

Plate, Potato, Plato.

Year: 1986
Level: First Year, Spring Semester 2
Unit: Investigative Studies
Dates: October 3, 10, 13, 17.
Duration: 1 Day Workshop x 4 groups

Origin

This one day mandatory workshop, scheduled as part of the Investigative Studies unit, was offered four times allowing all the first years to rotate through it in small workable groups of around twelve. The workshop was principally conceived to draw attention to how the experience of mundane objects could be transfigured: 'being-made-memorable' through the deliberate exercising of memory patterns of various kinds. The memorising-act came under scrutiny. At the time I noted a diminished sense of recall or recollection amongst the cohort of students, in respect of noticing the detail in things, a lack of particularity in referencing, and a vagueness to commentary. The workshop introduced them to mnemonics and demonstrated methods by which retentiveness could be enhanced, and recall enriched (being able to 'fill in the detail' of recollection).

Premise

Each participant was required to bring to the workshop seven objects: A paperback novel, a mug, a spoon, a glass (tumbler), a potato, a stone and a plate. Each of the 12 participants objects were then laid out on the floor of the studio in rows beside one another following the same sequence: the book first, then the mug, then the spoon, then the glass, then the potato, then the stone and finally the plate. In this layout the same items would all align on the vertical axis as a column or sequence of books, of mugs, of spoons etc. The completed grid comprised 84 separate items.

Kit Inspection

Once set out, the morning was allocated with each participant attempting to memorise, through what ever means, all of the 84 items on display, such that, if asked, any one of them could identify or recognise any one of the anonymous items as belonging to 'so and so'.

What quickly becomes apparent through this task is the different considerations that are brought to bear in *differentiating* similar things, and the nature of the thing being scrutinised, its *uniqueness* is identified in ways specific to the thingness of that thing. An awareness of systems of classification, (a taxonomy of objects), emerges out of this process which prompts reference to Plato's theory of forms. This could be exemplified in those mass-produced items, where identical replication is desired: materialised from an 'ideal' prototype the reproductions are designed to resist marks of differentiation (perfect casts from the mould). It is only with the loss of newness, the 'immaculate' state undergoing wear and tear of use, that damage and spoliation becomes visible: the chip, the crack, the stain, the mark etc., the flaw that registers uniqueness. The organic reproducibility of the potato generates on the other hand only approximations to 'potato-ness' in an endless array of traits of deformity more conducive to particular identifiable characterisations. The book triggers 'text-memory' relatively easy to register. Sets prompt comparisons: biggest, smallest, heaviest, roughest, dirtiest etc. There are quirks of noticing, the analogous 'looks like' that mnemonically fixes a differential: 'That stone looks like or reminds me of the head of a dog' etc.

Identity Parade

All the items were then regathered: all the books were randomly collected together, all the potatoes were randomly collected together, all the plates were randomly collected together etc. In so doing each individual's discrete set was dispersed into these anonymous congregations of books, potatoes, plates etc. Each participant would then take it in turn to nominate somebody to go and retrieve a specific item from one of the collections and return it to its owner. And so each participant would progressively re-collect their set through this process of selection and return. (e.g. Jane nominates John to retrieve Sarah's spoon from the collection of 12 spoons and return it to her). This process would continue until all the items were returned to their original owners. Discussion would then ensue about the effectiveness of the various memorising processes (mnemonic systems) explored. This would conclude the morning session.

Page 89

In the afternoon session each participant with their reclaimed set of seven items were all asked to locate page 89 in their paperback novel. They were then directed to read that page and consider its content as a directive or script that could determine a particular arrangement or staging of their seven items (as an ensemble) such that the arrangement enacted or illustrated the occurrences as described on page 89.

With their 'cast' of seven items, each with their own characteristic qualities, the challenge was to deploy these traits in combination in such a way that it would capture the essential content of the extract. The placement and grouping between the items offered considerable variation of option: above, beneath, leaning against, in isolation from, in tandem etc; degrees of precariousness: of balance or instability could be explored; the book: open, closed, standing on edge etc; qualities such as transparency, solidity, the warmth of paper, the coldness of glass; the inferred acoustic possibilities inherent in the items (tapping spoon on glass, the shutting of a book etc.) The idea was to maximise the potential of this limited cast in staging a tableau of the text.

Time was then set aside for the twelve improvised 'arrangements' to be carefully scrutinised by all of the participants, making notations that would help to recall them, speculation was encouraged in relation to 'what they might mean', given each is enacting a text or episode from a story of some kind.

Each in turn was then directed to read out their page 89 from which their arrangement derived and discussion then ensued on the relative merits of equivalency achieved.

Changing the Cast

Time permitting, a further variant then took place, involving an exchange of sets, whereby each participant inherited another's set and then arranged this new set (new cast) to 'perform' their original staging. The 'temperamental' difference between the two sets, their physical differences would generate a different 'performance' of the same 'script'. The apparent differences when compared then provided more observations for discussion.