

ANNOTATIONS

200 GERTRUDE STREET



AN EXHIBITION OF VISUAL ART AND WRITING THAT EXPLORES
THE IDEA OF COMMENTARY AND RESPONSE.

ANNOTATIONS presents a group of artists working in the areas
of painting, photography, music and literature who have written in

the margins of another's work, or allowed their own to be illuminated by the thoughts
of someone else.

The inspiration for this exhibition derives from the Writers' and Speakers' Meeting
at Gertrude Street in April 1988, which was paradigmatic of the conflict that continues
to dog the contemporary relationship between art and writing. That impassioned
event made it clear that many artists are still suspicious of the hard-wearing currency
of the written language as it affects the meaning of their work. This perhaps well-
founded anxiety, draws its substance from the range of linguistic powers writers can
deploy; those adroit and authoritative institutional voices.

ANNOTATIONS looks for a reconciliation between language and other media,
by presenting works that explore the process and experience of commentary upon
another's work. The artist has been invited to find another way of using art practice
as textual comment. The voice of the essayist has been adopted by the artist, and the
ways in which a writer can respond to and work with visual art have been broadened.
Such responses are then allowed a space within and around the work. The exhibition
offers a common space where exchange can take place, and in which responses and
meanings can resonate.

But this is a dangerous practice. Just as bold-face italics in the margin of a book
indent and cramp the text, so too does a work run the risk of being eaten into by the
thoughts of another.

Dialogue requires courage.

Artists and writers pursue their work with parallel ardour and seriousness. That
they often only turn to each other for comment in extremis, is troubling. By allowing
someone else to explore the difficult discourse of response in their own language, an
important space is opened up within the work; a space for contradiction and error.

Many of the artists in this show have allowed that space to be hollowed out of their
work, collaborating with another person to produce layered texts of action and reac-
tion, revelation and response. Others have constructed monologues of self-annota-
tion that declare histories and influences, and re-position the artist in relation to sur-
rounding systems of thought.

The variety of ways that the participants have chosen to work together points to
another part of the exhibition's intention: to challenge the adequacy of meaning in
the names we use to define different roles. Are the processes of the respective prac-
tices as different as they sound? *ANNOTATIONS* provides examples of work
about which little is told by naming the maker's role.

In the same way that the body of the exhibition works the idea of commentary, sev-
eral writers have contributed to a catalogue of essays and fictions. The texts describe
the relationship of the writers to the work that most clings to their thoughts. These
writings attempt to map out the very complex webs of admiration, jealousy, need, love
and awe that make up one writer's thoughts on another, and to present another way
of describing such a relationship outside of the critical text. By colliding fiction and
analysis – a collision that is not contrived or strategic, but simply the only way of
articulating a broader view of the world – a space is found for autobiography and the
voice of the story-teller.

This voice is one that critical discourse often forbids itself.

ANNOTATIONS attempts to allow this voice to be heard. What we hope
emerges from this show is an understanding of the fragility of interpretation, and the
poetry that can result from the crude jottings we make when inspired by the work of
another.

ROSE LANG, VIRGINIA TRIOLI • OCTOBER 1989



True Story: eighteen century people aboriginals from Beagle Bay crossed the Desert came out Fitsroy River where telegraph line crossed before, That's before langee So this woman from Beagle Bay. this. one woman middle aged went away across the desert that was soaked water someplace dry anyway that women crossed the Plain she had enough water, she also had a sore head and she came to the telegraph line line before langee. and she see's water right over the river. full river too langee. That women she knows where water hole in river. sea water dries up women cam down dia water hole she drank and she was tired and went to sleep under a tree. she didn't care who come's turn over

STORY NOT FINISHED

she was that sound asleep and at the same time her hands and legs were weak and tired. all of a sudden alligator see's her come in then drops off to sleep again alligator comes real close to her alongside the woman throw his hands over his shoulder. That old woman she had a dream about his boyfriend she thinks then she throw her hand over his shoulder. Then when she looked properly she saw the alligator she tried to escape but couldn't the alligator dragged her into the water. The alligator dived deep into the water still holding the leg of the woman. then they swam up to the alligators home. Then that woman was living with the alligator, he was a good man fed her on raw meat. So that woman watch now alligator go so she got away to yeda station.

