

Collaborative Viewpoints: The Writing of Impossible Descriptions

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The emergence of feminism in the late twentieth century saw a critical re-appraisal of conventional modernist approaches to theory and practice in the visual arts. Concomitantly, postmodernism posited the “death of the author” and made more implicit the viewer’s role in the generation of art. While much subsequent scholarship has been devoted to understandings of women’s artistic practices and their placement within the art historical canon, and some attention has been paid to the question of collaborative authorship, especially in the field of literary studies, there has been little focus on the dynamics of collaboration when theory meets practice.

Taking as its springboard Joanna Zylińska’s concept of the “writing of impossible description”¹ and the consideration of an encounter with art grounded in a feminist ethical approach, this paper interrogates the nature of artistic collaboration. It examines the reciprocal relationship between art making and theorising through an investigation of the authorial voices of artist and viewer. By focusing on a creative partnership established in the joint authorship of a recent publication, this paper seeks an understanding of a collaborative critical practice.



Figure 1 Anna Sabadini, *Knitted View East with Crepuscular Light over King George Sound*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 180 x 220cm. Copyright Anna Sabadini. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

We should like to start this discussion with an image of one of Anna Sabadini's paintings, *Knitted View East with Crepuscular Light over King George Sound*, 2010 (figure 1), exhibited at the Arterial Gallery in Sydney in 2010. The images of the works in the exhibition entitled *Home* became the basis of our first collaborative paper, in which we interrogated artistic practice from the perspectives of the viewer/theorist and the artist/maker.²

Unfortunately, a reproduction has the tendency to flatten out the painterly qualities of the work and moreover conflates the way the image and viewer interact with each other. As a viewer, Ann Schilo's initial encounter with this painting destabilized her known perceptions of the world. At first glance, she seemed to be presented with a landscape – or rather seascape – that has a certain currency in the history of Western Australian visual culture. King George Sound is an important harbour, a place of early European settlement, which has been depicted by numerous colonial painters as a site not only of a Western concept of beauty (sublime and picturesque) but also one of colonial power and patriarchal dominion.³ In Anna's painting, God's fingers of pure reason shine down from on high. Yet, as Ann

moved closer to the painting, the focus shifted. The scene was disrupted, dispersed, dislocated. Pattern took over to disassemble reason and coherency. She become immersed in an expansive field of mark making, in knitted strokes of colour, and then lost in the field of vision (figure 2).



Figure 2 Anna Sabadini, *Details of Knitted View East with Crepuscular Light over King George Sound, 2010. Oil on canvas. Copyright Anna Sabadini. Reprinted with permission of the artist.*

In discussing her responses to the painting with Anna, both became increasingly aware of the mirrored concepts of intimacy and distance, and how they are important framing devices in trying to find a way of talking about artistic practice. The establishment of a working relationship with a viewer/theorist, who was familiar with her painting, enabled Anna to frame her work in the theories of the feminine sublime, in turn enriching her practice. For Ann, the ongoing dialogue with a visual artist not only helped refine, but also enhanced, her theoretical understanding through a pragmatic engagement; the visualising of theory in practice and practice in theory. For both of us the collaboration highlighted the importance of localised subjective knowledge in mediating these connections. The back and forth between intimacy and distance facilitated our seeing.

By considering our respective involvement and engagement in the production and eventual publication of a journal article, we wish in this paper to interrogate what it means to collaborate. From our situated knowledge and experience, and located within a feminist framework, we will tease out the importance of intimacy and distance in the process of collaboration and its interrelationship with other complexes: self and other, authenticity and authorship, materiality, crafting and language. We will show how our collaborative process has led to both a revealing and valorizing of our own and the other's knowledge and understanding of art, its theory, and its practices. In so doing we posit an understanding of artistic collaboration that bridges the conventional separations between theory and practice, between author/writer, and artist/painter. Underpinning these considerations is the place of language – the languages of theory and practice in the visual arts.

I entered the collaborative proposition with a sense of anticipation and also trepidation. I recognised Anna as an intelligent, creative thinker/painter. Her art work has so many layers that entice me: visually, critically, theoretically. There is a depth to her practice that is both technically and visually engaging. It is a practice that I wanted to write about. I also recognised my own position. As an academic in an institution that is ever mindful of research quantum, I need to have a publication track record. The writing of journal articles, book chapters, and so forth is part of my job expectations. Yet there is also an institutional paradox that I face. While collaboration is hailed as a vital mechanism for building a research community, there is a bias that considers sole authorship a more valued outcome. As evidenced by advice from one senior colleague when I mentioned I was working on a joint paper: "That's well and good Ann, but you really need to concentrate on getting your own work published."

