

Third Place

Year: 1992
Level: First Year, Spring Semester 1
Unit: 10163, 10164, Foundation Studies 3 + 4
Duration: 28 days
Dates: July 20 – November 17

Origin

This was the year that two additional Foundation Studies units were officially introduced into the second semester for the first time, replacing the previous Investigative Studies units. This allowed a greater degree of continuity to flow on into the second half of first year. The pedagogy driving Foundation Studies in first semester had already infiltrated Investigative Studies, so the distinction was no longer relevant. Following the trialling of a single thematic project ('site') in the previous year, (that ran for the entire semester), arguing the benefits of greater continuity and momentum, a similar strategy was adopted again. I was given the responsibility of conceiving the project.

Premise

The project derived from the relatively simple premise of what would happen if two projects were allowed to 'collide' with one another, triggering a third (possibly unforeseen or unexpected) outcome. The image of atoms colliding in a particle accelerator, revealing new contents or insights following the deliberately engineered impact, came to mind as a good analogy. This idea was also partly prompted by an interview given by the novelist Toni Morrison about her, recently published novel "Jazz" (ABC Radio: Books & Writing 12 June 1992, transcript: ABC 24 hours magazine, June 1992). She spoke of how Jazz musicians deliberately put themselves into a difficult space, so as to relish the challenge of breaking through to a 'third place' as a form of triumphant improvisational transfiguration (extricating themselves from a seemingly impossible predicament). Morrison was also alluding to confronting the more troubled aspects of one's personal history, to engage directly with it, creatively in order to process and come to terms with it. Making things deliberately difficult for oneself so as to challenge one's creative ingenuity in (hopefully) overcoming the difficulty seemed to be a good predicament to confront the students with.

The first part of the project: "A field of dense affinities" was adapted from a project: "Dwelling" that I had written previously in 1989, and offered at the time to second year students as an interdisciplinary option. It centred on two key quotes of David Malouf dealing with those crucial formative 'first experiences' in childhood, of the places we grew up in, and their significance to our sense of identity, in making us what we are. Malouf continually reminds us of the importance of these individual personal histories in the creation of a culture and not to downplay their significance as inconsequential to the bigger picture. In the literal *idiomatic* sense, students were encouraged to *own* their own history, to affirm and own up to it: as one's *own*, as a unique resource to draw from.

The second part of the project: "A load of old cobblers" was newly conceived and centred on the phenomenon of shoes explored from various vantage points: physically, psychologically, historically, culturally sociologically etc. The 'Old Mother Hubbard' nursery rhyme formed an emblematic bridge across to the "dwelling" project, and an illustration of the 'shoe house' provided a key image for the front cover of the 'Third Place' project. Participants were encouraged to research shoes and to make 'shoes' (utilising considerable artistic license afforded them through the project), at no stage were they required to fabricate a functional shoe as such, and this opened up a vast range of material options, and crucially opportunities to work outlandishly with both monumental and miniaturised 'shoes'. The section: 'journeying into the interior' encouraged fanciful explorations of the shoe in keeping with the imaginary realms of 'Alice in Wonderland' or Jules Verne's 'Journeys' to the interior. The immense variety of shoes not only prompted by function but also by fashion was discussed: the issue of style as exemplified by the colourful tale of Doc Martens. The semiotics of the shoe was also touched on (via Roland Barthes: 'The Fashion System') and the shifting fortunes of style, which had pertinence in relation to shifting 'trends' (for example in contemporary art practices) and what causes things to come in and out of 'fashion'. A 'technical glossary' of the language of shoes was also included in the project sheet, and a conversancy with this language and its history (and possibilities) was encouraged.

