

A conversation between artists Ash Kilmartin and Anna Varendorff on the occasion of their exhibitions - *Artefact and Letter* and *Bouba* at TCB Art Inc., February 2015. Mediated by Charles O'Loughlin,

Charles: Ash, speaking with you during your install, you recounted for me a superbly convoluted story; that you made *Variables and binaries* in Christchurch as a follow up to a text that you had written for Mitch Cairns on the occasion of his exhibition, *Cigarette cm*, at TCB in 2014. At this time, you were living in the same Paris studio where Mitch had produced his work for TCB; a gallery where you had previously exhibited.

To further add to the intricacies of this story, the Physics Room in Christchurch invited artist Emma Fitts to write a text in response to *Variables and binaries*. Her chosen format for this text was a letter. You explained that the subtitle text in *Artefact and Letter* is a reply to Emma Fitts' text. Or, to put this story more simply, a text based visual reply to a written response to the visual follow up to a written text.

What I like about this story is the chain of dialogue that both answers and continues an on-going conversation. With this in mind, this conversation between yourself and Anna Varendorff feels like a natural continuation; a conversation on your responses to the similarities and differences within your practices and work.

The video works previously mentioned study two sites of astronomical and geophysical observation, one in Sydney, the other in Christchurch, New Zealand in order to, what is described in your media release, 'attempt an incomplete portrait of the cultural and scientific impulses behind these spaces of measurement'.

Although posited as a 'portrait' of these two places, I am drawn to the idea that the study of these spaces offers another kind of measurement, or assessment, of the way in which humans measure themselves through the tools and apparatuses of knowledge.

Ash: Mitch's invitation to write something for *Cigarette cm* came just as I arrived in Paris and was reading about the French 'republican calendar', an attempt during the Revolution to decimalise time - extending the rationalism and secularism of the Metric system to include all units of time, from seconds to seasons. The absurdity of the story of the system's failed application (and some of the bizarre points of the system itself) led me to tracking down the 'international prototypes' of certain metric standards. The apparent subjectivity and contingency of the quantities we take for granted crossed paths happily with Mitch's proposition of the cigarette as a unit of time - albeit one that, as a non-smoker, I can't completely identify with...I'm sure the cigarette has a longer duration for non-smokers than it does for those smoking.

So, this text for Mitch became a video work, which followed me to Christchurch and Lake Tekapo in NZ, then later to Sydney and Parramatta, where of course, the historical lives of the observatories were more easily accessible to me than the science itself. For me, the importance of the science was always secondary to a

more direct human situation. All four locations *felt* big: the question for me was to find a way through all the information to say something that felt real, present and current.

Anna, I really enjoyed the proximity of your and Haima's work to mine: exhausted by these convoluted, remote stories told in text with silent images, here in the next room was your collaboration inviting real presence and an immediate response from its viewers. It was such a delight to hear how different visitors figured out how to 'play' the work. It was as if, while I struggled to communicate certain locations into another, you simply created a new one that could be experienced directly. Can you tell me about how you and Haima developed the work - did it have similarly convoluted lineage?

Anna: Ash, not having heard (all of) the narrative Charles has outlined here before reading this document, I did not know about all of the multiple and reciprocal incidents that preceded and underlined the timbre of your work, *Artefact and Letter*. But even without direct knowledge of the story, it was the distention of local mean time, surrendering as it did to the viewers tensions and anticipations solicited by your work, which I was struck by as I spent time observing interaction with it.

And it is this same distension of experience, not calculated by the full cigarette or the coagulation of vignette and narrative, but in fact by the focus and commitment of a viewer to discover your works, and to mine, that I see as commonality rather than point of distinction.

Of course there are the obvious dis-similarities which make our works improbable for direct comparison, however side by side the works seemed to me to compliment each other, not least because you graciously allowed for the sound of mine to wash over yours. But on a more determining level there was the unfurling of the works, the extended period of enquiry, for which both rewarded the viewer, that I think is where the pairing of our shows found supporting equivalency.