During the 1990s, feminists such as Catherine Clement, Julia Kristeva, and various women's groups, such as those in the United States that formed in the University of Tulsa and from the Mid West Modern Languages Association, sought to transform the dominant paradigm of academia by intervening in language through shifts in genre and styles, as well as collaborative approaches to writing.⁴ By the end of the decade, numerous publications that offered different voices and collaborative practices had emerged as a result of these concerns.⁵ While we do not wish to diminish the work of these other women, twenty years on, we find that little has changed between such desires and academia as we investigate similar terrain. Although there has been a moderation in tone – most noticeably by women writers – the dominant will to truth in academic discourses is still the coherent reasoned authority of the single authorial voice.

Ironically though, what has always frustrated me about academic writing is its refusal of the personal. As Gavin Kitching writes in *The Trouble with Theory*:

first-person pronouns and forms of the verb are entirely absent ... there are no 'I think's', 'I feel's', 'it seems to me's' and so on, let alone any openly introspective or reflexive passages. This form of theoretical prose is, in short, rigidly objectivist, both in the sense that it conjures up a world of objects affected or moved only by mechanical or inanimate forces, but also in the sense that the prose itself appears to have no subject or creator.⁶

Hence the paradoxical situation of authority being present but with no admittance of the self except as ego. What this has always done for me as a reader, is push me away, intimidate and distance me. And when I was trying to "write theory" because I thought I had to, I found myself using a voice that was not my own – I felt distanced from myself. Distance is not altogether a bad thing – after all, metaphorically in language it is aligned with clarity and perspective. What Richard Rorty alludes to when he writes: "*theoria* suggests taking a view of a large stretch of territory from a considerable distance."⁷ In distance there is recognition of an other, of difference, but that is where it stays – perspective and clarity also tend to be aligned with aloofness and coolness. What I find lacking in the formula of academic language is intimacy, the life-blood of the creative process, the part of the process that admits the other.

The feminine sublime does not domesticate the object that might be the source of threat but rather accepts the amorous relationship of pleasure and pain, and life and death, and the potential dispersal of the self. This mode of encountering difference takes up a 'position of respect in response to incalculable otherness' and thus situates itself

in the realm of ethics, defined by Levinas as ‘respect for the alterity of the other’, rather than impersonal, subject-object-orientated aesthetics.⁸

The theoretical embarkation for our initial investigations was located within Joanna Zylińska’s exploration of the feminine sublime and her concept of *déécriture féminine*, the writing of impossible descriptions, which provides a conceptualising framework for our collaborative work. Zylińska emphasises an ethical dimension to the feminine sublime that not only disavows a distancing between subject and object but also opens up to an “amorous encounter” which can lead to “wonder and bewilderment.”⁹ In so doing, an everyday event can be transformed into an extraordinary one; one which is “rooted in materiality” and reconnects “the lost communication between materiality and ideality or body and language.”¹⁰ These reconnections align with Barbara Bolt’s emphasis on a material approach to understanding art and were important for both of us to ground our approach with a specific and localised response.¹¹

Truth be told, I was never entirely comfortable with my own railings, nor with those of my fellow artists, against having to read and write theory, especially when I recognised this stance as a polarised one, and as such, incomplete. I am actually interested in ideas, but not interested in promulgating the usual dichotomies of beauty versus ideas, form versus content, materiality versus concept: as if art had to be one or the other, and could not include both; as if art, the process of seeing and expression through materiality, could not also be a valid way of philosophising. It is quite hard to maintain a middle ground, not to take the stance of binary opposites: art versus theory, self versus other. In this regard, encountering difference and collapsing binaries, our collaboration has been important to me. In writing our last paper together, I admit to not being able to take in the full details of the feminine sublime, BUT, in this instance I did not feel I had to because Ann seemed to understand it. I focused on words instead that were of interest to me, that helped to expand and enrich and frame the painting process and my interests – feminine, sublime, ethics, blurring of boundaries. I added these words/concepts to words that had been floating around in my own head for the last couple of years – diffusion, translation, duality, fragmentation, home. These words were loci. It is in the spaces around these words, rather than in their specificities, that I think we met and expanded our joint conversation.

