

# Text, Discourse, Deconstruction and an Exploration of Self: A Disruptive Model for Postmodern Art Education

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## **Text, Discourse, Deconstruction and an Exploration of Self: A Disruptive Model for Postmodern Art Education**

**Jane Gooding-Brown**

### **Background to the Study**

There is a need to reposition visual arts education away from the modernist approaches which have dominated this discipline for more than 50 years and move it into the particular postmodern way of thinking which is characterizing much of the cultural life of the late 20th century. In recent developments in American art education there has been the recognition of the necessary inclusion and intermeshing of the disciplines of art history, art criticism and aesthetics with studio practice. This means a more informed, polysemic, different world view via the visual arts can be included in the curriculum. The development of postmodern approaches and strategies in this expanded field of art education must reflect the continuing recognition and significance of difference, a vital postmodern issue, now occurring in our society.

In the State controlled secondary (Grades 7-12) education system of New South Wales, Australia in which this study is located. In the State controlled secondary (Grades 7-12) education system of New South Wales, Australia in which this study is located, the interrelationship of the disciplines of studio practice, art history, art criticism and aesthetics has been the basis of the State mandated Visual Arts syllabus for a number of Grades. The disciplines incorporate the processes of practitioners in the State mandated Visual Arts syllabus for a number of s. The disciplines incorporate the processes of practitioners in the field of the visual arts with artists, art historians and art critics as models for inquiry. Visual Arts is a subject area which students elect in Grade 8 (aged 14) and, like other electives, extends through to Grade 12 where it involves examination in the Higher School Certificate, a high school exit and a university entrance examination similar to the British General Certificate of Education or the International Baccalaureate. Students electing Visual Arts therefore have a number of years of in depth study in the disciplines of art education. Recently (1994), in a revision of the Visual Arts syllabus, there has been a realignment of the disciplines to recognize that aesthetic theory permeates all disciplines of art education and therefore aesthetics has been 'excluded' as a discrete study. As part of this revision there has been the inclusion, into the syllabus, of a postmodern framework, along with cultural, subjective and structural frameworks, through which students and teachers can approach art practice, criticism and history. This is a timely acknowledgement of a postmodern plurality. Although I situate my study against an Australian background, there are significant implications for visual arts education, and for education in general, for a world wide perspective.

Since the Second World War there has been a 'rethinking' about how we understand the world. We have tended to call this thinking, postmodern.

When I rethink the world as postmodern I understand that it can no longer be seen as an overarching monoculture or as dominant patriarchal discourses (white and Eurocentric) with 'outsider' marginalized subcultures and ex-centric groups, existing on the fringes. The promotion and the inclusion, into the dominant discourses, of these previously marginalized voices, is necessary for the continued functioning of society in general. If we believe that the 'grand' narratives of modernism have lost their credibility (Lyotard, 1984) under critical interrogation, they give up their claims to 'Truth'. In some ways they appear to have been displaced by "the contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained" (Murdoch in Lather, 1991, p.6) narrative. Likewise, the subject, having been decentered by modernist and structuralist practices is now "refashioned as a site of disarray and conflict inscribed by multiple contestatory discourses" (Lather, 1991, p.5). The notion of multiple interpretations and inscriptions, of cultures and of self, emphasizes and privileges the concept of difference. Ricoeur (in Foster, 1983) observes:

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly. . . we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others (p.57).

It is therefore in this postmodern 'condition' that I no longer see my world in terms of 'right' answers or single meaning when the notion of difference brings with it different interpretations of self and identity and the world. The particular ways I interpret experiences and meanings of self and identity in the world are socially and historically constituted by all discourses or discursive practices. Further I am particularly constituted by those in which I am more dominantly positioned--woman, white, middle class, heterosexual, mother, teacher, student, post colonial. However, all discursive practices constitute who I am. Moreover, the particular interpretations of others in the world, constituted by discursive practices, also contribute to my concept of self. The experience of interpretation and the interpretation of experience adds to my own concept of self and identity. It is, therefore, my belief is that everyone makes interpretations of meanings or 'sees' their world differently, and constructs identities, through, and because of, their positionalities in the practices of all discourses.