INSERT MYSELF, here, in between these two texts by Butcher Joe: Stephen Muecke, his friend? Perhaps. In a field of ambiguous relationships of both work ('research') and pleasure, always at several removes from any possibility of a 'true' or 'real' contact.

I sign myself here in Sydney, in your absence, a signature which accumulates as style, a specific sort of trace like your own, coming at the end of a life being written by 'others', all stylistically gesturing their appropriation of a social project which for the moment bears your name, Butcher Joe, but extends beyond all possible ambits of that name. Butcher Joe *and* his paintings. Butcher Joe *and* Aboriginal art. Butcher Joe *and* Aboriginal music. Butcher Joe *and* traditional Nyigina knowledges, etc.

In how many ways are we removed from each other's concerns, he and I? In age, in language/culture, coloniser/colonised, metropolitan and rural, rigid and nomadological.¹ And then I was always working with Paddy Roe, which made Butcher into a kind of marginal character in the story that Paddy and I were telling each other.²

And perhaps one needs to distinguish between art and science, as if Butcher Joe were always already 'artist', somehow in excess of all disciplinary constructions of knowledges, a fluid, empty ab-original incoherence of drifting 'facts' waiting to be stratified. But we know this will miss the mark, because of science's discursive regularities, which carry with them their own points of disappearance. Most significantly, of course, in the unsaid of *origins* which became part of the Aboriginal name at a time when the notion of origin stood at the heart of Western epistemologies, as in Darwin, whose ship, the Beagle, finally sank in a bay near the mission of the same name where Butcher Joe first learned to paint.

Let us conceive of artistic production as a kind of machine, something comprised of different parts which fit together and move in sequence. For instance, there is no artist without a market – they are symbiotic – and the romantic idea which says the artist comes first, that he or she is in fact 'aboriginal' is no doubt part of the sales pitch which helps move the paintings.

Let us now oppose the 'Western' art machine with the 'Broome' one. What regularities and discontinuities characterise the two, make them incompatible, or, on the contrary, compatible to the extent that Butcher Joe's art can be said to 'emerge', begin to exist? Frame, key, title, signature, museum, archive, discourse, market ... these are some of the 'Western' ones, to which one may add various other categories which limit and define the artistic project.³

To these one may oppose, from the 'Broome' machine, the categories of trade route, discourse, series, agent ... and there may be others.

The major differences extend along these lines: the 'work of art' is not individuated in Butcher Joe's country, it is not framed, authenticated by a signature, nor does it form part of an oeuvre. It is not destined to accumulate in a museum or an archive so as to build up towards a life's

work (paradoxically, that is what is now being done with Butcher Joe's work to make it more compatible with the 'Western' machine.) The painting is contingent upon an event, or a specific scene in the countryside, or a narrative. It is always connected with discourse, with the discourse of the dreaming (*bugarrigarra*) or history.

It emerges as part of the traditional demand for two-way 'flow' of artifacts, in that sense the painting or pearl-shell carving forms part of a series of artifacts which may have been made by anyone – they bear the signature of the country of origin at least as much as the signature of the crafter. That is why Butcher Joe always makes a 'book' of paintings. His work doesn't finish until he has completed a Spirex drawing book with his watercolours, and his first step is to get someone to write on the corner of each page a series of numbers from 1 to 10 or whatever. This how he always begins teaching someone the Nyigina language also; you have to put down the numbers 1 to 6 on the page, then he declines Nyigina verbs according to ritual which no doubt emerged through many years of working with linguists.