It seems to me that the feminine sublime, in turn, not only redefines space and time but also delineates the boundaries of the meeting parties, which, nevertheless, may soon blur. The point is that the encounter itself defines those facing each other, giving them a chance to know themselves, and see their own difference, before they actually approach the other. The dis-

proportionate “masculine” (that is apparently neutral) sublime is personalized here: mutual wonder of both sides excludes the position of mastery the subject might adopt towards the threatening object. Thus in the feminine sublime we have two subjects not only exposed to each other but also needing each other for the assertion of their own (temporary) subjectivity.¹²

In the feminine sublime, not only painting and its theoretical explication, but also we as artist/writers, are positioned as two subjects both exposed and needing each other. As we will discuss, the recognition of the alterity of the other and the interrelationships of individual subjectivities is an important consideration in collaborative creative partnerships associated with artistic practice and the theorising of it. In our interrogation of the implications of the feminine sublime for our work, we can identify a number of key encounters:

- Artist/scholar with her everyday life
- Artist/scholar with conceptual ideas, with theory
- Artist/scholar with the painting as activity and as artifact
- Viewer/theorist with the painting as artifact
- Viewer/theorist with art historical and theoretical background
- Viewer /theorist with everyday life
- Artist/scholar and viewer/theorist in dialogue
- Practice and theory of painting
- Practice and theory of writing

Each of these aspects had (and still has) the potentiality for encountering difference, though for this paper we wish to concentrate on the later aspects: the dialogue between artist/scholar and viewer/theorist and the languages that pervade theory and practice, in this case painting.

In the course of her enquiry, Zylinska considers the possibility of “*dé-criture féminine*” by incorporating Cixous’ concept of “*écriture féminine*” with Lyotard’s idea of “writing of impossible description.”¹³ For Zylinska, *dé-criture féminine* “embraces non binary difference” and “serves as a useful tool for analyzing (the) transformations.”¹⁴ As a concept,

it challenges the ideas of clarity, mastery and presence. Celebrating an event, immersion or plunge, it collapses the distinction between theory and practice, or primary and secondary texts. It questions the phallogocentric discourse of Western philosophy, but also certain forms of ‘phallogocentric feminism’ which silences indeterminacy for the sake of arriving at clearly defined feminist politics and feminist ethics. In what I perceive to be the most political and most revolutionary of manoeuvres, *dé-criture féminine* is always deferred ‘which is the fate that waits the mind when it tries to grasp itself through

logic, theory of knowledge or literature, narrative or essays.' Deferral does not need to stand for a refusal of feminist action, but it does involve the radical questioning of the concepts of both action and feminism.¹⁵

It is this writing of impossible description that enables us to consider the activities of collaboration. It can also be used as a tool through which we might speak as authors individually and collectively in respecting the alterity of otherness through language.

In thinking through the possible ideas for this paper, I keep coming back to language. Differences in language. The language of mark-making in my paintings, the language of painting versus writing, of creativity versus theory, of poetry versus the academic. And to what these differences in language signal – intimacy, distance, openness, linearity, vulnerability, connection. As Kimberley McCarthy and Sandra Steingraber among others have highlighted, “the traditional academic essay consists of the linear presentation of ideas. In contrast, the presentation of artistic ideas may or may not include linearity.”¹⁶ Exposure to Zylinska’s concepts caused me to question the ethics of academic writing. The pressures of negative alterity, the requirement to fit in with the institutional academic voice, make it very hard to maintain *both* distance and intimacy in relationship to one’s work. Authority over authenticity is encouraged, the necessary overview from great distance but not the welcoming closeness of the other. I keep asking myself, “How can writing theory be made more unbounded?” “Is it possible to conduct intimate philosophy, one that is open and inclusive and welcoming of the other?”

Through our collaborative partnership we have come to recognise that this binary separation is not a case of either or, one form as opposed to the other. Encouraged by Zylinska’s call for an ethical encounter, we sought a meeting where difference is not only undertaken in “respect for the alterity of other” but also has the potential to produce a new kind of envisaging and articulating. We desired a way to conceptualise the writing of art in another mode, not one where distinctions are collapsed or one position takes mastery over another; but rather where our own subjectivities are exposed and considered. In the practice of our collaboration we faced both the other’s and our own subjectivity, encounters that called us to recognise the individual habits of thinking, modes of expressing, ways of exploring and articulating ideas that both confounded and delighted our interrogation of Anna’s paintings. As such, our understandings of both practice and the theorising of it have been enriched.

Meeting with alterity, then, does not in itself result in ethical encounters. It does not automatically encourage the intimate side of the equation. In looking over the list of

possible encounters mentioned above, I considered what it was about my studio practice that I believed to be ethical, a true meeting with the other. Looking around my studio, I see a list of reminders to myself taken from Zen philosophy that are pasted on the wall: Non-Judging; Patience; Beginner's Mind; Trust; Non-Striving; Acceptance; Letting Go. The entire creative process involves transporting the self into some sense of ethical otherness, whether it be through imagination, materiality, or process. It constitutes a true collaboration with the other encountered in yourself, a willingness to go beyond what you already know about yourself. So many times, after working on a painting I have stepped back with wonder, asking, "Did I do that?" It needs to be an open process of pure discovery, of the unknown; a dance between metaphoric distance and intimacy. *Let us see what happens, let us not judge this now, let us be prepared to fail as we might learn something, let us discover something new.* I think of a plural me – and say "Let us." I am in cahoots.