Visual arts education, situated in a postmodern framework, is uniquely positioned to examine those different interpretations and identities. An acknowledgement of postmodern difference also means the inclusion of art genres which were previously marginalized by being called 'craft'; or by being the traditional art of ethnic or racial groups; or by being the art texts produced by new or non 'traditional' technology; or art texts identified as particularly women's or homosexual's or children's. Equally important for inclusion here are the art texts<sup>1</sup> of our own students.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this project I use the word 'text' to refer to all art works and art writing.

## A Problem for Art Education

One project for research in art education, particularly in art criticism, should be the investigation of a postmodern perspective for interrogating interpretations of meanings in art texts. Such a perspective involves taking poststructuralist approaches to interpretation and meaning in order to disrupt modernist assumptions of fixed meaning in art texts. The consequences of such a perspective ultimately lead to an understanding of how interpretations (of meanings) have been socially and historically constructed by discursive practices and how the experience of interpretation contributes to an exploration of self and identity. We need to have a way to unpack and 'repack', through techniques of postmodern critical activity, those rich, dense interpretations of meanings in art texts in such a way as to understand and expand upon concepts of self and identity and difference. The visual arts have been involved this century in the exploration of the artist's self and identity. In this postmodern condition the viewer of art is also involved in an exploration of self and identity.

### Theoretical Framework

In this study the French theorists, Jacques Derrida (1976, 1978) and Michel Foucault (1972, 1973, 1978, 1980, 1985, 1986) offer the primary sources for an understanding of poststructuralist theory. These theorists afford me opportunities to disrupt art texts. Foucault gives me opportunities to examine discourses and practices of the self. Derrida's deconstructive play with language directs me to possible strategies of writing interpretation and the strategies of deconstruction give me 'disruptive' methods of entering art texts.

For further discussion of both postmodern and poststructuralist issues I look to literary theory, feminist theory, educational theory and postmodern psychology. I am also informed by my readings of critical theory, art criticism, 'new' art history and aesthetics.

In art education, Efland, Freedman & Stuhr (1996) have published an overview of postmodern strategies for curriculum development. Roger Clark (1996) has written on postmodern pedagogy. Graeme Sullivan (1993) has examined the postmodern phenomena in art education. Debates centered around the concept of disciplines in relation to the Getty funded research into Discipline Based Art Education have. A number of art educators, Terry Barrett (1994), Elizabeth Garber (1989), Anne Wolcott (1991), have examined the nature of interpretation of meanings in art texts and Michael Parsons (1992) has looked at interpretation as cognition and emphasizes the importance and role of language but without privileging either speech or writing.

### Issues of Significance

Issues which inform and which are examined in this study involve the concept of text, interpretation, discourse, and the poststructural activities of deconstruction and disruption which are involved in the research methodology and the resultant disruptive model.

## Text

I believe that "A text can be considered as [any] system of signification -- pictorial (sic), [oneiric], filmic, as well as literary -- whose devices of meaning go beyond the linguistics of the sign." (Ropars in Mowitt, 1992, p.167) and "Text in general is any system of marks, traces, referrals. . ." (Bennington in Papadakis et al, 1989, p.84). In using the word 'text' I am tentatively referring to the broad postmodern view of 'text' as that which can be 'written', 'produced' or 'read', that allows the viewer to enter at any point, and is 'overpopulated' with the practices of discourses. In substituting the word 'text' for 'work', I acknowledge Barthes's distinction that the 'work' is a closed structure already permeated with meaning waiting to be deciphered, while text is "irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning" (Eagleton 1983, p.138).