At the time of the conception of the project I was reading extensively from Aristotle and Plato and incorporated two quotes, one from each. The Aristotle quote underscored the importance of acquiring the 'art' of something, through direct first hand experience, acquiring the knowledge and understanding of how to do something as a learned skill. (Students were asked to perform an 'autopsy' on a shoe to better understand its manufacture). Aristotle

compares this with the acquisition of something, as a ready-made, where the purchaser remains ignorant of the *art* of its manufacture. This quote suggests that little is learnt or understood when solutions are provided obviating the need to work through a problem in order to try and find a solution (of one's own – through one's own ingenuity). Foundation Studies projects were offered as problems to which no obvious solution was apparent, and certainly not supplied. The Plato quote, from a Socratic dialogue, suggested that operating exclusively within the rules and acquiring qualification to act only in relation to them in a totally regulated environment would see the demise of the arts, and be 'utterly unendurable'. For, Socrates suggests, it would outlaw inquiry, which operates beyond the confines of regulatory laws, in uncharted territory, in an endeavour to discover new things. The inference here was in relation to risk taking, going 'out on a limb' and deliberately following what you have been told was 'the wrong track' as vital to the continual re-energising of the arts.

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Introduction

Last semester a variety of subjects and developmental approaches were investigated within the studio, from these a useful resource of ideas and material possibilities accrued. It is hoped that some of these preliminary initiatives may undergo further development within the context of the current project.

This semester a single research topic will span the entire fourteen weeks. It comprises two parts that should be pursued independently of each other, but at some point 'negotiation' needs to be entered into between the two such that a correspondence (a mutual responsiveness) causes a fusion of intent (a collision of purpose) that will ultimately focus a 'single journey' of activity. As the semester proceeds additional 'instalments' will be made available as optional directives to deflect or adjust momentum into alternate alignments.

Part 1 – 'A field of dense affinities'

The concerns of the first part of this two part project are illustrated by two brief 'readings' by David Malouf. The first of these is an extract from his autobiographical essay "12, Edmonstone Street". It follows a journey of exploration through the space, place and time of memory via a lingering sequence of evocative recollections of the author's childhood home ('a field of dense affinities'). The text addresses the immeasurable significance of our primary childhood experiences, of the home into which we find ourselves, to the shaping of our understanding of 'self' and our sense of 'residence' or 'placement' in the world. Malouf proceeds through anecdote and incident to describe the binding relationship between the space of the *body* and the space of the *abode* within which it dwells.

The second reading is a portion of a radio interview recorded for the series 'Books and Writing' and offers further reflections upon the significant part that memory plays in the notional construction of 'culture' and ones own sense of placement within a given 'culture'.

In the context of these two readings you are asked to nominate a location, that in most cases will be your childhood home, though it could also be an irregularly visited home or frequented place of your earliest experiences. Through the re-exploration of that place – in rummaging through the cupboard of your childhood memory – attempt to reanimate anecdotally the particularities of that space through activities that both address and accommodate those experiences.

Malouf: Reading 1

"First houses are the grounds of our first experiences. Crawling about at floor level, room by room, we discover laws that we will apply later to the world at large; and who is to say if our notions of space and dimension are not determined for all time by what we encounter there, in the particular relationship of living-rooms to attic and cellar (or in my case under-the-house), of inner rooms to the verandahs that are open boundaries?"

Each house has its own topography, its own lore: negotiable borders, spaces open or closed, the salient features – not Capes and Bays in this case but the Side Door, the Brass Jardiniere – whose names make up a daily litany. A complex history comes down to us, through household jokes and anecdotes, odd habits, irrational superstitions. Its spirit resides in ordinary objects that become, beyond the fact of presence and usefulness, the characters in a private language – characters too in the story we are living. We hear our first folk tales with a start of recognition, since what is enacted in them is general to every society, even the smallest, and our own has already revealed to us the magic that glows along a threshold or round a forbidden biscuit tin. The house is a field of dense affinities, laid down, each one, with

an almost physical power, in the life we share with all that being 'familiar' has become essential to us, inseparable from what we are. We are drawn back magically, magnetically, to our own sticky fingerprints. Even in their ghostly state, on objects long since dispersed. They haunt us. Set loose in a world of things, we are struck at first by their terrible otherness. It drives us to fury. For a time, while we are all mouth, we try to swallow them, then to smash them to smithereens – little hunters on the track of the ungraspable. Till we perceive at last that in naming and handling things we have power over them. If they refuse to yield their history to us they may at least, in time, become agents in ours. This is the process of our first and deepest education."