In your writing and painting you seem to return often to the issue of intimacy and distance. And in your encounters with ideas, with daily life, the studio, and the stuff of paint, there is a push and pull between binary oppositions that are sometimes in proximity to one, sometimes another, yet always there is this oscillation. For example, in your paintings, there is a destabilised terrain that is and is not one, at one and the same time. I am reminded not only of Zylinska's interest in spatial and temporal redefinition, but also of her call "to reconnect the lost communication between materiality and ideality or body and language."¹⁷

More obviously, the I/other complex inherent in the art-making process includes the viewer. Art is ultimately made for viewing or listening to or reading. When I make, I anticipate this. As much as I try to maintain integrity with the other in myself and the process of discovery, I also keep the viewer in mind. Anticipating his/her engagement, disconcertment, pleasure, discomfort, recognition, celebration and so on. However, when I ask myself, "How is it specifically that I engage the viewer, or fail to?" the factor underpinning all is the crafting of the painting – my knowledge and interaction with a tradition of painting, with formal considerations such as composition, tone and so on, and with the materiality of the paint itself. These constitute the language with which I communicate the ideas.

Octavio Paz, in an essay in his collection *Convergences*, wrote about 'seeing and using'. He suggested that craftsmanship 'in its perpetual movement back and forth between beauty and utility, pleasure and service ... teaches us lessons in sociability.' He wrote of the 'rationality' of industrial design, the impersonal uniformity. The handmade bowl is, by his definition, already sociable. So too is food prepared with discrimination and offered at the domestic table.¹⁸

Through crafting, the other is admitted, whether reader, viewer or listener. By its very definition, crafting implies a negotiation with otherness and therefore ethics. In crafting lies sociability, the gift of possible interconnection. First and foremost it requires an understanding of materiality, a potent other, whether of paint, or as in writing, of words. In creative practice what is important is a certain openness of the self, not to have an end-point in mind, but to enter into an honest investigation with the material/paint as partner. It involves an intimate knowledge of the material, a coaxing and manipulation of it, but also a willingness to allow it to speak, to be in its own right. Equally important is being open to the other in yourself, to the perpetual unknown. Knowing your craft could, after a while, become an automatic thing, bringing altogether too much comfort in the employment of familiar repetition. Being continuously open to the other in yourself keeps the intimacy/distance complex in play, as does pushing the material to new limits or respecting the times when it speaks in ways you do not altogether understand, accepting concepts of meander and play, of transportation and pleasure, of frustration, of proposition, wilfulness, rejection, and reassertion in constant flux.

The emphasis of studio practice is therefore not on *making*, implying authorship, but on negotiation. This is what I think Barbara Bolt means when she writes: "The intensity of the different operates in artistic repetition."¹⁹ What gives intimacy distance and distance intimacy is openness. This willing dispersal *and* concentration of the self translates to a certain authenticity. These relationships are read and understood by the viewer, and as such constitute a warm invitation to their own self to enter the I/other complex that is art.

In the end, this complex sits within the bigger I/other complex that is us and the world. The ritual of studio practice that enacts seeing, negotiating and communicating presents an ethical model for an idea of an intimate philosophy as opposed to *theoria* of distance. Instead of necessitating the linear academic conquest of past ideas, the revoking of a prior status quo, it situates me/you in localised, specific meaning making. This model can also be applied to collaboration between art and theory, employing Zylinska's ideas of *décriture féminine*.

As a viewer, my encounter with these paintings destabilises my known perceptions of the world. For example, at first glance I seem to be presented with a landscape or an interior, images that have certain currency in the history of visual culture. Yet as I move closer that view becomes transformed into a field of repetitive marks, dots, cross hatches, knits. In these marks there is an intimacy that suggests the body of the artist, her daily rituals of making. For me, the delight is in the crafting of the image and in the play of signifiers of the conventions of western painting. It trills through a dialogue between romantic and classical modes of expression. I enjoy how they rub against each other; both present and absent, intimate and distant. And while I sometimes rail against the limitations of written language, at the same time I am heartened

that occasionally, even for the heroes of theory, there is an apparent inability of the written word, of academic positioning, to not only say anything appropriate or worthwhile, but also to grasp all the messy incomprehensibilities of artistic activity, that they too are also lost for words.

