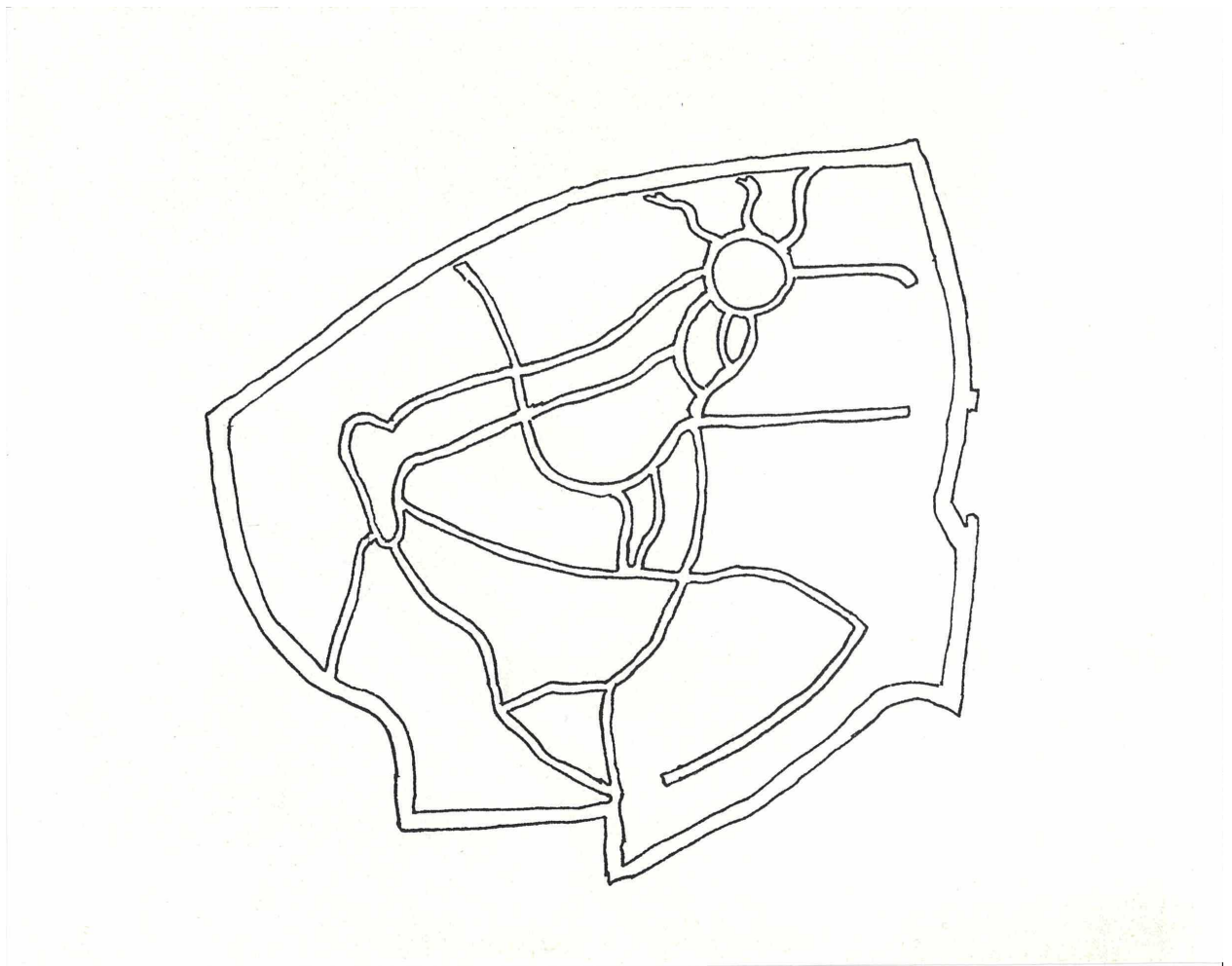


THE BIRDNESTER

*'Dye den neft weet dyen weeten,
Dyen rooft dyen heeten.'*



Map of Rookwood Cemetery

The Birdnester

Year: 1988
Level: First Year, Autumn Semester 1
Unit: Foundation Studies
Dates: May 2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 13*, 16, 18, 20 *Excursion to Rookwood Cemetery, Lidcombe
Duration: 9 days

Origin

This project was centred on a painting by Pieter Brueghel entitled "The Birdnester" (1568). I had an ongoing interest in this picture (still do), and previously gave a Lecture on it at Sydney College of the Arts in 1982. I recall reading an essay by Aldous Huxley from his collection 'Along the Road' (1925) entitled 'The Best Picture' where he elaborated on why, in his opinion he thought 'The Resurrection' (c1460) a fresco by Piero Della Francesca in the Museo Civico, Sanselpolcro, could be considered one of the best pictures ever painted. In asking myself the same question Brueghel's 'Birdnester' came to mind. This prompted me to investigate why I held this painting in such high regard (which I partly alluded to in the Sydney College Lecture).

