

R E S E T T I N G S

'The unstable world drifts like an island at the heart of each of us.

Gerald Murnane [1]

In order to describe what went into the process of making *Resettings*, in tracing what Murnane calls '*my networks of meaning*', I'd like to dispense with the notion of intentionality - the notion that a sovereign individual acts upon the world, forges a path through it somehow through an effort of will and conscious decision making [I decide, therefore I am].

I'd like to replace intention with *inclination*, with its connotations of tendency and gradient; inclination which leads to desire, a kind of disinterested non-personal desire. Desire as a kind of Bergsonian force in the world, like gravity. Newton's apple falls to earth because the earth desires the apple and the apple desires the earth; they move together, are inclined towards each other, because the complex system of which they are both a part provides a space for this particular kind of closure. Desire is the *suck* of possibility, produced through an interaction or negotiation between agents and the terrains they simultaneously occupy and construct. My actions in the world are an endless falling, a falling into possibility.

In 2005, I traveled to Nevada to visit Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, one of the seminal Land Art works of the late 60s early 70s.

Double Negative is a hole, and the idea of a hole. It isn't an object, but what remains of an action, a gesture. It doesn't represent the action. It has no content, ironically perhaps since man made holes in the ground are usually containers of some kind - wells, graves, mines, foundations. It doesn't do anything; it's kind of passive, inert, unlike other Land Art pieces such as Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* which evokes the potential for something spectacular to happen as a focus for the work, or Robert Smithson's pictorial, solipsistic, *Spiral Jetty*. It's even distinct from Heizer's own later work, which is object oriented, architectural and genuinely monumental. In *Double Negative*, the figure/ground binary of object based work is turned upside down; the figure is an absence rather than a presence.

Duchamp considered the title to be the most important aspect of a work. The titles *Lightning Field* and *Spiral Jetty* are simply descriptive, but *Double Negative* bleeds out into other contexts, invites a number of readings. Double negatives are often found in vernacular language or poetry, where the usage might be considered somehow subversive, such as '*we don't need no education, we don't need no thought control*'. There is a Double Negation Principle in classical logic [2]. A negative plus a negative equals a positive. Whilst driving through Death Valley on the way to the site, I realised that if you consider the binaries Life/Death, and Mountain/Valley, the name *Death Valley* is also a kind of double negative. Returning through Las Vegas, the capital of mindless excess and spectacle, I spotted a vehicle with the number plate 'NO NO'.

Double Negative can be appreciated as a kind of Fluxus koan that just needs to be written down on a piece of paper with a typewriter, like a Yoko Ono piece - you know, '*interrupted line, desert, dust clearing*.' But to engage with it as an object, or anti-object, or the remains of an event or whatever, kilojoules of muscle power and non-renewable resources must be leveraged. You have to travel to the site, because the work isn't going to come to your local gallery as part of a touring exhibition, it resists the museum as much as it can, as much as any piece of art possibly can. The institutional frame is conspicuously absent. The location isn't signposted. The work is neither hidden away nor overtly on display, yet it must be searched for. The owner of the work, the Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art, supplies arcane directions like '*turn right at the bottom of the mesa at the burnt-out car wreck*'.

When you've successfully negotiated the maze of dirt tracks on top of the mesa and arrived at the site, you're confronted by two obdurate and unspectacular holes in the ground. It's big, yet modest, banal, relatively invisible. It's kind of an anticlimax, but if you've expended that much energy and you're open, you get rewarded. The site's inaccessibility induces a certain level of commitment which can push the experience into a non-usual dimension. It concentrates you, it encourages you to spend time, invest time, devote time.

Double Negative is an emptying-out of the sculptural problem-space of late Modernism. It swept everything off the table with a crash, refusing to do what sculpture up until that point was supposed to do. It's a supremely reductive statement, located in the arid and featureless desert landscape which is the quintessential Modernist symbol of the sublime [embodied in this passage from *Suprematism*, written by Kasimir Malevich at the beginning of the 20th century].

'The ascent to the heights of non-objective art is arduous and painful. . . but it is nevertheless rewarding. The familiar recedes even further and further into the background. The contours of the world recede more and more, and so it goes, step by step, until finally the world - 'everything we loved and by which we have lived' - becomes lost to sight. No more 'likenesses of reality', no idealistic images - nothing but a desert.' [3]

Before I travelled to *Double Negative* it didn't really exist. I'd read about it in books, seen a few photographs from the 70s, and I'd heard people refer to it, so I accepted, I believed, that it existed. It was a tantalising story; a forgotten masterpiece in the desert, a cultural remnant from an engaged and less cynical era, crumbling and decaying and forever resistant to art-world commodification. Somehow geological, like a meteor crater, a vestige of a cataclysmic event. The fact that I could think about it even though I didn't have any direct experience of it was one of its most fascinating aspects. It was a simple and concise idea which generated a story, a story within other stories; the story of Modernism, the story of the Male Artist, the story of the Frontier, the story of the Avant-garde [the story of Progress], the story of the Individual. All of these stories fed into one another like tributaries in the meaning network of *Double Negative*, contributing to a terrain of possibilities - a pattern of inclines, irresistible inclines, that attracted me like the ocean attracts a river.

Maybe most of the things I think about are fragments of texts, things of which I have no direct experience. I've never been to a place where the sun never sets. I take a lot for granted. I don't need to know in order to move, or be moved.