The *series* is a nomadological feature, like that of travelling through the country, one place after another, and a chain of stories, 'and then ... and then ... and then'. This is *not* a hierarchically constructed narrative of plots and sub-plots, major and subordinate clauses, dominant discourses or logical structures which have a strong *metaphorical* tendency (for which it is appropriate to find interpretative 'keys', as in 'Western' symbolism, for instance) The series is *metonymic*, each painting is a new departure, and it corresponds to a particular place – one cannot be subsumed by the other, each one is a site of renewal and decay, as in the desire to paint and to live, live, that is, according to nomadic techniques.

There are two texts, the watercolour of the woman and the crocodile, and the written text, originally in pencil on two sides of a roughly ruled page of drawing paper, now quite yellowed with age, though it probably doesn't date back much before 1977. That is when Butcher Joe painted the picture. The story was written sometime before, by his granddaughter, to whom he dictated in the camp at Beagle Bay.

The analysis to follow will attempt an approach to an Aboriginal aesthetic, rapidly shifting its gaze between the picture and the written text, avoiding where ever possible the available categories of the dominant 'Western' aesthetic, hoping that certain hints coming from conversations with Butcher Joe and Paddy Roe will inform the analysis.

TRUE

The woman who travelled to Langgee has a name, but I will not give it here, she is a dead woman, but from this century, not the last. The citing of the date in the written text is an intrusion from white historiography; it is a realist detail, it puts the story in its historical context. The phrase is anthropological, referring as it does to 'aboriginals' (from the outside).

It is a 'true story', generically distinct from the *bugarrigarra* (dream-

ing) stories; it is about something that happened within living memory, not something that always already was.

The watercolour is realist also, not abstract in a traditional iconographic manner. It too could be read as anthropologically empirical because Butcher Joe always draws 'scenes from real life' as they were before colonisation. Only native animals, clothing and decorations as they were, specific landforms which are the memory of a place old age prohibits him from visiting any more.

HYPOPTICS

Seeing, in this aesthetic, is glancing, it is not gazing full on so as to possess a scene, take it away and store it. It is an aesthetic of the glimpse where things half seen can be imagined as something *other*, beyond and magical:

Sometimes we see a woman pass but, when you look again you might say: 'Oh I've only seen a grass'. But it is the woman Worawora, she still lives today.⁴

Stories of the third eye and the *ngadjayi* (spirits) confirm this.⁵ Perceptions come in flashes, in disruptions of the steady gaze. Since the country is variously peopled by spirits, ghosts and natural things transformed, there is always the danger that this mystical world will break through into perception, especially if you walk in certain 'danger places'. Gaps can appear in the veil of ordinary looking. 'Clever men' like Butcher Joe, can look through these gaps and see a 'long way'. He has drawn pictures of *rai* and *balangan*, so he is not too disturbed when they make themselves visible to him. It is not the intensity of his gaze which produces them: if he is at peace with a place they will come. The harder you look the less likely you are to see. You dream, and something good will come to you, like your boyfriend, but when you look again ...

EROTICS

There is a widespread myth in the North that crocodiles will never harm a woman, 'only keep her for sweetheart business'. There is no denying the phallic forearm of the crocodile. And in the story, at the point of rupture between pages, before you 'turn over', you are told about the woman's desire, a narrative device anticipating an erotic outcome.

The story is structured in two parts, the trip in to Langgee following a traditional Nyigina track, the sore head, no doubt caused by a dispute in camp which has driven her away (the boyfriend?), the arrival, sleep, the sexual subconscious.

Water is already heavily thematised, and it will be the sexual medium: 'dived deep into the water'. The alligator turns into the boyfriend, and when see can look *properly* (rather than figuratively, seeing him as more than an instrumental phallic effect) it is too late. The irony of 'he was a good man' sits uneasily with the 'raw meat', this is why

she has to get away, complete the journey back to her people at Yedda, which achieves closure for the text, she will have a story to tell when she gets home.