Premise

The students were progressively given directives, all of which had some connection with the 'Birdnester' painting. The work that they evolved and developed was thus forced to correlate in various ways with the image *in its absence*. The source that they were working from was only revealed at the end. The project essentially inverted the notion of influence, where a work may be directly 'influenced' and prompted by an existing image which informs the 'look' of the ensuing outcome. In this instance the students were working 'blind', had no access to the original painting per se, but were challenged to speculate with clues that were progressively introduced and tried as best they could to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Connections to notions of 'source material' and what could be considered as a resource or starting point for a project were, in part, opened out through this strategy.

Step 1 (T)OLD

The students were issued with an initial set of directives that required them to do four things:

- 1) To research the etymology of their family name, to derive some sense or meaning as to its origin and using the idea of a rebus to create something that could indicate a sense of that name.
- 2) To recollect an anecdote that linked them to a remote family ancestor and without actually doing anything tangible, consider how the memory was recalled to consciousness and in particular the imaginary 'look' of the memory (with all its unreliability). They were also asked to rehearse the telling of that anecdote.
- 3) To bring to mind the anecdote when out walking, particularly when about to step or jump across something.
- 4) To consider ways in which the possibilities of the researched name could in some way come to correspond or associate with the identified anecdote.

STEP 1

(T)OLD

NAME

RESEARCH THE ETYMOLOGY OF YOUR FAMILY NAME
WHAT DOES YOUR NAME MEAN?
WHERE DOES YOUR NAME COME FROM?

IN THE ABSENCE OF DEFINITIVE INFORMATION, SPECULATE PHONETICALLY.
WORK WITH WHAT IS PLAUSIBLE.

REBUS

DEMONSTRATE YOUR NAME *BY THINGS*

MEMBER

CHOOSE A DISTANT MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY,
THE ONE THAT IS EVIDENTLY MOST FOREIGN TO YOU.
SELECT A SINGLE SIMPLE ANECDOTE
THAT CONNECTS THE TWO OF YOU TOGETHER.

DO NOT WRITE OUT YOUR ANECDOTE
BUT RATHER REHEARSE IN YOUR MIND THE *TELLING* OF IT.

RE MEMBER

IN BRINGING YOUR ANCESTOR TO MIND, HOW DO YOU RECALL THEM?
AVOID VIEWING PHOTOGRAPHS.
RELY UPON THE UNRELIABLE.
THE DISTORTIONS OF MEMORY.

STROLL

AS YOU TRAVEL ON FOOT FROM PLACE TO PLACE,
AS YOU WALK FROM THE STATION TO THE FACTORY,
OR FROM THE FACTORY TO THE STATION,
RECALL THE ANECDOTE,
SO THAT IT ASSOCIATES ITSELF WITH WALKING.
PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO THE ANECDOTE
AS YOU ARE ABOUT TO STEP OR JUMP ACROSS
DITCHES OR PUDDLES.

SHOW

UTILIZE AS FULLY AS POSSIBLE THE RESOURCE OF YOUR NAME
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ANECDOTE, SUCH THAT IT'S *PRESENCE*
IS IN SOME WAY EVIDENT IN THE WAY IN WHICH YOU
DEMONSTRATE THE ANECDOTE

ALLOW YOUR NAME AND THE ANECDOTE TO REVERBERATE
ONE AGAINST THE OTHER.

The students were then directed to construct a slab measuring precisely 59cm x 68cm. These dimensions were those of the 'Birdnester', which was painted on a hard wood panel of black oak. The physicality of the actual dimensions were encountered at this point. There was no indication given as to why they were to construct the specified slab.

Step 2

HARD

Construct a slab out of hard materials that measures exactly 59cm x 68cm. This should be a composite or aggregate of a number of dense surfaces – wood, cement, plastic, stone, glass, brick, metal, plaster etc. The possibility of working on both sides of the slab should exist. The two surfaces should appear as flat as possible and should feel neither fragile nor flimsy. It should be thick enough to stand free on any of its four edges.

