscreen, plaster on canvas, 76 x 56cm; image courtesy the artist

and against themselves and the objects and experiences they sought to describe.

In her essay on Sischy at the helm of *Artforum*, Janet Malcolm³ tracks startling intolerances amongst board members and internecine wars ('psychodramas of the first order') between critics, curators and artists. She details one prolonged exchange between critic and curator of the major 'Primitivism' show staged at the Museum of Modern Art. The dispute centred on whether this exhibition was yet another colonialist dishonouring of the 'primitive' art on display alongside Modernist masterpieces by the likes of Picasso and Brancusi. As Sischy recalls: 'Practically a thesis had been written on the label below a Brancusi work, but it was enough to say of the primitive sculpture beside it, "From North Africa".'

But William Rubin, the chief curator, countered:

Any 'light' shed on the primitive objects [in this exhibition] is incidental to the primary purpose to illuminate modern art ... The specific function and significance of these objects – the ethnologist's primary concern – is irrelevant to my topic, except insofar as these facts might have been known to the modern artists in question. Prior to the 1920s, however, at which time some Surrealists became amateurs of ethnology, artists did not generally know – nor evidently much care – about such matters. This is not to imply that they were uninterested in 'meanings' but



Dance mask, © musée du quai Branly, photo Thierry Ollivier, Michel Urtado

rather than the meanings which concerned them were the ones that could be apprehended *through the objects themselves*.

Artforum's writer, Tom McEvelley, attacked this 'formalist' notion as both unethical and old hat – perhaps forgivable in Robert Goldwater's classic 1938 text *Primitivism in Modern Painting* but surely not in the 1980s. Whilst McEvelley's writing is cogent, pithy and sharp, the prolonged exchange between critic and curator is a cockfight between old and new guard, both men straining to defend their honour and positions. McEvelley's 'dangerous lustre' stirred angry bees and other creatures, with Rubin identified as the old bear 'barked' out of the woods. 'In a sense', gloats McEvelley, 'it's a chance in a lifetime. We rarely see these bears out in the open – especially the big one.'⁴ (Rubin's wounded reply: 'We deeply felt the absence of *politesse* in the thing about the bears.'⁵)

The *théatron* (Gk., 'a place for viewing'; from *theáomai*: 'to see', 'to watch', 'to observe') of the exchange is evident, and what incites curiosity is that even at its most turgid (for example, the tedious bickering about the number of objects in a vitrine), it is an *agon* (Gk., 'contest') worth witnessing. The drama is loaded with intriguing subtexts. Notably, both men are speaking *of and for* others – Rubin on behalf of the Modernist giants, and McEvelley for the exploited, decontextualised 'primitives'. Although ostensibly more PC than Rubin, the younger (cub) critic McEvelley also takes on a suspect position, hoisted on his own petard only a few years later when he wrote:

To claim that tribal carvings are significant only in their original context ... is to fall sway to the myth of origins and to blind oneself to the fact that they do touch, pierce, puncture, wound their viewers... A tribal carving may function as a *punctum*, peeling out of the *stadium* that is Western culture. The blood need not be on the ritual objects for them to leap out at us; it is sufficient that they be different from what our culture has encoded for them to irrupt ... The issue then becomes not whether tribal masks may or may not be taken out of their ritual contexts without ceasing to be tribal masks, but, rather, how to read ... and ceaselessly recontextualise meaning.⁶

Mary Bette Wiseman's championing of Intertextuality (heavily influenced by Roland Barthes's *S/Z*) states the act of *reading* art as a creative and perspicacious practice which should and does allow for multiple interpretations.⁷ It also lifts the *Artforum* debate outside of its own 'nervousness' into another realm.

'being has teeth'

This issue's title ('*Critical lining*') makes me think of coffins, their black velvet inner shield a final seal separating the threat of bodily juices oozing back into the living world.

Art-speak sometimes functions as a way of assuaging the great, ferocious yawp of our emotions and reactions – William James's 'big blooming buzzing confusion' akin to the infant's first sensing of the world. By securing interpretation, art-speak can serve to create a *lining* between the finished (finite) 'art-object' and the non-finite, perpetually re-generating world. Certainly some of the cockfights Malcolm describes – Jack taking aim at the Giant – do not assuage the infant but are, rather, perpetual enactments of the trauma of immediacy: disturbing, upbraiding, seeping through the membrane.

