

Botanising the Asphalt

Year: 1996
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Unit: 33062 Foundation Studies 1
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Origin

A perennial problem that plagued the curriculum structure of the undergraduate program concerned the lack of any obvious linkage between the content of each discrete unit on offer. Antagonisms were prevalent in particular between the theory units and the studio units, they were seen as disregarding of one another, and students had to continually jump the 'disconnect'. To address this issue, and by way of an olive branch, I proposed, as a trial, that the first project in Foundation Studies this year draw directly on the source material being used concurrently in the art theory strand. As the primary focus was on "Modernity", I reviewed all the recommended reference material supplied to the students as the basis for Foundation Studies own "Studio Research Topic". The title "Botanising the Asphalt" was a term Walter Benjamin used to describe the activity of the 'Flaneur' in his book on Baudelaire.

Premise

A key issue central to an understanding of "modernity", it seemed to me, concerned an altered relationship to or understanding of time primarily through the process of commodification: time regarded as commodity. Notions of 'newness' become pervasive, the need for perpetual change (generative of the outmoded) and a manufactured proliferation of consumable goods to keep pace with and cater for the desire 'to-be-modern' (the 'news' being viewed as one such commodity).

Students were encouraged to work with processes that engaged with multiplicity, proliferation, repeatability, rapidity. The notion of the 'update' or 'updating', 'up to the minute' suggesting a continuous 'turnover': of alteration, amendment, revision, that precipitate states of frequent monitoring (like the stock-market). The cycle of perpetual destruction/construction (as demolishing and rebuilding) also offered certain procedures of making/destroying that could be examined to good purpose.

My introductory lecture made extensive use of the comparison between the rowing boat and the speed boat as an analogical device for polarising the distinction between 'modernity' (the speedboat: 'then this then this then this then this' – as it smacks the water in its rapid advance) and 'contramodernity' (the rowing boat: 'and then and then and then and then', the backward facing rower, the oars rhythmically dipping in).

To kick start the project, as a 'collective day of action' (to occupy and 'claim' the empty studio space) I got the group I was working with to cover the entire space with newsprint and then proceed to edit, add and manipulate both text and images. The project itself had some overlap with 'Klitsch' in connecting with 'news' as constructed and disseminated through the media.

Botanising the Asphalt

The first studio research topic will focus its attention upon the idea of "Modernity". It has been designed to integrate with the art history unit running concurrently with it. The work produced, in reflecting upon "Modernity" should attempt to respond to what are perceived to be some of its essential conditions, making them visibly evident as various processes in transit.

There are various places that could be historically unearthed in search of evidence of "Modernity". For the purposes of this project the "sites" chosen are "Paris in the latter half of the nineteenth century" and "the writings of Charles Baudelaire". These two "sites": one situated within the other will constitute your main area of archival research.

How is "Modernity" constituted?

One of the major constituent elements that structures and organises the idea of "Modernity" is its hyper-sensitivity to time. "Modernity" is engineered to be highly responsive to minute fractions of time and to operate synchronically. Time becomes a measurable commodity

transformed into a kind of currency with an exchange value. Modern-time appears to 'appreciate' in value as a form of accountable expenditure.

How can expended time be made visible? One way of thinking about this is in relation to the idea of "manufacturing" (labouring-to-produce) and to consider *laborious* activities that visibly appear time-consuming.

Modernity's preoccupation with standardising time as a synchronised monotone (monotony) – a mechanically repetitive ticking – has the affect of neutralising its presence as a routine accompaniment. This sense of infinite repeatability suggests actions that can be duplicated indefinitely. Consideration could be given to the setting in motion of a production line of proliferation or multiplicity.

The fixed nature of mechanical time – the finite number of seconds in a day – directly challenges the ingenuity of "Modernity" in its drive to exploit to the maximum the availability of time-as-resource. This restriction is alleviated through various processes of acceleration. Within "Modernity" the world appears to speed up. There is a sense of rapidity and urgency as the pace quickens. How can this quickening be made visible?

Modernity in being hyper-sensitive to the quickening of time develops an anxiety about being-left-behind, there develops a strong conviction that time progresses and in viewing time as *progressive* there is a heightened concern with remaining current (being-progressive) and so 'being-current' expresses a desire to be at the fore-front of time, that leading edge that appears to offer the best vantage point from which to view the immediate future. The presumption in 'being-up-to-the-minute' and pressing up against the threshold of the future is that which is 'just-about-to-happen' can be tantalisingly glimpsed and reported back. There is intense competition to be the first to sight the various manifestations of "newness" drifting in from out of the future and such innovations (discoveries) are invariably contested and subject to controversy and legitimation.

Modernity has little concern for the historical past (as backward looking), all its attention is upon the currency of 'newness'. Modernity is therefore somehow a condition that continually attempts to shed or disown its own history, to rebuke any sense of a delimiting tradition and to appear where possible *unprecedented*.

Modernity is indebted to 'currency' as a condition of its very existence. Without "news" modernity is somehow inconceivable. Newspapers circulate the "new" as the 'currency' of current events.

Modernity is media mediated. The 'media' gathers up daily occurrences deemed new(s)worthy and circulates this information as a perpetually updated (up to date) 'bulletin' of what is considered significant 'currency' for an informed audience. As part of this project, activities could be considered that put into circulation devices capable of amendment and updating (cf. rumour).