Step 3 Onweg

The students were then given a text in a language that appeared difficult to translate, written in quasi Old English. They were asked to derive some sense from this text, on the basis of the look and sound and suggestive possibilities of the words, to see the text as telling an anecdote of some kind and to depict what the story might look like through drawing. This again required an imaginative leap and license to interpret. The text was in fact a selection of Old English words that when cobbled together crudely described what was going on in the Birdnester painting.

Step 3

ONWEG

SUM BODIG CUMAN FRAM TOWEARD NIGHER DIC STOPIAN STARIAN MAENAN. PRICA UPWEARD OFER SCULDOR. GEOGUTH CLIMBAN TREOW LIM CLINGAN, HEARD AND FAEST, STELAN GEONG BRID NESTLIAN. HAET FEALLAN. SUM BODIG HLAENAN FOREWEARD SPRINGAN DIC, GAN BI MAENAN ONWEG.

Picture as best you can the above anecdote. Allow the sounds of the words and their visual configuration and syntax to conjure images. You may prefer initially to work with only a few words in isolation or select a short phrase and work with the resonance between the words to establish sense or nonsense.

Step 4 Hroc Wudu

The students were then required to travel to Rookwood Cemetery in Lidcombe, and were issued with a very simplified map, without text, of the cemetery. They were directed to look with a sense of expectancy for Rooks and Oak trees (a 'rook' flies through the sky of the painting, and an oak tree is being climbed by the Birdnester). Having previously reconnoitred this extensive cemetery for oak trees I discovered they were very scarce and only to be found in the small Lutheran section, so locating them was no easy task. The irony of looking for Rooks was that there are no Rooks in Australia, what are known as 'Rooks' are in fact Australian Ravens. They were asked to be mindful of certain gestures and actions (that mimic those that take place in the painting). They were asked to be mindful of the season (as the painting is distinctly seasonal) and to allow whatever they encountered as they roamed the cemetery to be thought of as a potential anecdote, a story that could be told, (as the painting itself is centred on a chance encounter between the peasant in the picture and the viewer.)

STEP 4

HROC WUDU

Rookwood Cemetery Visit

MAY DAY

“.....this image is particular of a certain season, particular of a certain part of that season, a particle of a certain day.....”

OAK ROOKS

IN SEARCH OF OAK, IN SEARCH OF ROOKS, JUMPING THE EARTH DITCH, WANDERING OFF, STAYING IN SIGHT, WALKING TOWARDS, WATCH COMING FROM TOWARDS, MEETING, POINTING OUT, OVER SHOULDER UP AT TREES.

EVOKE

IN YOUR WANDERINGS YOUR FOCUS SHOULD BE ANECDOTAL, SEASONAL, WITH A SENSE OF SEARCHING FOR A SPECIFIC KIND OF BIRD AND A SPECIFIC KIND OF TREE. THE THINGS YOU ENCOUNTER ALONG THE WAY SHOULD FORM THE SUBSTANCE OF YOUR ANECDOTES. YOUR EXPERIENCING SHOULD BE SELF-CONSCIOUSLY *EXPECTANT*

Step 5 Ditch

On returning to the studio the students were then given the translation of ONWEG and asked to apply the anecdote to their constructed slab or panel so that it could convey something of the tale told

Step 5

DITCH

SOME BODY COME FROM TOWARDS NEAR DITCH STOPS STARES ME. POINTS UPWARD OVER SHOULDER, YOUTH CLIMBING TREE LIMB CLINGING, HARD AND FAST, STEALING YOUNG BIRD NESTLING. HAT FALLS. SOME BODY LEANS FORWARD SPRINGS DITCH, GOES BY ME ON THE WAY.

By variously affixing things to your panel attempt to persuade it to dialogue or correspond with the anecdotal 'ONWEG' as it appears in the above translation. The panel should begin to tell a tale.

Step 6 Timmerman's Jan Van Gleübher Lecture fragment (1)

This was a detailed verbal description or *ekphrasis* of an unseen painting. The first of two fragments from a lecture I had written previously about Brueghel's Birdnester and adapted for this project. Brueghel's name was anagrammatically altered to 'Gleübher' to maintain anonymity and the transcript given as the work of 'Felix Timmerman' a pseudonym I invented for myself at the time. This was an exercise in concentrated listening, where the students were required to vividly imagine the picture exclusively through the descriptive words used to conjure the image.