This idea of text is important to postmodern practice of discourses. Postmodern texts combine two important drifts; they are part of Foucauldian discursive practices, and they contain the Derridean network of traces which enables them to be deconstructed and reconstructed in "a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes. . . ." (Eagleton, 1983, p.138). Lather (1991) notes that "we cannot exhaust the meanings of the text, . . . a text can participate in multiple meanings without being reduced to any one, and . . . *our different positionalities* affect our reading of it." (my emphasis, Lather, 1991, p.145).

## The Role of the Art Text

I understand in this postmodern condition that the emphasis in looking at the art text is not to see it as a vehicle for individual genius. Nor do I see the art text as a direct expression of the artist's personality, or that it is an expression of an eternal Truth untainted by issues of the social world (Rees and Borzello, 1986). Without pushing the art text to the other extreme articulated by some new art historians, in looking only at the art text as an illustration of social issues, I use art as a text intentionally created by an artist constituted in discursive practices, which is acted upon by all other texts in the world. The art text represents within it the embeddedness of social, historical discourses, yet maintains a quality which makes it art and not something else, an issue I will not pursue in this study. In focusing on the art text in this study, it is not to know the text as aesthetic object but to understand it as a site through which to look at self, an opening for opportunities regarding self and identity.

## Interpretation

Interpretation is understood to be the major task of critical inquiry where the art text is made to reveal or give up meanings. Those meanings or what the art text is 'about' may be revealed or given up to the viewer in a number of ways. In my study, interpretation turns towards, not what a particular text means as art, but how the discursive practices embedded in the art text's meanings can be unpacked and situated in the social world. Interpretation acts as interpreter or translator of meanings into discursive practices. The viewer, in positioning herself

in these discursive practices, positions herself in the art text. An awareness of complex positioning within the discursive practices of the art text's interpretation, within the discursive practices of the art world itself and within the discursive practices of interpretation, allows the viewer to interact with the art text both as an experience of aesthetic object and of social construction thus reconnecting the link between the aesthetic and the social world. Interpretation also acts here as a technique of the self (Foucault 1986). In realizing that one's own interpretations are constructed by one's variable positioning in discourses, an understanding of the constructedness of self and of the world may lead one to an awareness of the potential for choice or change.

### **Discourse and the Self**

My study involves in part the recognition of the world as a web or network of interconnecting social discourses and in choosing to use the word 'discourse' I am fully aware of its difficulty as a concept because of its many conflicting and overlapping definitions. Using Foucault, I define discourse as a way of constituting knowledge about an object, via a system of discursive practices. To this definition I would add Martin Jay's (1993) characterization of discourse as a loose shifting system of practices; statements, associations and metaphors, which form the objects of discourse. I use the words 'discourses' and 'discursive practices' interchangeably throughout this study.

Coupled with this understanding of the constitution of objects by discursive practices is an analysis, articulated in Foucault's last writings, of how the individual comes to know her/himself as a subject. Foucault calls the process by which the individual reaches such an understanding, techniques or practices of the self. I will maintain in this study that interpretation is a practice of the self. For this study I assume 'subject', 'subjectivity' and 'self' as terms applying to an individual in society constituted by discursive practices and brought into being by self reflexive activity. I understand identity as the experience of self. The most relevant understanding of self for my study comes out of feminist theory with the concept of a multiple, shifting and often contradictory identity, being contradictory because of its being representative of many discourses. My belief therefore, is that our selves are positioned differently, that they are unstable and shift about within discourses. One's interpretations of meanings are constituted by the discursive practices in which one is positioned either dominantly or marginally. It is the differing discursive practices ranging from the material ordering of one's day to day experiences to the spiritual significance that one attaches to one's activities that Foucault understands as the ways in which individuals give meaning to their activities and seek to interpret their experiences. In understanding the discursive constructedness of self I also understand the autonomy and agency that I can exercise in the practices of my life. An exploration of self and agency in adopting positionalities and making interpretations will play a significant part in this project.