Malouf: Reading 2

"I'm of course always interested in the ways in which, being what we are, we immediately begin interpreting and mapping almost anything that happens, any phenomena, or acts, or events. I mean the mind, our mind, seems to find it natural to process, to interpret, to orientate ourselves. I would say that there's a very strong static quality in my narratives, which I'm sure a lot of people don't like, in which that is going on, as well as the move forward chronologically and I think that's another one of those two modes that all the characters who matter seem to me, to be operating in. One is submitting themselves to a world of moving forward, of action, of confronting experience and the other one is the business all the time of mapping precisely where they are, getting the past into order in their heads, so it can become the present and the future. When people talk about memory in my work, as if it had something to do with nostalgia, it seems to me it is never like that, memory is always a way of plotting where you are, so you can take the next step forward, that the past has to be dealt with so that you can make the present become real and the future become real. I think one of the great problems in a place like Australia, is we don't have a very strong grip on the future and that seems to me because we don't believe strongly enough, or have a strong enough grip on the past. I suspect that cultures can only believe as far ahead into the future as they can believe back into the past and if that turns out to be twenty or thirty years you're in real trouble."

Part 2: 'A load of old cobblers'

The second topic of research to be investigated as a parallel development to the 'field of dense affinities', resides in the vicinity of the 'encased' foot and its sheltered insularity (its insulation) within what is termed 'footwear' (i.e. the accessory of the 'shoe').

It is envisaged that as this component of research unfolds an inventive rapport be developed between the notion of the 'wearer' and the notion of the 'worn' that will lead to the materialisation of a collection of 'shoes'.

The nominal term 'shoe' in this context is used ubiquitously as a generic reference to all sub-species of footwear: boots, slippers, sandals, sneakers, pumps, galoshes, brogues, poulaines, thongs, winkle-pickers, plimsolls, penny loafers, brothel creepers, reeboks, desert boots, doc martens, chopines, hush puppies, moccasins, mules, clogs etc.

The Art of Shoemaking

"The teaching they gave their pupils was rough and ready. For they used to suppose that they trained people by imparting to them, not the art but its products, as though anyone professing to impart a form of knowledge to obviate any pain in the feet, were then not to teach the art of shoemaking or the sources where one can acquire anything of the kind, but were to present several kinds of all sorts: for it has helped to meet a need, but has not imparted an art."

- Aristotle 'On Sophistical Refutation' 184a

Shoddy Work

In the first instance an intimate knowledge of the physiology of a shoe (its inner workings) needs to be gleaned and a familiarity with its terminology (refer to technical glossary). Such an understanding could be best obtained through the careful dismantling (dismembering as autopsy) of a 'shoe' specimen into its anatomical parts.

Tickling the Sole

Each of us as 'wearers' are obligated as a matter of cultural propriety (of 'custom') to dress both feet in a uniform casing which effectively shields each barefoot's nakedness from public view, on the presupposition that feet need insulating from the ground, which is seen as a contaminating and thus threatening agent.

'This Little Piggy went to Market'

In becoming an article of clothing the 'shoe' as all articles, signals 'style' as innumerable stylistic variants each evolving from basic patterns compete against each other in the market

place. Each 'style' of shoe not only denoting its function (as for sport, for dance etc.) but also connoting affiliation with specific sub-cultural groupings (as a behavioural indicant of status). In entering the 'fashion system' one enters the system of 'signs' of 'designation' and 'insignia': the semiotics of uniformity.

The Case of Dr Klaus Maertens

"Doc Martens have brought the aggression of the storm-trooper to the suburbs in a way that would have horrified Dr Klaus Maertens, who invented the boot in 1945 as nothing more sinister than a step forward in comfort. Its air-cushioned sole was the important thing for him. When Bill Griggs persuaded the German parent company to let him manufacture workmen's protective boots with the air-cushioned sole at his factory in Northampton, England, in 1960, he could have had no idea of the talismanic significance that DM's would assume as the uniform boot of the aggressively macho young urban male. British skinheads made it their own in the seventies. It was their 'Bovverboot', with which they hoped to crush (or at least put the fear of god into) the complacent bourgeoisie. They failed to do so because the boot itself became turned into an almost universal fashion accessory, even turning into the sort of shoe that college educated boys in sports jackets and ties might wear for job interviews.

