

Abstract:

Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire

(Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear)

Karen Ball

We all play roles in life. This paper is a personal reflection on identity, and the questioning of this identity. The writer allows the reader into a dream like environment where a life role is acted out as autobiographical narrative through appropriation and reference to the other. Theoretical sources include Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Joseph Kosuth. With reference to these sources, comparison is made between Jan Vermeer's seventeenth century portraits of women and Bertolt Brecht's early twentieth century epic theatre.

Sydney College of the Arts

The University of Sydney

MASTER OF VISUAL ARTS
2007

RESEARCH PAPER/ DISSERTATION

TROIS PIECES EN FORME DE POIRE

The Narrated Self: creating identity as autobiographical narrative
through appropriation and reference to the other

by

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Printmedia

December 2007

Author's Statement

I want to thank my family for their invaluable support and encouragement throughout this study. I am grateful for the insight and guidance provided by my Academic Supervisor, Dr Danie Mellor and the friendly assistance of Janet Parker Smith, the Printmedia Technical Supervisor at Sydney College of the Arts.

“The writer’s language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it. This should impose on critics the duty of using two rigorously distinct methods: one must deal with the writer’s realism either as an ideological substance (Marxist themes in Brecht’s work, for instance) or as a semiological value (the props, the actors, the music, the colours in Brechtian dramaturgy). The ideal of course would be to combine these two types of criticism; the mistake which is constantly made is to confuse them: ideology has its methods, and so has semiology.”

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies - Myth Today*, 1957, p.137

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Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire (Three Pieces in a Pear Shape)

Introduction:

*Narrative is simply there, like life itself.*¹

For at least one hour we had maintained a profound silence. We were looking at an exhibition of handmade artists' books at the Bibliotheque Forney, in the Marais, Paris. I was totally engrossed in the books, overwhelmed by their diversity and intricate beauty. I was also actively committing specific details in them to memory. I assumed my friend's silence meant she was similarly occupied. Later, over coffee, I discovered that was not the case. Her silence was due to her melancholic state of mind. She hardly recalled any details of the books, so we were not able to share the moment in the same way and would, subsequently, remember that day for different reasons. Following that experience, I realised how important observation and preservation of details are to me. They are part of my identity. I collect details: feelings, words and pictures from particular moments then mentally bind them together before they fade away. I am something of a 'bricoleur' in the sense that one can define bricolage as a way of putting together, in an inventive way, elements that come from different areas. In a form of recycling, I make these elements into narratives, like a series of books. I have accumulated quite a library. It is how I make art.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, trans. by Stephen Heath in *Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, London, Vintage 1994, p.251-2

This paper investigates how my art practice is influenced by specific 'collected' details and signification from selected works of art. Within this study, I will also discuss the phenomenon of reprise of historic, innovative theatrical devices, and their implementation in my own and others' contemporary performance art practices. I am the subject of this study. It is composed of text and art objects, in the form of a narrative. It is as an assemblage of myself - a framework to which I attach my identity. I will tell this story and constitute myself through narrative exchange. What constitutes me as a subject is the desire for a response from the Other.² It has been said that otherness is joined to selfhood and the response of the other is always contained within the act of the narrative production itself.³

In so far as this study acknowledges influences from other artists' practices and historical theatrical devices, it has a polyphonic structure inclusive of the other's voice that can be isolated from the whole of the message.⁴ It is a dialogic narrative, composed of several voices which transpose from one medium to another.⁵ That is, this narrative is formed from a composite of mediums, involving both my written and studio work. Through this structure of word, image and performance, I will posit questions, in a hermeneutic code, for consideration by the audience and myself. These questions will include the role and implications of transformation, time and repetition on my artistic identity. It has been said that there is no such thing as an innocent eye, as all viewers are conditioned by culturally shaped habits of 'seeing'

² Martin McQuillan, *The Narrative Reader*, Routledge, London, 2000, p.17

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, in *Ecrits, a Selection*, translated by A. Sheridan, Routledge, London, 1995, p.86

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin specifically referred to the polyphonic structure of Russian writer, Dostoyevsky's fiction in which the other's discourse gradually penetrates the consciousness and speech of the hero. John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.9

⁵ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories*, in WJT Mitchell (ed) *On Narrative*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1981, section 3

⁶ Wayne. E. Frantis, *Paragons of Virtue – Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge University Press, U.K. 1993, p.16

and interpretation.⁶ Thus, the audience will bring their own meaning to this dialectic through a code - a system of rules, values and assumptions.