It would be strategically appropriate throughout this project to operate under the guise of a new(s) reporter intent on 'Botanising the asphalt'. A reporter can be seen as somebody permanently on the look-out for a 'new' (news) story. A reporter can be mobilised at a moments notice to report occurrences as they happen. Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'flaneur', as observant street stroller taking in the 'traffic' occasioned by a walk, noticing and noting occurrences along the way, is not dissimilar to the occupation of a roving reporter on the look-out for 'new(s)'. There is a sense in which modernity is complicit with the "trafficking" of the 'new(s)' as a common currency of supply and demand.

"It is impossible to glance through any newspaper, no matter what the day, the month of the year, without finding on every line the most frightful traces of human perversity, together with the most astonishing boasts of probity, charity and benevolence and the most brazen statements regarding the progress of civilization. Every journal, from the first line to the last, is nothing but a tissue of horrors, wars, crimes, thefts, lecheries, tortures, the evil deeds of princes, of nations, of private individuals; an orgy of universal atrocity. And it is with this loathsome appetiser that the civilized daily wash down their morning repast. Everything in this world oozes crime: the newspaper, the street wall and the human countenance. I am unable to comprehend how a person of honour could take a newspaper in their hand without a shudder of disgust. (Baudelaire: Intimate Journals)

Baudelaire's captivity of this oppressive litany of social calamity detailed by the news, in mid-nineteenth century Paris, his morbid fascination with the symptoms of crisis reveals the

dilemma of modernity's broad cast. The more comprehensive the coverage, the more thorough the dissemination – the bigger the picture – the more unruly and anarchic it appears.

“Uninterrupted disturbance, everlasting uncertainty and agitation instead of subverting this society actually serve to strengthen it. Catastrophes are transformed into lucrative opportunities for redevelopment and renewal; disintegration works as a mobilising and hence an integrating force.” (Karl Marx: Communist Manifesto)

Marx is quick to alert us to the exploitative possibilities inherent within this situation of social insecurity.

Modernity appears to thrive in a 'changeable' climate. It is temperamentally restless. Visibly this restlessness is manifested through the notion of 'development' and 'upgrading', requiring that a 'site' be continually redeveloped. The consequence of this is that most 'modern' urban cities – Sydney is no exception – are experienced as a permanent building site where construction and demolition co-exist. Modern cities are by their very nature 'works in progress' to which finishing touches can never be made. In one sense 'modernity' could as a project be said to be 'incompleteable'. The word 'modern' derives from a latin source that is translatable as 'just now'. This instant moment of 'just now' is quick to fade into 'then' and for 'then' to regain its 'just now' again it requires to be perpetually renovated to restore and retain its 'nowness'. As part of this project actions could transit through scenarios of destruction and reconstruction in a desperate effort to retain 'nowness'.

What is all the commotion about?

It needs to be stressed that this project should be fuelled by its own sense of brevity. The limited time available should not be consumed by *deliberation*. In entering the "time-zone" of "modernity" activities should discernibly accelerate. It is more a question of 'how much' you do with this project, rather than 'what' you do with it. Your studio 'site' should transmit something of the *histrionic* shifting narrative that is the daily new(s) with all its associated clamour and tumult of (ex)change.

Library research should not be seen as preliminary to the project but rather as an auxiliary activity occurring alongside studio work. "Baudelaire's-experience-of-a-modernising-Paris", operates as an historical anchorage to the projects *drift* and should usefully illuminate the 'modernity' that you choose to work with.

Reading Reference List

The Writings of Charles Baudelaire

Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil) ed. Marthiel & Jackson Mathews, New Directions.
Intimate Journals (tr. Christopher Isherwood), City Light Books (1983)
Paris Spleen (tr. Louise Varese), New Directions (1970)
Selected Writings on Art and Literature, Penguin (1992)
The Painter of Modern Life & Other Essays, Da Capo Press
Art in Paris 1845-62: Salons and other exhibitions reviewed, Phaidon (1981)

Writing about Baudelaire

Walter Benjamin – Charles Baudelaire: A lyric poet in the era of high capitalism, verso (1983)
Jean Paul Sartre – Baudelaire, New Directions (1967)
Enid Starkie – Baudelaire, New York University Press (1958)
Martin Turnell – Baudelaire, a study of his poetry, New Directions (1972)
Ed: Henri Peyre – Baudelaire, a collection of critical essays, Prentice Hall (1962)
Aaron Scharf – The Roots of Modern Art, Baudelaire: vanguard of Modernism (P.41-59)

Writings about Modernity

Marshall Berman – All that is solid melts into air: The experience of Modernity (p.131-172)
Penguin (1982)
Matei Calinescu – Five Faces of Modernity (p.13-94) Duke Uni. Press (1987)
Sigfried Giedion – Space, Time and Architecture (p.739-776) Harvard Uni. Press (1967)
Ed: William Sharp & Leonard Wallock – Visions of the Modern City: refer to two essays:
'Painters of Modern Life: Baudelaire and the Impressionists' by Michelle Hamoosh (p.168-188) and 'Manet and the Paris of Haussmann and Baudelaire' by Theodore Reff (p.153-167)
John Hopkins Press (1987)

General Reference

Raymond Williams – Keywords, a vocabulary of Culture and Society, Fontana (1983)