Undecidability: Room for Thought in the Visual Arts

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My thoughts, when I had something to say or write, were that which was furthest from me (Jacques Derrida, 1978: 8).

In this article I focus on the concept of the *undecidable* as proposed by Jacques Derrida, and draw on a philosophic study of the cinema by Gilles Deleuze to explore the nature and importance of the undecidable in the visual arts. From film and installation art I draw examples of what may constitute or suggest 'undecidables' that destabilize thought and create the possibility for an encounter with what Deleuze (1989: 278) calls the "un-thought within thought".

I encountered the writing of Jacques Derrida through the work of Gilles Deleuze. Fellow Frenchmen born five years apart, they shared a deep and mutual respect for each other's work. Figuring a critique of texts that he deconstructed, Derrida wrote (1981a: xv):

> The critique does not ask 'What does this statement mean? but where is it being made from? What does it presuppose? Are its presuppositions compatible with, independent of, and anterior to the statement that seems to follow from them, or do they already follow from it, contradict it or stand in a relationship of mutual dependence such that neither can exist without positing that the other is prior to it?

In the introduction to *Dissemination* (Derrida, 1981a: x-xiii), Barbara Johnson succinctly outlines Derrida's programme of deconstruction in *Of Grammatology* of Rousseau's *Confessions*. In this reading, Derrida discusses the ambiguity and the slippage between writing and speech and between sexuality involving a sexual partner's presence and his or her absence. Here, Derrida is not trying to uncover the meaning of Rousseau's writing in the conventional sense: that is, what he might be trying to say or how well he succeeds. Johnson points out that Derrida's reading is purely textual, indifferent to the "flaws or weaknesses or stupidities of an author, but [attentive to] the necessity with which what he [the author] does see is systematically related to what he does not see" (Derrida, 1981a: xv). Derrida's interest is in words, in the seen and unseen presumptions behind those words, no matter whether these are known or unknown to the author. Johnson describes how Derrida's textual reading "proceeds by a careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself" (Derrida, 1981a: xiv), and reiterates that, "There is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida, 1981a: xv). Further, Derrida (1981a: xv) writes:

> The critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, their effects on what follows from them, and that the starting point is not a (natural) given but a (cultural) construct, usually blind to itself.

In this reading of Rousseau's *Confessions,* Derrida created what he called an undecidable – an entity that calls into question the perception of writing and speech as opposites. Rather than treating presence and absence as opposites in which the positive value has priority, there is in fact a kind of slippage between the two, a state that cannot be given a precise name or value. Derrida accentuated this idea of the undecidable to undermine and destabilize patterns of thinking, reiterating in an interview published in *Positions* (1981b: 43):

I have called undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, 'false' verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and dis-organizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics (the *pharmakon* is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside, neither speech nor writing).

Other examples of undecidables nominated by Derrida are hymen, spacing, gram, incision, supplement, difference and communication. In a brief explanation of Derrida's undecidables, Marcel Cobussen (2004: 1) refers to the latter three and includes the opposing terms that destabilise them: "supplement (addition and replacement), difference (distinction and deferral) and communication (oral presentation and transmission of messages)". Undecidables are derived from opposites but cannot be fully included in one or the other. They have no place linguistically – at least in the languages used by these philosophers. Their use "at once brings about fusion and confusion between opposites" (1).

Of course, a basic distinction must be made here between what Derrida does in deconstructing existing texts and uncovering among other things, undecidables, and what an artist does, which is to create an artwork that might anticipate aspects of its possible deconstruction and thus incorporate elements such as undecidables. Further, an artwork might not deal in opposites but rather in images that seem very distant from one another. In either case a slippage may be created that initiates a state of "fusion and confusion" (Corbussen, 2004: 1) akin to Derrida's undecidable.

In an artwork entitled *Part A Part B* (1998) I set out to create something that would require maximum interpretation from viewers. Rather than conceiving of a whole (which might be quickly intuited) and breaking it into its parts I wanted to explore how seemingly unrelated parts might be made into a whole whose meaning relied mainly with the viewer. Thus, I produced three separate photographic stills to be viewed alongside a television monitor. Each still was of a different size. Two were coloured and one was black and white. Any relationship between them in their subject matter was deliberately minimised. The monitor showed only text, which consisted of a collection of banal, unconnected phrases such as:

Someone asked me where I bought my shoes.

Wedding dresses you can wear again.

Sprinkle with two tablespoons before serving.

Instead of moving up the screen, as Western custom dictates, the various unrelated pieces of text travelled down. The pace of the downward movement was altered for each sentence so that while one accelerated to the bottom the next descended slowly. These banalities were chosen for the humour, interest and images that they might evoke. What you had was disrupted text, disrupted images, and disrupted narrative in a disrupted format. My interest in *Part A Part B* was not what the images or the text conveyed so much as exploring where meaning may or may not originate in an artwork. The work shifted the weight of presence and absence, in this case between the images and text. It caused a slippage that unsettled preconceptions about how we watch a monitor, what we expect to see and how we expect to see it. In short, it destabilised our established thinking patterns and opened the way to new thoughts and connections.