Roland Barthes suggested it is through this code that the audience lays claim to the structure of a creative work (literature, art, music). That is, the audience applies their own form to it. Barthes elaborated on this theory in his essay *Death of the Author*⁷ in which he theorizes that the reader, not the author, writes the story. Similarly, the audience assigns meaning to the creative endeavour of others through preconceived ideas, experience and expectations. *Trois Pièces en Forme de Poire* resulted from such a code and search for meaning. It was the name given by Erik Satie to one of his musical compositions, in reaction to Claude Debussy's statement that the music lacked structure and form. Debussy attempted to consign his own meaning to the music and Satie reclaimed it by assigning a name, albeit an obscure one, as no pear is to be found in the composition.

I too have been influenced by *Trois Pièces en Forme de Poire*, however, and taking ownership of the name, I have assigned my own meaning to it. I have appropriated it for this study - a narrative divided into three parts: *looking* (and *seeing*), *thinking* and *being* (*acting out*). There is no pear. Though I have appropriated the name only, this act of appropriation alters and transforms the original interpretation of Satie's creative work. As such, this blatant copy of the title impacts on my identity and integrity as would the appropriation of another's image. Appropriation may manifest as a form of mimicry, homage, subliminal influence, or pure happenstance.⁸ Within this study, I will address the premise that 'identity is dependant on others', and discuss issues arising from the reprise of whole or specific sections of historic, iconic imagery. In the context of my own art practice, I will focus on two apparently disparate creative art practices which have influenced me: the seventeenth century portraits of women by

⁷ McQuillan, *The Narrative Reader*, p.307; Roland Barthes, *Death of the Author*, 1967, an essay first published in the *American Journal*, Aspen, appeared later in *Image-Music-Text*, London, Fontana, 1977

⁸ Happenstance – a chance instance

⁹ 'Epic Theatre' – originally a German expression used in contrast to dramatic theatre. In 1926, epic theatre was utilized by Bertolt Brecht with projected texts, film, treadmill stage and interruption of sequences to address social issues.

Jan Vermeer and Bertolt Brecht's early twentieth century epic theatre.⁹ These two creative art practices are influential to me due to their theatrical deployment of space, the conversion of the emblematic space to a meditative one and the reflection on aspects of privacy which pertain to the revelation of identity.

In my analysis I will refer to Walter Benjamin's theories related to Brecht's epic theatre and historical reprise of image and idea. In the early twentieth century Benjamin noted that there was an inevitability to constant reprise of ideas and images which he suggested was due to boredom at the prospect of looking for new ideas and faith in the idea of perfection (of the original).¹⁰ He looked to the nineteenth century covered arcades of Paris to elaborate on this theory. In relation to the Parisian nineteenth century arcades, Benjamin conjectured that out of context use of motifs and objects from earlier centuries was utilized as a means of engaging and seducing the consumer. He also noted that aspects of epic theatre, as pioneered by Brecht in the early twentieth century as a vehicle for social comment, were applied as a means of audience manipulation, influencing interpretation of the image or performance.

To further my discussion of interpretation of the sign and the psychological implications that surround a narrative, I refer to Jacques Lacan's analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*.¹¹ The original meaning of purloined is *diverted* or *put far off*¹² which can be seen as a means of distraction or audience manipulation, used to influence or alter the perception of what is before them. Lacan used this story, of a diverted letter, to illustrate his theory that *it is the Symbolic Order which is constitutive for the subject – by demonstrating in the story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier*.¹³ That is, the letter travels a definite path which forms a symbolic circuit or signifying chain that cuts across the subjects of the story. Lacan further stated that signifiers only take on meaning in

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, quoted by Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing, Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*, USA, MIT Press, 1989, p.119

¹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Purloined Letter*, originally published in *The Gift*, Print Periodicals, N.Y. 1845. Jacques Lacan's essay on *The Purloined Letter* opened the *Ecrits* published in French, Editions du Seuil, France, 1966

¹² Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan – an Introduction*, Free Association Books, London, 1986, p.97

¹³ *ibid*, p.91

relation to other signifiers.¹⁴ Without involvement of the other subjects in the story the letter would carry no power. The letter, as the subject of *The Purloined Letter*, is also a floating signifier¹⁵ that determines the acts and destiny of the human subjects, including the Queen, the Minister, the policeman and Dupin (the detective, who is said to know all). In this context, my act of appropriating the title, *Trois Pièces en Forme de Poire*, has also created a floating signifier. That is, the context of the words and their interpretation, or their contextual reading, has changed because I have chosen to use them for something other than that intended by Satie.