### **Methodology**

The methodology for research in this study is conditioned by the way I learn about and understand the world. My belief about knowledge is articulated

by the feminist writer, Dale Spender (in Reinharz, 1992): that "at the core of feminist ideas is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge" (p.7). My method therefore is to use and integrate a number of data gathering strategies which provide me with a dense network, an excess, of information. Lather's (1991) statement that the methodological task has become one of "generating and refining more interactive, contextualized methods in the search for . . . meaning[s] rather than prediction and control" ( p.72) fits with the research strategies, particularly text deconstruction in this study.

As a feminist researcher I state my position in the major discourses of woman and education in relation to this research. I also articulate how my experiences as a feminist within those discourses may influence the research project and the data. By stating this I am avoiding an objectivist stance where the researcher is invisible.

A case study methodology allows me to incorporate a number of data gathering strategies. These strategies look at student's conversations in a number of art criticism classes which use particular contemporary art texts for discussion. They look at visual verbals<sup>2</sup> as writings of these same students, the writings of professional art critics and art educators who have used the same art texts for interpretation and interviews with the artist. My own journal, in which I recorded my interpretations of experiences during the research study, is also examined. The artist whose work I use in this study is the contemporary installation artist/photographer, Sandy Skoglund.

The students chosen for this study were Grade 11 art students, preparing for their final university entrance examination in Grade 12. These students attend schools for gifted students in Sydney, Australia, schools which have reputations for 'excellence' in the visual arts. The use of the conversation and writing of 'gifted' students allows for an 'expert student' viewpoint and focuses on students who are 'unusual' thus allowing for the collection of information which is rich and dense (purposeful sampling, Patton 1980).

### **Text Deconstruction**

The methodology is informed by my understanding of Foucault (1972, 1973) and Derrida (1976, 1978). From Foucault, an understanding of the concepts of discourses allows me to illuminate discursive practices in art texts. The concepts located in the writings of Derrida are used to (post)'structure' or conceptualize a 'loose system' of textual analysis or textual deconstruction of the conversations and writing of these secondary school students, of the artist, of writings of the selected professional art critics and art educators and my own reflective journal writing.

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'visual verbal' came out of support documents associated with the Visual Arts Syllabus, State Board of Studies, N.S.W., Australia, in the 1980's. These documents were written by a committee of art educators employed by the Board of Studies.

### A Disruptive Model

From the research data gathered out of the case study, I propose a disruptive ~~model~~ of interpretation for art criticism. This ~~model~~ may be used as a self reflexive ~~model~~ which allows students to look at themselves as social constructions, for who they are and how they might have become who they are. My aim is to enhance student understanding of the construction of discursive practices in the world, and, particularly of the social construction of self.

My belief, supported by Bowers and Lather (in Lather, 1991), is that reflexivity and critique are two essential skills that we want our students to develop. Students in modernist structures of educational practices rarely find themselves with access to knowledge, skills or strategies which they need to be self reflexive. So I am looking beyond the practices of structuralism, in developing a ~~model~~ which uses postmodern art educational practices, to give students strategies to be reflexive about the constructedness of the world and themselves.

The ~~model~~ developed in my study is a disruptive one in that it proposes to critically dismantle practices that surround and involve the interpretations of meaning in art texts. My reason for choosing to strike through the word '~~model~~', is that I consider that the word is inadequate, but necessary. The word '~~model~~' is often used in structuralist theory and its connotations of structure, pattern, system, would be inappropriate in this poststructuralist project without some modifications. By striking through the word *and* printing it, I am both allowing *and* rejecting these connotations of '~~model~~'. In using 'disruptive' I refer to the Derridean use of that which seems to occur in a structure when it is subjected to close reading or critical dismantling. Close reading or the critical dismantling of a text implies scrupulous attention to that within the text which appears resistant to reading. Culler (1982) notes that close readings seem "to depend on the investigation of possibilities that would be neglected or eliminated by other readings and that are neglected precisely because they would disrupt the focus or continuity of readings which their elimination makes possible" (p. 246). I propose to examine the concept of 'disruption' in educational practices as an implication of this study.