EXCHANGE

Contact with Butcher Joe could always produce a market, a point of exchange on a trade route. Being on the spot meant that you were in the line of exchange which would frustrate those in Perth who wanted him to retain his work for them alone. 'Things must go two ways', says Paddy Roe about Aboriginal-White relations, and he is reinscribing a traditional trade rule. Once it was only the artifact that was traded, but now the agents trade on Butcher Joe's name. His name, the singularity of his style, these are rarities, and rarity is value in the contemporary production of Aboriginal culture as archival accumulation, not a lived disposable economy for those producing the artifacts.

The story and the painting go together, they displace each other in a certain direction, and the one cannot move without the other. The story glosses the painting as a supplement of pleasure which can be reiterated by the owner, in a faraway place, who can cite Butcher Joe's name and his exotic location. Butcher Joe was tapped into a market and the trade scattered and amplified, beyond his control.

DRIFTING OUT

Butcher Joe has caught the tide and is moving out, to islands where tastes, perceptions, science and calculation are the ripples his work has become. Texts are formed, paintings will be remembered and reproduced, not all the songs will be forgotten. Sentiment will not always get in the way of understanding that an Aboriginal aesthetic is a material way of life, not something to be preserved. It is something that is being produced differently in different sites. Art to 'go' in ships and airports. Art to stay in museums. Even Butcher Joe's art does not have a true point of origin, since its creativity was its dialogue with Western realism. The conditions for an Aboriginal aesthetic are the conditions for living with the possibility of expansion and transformation, always moving slightly beyond recognition, allowing critics and traders the occasional glimpse of a secret which is both profound and as candidly open as the country in which we walk. We walk until we reach a tidal creek, lying down to sleep, happy to drift out, not caring who comes ...

NOTES

1. See 'Strategic Nomadology: Introduction' in Kim Benterak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984, which borrows from 'Traité de Nomadologie: La Machine de Guerre' in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Ed. de Minuit, 1980.
2. *Reading the Country*, (op. cit.) and Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983.
3. Jacques Derrida, *La Verite Peinturée*, Flammarion, 1978.
4. *Gularabulu*, (op. cit.) p. vii
5. *Reading the Country*, (op. cit.) p. 138

AN ANONYMOUS PERSON lives in the northern suburbs of Melbourne.

A few years ago he returned from a trip around Europe. He expresses a scepticism about life in the suburbs and speaks disparagingly of the lack of interest felt by his mates in the world around them.

The following is an extract of this person talking about what travel means to him:

I'd like to, when I'm 50 or 60, to say 'Well I was in Melbourne for a while, but I was here and there.' There's just too many things happening. You only get one shot at life. And if you waste your opportunities, if you don't do it now, the next opportunity is when you're 50 or 55 or 60 or retired. And your options are much more limited. There's too many things happening to sit back in Melbourne and let them all go past you.

What is he saying here: something quite commonplace or something quite important?

A something *commonplace* in his statement is the imperative to leave one's mark on the world. 'I was here' only clutters the trajectories we might make in our own excursions. These inscriptions – carved into rock or scrawled on toilet walls – seem an illegitimate claim on our attention, just as a neighbour in a dinner party might put their feet up on our conversational space with an autobiographical itinerary. What makes him so special?

A something *important* in his statement is to leave one's mark on the world. His proposition, 'You only get one shot at life', contradicts the picture of a world that is governed by serial repetition, where one life is but another story, consumed and forgotten. What makes him so special that he should see himself up there where everything is happening? Projecting oneself forward in time to the other side of life seems to implore the significant question: Will I finally be able to say anything important to the people around me?

'Well I was in Melbourne for a while, but I was here and there.'

OCTOBER 1989

HOW LONG AGO WAS IT? A month. Perhaps more. That's when it all started. When he'd stopped. Just like that. It was planned and he felt ready. The best time for it was after seeing a band at one of those smoke-filled venues where people chain-drink cans of beer and their feet stick to the floor. Bodies knocking into each other, music pumping through a bank of speakers, the bands fronted by strutting singers and tall, cool guitarists.

And so he did it. He ground out the last butt. The next day began, hazy at first but picking up all the time.