The human subjects in *The Purloined Letter* are changed and displaced as they look for, lose and receive the letter. Dupin explains to the narrator that the case involves the thief, the meaning of the letter and the symbolic power bestowed by possession of the letter. Lacan endorsed this view and suggested that the symbolic is a substitute for what is missing from its place. In his analysis of *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan deduced that the meaning of the letter, and its very existence, altered according to whose possession it was in or where it was situated. That is, it symbolized something other than what it was and its absence afforded it greater meaning, irrespective of its content (which the audience never knows). In relation to my study, the letter and whose possession it is in, are analogous with the artist and the image, who owns the image and what it signifies. In that context, my study could be known as 'the case of the appropriated work of art' in which I am the perpetrator who looks for, loses and takes possession of specific details from the creative practices of others. The appropriated items are displaced and changed in this process. The audience will interpret the meaning of these appropriated images and be aware of the inherent, symbolic power afforded them by their original ownership while questioning their existence within this new situation.

Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined letter* was particularly concerned with Freud's notion of the repetition compulsion.¹⁶ That is, the idea of perpetual recurrence of the same thing in human relationships which Freud considered to be an unconscious

¹⁴ John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.69

¹⁵ Claude Levi Strauss was regarded as the first to use this term in the 1950's following Saussure's concept of signification, in the early 1900's. A 'floating signifier' describes a concept whose meaning changes depending on context.

¹⁶ 'The Repetition Compulsion' is a theory referred to by Freud related to death drive and desire to return to an inorganic state. Lacan expanded on this theory and borrowed the term, *automatisme de répétition* (repetition automatism) from French psychoanalysis. In the 1950's, Lacan increasingly used the term 'insistence' to refer to repetition compulsion. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964, translated A. Sheridan, London, Hogarth Press, 1977, p.33

repressed desire to repeat both pleasurable and non-pleasurable experiences.¹⁷ Lacan linked the repetition compulsion with the insistence of the signifying chain, due to his belief that the true subject was the subject of the unconscious, not the ego. Through video documentation, in the performance aspect of my narrative, I will reference (and activate) the repetition compulsion, the conscious (or motivated) and unconscious act.

Lacan's analysis of *The Purloined Letter* was part of his formulation of the Real, described as that which is always in its place and cannot be symbolized.¹⁸ The letter, due to its diversion from place or its 'floating' character, symbolized something other than a letter. Lacan's analysis of language is pertinent to my study, in particular his definition of the Imaginary as in the realm of illusion.¹⁹ In Lacan's analysis of language, the Imaginary depends on a division between the self and the other, but it relies on the reference to the other. In relation to my study, the realm of illusion involves reliance on repetition of the other's ideas and images. Lacan believed that repetition and mimicry was fundamental in living creatures. He described the ethological phenomenon of mimicry in animals as an instinctive act, common to many living creatures. He noted that certain beasts have the habit of assuming the insignia and identity of their surroundings, as disguise or assuming an image.²⁰

I begin this narrative with contemplation and reflection on these theories in chapter one, *looking (and seeing)*. This chapter, observed from a personal perspective, is a synopsis of signification, the relationship of objects to each other and the influence of sensory stimulation. I have recorded moments and observations, as both preamble and self-critique with reference to Roland Barthes' *Leaving the Movie Theatre*,²¹ an essay in which he analyzes his own borderline moments of immersion in pleasure. Like Barthes, I move from the first to the third person, observe myself and blur the scene without distorting the image.²² *Looking and seeing* follows a process of transmutation from the written narrative to the tactility of embossed words in a small book, as *mise en abyme*,²³ a preservation of my ephemeral thoughts.