Lecture fragment (1):

“ I want to talk about a painting by the flemish Painter Jan Van Gleübher. This is an oil painting, painted on oak panel and dated 1568, it carries a latin inscription which translates as

'the coming towards and the going away, over my shoulder and I'm on my way.' This painting appears to allude to a parable of some kind.

In this picture Van Gleübher in depicting a so-called 'natural reality' has discerned the importance of time, the essentially temporal nature of reality. This image is particular of a certain season, particular of a certain part of that season, a particle of a certain day. In locating time and fixing it permanently within the image, the artist actively dislocates time and immobilizes it. Before the advent of photography and film, which has since deadened our appreciation of this no small miraculous act, this facility to freeze time visually, would infuse the spectator with a sense of wonder and amazement. In submitting to this painting we can trick time. We can experience an eternal Spring, an experience conjured by this painting, regardless of the flight of time which temporally moves us along its seasonal path. In submitting oneself to this specimen of time captured, one momentarily stands outside of time. The image is sufficiently convincing, that it allows the mind to enter and partake of its depicted reality without hesitation.

We are dealing here with a generous evocation of a Northern European Spring: the ground is wet underfoot, the light even and soft, an atmospheric dampness prevails, perhaps after a morning's shower. The oak tree has just leafed – a purple blue iris is fully flowered in the ditch alongside a blackberry bush (the selection of flora is particular, as all plants help to elucidate the parable by standing in relationship to it.)

Noises emanate from the picture plane: the young birds helplessly screeching at the moment of capture – a flock of birds ascend the distant sky – bird song – bird calling – beneath them in the distance captured fowl: pecking at feed: watched by peasants. The painting is acoustically tuned. The scene is sufficiently compelling that a cool breeze appears to carry these distant sounds towards the spectator. There is a sense that this landscape has an existence that thrives independently of us. It is encouraged into the painting by the artist in order that a convincing ground of reality be established, through which the protagonists pass.

We can imagine this scene independently of the peasants that narrate it. These two characters, the one up the tree and the other walking towards us, arrived in the picture a few moments ago, and they will be passing through and out of the picture any moment now. Incidentally, we are just about to jump the ditch ourselves and pass into the picture, treading our way along the track to the distant homestead. We are to be taken on a guided tour.

Having captured time in this painting, let's now observe how the artist articulates space. In convincing us of the existence of this 'other' reality – the artist must persuade us that we are no longer staring at a panel of wood coated with paint – but that we are actually able to look through the solid panel of oak into a space inhabited by a sixteenth century Flemish landscape populated by peasants about their business. We tend to lose sight of this remarkable capacity to inhabit other forms of reality. The artist who can conjure these 'other' realities is indeed a magician.

Van Gleübher plots activity throughout the space he creates. He directs our eyes around the space – but first he must catch our attention. The peasant strolling towards us establishes eye contact. His smile engages us and his finger points us to a space above and behind to the left, like the hand of a clock. We observe a youth clinging quite precariously to a branch. He is raiding a bird's nest. We are left stranded at the top of the picture – up the tree - How do we get down? The hat falls from the head of the youth and our eyes follow its gravitational descent between the silver birch trees – behind this vertical trail of trees the track passes and deposits our eyes at the left edge of the painting – A thatched dwelling stands beside the track hidden by a row of planted saplings. We are left there a moment before moving off to the right along the track which traverses the middle distance behind the peasant and along which another peasant walks, carrying a bundle upon her head towards the distant farm buildings. Our eyes are now viewing long distant towards the right of the picture. We continue the track and follow a pair of cart horses being led out of the picture through an exit provided by a barn door. A tree which grows out of the right edge of the painting where the eye lingers deflects us back into the picture space – like a ricochet – up vertically into the sky where we are offered the opportunity to experience infinite space, a limitless celestial gaze.

Having ascended to the top right of the picture, our eyes are at their most distant point of focus. From this most distant point our mind's eye is carefully redirected back to our body waiting on this side of the ditch. How is this done? – Having touched the upper extremity, we

float back down through the clouds – where by a sequence of watery stepping stones we arrive back at the feet of the peasant: the sky reflects in the pond – the pond literally flows into a stream flowing from the right edge, middle distance, down that edge, moving toward the foreground banked by the edge of the picture and directed along the bottom of the perimeter. Having navigated our mind's eye back to the foreground we ascend the robust figure of the peasant (in the same way the youth ascends the tree), where we meet with those eyes and that smile once again that guides us so amiably around the picture – for it is in every sense a guided tour – the artist supremely commands our attention and leads us at his discretion throughout this field of vision.