He's in a music shop, browsing through liner notes on a rare Saints album. Nick Cave's answer to his critics, *SCUM*, shakes the sound system. A pause as the song finishes. The shop assistant approaches a customer.

»Can I help you?«

»No, not really. I'm just having a look.«

»What do you like?«

»I don't know. I'm just starting a collection, so I haven't really thought about it...«

He took walks with a friend. She'd talk and he'd play spot-the-smoker with passing traffic. An old white car trundled toward them. An old white man was hunched toward the steering wheel, trying to

see up, over and through the windshield. One of his hands gripped the wheel tightly. The other tenderly nursed a cigarette.

Things were looking up. Two weeks have passed and he's feeling strong. He's exercising, breathing better. Might even get out some night and do a Saturday Night Special, moving round the room to the guitar on *MARRIED WOMAN*.

It wasn't to be. A week later, an incident. So things slid back. Red Rodney swings on a trumpet solo, later there's Chet Baker singing *TIME AFTER TIME*, later still Art Pepper's *JUNIOR CAT* – these sounds drifting out through the open windows.

Then it's a frenzied dash across the city in search of the repair shop that can mend a 78" record player. Out of luck. They only do radios. Parts are so hard to come by.

Walking with a friend, he's back on track, grabbing for a packet of PK, shoving pellets in his mouth. There's a line pounding in his head, a line out of nowhere.

»By the way, I'm going for cigarettes.«

She looked at him. He repeated it.

»'By the way, I'm going for cigarettes.' It won't go away ... and I haven't heard the song in years.«

Thinking back on it, he knew he had the album somewhere.

ANNOTATIONS

FRIDAY 3 - SATURDAY 28 NOVEMBER 1989

LIST OF WORKS

1. **FIONA MACDONALD**

*Pages 60 and 61 from Lady
Marguerite's Album*
1989, framed
450 x 340 cms

2. **STEPHEN BRAM**

Untitled
1989, photograph
25.5 x 20.5 cms

3. **ROSE LANG and
STIEG PERSSON**

Untitled Triptych
1989, silver gelatin photographs
and words on paper
photographs: 101.6 x 101.6 cms
paper: not specified

**JOHN BARTLETT and
NATASHA MOSZENIN**

4. **John Bartlett**

More Anon
i. INNER SANCTUM
ii. SPACE
iii. HOP HOP DASH DASH HOP DASH
DASH DASH HOP
iv. CONGA TO NOLONGER
1989 acrylic and oil on canvas
177 x 68 cms

5. **Natasha Moszenin**

Hip hop haiku
1989, big white paper
each piece 110 x 42 cms

6. **LINDA MARRINON and
RALPH TRAVIATO**

Vicki Vale of Tears
1989, strawboard, oil paint and food
approx 150 x 150 cms

7. **GEOFF LOWE, JON CAMPBELL
and KEVIN MURRAY**

Asia - 5 records
(No. 2 found by Kevin Murray,
No. 3 by Jon Campbell)
1989, art materials on records
No. 2 shellac, 24.5 cms diameter
others 30 cms diameter

8. **BRENDA LUDEMAN
and KATHY TEMIN**

Gloriette 1989
comprising:
Kathy Temin
3 oval pieces:
2 oval pieces, photocopies
1 oval piece, felt, fur and enamel
Quotation; Alfred Jarry, *Messalina*,
Atlas Press, London 1985
23 x 30 and 27 x 39 cms
Brenda Ludeman
1 piece:
stainless steel and angle iron
18 x 28 x 42 cms

9. **ROBERT ROONEY**

Teen Scenes and Teen Dreams
i. *The Death of James Dean I*
1983, acrylic/synthetic polymer paint
on canvas
107 x 132 cms
ii. Article:
'Flickers of Teenage Exploitation'
The Australian, 17/1/87
iii. Article:
'An Image Darlin' Matt Just Can't
Outgrow'
The Australian, 20/1/88
iv. Article:
'Even Presley Could be Prim'
The Australian, 9/1/88
v. Documentation: 1952-1988

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► PRO • COLOUR ◀

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