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 69

¹⁹ *op. cit.*, J. Lechte

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Roland Barthes, *Leaving the Movie Theatre*, in *The Art of The Personal Essay* Phillip Lopate, Anchor Books. N.Y.1995, p.420

²² *ibid*

²³ *Mise en abyme* – a replica of a text or narrative embedded within that text or narrative. *The Narrative Reader*. p.322

I follow this with *thinking*, a mental rehearsal of an art performance. I think about what I have seen, read about and how it impacts on my artistic identity. I imagine the presence of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht in the theatre wings. Benjamin's theories, related to the theatre dynamic of the Fourth Wall and Brecht's epic theatre, are critical to my art performance. I am conscious of interruption of sequences and the use of light and sound, as referenced by Benjamin. Contemporary artists, who employ these tools and have influenced me, such as Australian photographic installation artists George Parkin, Rose Farrell and performance artist, Linda Lou Murphy are discussed. I also reference the Japanese writer, Kobo Abe, who creates a fantasy of identity, which involves the mask. Together with the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, the creative practices of these artists and writer are relevant to my narrative. It is through them that I am able to discuss imagery and objects from my art practice as both theoretical and aesthetic objects. Similarly, I look to Benjamin to chart 'the matter itself' and 'where I found it'²³ – the imagery which I have physically and mentally gathered to make my own.

I contemplate the comment by Joseph Kosuth, that art only lives by influencing art after it,²⁴ or it exists, in perpetuity, for the inspiration of others. He suggests art is a living entity that perpetually influences other art. Kosuth also stated that as the world changes the meaning of things change. *Once a particular artist's reality has gone, the reality of that particular work of art is gone too - its physical residue is little clue to the meaning of the work of art.*²⁵ This suggests that due to the passage of time or the physical passing of its artist-maker, the original meaning attributed to a work of art has 'gone.' In other words, the work of art can be seen to 'live on' even though it may have lost the impetus and meaning bestowed on it by the original artist. Kosuth does not specify whether the disappearance of meaning, in an artwork, coincides with the personal demise of the artist. However, he does suggest that an empty, creative work will inevitably, over time, be 'recycled' and assigned a new meaning by another artist. The appropriating artist may see the new or recycled work of art as an act of mimicry or homage to the original artist, as a subliminal influence or pure happenstance. The audience may interpret it similarly or the meaning may seem to them to be obscure and confusing.

²³ Walter Benjamin, *Excavation and Memory*, Gesammelte Schriften, iv, Berlin, 1932 (translated by Rodney Livingstone) p. 400-401

²⁴ Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After*, MIT Press, Cambridge. Mass, 1991, p.78

²⁵ *ibid*

Assignment of a new meaning to the image of another, by a subsequent party, can be an act of 'intellectualized' appropriation. That is, it is consciously undertaken by the appropriating artist, as an academic exercise, to challenge their own perception and that of the audience. It can be a dynamic in which the appropriating artist constructs a relationship between borrowed images posed as propositions and paradoxes for the audience. Intellectualized appropriation, however, can create a conundrum for the viewer in relation to the authorial voice. The values and assumptions of the original artist, and their audience, may be at odds with those of the appropriating artist and the contemporary audience. What may be seen as a symbolic motif or signifier in the twenty first century may not have been the intention of the original artist in a previous century. However, creation of a conundrum for the viewer may be the intention of the contemporary appropriating artist. My appropriation of Satie's *Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire* can be seen as a form of intellectualized appropriation in that I have perpetuated the paradoxical title of a musical composition, as an academic exercise, to challenge the perception of and create a conundrum for the audience.

I think of this as I begin my first art performance. It is a defining moment which I describe in *being (acting out)*. I have amassed a collection of symbolic objects: including figurative etchings, a suitcase and masks. They have waited, in anticipation of their acting role in my narrative. I handle them all with white cotton gloves. Each item is a signifier, personal to my psyche, yet some are borrowed from the creative practices of others. According to Freud, we protect ourselves through a subtle art of substitution in which an object may stand in for what we are hiding from ourselves.²⁶ Freud made this statement in reference to displacement and psychical dramas in one's everyday life. In this context, my performance is the first act in a new life drama. I switch on the music. It is the haunting restraint of Erik Satie's *Gynopedies* and *Gnossienne*.²⁷ I enter the darkened room. The curtains are open and the suitcase is closed. I switch on the lamp. A subdued glow permeates the space. The audience waits silently in the shadows. I can feel them looking - at the objects and me.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, translated by Alan Tyson, pub. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 15- 42

²⁷ Erik Satie 1866- 1925, *Gynopedies, Gnossiennes*, recorded by Aufnahme. Enregistrement: De Vereeniging, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, 9/1992