How does Van Gleübher set this picture in motion – convince us that these peasant characters are real? The key to this motion is the central character and his relationship to the picture plane. There is nothing about this character that is stable or motionless – every element is inclined or angled away from the vertical or the horizontal. In order that this figure remains upright it must remain in motion. There is a forward momentum which we conjure in our minds in order that the figure remains believable. The peasants weight is upon his right foot – his body leans forward and his left foot is about to lift and step over the ditch. In our minds we complete this movement – the peasant relies upon the spectator to realise his intent to cross the ditch. Where the sleeve at the elbow of the arm crossing the torso intersects the vertical plane of the tunic – this is the dead centre of the picture and the only point at which the peasant in the sleeve of his tunic touches the surface of the painting – from this point of surface contact the hips and legs incline downwards into the painting and locate themselves on solid earth and the upper torso inclines itself back into the picture space and directs us towards the activity up the tree. In unconsciously seeking the centre of an image we touch the sleeve of the tunic and then lean into the painting as the figure takes us beneath the surface.

We slowly submerge ourselves along these trails of slight inclination and eventually we find ourselves fully immersed within the painting. All the lines of the body are curved or arched. The figure is sprung and twisted at the hips, the head is tilted – all this invites our participation in the straightening or correction of poise in motion.

This matter of the artist inviting and actively encouraging the participation of the spectator is given high consideration. The painting becomes an offering – we become witnesses to an event, we are welcomed on entering the painting, as if somebody has just greeted us on opening the door. There is a sense of the artist's hospitality in receiving the attention of the spectator – In observing this painting we are elevated to the position of guest.'

Step 7 Issuing of Parable and Lecture fragment (2)

The Parable that Brueghel's Birdnester painting illustrates was then issued and an interpretation of a possible meaning of the painting given, as Timmerman's second lecture fragment on Jan Van Gleübher's picture (again in the absence of the image).

PARABLE

"HE WHO KNOWS WHERE THE NEST IS HAS THE KNOWLEDGE, HE WHO ROBS IT HAS THE NEST"

Timmerman's 'Jan Van Gleübher' lecture fragment (2):

" I would now like to talk about the function of this particular painting, a function in fact common to most of Van Gleübher's paintings. Its overriding purpose is to convey a parable. A parable is defined as a fable or allegorical narrative from which a moral is drawn. The painting becomes a directive of conduct.

All those aspects of the painting that I have talked of thus far stem from the realisation that the artist in order that he may communicate, must first master the means of communication –

the artist must be skilled in manipulating time, in manipulating space and in the complex interaction between time and space: the manipulation of motion. The artist must attune themselves with a capacity to summon reality – experiences held within the picture must be vivified. The painting must convince by achieving a vivid correspondence with reality. The artist once in possession of this ability to conjure reality is then sufficiently adept to organise that reality towards a particular viewpoint. The artist expresses a view both literally and metaphorically. The painting is an emphatic expression. The artist professes – all his facilities as artist are focussed upon a particular notion seeking expression or acknowledgement. The facilities of the artist remain subservient to this intent, they are a means to an end not an end in themselves.

The parable that this painting so ably illustrates is as follows “He who knows where the nest is has the knowledge, but he who robs it has the nest.” (Dye den neft weet dyen weeten, dyen roof dyen heeten)

How are we to interpret this parable? All good parables, and this is no exception, offer us a variety of meanings. The parable is as complex as the painting, it needs time to contemplate, in contemplating the painting.”

[In acknowledging that there is no definitive interpretation, Timmerman then goes on to discuss a number of plausible though often contradictory interpretations of the parable. I've selected one of these 'readings' as it appears to correspond quite well with the intent of this project, though I must admit to one or two reservations about the text itself.]

“...Humankind can be seen vacillating between two poles – the pole of action and the pole of contemplation. A polarity is set up between thinking and thought on the one hand (this becomes the locus or positioned place of the mind as 'mindfulness') and activity or action on the other hand, seen as the locus of the body. The mind and body appear to function as an interdependent duality.

The mind is personified by the peasant standing before us. The parable itself is located in his mind – the scene that surrounds him becomes a visual manifestation of his inner state of mind. He is trying to explain something to us and this picture is the image he holds in his mind. He is trying to tell us something by thinking about it, if we are sufficiently receptive an act of thought transference occurs.