In 1998 when *Part A Part B* was exhibited, video, as an art form in a gallery setting was still unsettling for many viewers. There were expectations of colour, sound and particularly narrative. Video art works however, are not bound by narrative structure in the same way as conventional film in a cinema. They are not even obliged to present an image. In 1988 Grace Glueck (Lovejoy, 1989: 122) wrote, in the

New York Times: "A video piece unfolds in time and therefore demands a time commitment from the viewer." Furthermore:

> While the basic property of video is that it moves and changes, we are used to an art that we can contemplate, that stands still for our eyes to return to in sensuous and cerebral appreciation. Yet we'd do better if we stopped trying to relate video to fine art, film, or even commercial television, and began to regard it as a developing medium in its own right (122).

Continuum (4), 2002

As an art form, video has been considered by many to be the poor cousin of film. It straddles the border between art and non-art, between three dimensions and two dimensions, object and image. It challenges the still and moving image, the narrative, figuration and the very ways we read and view an object. While cinema draws people into a darkened room to sit silently and still, there are a number of physical and mental positions possible in the presentation of video art works and thanks to technological developments these possibilities are increasing. You can encounter video works at any stage in their presentation and amble back and forth, coming and going as you please. Not taken seriously within film noir and often unaccepted as a bona fide art medium, video and video projection occupies a position tantamount to undecidability. A position from which it still continues to challenge its defining parameters.

In 2002 I created a video installation called *Continuum (4)*. This work operated between the spatial and temporal opposites of inside and outside, actual and virtual, past and present. Having edited, repeated and looped footage and added filters and transitions to create moving lines of yellow and green light, the image could be incorporated into the space of a windowsill to reflect the world outside. I added street noise that featured trams, thus bringing the sounds at ground level up and into the room on the eighth floor. This video was then projected along a window ledge to reflect horizontally in the glass.

Continuum (4) derived its meaning from a particular spatial and temporal situation. The experience of leaving a very busy street to walk or ride to the eighth floor, to negotiate corridors to a quiet location where you were finally drawn towards dominating windows, was part of this work. Because of the positioning of the image and its refection, together with its horizontal movement, there is a crossover between the inside and the outside, a slippage. We seek connections that allow recognition and an oscillation between the actual and the virtual takes place. In *Continuum (4)* the virtual is connected

to the actual in colour and sound to prompt an oscillation, but it is not an exact replication. There is game play within this work. What is being added? What is being replaced? Disjunctions arise between sound and image, movement and time. These disjunctions could put thought into contact with the unthought as a Deleuzean notion.

The extensive research undertaken by Gilles Deleuze in his two cinema books (1986, 1989) recognises the importance of undecidability. Deleuze uses "…the unsummonable in Welles, the undecidable in Resnais, the inexplicable in the Straubs, the impossible in Marguerite Duras, [and] the irrational in Syberberg" to explain the "un-thought within thought" (1989: 278). Deleuze proposes that we operate within fixed ideas that seal us off from the real essence of thinking. It is only when confronted with the unexpected, the indecipherable, a disruption or a dislocation that we experience vibrations that allow thought to happen. In the creation of gaps, disruptions and disturbances, thought becomes suspended. We are now no longer possessed with our image of thought but are faced with the virtual, infinite possibilities of thought itself. "…the force of time as change" (Rodowick, 1997: 178, 239). Deleuze (1994: 276) describes this as "the empty form of time" that creates a difference in thought that encourages the will to think.

"Gilles Deleuze clearly aligns the artistic image with the specific capacity to dislodge the image of thought..." (Flaxman, 2000: 12). He explains that while our thought is locked into common sense, subject to "habits, rituals and conventions" (Flaxman, 2000: 13) it influences and restricts what we see. The image of thought is the image thought gives itself. Undecidables are a shock to our thought processes. They unsettle our preconceived ideas and force a re-evaluation, creating circumstances that can allow the happening of thought. Faced with the uncommon or the unforeseen, we experience exchanges between faculties. This is not something we merely recognise. It is an experience, an encounter that could catalyse a different way of thinking. In 2003 I watched a series of Samuel Beckett plays maintain their stage appearance while adapted for film to be shown on television. This irreverent format in no way reduced the shock of Beckett's strange and unique mix of images, text and meaning. Deleuze argues that such strangeness, the inexplicable and impossible, is the trip wire on the way to new thought. A dehiscence is created and the resulting "Sensations mobilize the differential forces that make thinking possible" (Flaxman, 2000: 13). Kafka (Stern, 1980: 15) said something similar about books when he said that they should "bite and sting … a book should be an ice pick to break up the frozen sea within us".

