

Artist's text

Amendments

The *Amendment* drawings are larger body-scale water-colour works on paper made up from many concentric watercolour rings, traced in pencil and hand coloured one-by-one applying a continuous circular gesture and head of wet medium. In the studio each drawing took an extended period to complete as the rings gradually accrued. As I completed each ring (they begin at the top and are drawn down each side in parallel arcs), I loaded a head of wet pigment such that it eventually and inevitably spilled from its path and gravitated to the bottom of the sheet down and over earlier rings, sometimes deviating or finding a new path, but always modifying those rings over which it passed until it fell from the paper and was captured by and stained a balsa wood tray or 'receiver'.

Materially explicit in the *Amendments* is the fact that the water-colour rings are a co-centric, rendered ground controlled and directed by me against which the drip is to a large extent an autonomous gestural vehicle commanded by gravity and the absorption capacity of paper. There is alongside a pure optical impression a strong material presence, coupled with a sense of spoiling. There is a tone of growing complexity and self-defacement.

The series began as more crude tracings of the circular form and evolved into more tightly-serried rings with a honed sense of colour palette. The amount of drips increased correspondingly. Initially the receiver trays were not present in the works and the drips merely puddled on my studio floor. My reading of Michael Bakhtin's 'grotesque method' alerted me to the fact that crucially these drips needed to be both acknowledged and recycled into the drawing. Thus the receiver arrests the drip from its 'normal' discharged state and redeems it via the base, lower bodily realms and back into the pictorial body of the work. Not only would this formally acknowledge lost aspects of the studio process and allow them to re-enter the meaning of the work but it would sublimate their material objectiveness into symbolic readings.

In visual-pictorial terms the *Amendments* contrast the concentric rings forms with vertical columns, which elicits a number of associative readings of the incongruities between disk and column, the elevated or grounded, the head and trunk and the perfect-imperfect. Melbourne based Age newspaper art reviewer Robert Nelson epitomised this narrative (allegorical) function in a published review of the works,

ultimate sublimity is experienced as the supreme anticlimax. I wonder if that's also the discourse around Greg Creek's perfect circles at Sarah Scout. At the heart of their geometric perfection, as if in the otherworldly orbits of Dante's Paradise, there's a catastrophic leak (Nelson, 2009).

In my preferred reading the viewer's resolution of such incongruities in the *Amendments* works renders the topic of political law-making compromised and failed but also about a positive congress. Such were my aims therefore to suggest that all ideals must be amended and their purity or indeed beauty as concept or ideal must to some extent be compromised to co-exist in the real world real-politic.

The Amendments emerge from aspects of Australian Australian political cartoons like the drip, the stain and the chance accident suggested by Bruce Petty but also a sense of ironically nuanced and conflicted mix of attitudes, exemplified in Jasper Johns' (USA, 1930) series of 'device' drawings that derived from his large gestural drawing in charcoal, *Diver* (1961), the dadaist iconoclastic gestures of Francis Picabia (France, 1879-1953) exemplified in the versions of *La saint verge* (1920) and particularly, the savagely ironic Marcel Broodthaers' (Belgium, 1924-1976) work, *la peste*, (1973).

American critic Thomas McEvilley has described Broodthaers' form of interventionist image-making as: 'the world of political divisions becomes an arbitrary, artificial overlay on a material reality that lacks it' (McEvilley, 1989: 110). The title and embedded text caption of Broodthaers *la Peste* is a reference to Albert's Camus 1947 novel *La Peste* (The Plague). Where Camus' novel has been read as a treatment of the French resistance to German occupation during World War II (Gray, 2007), Broodthaer's drawing, in line with his object-based works has been interpreted by Benjamin Buchloh as encoding Marxist doctrines or reflections of them. *La Peste* conflates metaphorical readings of fascist political intent with an ideological critique of the commodification of art by mainstream culture. However, McEvilley doubts whether Broodthaers' connections to Marxism, 'to varying degrees, but hardly pervading the artist's life - should control interpretation of the oeuvre' (McEvilley, 1999: 71). McEvilley highlights that when Broodthaers did talk about his work, 'it was not in terms of ideological content but, with whatever ironies in place, in terms of beauty. A level of sentiment and nostalgia sweetens the sometimes-bitter draught of the oeuvre' (McEvilley, 1999: 85).

These combined references map an area in which a kind of reflective political response might be researched, ranging across defacing iconoclastic gestures, pictorial ironies and optical beauty. Crucial to this is a more subtle reading of cynical gesture that is referred to by McEvilley in contemporary art terms, as an *attitudinal* gesture. In his *Thirteen Ways of*

looking at a Blackbird, McEvelley characterizes ‘attitudinal gestures (wit, irony and parody and so on)’ as the *qualifiers* of already existent content (McEvelley, 1991: 70); whether the existing content is the material ground, metaphorical ground or social ground it constitutes part of the work’s content.

The desire to persuade, for example, is a form of intentionality that saturates some works and involves itself in all their effects. []. In irony, wit and so on, some level of content is presented by the artist with indications that his or her attitude toward it is not direct and asseverative but indirect and perverse. The process is complex. The viewer’s mind compares the statement received with another hypothetical statement which the mind constructs as representing the normal or direct version, and by contrast with which the abnormal and indirect approach can be perceived and measured. Thus ironic indirection, entering into another category of content, criticizes that content at the same time it states it, and alters the charge of meaning (McEvelley, 1991: 82).

Attitudinal gestures supply a broader scope for making that encompasses not only primary drawing artefacts but those that create new meaning when directed against the works themselves as disorderings of existing depictions, captions and so on. This refers as much to the spiral in the context of the drawing figure in Steinberg’s image (a character who traces his world in spite of its political complexities), the text “La Peste” in the context of the stains in Broodthaers’ work *and* the stains themselves against the whole ground of the support. Typically for art, complexities abound. And typically, the work is not simply dogmatic in its approach to the viewer but seeks to engage the viewer in the process of content construction.

Buchloh, Benjamin (Ed.) (1988), *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*. Cambridge: MIT Press
Crimp, Douglas (1989), *This is Not a Museum of Art, Marcel Broodthaers*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center
McEvelley, Thomas (1991), *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millenium*. New York: McPherson & Company.
Oppitz, Michael (1974), *Marcel Broodthaers : Catalogue*. Brussels: Societé des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts Bruxelles.

May 2013