A preoccupation of my work is to provide a moment where the visitor to the work is free to play and discover, responding to the invitations of the space in their own time, and in so doing experiencing the passing of time from and of their own singularity of action. The less one heeds the constraints of 'the usual' action/time/behaviour the more one is able to experiment with the work, and the more fun and elastic its potential. So the 'tool of measurement' in *Bouba* is one of subjective experience. More a measure for the participant than for an observer of the participant. So to follow on from Charles' comment that '...humans measure themselves through the tools and apparatuses of knowledge', I try to offer some potential for spontaneity and for a rupture with the 'regular' which offers no familiar apparatus but one of play, and by realising this experience in contrast to the 'usual', unearthing a 'measurement' of relative experience exposing the subjective.

One of my feelings when encountering your work was that of being led by the hand through a labyrinth of historical and personal references, and desiring to know more. This gathering portraiture of the sites and connecting narratives was of course preoccupied with the slightly absurd history depicted, but also held a moment of amusement and humour which alleviated the tragedy of the futile site histories.

I understand that the decision to have the narrative in subtitles was necessary because your work generously shared audio space with my own work, but as an outcome I felt that the extra layer of ambiguity of the conversation presented in text

added another fold to my experience. Can you talk about the degree of necessity in your decision to work with subtitles, and the result?

Ash: The subtitles were my preference for a number of reasons, particularly in this case because I knew that sound would be a key aspect of your work. In this programme at TCB, where we were chosen to work alongside one another (though completely independently), it was important to me that the two projects could acknowledge and accommodate one another rather than fighting for sound-space or politely ignoring one another.

The sound from *Bouba* varied widely in volume, pitch and texture: when left alone, it could be almost silent, resonating gently as patient, low background noise. But when activated, it could be loud, physical; played rhythmically or in a slow, bumbling way; some interactions were hesitant and gentle while others - when visitors knew how to approach the work, what it was capable of - were confident and big-sounding. I always had a sense of anticipation, when sitting at the desk in the front gallery, waiting to hear how people would engage this moving, singing sculpture (without my being able to see it).

To have this active independently of my own work was a real gift: a reminder all the time of how contingent factors might colour our understanding of every situation. I wonder how viewers' experience of *Artefact and Letter* differed, depending on the sound from *Bouba* next door at the time of viewing. And of course, how being static in front of a silent screen of mostly static images might have affected their engagement with *Bouba* too.

Both *Artefact and Letter* and *Variables and binaries* were written during the time I was filming for them, respectively. While they are to me, primarily, text works, the images couldn't help but co-write with me. The labyrinthine feeling reflects how I felt trying to pick a path through all the information myself. How can I make a work that tells a story about a real place or object, without it becoming overburdened with fact? Without feeling like I've taken from that thing, and not represented it fairly, fully and truthfully? Without taking a position of false authority? I hope to communicate that there are so many other ways to talk and think about these sites.

Tim Ingold, who works in archaeology and social anthropology, writes that "Telling a story is not like weaving a tapestry to *cover up* the world, rather is a way of guiding the attention of listeners or readers *into* it. A person who can 'tell' is one who is perceptually attuned to picking up information in the environment that others [...] might miss, and the teller, in rendering his knowledge explicit, conducts the attention of his audience along the same paths of his own." ('The Temporality of the Landscape' in *World Archaeology*, vol 5 no 2, 1993 p153). The subtitle format allows each viewer to read in their own voice, or at least, not to identify the text with one particular speaker - whose voice suggests a gender, an age, and other qualities. Hopefully it allows them to pick up things that go unmentioned.

So, certainly, this has in common with your work an openness to how viewers might engage and make their own version of the work. I imagine that, rather than being a causal process (touch the sculptures to make noise), the sound is intended as an amplification of interaction (the sound represents or affirms the way the work is encountered). I'd like to know more about how sound has become part of your installation practice, and whether *Bouba* has surprised you, shown you something other than what you expected, or has changed how you might engage this format again?