Film genres that are unexpectedly mixed or altered can initiate the jolt to the senses necessary to engender thought. *Dogville* (Von Trier, 2003*)* gains much of its unsettling force because it hovers between a film and a play and somewhere between fiction and reality, entertainment and horror. Our preconceived ideas can be thwarted when a musical format is used to depict the sinister outcomes of World War One in *Oh What a Lovely War* (Attenborough, 1969). *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (Deren, 1946) hovers between a film and a dance. Here "the fusion and confusion" (Corbussen, 2004: 1) experienced through an undecidability is achieved by freeze framing, speed changes, looping and stylised movement, which never allow you as viewer to settle comfortably within a certain space or time. You strive to make associations that will allow you to make rational judgements or restore some semblance of narrative but you are conscious of the montage. At any interval between sequences, the film can branch in any direction and it does. Neither time, nor space, nor movement are connected rationally. Reality and dream are interchangeable and the film appears as a suspension out of time. The slippage between film and dance, reality and fiction create a strangeness in Deren's work, the quality of undecidability that can provoke thought.

In a deconstructive reading, "to study an object by means of that very object is open to certain analyzable aberrations" (Derrida, 1981a: xvi). In Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil* (1982), the actual and

the virtual are one. This is a film about a film, "... the film which takes itself as its object in the process of its making" (Deleuze, 1989: 76); "… the actual and the virtual, chase after each other, exchange their roles" (Deleuze, 1989: 127).

It is not the practicalities of film making that interest Marker or the meaning that can be derived from a progressive, narrative image that we are accustomed to seeing; it is the morality and authenticity of the language of film, the image and its relationship to memory and history. Freeze framing interrupts the flow; stills and speed changes are incorporated; we cut from one place to another for no apparent reason. Natural colour gives way to monochromatic colour to black and white and, on one occasion, image is separated from image with a blank, black screen. It is a composite of multiple times. The narrative is not chronological and constantly bifurcates.

Marker uses footage from a number of different sources including television. We traverse backwards and forward in time as we alternate between Tokyo and Guinea Bissau with two small digressions, one to San Francisco and the other to Iceland. *Sans Soleil* becomes many films within a film. Scenes in the film *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) are compared in *Sans Soleil* with the locations existing now in San Francisco. *Vertigo* is therefore given a history and a supposed reality. When images of places in one film refer to, and are compared with, the same locations in another film and as they exist in reality today, the layers of non-chronological memory begin to flounder between the true and the false. Marker's film critique highlights discrepancies, false impressions, influences that colour our perceptions. It is a critique that lays bare undecidables. Its very basis is undecidability.

American artist Robert Smithson (1967: 44) wrote, "I'm interested for the most part in what's not happening, the area between events which could be called the gap." His mirrors in the landscape titled *Displacements* were disjunctions that repeated the landscape, made it 'stutter,' creating an unexpected experience of the unforeseen. The undecidability he created between the actual and the virtual is in the same category as the undecidability that could be experienced in watching *India Song* (1975), **or seeing** Orson Welles between the mirrors in the film *Citizen Kane* (1941). Smithson was always interested in opposites; his *Displacments* are the undecidables created in the slippage between the real site and the virtual site.

Andrew Benjamin (1993) clarifies the importance of the slippage in *Matter and Meaning: On Installations*. Benjamin (31-33) argues that through the shifting and redefining of boundaries, ways are opened up for new meaning. "What allows, initially, installations to have their effect is their position both to sculpture and the ready-made" (33). Benjamin explains how the ready-made creates an ambivalence of meaning when the materiality remains constant and one meaning is superimposed over another. The meaning that can be derived from installations, he says, is related to this instability. Because of the shifting and questioning around installation's boundary new meaning is possible. Rosalind Krauss (1985: 282) also proposes that meaning could be found within shifting boundaries. She discusses the dissolving boundaries between sculpture, architecture and landscape endeavouring to theorise and situate sculpture within the expanding field of landscape and non-landscape, and architecture and non- architecture.

Mona Hatoum sets up a confrontation with the unexpected in her work *The Light at the End* (1989), proposing materially that a funnel-like space in a gallery alluded to a tunnel. As viewers ventured down, attracted by the light, they would discover that the light was actually "red hot bars that could burn you to the bone" (Archer, *et al.,* 1997: 17). Hatoum's finely tuned capabilities and her awareness of the viewer enable her to exploit the slippage between opposites: light and dark, beauty and danger, attraction and repulsion, mind and body, inside and outside. In an interview about an early work, Hatoum said:

> I was trying to make something which would merge with its surroundings something beau-

tiful and ethereal which would be both there and not there. But it would be frightening. Now I realize that these kind of paradoxes were just what I was looking for (cited in Archer, *et al.*, 1997: 37).