Antonin Artaud, a theatre avatar writing in the 1930s, wrote of the necessity for cruelty (*cruauté*), not in the sense of

violent behaviour but rather the cruelty it takes for actors to show an audience a truth that they do not wish to see. He felt that art and artists should shatter the false reality lying 'like a shroud over our perceptions'. His ideas influenced later practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski who put a heavy emphasis on training the body to become a kind of 'sacrifice' (i.e., transparent) to the audience. But whilst several Artaudian followers have devised some questionable, indeed fatal practices,⁸ Artaud's great legacy lies in his writings about language and its relation to form.

Artaud advocated a language halfway between thought and gesture. He wrote both visionary and non-sense treatises, all set to goad our linguistic and sensory complacencies. The following text – Artaud's re-writing of the harmless *Jabberwocky* – amply exhibits the *cruauté* he insists upon, forcing the bodily sensation-into-gesture of a performer to become *articulate* (i.e., 'distinctly jointed', Fr. *artus*: joint), almost to the point of vomiting:

*Il était Roparant, et les vliqueux tarands
Allaient en gibroyant et en brimbulkòriquant
Jusque la ou la rouargbe est a rangmbde et rangmbde a ...
rouargbambde ...*⁹

The passage's sensory imperatives make some sense when sounded, even if the forces within these words 'might seem chaotic or pointless at first sight'.¹⁰ This last phrase is not Artaud's, but comes from the Canberra painter Bernard Hardy, for whom a painting is similarly a 'translation of thought onto the page ... mirroring an order that otherwise might remain beyond understanding'. For Hardy, art and talking/writing about it – crossing the threshold – are both *necessary* to one's physical and psychic health and fundamental to how we make and re-create the world.

[re-]crossing the membrane

To be a truthful reporter, putting a strict meaning on *truthful*, [a person] might not speak at all.¹¹

It was during childbirth that I learnt *not* to cry out – i.e., not to do what was expected. At certain points *in extremis*, to yell, to scream, even to speak was to override the most subtle connection between body and breath. Words to communicate this pain – or indeed, extreme joy – are often impossible to find.

But I can walk into a room and know the elation or disappointment I experience face to face with a work of art. I can also sit before the flickering representation of a shaman in ceremony and be happy not to know too much. *Betwixt cup and lip lie slips*. *Artforum's* drawn-out *agon* over *Primitivism* proves this in 'a bun dance'.

The rest is silence.

1. See Janet Malcolm, *Six Roses ou Cirrboxes?*, 1983.

2. Malcolm, 1983.

3. Janet Malcolm, 'A girl of the Zeitgeist', first published in *The New Yorker*, 1986, reprinted in Malcolm, 1983.

4. Malcolm, 1983: pp. 198-9.

5. For Rubin, the greater wound would have been to 'accept criticism that would put five years of work [and expense] into question'; Malcolm, ??: p. 269.

6. Mary Bitte Wiseman, 'Photographs: Primitive and Post Modern', in Gary Shapiro (ed.), *After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places*, Suny New York, 1990, p. 29.

7. Ironically whilst Barthes is not (theoretically) frightened of the



Amulet ('Märdergebiss'), 19th century, south German or Austrian, teeth (ossement), silver, 2.8 x 3.5 x 2.7cm. Image courtesy Musée du quai Branly, © Bayerischen Nationalmuseum, photo Bastian Krack

giddy possibilities such as multiplicitous 'writerly reading' encourages, this is not a 'text of bliss': her writing displays plenty of that 'nervousness' and 'unreadability' Sichi admits to within *Artforum*.

8. For example, Grotowski's adherence to Artaud's concepts became its own kind of hegemony, with Grotowski a both a liberator and false God with a messianic following, seven of whom suicided after his company folded.

9. Artaud's 'translation' of *Jabberwocky*, 1945, the opening excerpt which reads, in Lewis Carroll's original: 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:/All mimsy were the borogoves,/And the mome raths outgrabe./ ...'; from Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, 1872.

10. From the author's interview with the artist in 2011, the resulting article to be published in forthcoming issue of *AMA*.

11. Malcolm, 1983.

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