The 'disruptive' ~~model~~ will be used for interrogation of interpretation of meaning as discursive practice. It becomes self reflexive conversation as students explore their positions in discursive practices revealed in art texts and reflect on the constructed nature of those practices. Students come to see that not only their own interpretations of meanings in art texts are constructed from discursive practices but also that the experience of interpretation is constructed out of and constructs their concepts of self. When I talk of deconstructive art critical practice I am inventing a critical practice out of pieces of my interpretation of Derridean and Foucauldian strategies of thinking and writing. The 'disruptive' ~~model~~ will vary each time it is used and there will probably be no 'answers', but I would hope that there would be critical and reflexive thought about one's self in the world.

I propose to develop the 'disruptive' ~~model~~ further as a postmodern 'writing' genre for use by students when interpreting art texts. The student



becomes another producer of text, traced through other texts and discourses. It will be developed as a 'palimpsestic'<sup>3</sup> project, an alternative process to traditional interpretive art 'writing'. Students, through deconstructive and reconstructive strategies can continue to interrogate their palimpsestic texts further, to understand the positions from which their own interpretations are coming.

### Limitations of This Study

Although I assume and acknowledge other systems of interpretation and art criticism and recognize that they inform my work, I do not examine them in relation to this study. The modernist framework has influenced my teaching in art criticism for many years and its incompatibility with my own ideology of interpretation has formed the catalyst for change. I make the assumption that interpretations of meanings in art texts are not 'found' by looking but that we actively engage with the text's discursive practices in order to find meaning that explains self, identity and difference. The art text and the viewer can act together to extend meaning into the social world.

While acknowledging the significance of the postmodern and poststructuralism as theoretical frameworks, I have limited my examination of these to areas which are most relevant to this study. The issues are explored in a limited case study of two high school art classes in Sydney, Australia. The postmodern case study defies the traditional convention of looking for generalizations and instead looks for specificity or even exceptions. The data from this case study of a specific site and specific participants has heuristic value-- while it will not be generalizable it will suggest different directions for the development of a disruptive ~~model~~ in the practice of art criticism.

### Purpose and Significance of the Study.

This study proposes to develop a postmodern disruptive ~~model~~ for the interpretations of meanings in art texts leading to an exploration of self and self reflexivity through those interpretations. The ~~model~~ may also be developed into a different 'genre' of art writing, the visual verbal. In understanding the social practices of discourses, students could come to see their own shifting positions in discourses and understand how those positionalities constitute and condition their interpretations of the world. This has important implications for multicultural concepts in art education. The empowering of students by the personal construction and understanding of aesthetic knowledge and knowledge of self allows for greater expansion of interpretations, critical thinking, multicultural thinking and innovative 'risk taking' in their everyday experiences.

Postmodern poststructuralist concepts bring with them disruptive, contradictory, ambiguous, disparate ways of understanding the world. Students need to see that these are rich and dense areas for interpreting and making meanings. With the development of disciplined based art education and multiculturalism we need to have, in visual arts education, a way to unpack and

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<sup>3</sup> Palimpsestic: from 'palimpsest', the concept of reading one text through another or one text doubling for another or the extracting of a new text from an old one.

'repack', through techniques of postmodern critical activity, those rich, dense polysemic interpretations of meanings in art texts in such a way as to understand and expand upon concepts of self and difference.

The implications of subjectivity and understanding of self for critical art theory and critical thinking at the senior school level are significant. If students are able to understand and recognize their own and other's positioning in particular and different discourses they can examine their own interpretations through their relationship with the discourses embedded in art texts. By deconstructing the discourses in art texts for polysemic interpretations students can begin to see their selves in the world as social beings and see how they link with others. Their interpretations of meanings in all art texts and of the world become richer and more numerous. Students, in understanding how different positionalities in different discourses interconnect and interact may also critically think about programs in art education such as multiculturalism which could become as a whole irrelevant in their postmodern worldview.

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