It is instructive to recall a candid response of Roland Barthes, the French philosopher and admiring champion of the artist Cy Twombly. In 1978, he described an encounter with a reproduction of a Twombly painting: "It is still dark, it is raining, all is silent when I sit down again at my worktable. I look at *Herodiade* (1960) and I have really nothing to say about it except the same platitude: that I like it."²⁰

This is almost giving up in face of the unsayable. All you can do is set the scene. This is part of the crafting process: the way crafting admits the unknowable, the unachievable, trusting that there is enough in the experience of others to evoke. This experience is held in the metaphoric potential of the material, whether of paint or of words. Taking care to craft personalises theory with human experience by acknowledging the broader tradition of writing – by indicating the simultaneous familiarity and otherness of language, its mystery and magic, its connection to a common experience. Rather than the arid unpeopled landscape that theory suggests, the emphasis shifts to a subject who is in turn in the landscape. It is a complete picture.

What we have aimed for in this paper is bringing together the "materiality", the otherness, of words – their ability to be open and poetic, non-specific – and how this openness is inclusive of the other (reader, viewer). When Zylinska talks of impossible descriptions, this openness is what we think of.

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NOTES

- ¹ Joanna Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared: the feminine and the sublime*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
- ² Ann Schilo and Anna Sabadini, "Transforming viewpoints: to mix metaphors in the field of painting" *International Journal of Arts and Society* 5, No. 3 (2010): 13-28.
- ³ Examples of these colonial representations include: William Westall, *Bay on the South Coast of New Holland January, 1802*; Louis Auguste de Saison, *Vue du Port du Roi Georges, 1833*; Robert Dale, *Panoramic View of King George's Sound, Part of the Colony of the Swan River, 1834*, and Duncan Elphinstone Cooper,

Princess Royal Harbour, 1854.

⁴ For example see: Catherine Clement, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, trans. S. O'Driscoll and D. Mahoney, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia Press, 1987); Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, "Screaming Divas: Collaboration as Feminist Practice" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 13, No. 2 (Autumn, 1994), 259-270, University of Tulsa, date of access: 3 May 2010, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464109>; Lisa Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford "Collaboration and Concepts of Authorship" *PMLA* 116, No. 2 (Mar., 2001): 354-369, Modern Language Association, date of access: 9 May 2010, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463522>; and Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose, "Strange Bedfellows: Feminist Collaboration" *Signs*, 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1993). 547-561. The University of Chicago Press, date of access: 20 May 2010, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174857>.

⁵ An example of the collaborative approaches to writing by academics in the United States can be found in the collection of essays in *Common Ground: Feminist Collaborations in the Academy*, E.G. Peck & J.S. Mink, (eds.) (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998). While there are numerous other works we could cite here, one that relates to our research interests is Alison Rowley *Helen Frankenthaler: painting history, writing painting*, (London: I.B.Taurus, 2007).

⁶ Gavin Kitching, *The Trouble with Theory: The educational costs of Postmodernism*, (New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 2008), 21.

⁷ This quote is taken from a chapter in which Rorty discusses theory, irony, autonomy and solidarity in Western philosophy and literature. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 edition) 96.

⁸ Zylinska, *On spiders*, 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹¹ In her writing Barbara Bolt emphasises a material approach to understanding art where the artist's engagement with her surrounds through bodily activity is all important. This has alignment with Zylinska's call for an ethical dimension to the encounter with everyday life where, through the agency of the feminine sublime, materiality, body, language and ideas can be reconnected. Rather than making claims for a universal, all encompassing aesthetics, both writers ground their approach to understanding artistic practice in a specific and localised response. Such viewpoints are fundamental to the exploration of the various artistic transformations considered in this paper. See Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004) and Barbara Bolt, "Material Thinking and the Agency of Matter" in *Studies in Material Thinking* 1, No.1 (April 2007) AUT University, date of access 2 April, 2010 <<http://www.materialthinking.org>>

¹² Zylinska, *On spiders*, 102.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶ Kimberley McCarthy and Sandra Steingraber "Integrating Collaborative and Autonomous Impulses within Feminist Projects" in *Common Ground: Feminist Collaborations in the Academy* E.G. Peck and J.S. Mink, (eds.) (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) 102.

¹⁷ Ibid., 159, 173.

¹⁸ Gay Bilson, *Plenty: Digressions on food* (Victoria: Lantern, 2004), 164.

¹⁹ Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 156.

²⁰ James Rondeau, *Cy Twombly: The Natural World, Selected Works 2000-2007*, (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2009), 15.