While Derrida looked to language, installation artists deal with material and form. Hatoum's object titled + *and* – (1994) is a potent example of an undecidable in the visual arts. A motor driven object rotates through sand to produce and erase a line simultaneously. It is as explicit as yes and no while being both and neither at the same time. Hatoum can also combine materials and languages in an object that undermines its own explicit meaning. Inside a domestically sized room Hatoum placed a doormat with the word *welcome* clearly defined on its surface. As you approach the mat, however, the word dissipates into the very material, which is made of strong, unforgiving and unwelcoming steel pins that undermine the idea of welcome.

In João Penalva's installation *336 Rivers,* (1998) a virtual landscape with Russian dialogue and English subtitles recount alternative versions of stories, which make it difficult to determine what is actual, since neither the spoken narrative, the image nor the written subtitles correspond. The video work was set in a pseudo cinema space within a gallery. Chairs were aligned in front of a screen that featured a picturesque landscape image that was slightly unreal in its heightened colour. The minimal movement within the video negated the idea of a still but it had none of the action-reaction movement common to narrative structure. The undecidability of the work was in the slippage between an artwork in a gallery and the representation of the work as though it was a film in a cinema.

The catalogue for Penalva's *The Ormsson Collection* (1997) was a detailed publication promoting a collection based on the finding and eclectic pairing of objects according to personal criteria of a certain Loftur Ormsson. The installation consisted of Ormsson's collection displayed museum style, within a museum. Small narratives, exhibited largely as labels, were presented within the much larger narrative that was laid out by the museum and published in a book. The small narratives, in part, described the reasons for pairing certain objects. One such label described the pairing together of Martine de Jongh's domino work, which originated from a game played once every year over a nine year period by a mother and her daughter, with cereal measures (Penalva, 1997: 58). The larger narrative involved the story behind the collection, the story of the Icelander, Loftur Ormsson.

Is this museum display of Loftur's collection an artwork? In the end you come to realise that there is no such person as Ormsson, that the artist has fabricated the ideas in this exhibition and the reasons for its existence. The exhibition, which explores the making and practice of display with such authenticity, now obscures the true and the false. What are we looking at? Is this a simulacrum and if so is it art? Whose collection is it? Does this matter? What has been the role of the artist? Is that important to the definition of art? In this work viewers try to piece together various components (objects, images and text) through space and time. Penalva has used the temporal concepts that surround the nature of collecting and temporal narratives, including the overall narrative development of Ormsson, to question the nature of perception and memory.

Penalva's work revolves around the notion of truth. A false collection stands in place of a real collection. The collection that is an artwork is both true and false. What we thought was the truth is revealed as a lie but holds to be another sort of truth. This tangle of ideas has something akin to Derrida's word play in *Plato's Pharmacy* involving the supplement (Derrida, 1981a). The French word *supplément* meaning both addition and replacement, " as a dietary supplement both adds to the diet and becomes part of the diet" (Collins & Mayblin, 1996: 34). As Derrida exposes the *pharmakon* in *Plato's Pharmacy* (Derrida, 1981a) as both a cure and a poison, good and evil, true and false, Penalva plays with the notion of true

and false, fiction and reality, so that the work questions its own authenticity and begins to destabilize the very boundaries that define what art is. Both Penalva and Derrida undermine our preconceived ideas of truth and reality as Deleuze poses that this level of confrontation provokes new thought.

The nature of the undecidable is instability hovering somewhere in between creating "fusion and confusion" (Corbussen, 2004: 1). In the slippage between two values, a previously closed system is opened up to numerous possibilities. This open-ended process questions what we hold to be 'true' and thereby questions reality. Is truth pre-existing, there to be recovered, or is it part of the creative process, to be continually revised and reassessed in the light of change and thought? Derrida's process of undecidability challenges the dialectical investigation of opposites. How wonderful the *pharmakon* is "without being anything in itself", says Derrida (1981a: 127); then poetically suggests: "We will watch it infinitely promise itself and endlessly vanish through concealed doorways that shine like mirrors and open onto a labyrinth" (128), and:

> If it is ambivalent, it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other … The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference (127).

Visual artists engage in a similar critique. They undermine, subvert and play with known values. They create undecidables. They produce a slippage between opposites that can subvert many conceptions of meaning and thought. An irreconcilability, an ambivalence is powerful in its ability to surprise, even to violate our preconceived notions. Deleuze identified the importance of undecidability in film and recognised its value in the visual arts. This discussion shows not only the way in which art can provide this sort of possibility but how undecidability can be its very essence.

"To think is to create - there is no other creation – but to create is first of all to engender 'thinking' in thought" Gilles Deleuze (1994: 147).

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