Remembering and Dismembering: Violence, Representation and the Body.

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Jack Trolove

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CONTENTS

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Firstly, as Pakeha, I wish to acknowledge that Maori Sovereignty was never ceded in Aotearoa. I also wish to acknowledge my place and role here as Manuhiri, and that this research is contextualised by the reality that I write and make work on stolen land.

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ABSTRACT

Experiences of violence are commodified, sanitised and eroticised through their visual and linguistic representation, and as such they are implicit in the power relations in which the original violence occurs. Because of this representations of violence and trauma are deeply problematic. Within this research I explore the poverty, the continued violation even, of attempts to narrate (visually or textually) experiences of violence and trauma in the face of real people and real bodies that have been violated and traumatised. A response by some visual artists to this dilemma has been to try and re-present violence through the use of a symbolic body. The symbolic body may act as a cipher to communicate aspects of experience from other bodies. In this thesis I discuss the politics of using symbolic bodies as a visual strategy to narrate violence. I pay particular attention to how these representations may simultaneously remember (witness to) and dismember (violate) violated bodies. By reflecting on both my own works and those of other artists, I explore the possibilities as well as the problematics of attempting to narrate violence and trauma without violating. I discover that this is an extremely difficult task but insist on the importance of trying.

INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember I have been distressed by the presence of violence[1] in my own life and in the lives of others. As an artist I rely on visual language, making it important for both my life and practice to understand how imagery shapes our understandings of violence and power, and how this in turn shapes us. I sit down to watch the six o'clock news, I walk into a gallery, I open a book; everywhere I turn there are images and stories of violated bodies. A number of theorists point to the ways in which such images (in documentary or in narrative style) do not in fact 'inform' the viewer about violence and injustice, but instead commodify, sanitise and even eroticise trauma. While few accept that silence or non-representations challenge this cultural consumption of violence and trauma, the representational possibilities around these are very limited. Along with discussing these limits my work explores possibilities for engaging visually with issues of violence and trauma without violating.

The meeting place (where stories are told) between violence and representation is volatile. This fraught meeting place is where I locate my practice and this thesis. To investigate this territory, along with the development of my own artworks I have considered a number of figurative artworks and films, all of which have been born into a dominant culture,[2] poised to consume trauma. I am particularly interested in the theatrical strategy of 'symbolic' bodies that 'stand in for' another or more often, for a group of bodies in order to testify to a particular violence. Inevitably this 'casting' brings up many issues around power, agency and subjectivity, so I have selected particular works in order to discuss what I see as both the potentials and dangers of utilising symbolic bodies, particularly when the body is that of the artist. Through looking at where symbolic bodies begin and end, I am hoping to discuss the reach of empathy or maybe where empathy can begin and end.

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[1] In using the word 'violence' I refer to an abuse of power in any form. This extends to systemic violence, the violence of colonisation, gender based and interpersonal violence etc.

[2] In using the term Dominant Culture, I refer to power relations in society; who validates knowledge, knowing and experience and whose knowledge and experience is excluded from dominant imagery and discourse. In an academic context, Gramsci's concepts of Hegemony, (Adamson, 1980) as well as Foucault and Butler's notions of 'regulative discourses' (Foucault, 1975, Butler, 1997), shape much of this thought.

To contextualise I will discuss briefly what I mean by these particular artworks being born into a dominant culture poised to consume trauma. In doing this I discuss my understanding of the relationship between representation and reality, drawing on theory from cultural studies and post structuralist perspectives. In many ways the areas I am looking at can be broken down into the contexts of production and reception of artworks or more specifically, the motivations for producing and receiving. An image speaks a thousand words and a text is often said to be loaded with imagery. In my research I approach language and visuality as interdependent, compatible and interchangeable. This interdisciplinary approach is to focus on communication around violence, and allows me to move freely between textual, verbal, bodily and visual languages. This also allows me a wider inroad to explore the pedagogy of visual language, or how we are educated and shaped by it. My practice over the last ten years has engaged and will continue to engage in this area. The tensions and politics of representing violence form the backbone of my practice. To outline why this choice is so important when looking at issues around violence and representation, I wish to address the power of language and stories to shape culture. In the words of Toni Morrison, "Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created." (Morrison, 1993, p.2).

From a poststructuralist perspective, stories are not born into the ether, they are born into culture, born into millions of other stories and bodies. As a visual 'speaker' I consider the environment of the visual languages and contexts to which I am contributing, in the same way that textual and spoken languages are understood in poststructuralist theory. In her Nobel Lecture (1993), Toni Morrison emphasises the political and cultural nature of language;

> *"There is and will be rousing language to keep citizens armed and arming; slaughtered and slaughtering in the malls, courthouses, post offices, playgrounds, bedrooms and boulevards; stirring, memorialising language to mask the pity and waste of needless death. There will be more diplomatic language to countenance rape, torture, assassination. There is and will be more seductive, mutant language designed to throttle women, to pack their throats like pâté-producing geese with their own unsayable, transgressive*

words; there will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute; language glamorised to thrill the dissatisfied and bereft into assaulting their neighbours; arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness." (Morrison, 1993, p.1).

Having considered the power of representation to construct reality, I ask how might an artist use the body to testify, respond to or engage with issues around violence without not only remaking it, but without simultaneously marketing the violence or trauma.