The body is personified by the youth up the tree. He is a representation of action, plundering the fruits of the mindful peasant confronting us – he utilizes the knowledge revealed by the peasant. For it is the peasant who directs the youth up the tree (the peasant knows where the nest is and as such has the knowledge of its whereabouts). Thoughts become deeds in the person of the youth – he is an apprentice to knowledge, he is learning about the practicalities of applying knowledge, of becoming a physical embodiment of that practice, he has, as it were, 'robbed' the peasant of his knowledge of the nest's whereabouts and this facilitates his purpose in capturing the young birds. In following the correct advice, he is rewarded, by surprising the prize of a bird.”

Timmerman goes on to say:

“I would now like to pursue the theme of connection – connection not only between mind and body (brought about in this case by a pointing finger), but connection between the individuals themselves. This painting concerns itself with relationships between things. The notion of inheritance. The peasant becomes a guardian of knowledge – he himself has inherited that knowledge from his predecessors and has the responsibility of safely carrying that knowledge through his own life. The peasant must see to it that before leaving this world he has transferred intact this precious knowledge. In the acquisition of this knowledge the child emerging as adult is able to locate themselves in the world – this knowledge orientates them. In handing over his knowledge of the nest the peasant can observe the fruits of that transaction. The picture depicts this transaction.

Having relinquished the fruits of his knowledge, the peasant, as an emptied vessel leans knowingly into the ditch – this painting was painted in the last year of Gleübher's life – the earth colours of the peasant perhaps intimates his immanent 'departure'. The peasant in his intimation of mortality seems to be saying as he points up at the youth in the tree “He will carry the knowledge that I carried.”

This painting enacts this delicate transaction of knowledge between one generation and another. It demonstrates that most elusive of latin inscriptions that Gleübher chose to inscribe on the back of the thick black oak panel:

“The coming towards, the going away, over my shoulder, on my way.”

Gleübher’s affection for children, a feature of much of his work, indicates his profound understanding of the necessity of play, the necessity of games, the necessity of riddles in attracting children’s natural inquisitiveness towards knowledge. At the time that he painted this picture his wife had just given birth to a second son, his other child was four years old. The child within the man was amplified and made more poignant by his lingering illness, his sense of imminent departure.

This painting unburdens the painter, as the heavy sack on the ground, by the peasant, is left behind. All that remains is for the peasant to step out of the picture and into oblivion.”

Step 8 Image revealed and questions asked

The students were then finally issued with a photo-copy of the ‘Birdnester’ painting. A chalk line was drawn on the floor, orientated precisely to a set of co-ordinates such that as each student stood behind the line, their gaze could be accurately directed towards Vienna (over the horizon), where Brueghel’s Birdnester could be seen, at a distance from it’s location in the Kunsthistorisch Museum.

The students were then asked to consider the following questions:

- 1) Why do trees appear to gyrate?
- 2) What’s in the sack?
- 3) Why the resemblance between the sack, the polled willow and the cloud?
- 4) Between the hat and the nest?
- 5) Between the pointed finger, the spear, the dagger, the horn, the cod-piece, the sack?
- 6) Is the peasant blind? Supposing the peasant had impaired vision, how would this alter the sense of the painting?
- 7) Is the peasant smiling or sighing?
- 8) Why an Iris, why brambles?
- 9) A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush?
- 10) Why didn’t the project start with the painting?
- 11) If there are no Rooks in Australia, why Rookwood cemetery?
- 12) What was the connection between the two fables and the painting?
- 13) Why did the slab have to be solid and heavy?
- 14) Is Brueghel left or right handed? How do you deduce this?
- 15) Has the peasant already said something or is he about to say something or will he remain silent?
- 16) Why the absence of ‘coming-from-towards’ in the slab? (the looming large leaning figure)
- 17) What part do dreams play in this project?
- 18) What was the intention of this project?
- 19) Why mislead? What part does confusion play in this project?
- 20) What has all of this got to do with art?
- 21) What part does coincidence play in this project?
- 22) Is this project a project?
- 23) What relevance, if any, has all of this to somebody living in Sydney, Australia in 1988?

Step 8 Migration of the slabs

The slabs were then transported from the Peachtree studio in Penrith, to the Kingswood campus and variously installed in the foyer and grounds of the campus, where further discussion took place. The students were asked to go and wander around looking for ‘the knowledge’ in the bushland and nearby lake and report back their findings. (A comparable searching to that which took place at Rookwood cemetery). A final discussion ensued.



UEGEL d. Ä. (1525/30–1569)

LDIEB, 1568

CATCHER

NICHEUR

O DI UCCELLI

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien

Verlag Wolfrum, Wien I

in Austria





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