The paradox of the DM is the way in which it has been taken up by girls and gays to make statements far removed from those of the original skinheads. In the late eighties fashion has exploited the contrasts of mismatched items of clothing which are paired in such a way as to break all the accepted rules. London clubs have been full of girls in frilly net skirts and lace tops worn with DMs to temper the message of feminine frailty and vulnerability with a degree of toughness or self-reliance. The effect is ambivalent, just as it is when gay men wear DMs to project a masculinity which is possibly not what they actually feel. It is indicative of the confusion of roles and the blurring of distinctions that a boot with such down-to-earth origins should play such a central role in the semiotics of dress for well over a decade in many countries without losing any of its sexual potency".

- Colin McDowell 1989

Journeying into the Interior

It is necessary to alternate between a diminished and a magnified mode of behaviour in tackling your research, enabling you for example:

- a) To be gingerly lowered into a cavernous space of the shoe's interior through an eyelet in the vaulted ceiling above, without being overcome by the cathedral of smells, swirling pungently within the 'building'. In most cases you will find a highly polished and very slippery floor below (suitable for skating).
- b) To insert your entire body within the interior of the 'shoe' – as a snail in its shell – the pliable pocket providing a cosy hammock of reverie.
- c) To carve a pair of boots out of a small cube of cheese or a pair of slippers out of a bar of soap or indeed a set of sandals out of compacted sand.

In other words your collection of 'shoes' should dimensionally jump from the miniscule (that could fit comfortably within a matchbox) to the monstrous (that could accommodate several children).

Feral Shoes

In order that the 'shoes' development remains unhindered, it is necessary to view its emergence as an activity unconstrained by function. Under no circumstance is the shoe literally to be worn ('worn-in'). It should at all times remain unruly and feral (a brumby shoe?).

Arriving at a Third Place

As to how you go about combining the two parts of your research into a third kind of activity, it is necessary to improvise your way out of this duality: of point-counterpoint, trusting that through trial and error ('chasing the wrong track') a 'breakthrough into a third place' will eventually occur.

Choosing the Wrong Track

"To start out with one's own history and to re-imagine it, throw out what's useless in that history and hang on to what there is, and breakthrough into this third place. This is what improvisation does, it's powerfully creative. And musicians sometimes go all the way down the wrong track and they know it, but they have to go there, then they have to break through, then a whole other thing can appear in the music that they never could've gotten to had they

followed the regular lines. So that people who believe they're doomed are not, simply through an act of creation. And in the book it follows a kind of revelation about what really happened in the past. But it is also the act of the imagination of the 'I' to find out what all these forces were. I'm trying to show that if you can just get through to that place then there are possibilities and I love the notion of that kind of triumph."

- Toni Morrison (talking about her novel: 'Jazz').

Contrary to the Written Rules

Stranger: *"Yet once more, we shall have to enact that if anyone is detected enquiring into piloting and navigation, or into health and the true nature of medicine, or about the winds, or other conditions of the atmosphere, contrary to the written rules, and has any ingenious notions about such matters, he is not to be called a pilot or a physician, but a cloudy prating sophist; - further, on the ground that he is a corrupter of the young, who would persuade them to follow the art of medicine or piloting in an unlawful manner, and to exercise an arbitrary rule over their patients or ships, anyone who is qualified by law may inform against him, and indict him in some court, and then if he is found to be persuading any, whether young or old, to act contrary to the written law, he is to be punished by the utmost rigour; for no one should presume to be wiser than the laws; and as touching healing and health and piloting and navigation, the nature of them is known to all, for anybody may learn the written laws and the national customs. If such were the mode of procedure, Socrates, about these sciences and about generalship and any branch of hunting, or about painting or imitation in general, or carpentry of shoemaking, or any sort of handicraft, or husbandry or planting, or if we were to see an art of rearing horses or tending herds, or divination or draught-playing or any science conversant with number – I say if all these things were done in this way according to written regulations and not according to art, what would be the result?"*

Young Socrates: *"All the arts would utterly perish, and could never be recovered, because enquiry would be unlawful. And human life, which is bad enough already, would then become utterly unendurable."*

Plato (from 'Statesman')

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