I was captivated by the idea of *Double Negative*. I was touched by it. I wanted to touch it. I thought that maybe I could generate new work from it. But once I was actually standing there, experiencing my desire to use the work, bend it to my own ends, I was confounded.

Double Negative is highly resistant to being redeployed. It's such a pure gesture, so empty, so perfectly resolved and so forgotten. But I tried to capture it. I took its measure. I photographed it. I walked around inside it in the scorching midday sun and in the cooler hours of the early morning and as the day filtered down into dusk. I saw the moonrise, listened to the coyotes etc. I was at the site for three days, absorbing, sweating. I collected rocks. It was 56 degrees centigrade, some of them were so hot from the sun I couldn't pick them up.

Now, these are rocks which have been displaced by Michael Heizer, directly by his hand, via dynamite and bulldozer. You could say that after 37 years, the dust from the event is still settling. I found it interesting that I could take away chunks of a famous work of art and no one was going to stop me. There were no uniformed invigilators telling me not to touch the work. No barriers to protect and preserve it [or me]. So there was a sense of transgression. And I knew I was contributing to the

decay which is a significant element of the work these days. Heizer situated it right at the edge of the mesa, where erosion is most noticeably active. Its edges are softening, falling in, the wind is blowing it away, every raindrop guides another fragment closer to the Virgin River in the valley below. It's averaging out, becoming less and less of a negative as it gets older.

I packed the rocks carefully in bubble wrap and shipped them back to Australia with no idea about what to do with them. Heizer's anti-object position haunted me. Had I just collected them like a stupid souvenir hunter? I've got these beautiful and important rocks in my studio - yeah, so what?

Then in 2006 I was working on a retrospective of Edward Krasinski's work at the Generali Foundation in Vienna [4]. In his later installations Krasinski used a particular blue adhesive tape, stuck in a line around the walls, always at a height of 130cm. It became his signature gesture. He stuck it over his paintings, objects, architectural features; equalising everything, joining everything together. It operates like the Plimsoll line on the hull of a ship, an abstraction that relates the entire diverse contents of the ship to the water level of the ocean. It produces an absolute value. Krasinski used the taped line constructively, as an artist might use a drawn line to enclose and define space on a page. His gesture is additive, infinitely extendable and inclusive.

If you use Google Earth to find *Double Negative* [5], what you see is a line drawn in the desert. It's an interrupted line; one line that becomes two lines, or two lines that become one, depending on your point of view. It looks like mathematical notation, two short horizontal lines on a page.

Why not just a single line, a trench? Obviously for Heizer the notion of connection was important too. *Double Negative* looks like a bridge construction which was abandoned after the foundations had been dug. But there are practical and aesthetic reasons for the design. Heizer had to consider what to do with the thousands of tons of material he was about to displace. He could amortise it by spreading it evenly across the mesa. He could transport it to a place where landfill was needed. He could build a mountain out of it. Each of these strategies requires additional energy and produces a sense of excess, of waste. The most straightforward and concise solution was to have the excavation bridge the edges of the mesa so the material could be simply pushed into space, extending the excavation out into the valley. An act of removal becomes an act of transference, a simple rearrangement of the material. The work empties out into a space within itself. And the outcome is that the work incorporates the void, the edge, the seeds of its own destruction.

When you stand inside one of the cuts, the presence of the other one is always there in your imagination, if not directly in your line of sight. The work isn't a monolith. It embodies a sense of the other, an agitation, a possibility of movement.

Anyway it had been percolating in the back of my mind that I had these rocks and something might be done with them, but what? And then I was de-installing the Krasinski exhibition, walking around the Generali Foundation peeling the blue taped line off the walls 3 months after I'd laboriously stuck it on. At one point I looked down and experienced a shock. I had this bunch of blue in my hand. It had a peculiar shape, determined unintentionally by the parameters of my body. I was making something with my hands in the context of art, but sideways, out of the corner of my mind's eye somehow. And it wasn't only me who'd made it, it was Krasinski - without Krasinski it could never have been made. It was as if there was a direct connection between Krasinski's personality and mine, even though Krasinski had been dead for some time. Thinking about this made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. The line was pulling me into Krasinski's work and Krasinski was being pulled into my work by the line. It was compelling. It was as if the process used by Krasinski was physically resonating out of the work.

When all the tape was off the walls I had a shiny blue object, highly charged and really beautiful; saturated somehow, full. I turned it over and over in my hand - it was an irregular shape, a bit like a rock, a bit like an egg. It occurred to me then that I could wrap the rocks from *Double Negative* in Krasinski's blue tape, and I'd have a work which had emerged from the triangulation of 3 personalities separated by time, geography and ideology, and in which the notion of intention could be buried forever. I could effectively re-inter the rocks, re-mysteriate them in the manner of *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*.

In July this year I unpacked the rocks, and I saw that in San Francisco I'd used narrow blue tape to secure bubble wrap around each rock, anticipating the Heizer/Krasinski tape revelation by about 14 months. I'd completely forgotten about it. And I saw that the rocks I collected were mostly conglomerates, round river pebbles embedded in sandstone, because what is now the Mormon Mesa was at one point the flood plain of the Virgin River. So it's as if the idea of wrapping and embedding, enclosure and disclosure, infuses all of the elements individually, and all I did was exemplify it, objectify it, like uncovering the statue from the block of marble. It's impossible to differentiate cause from effect.

Resettings. At the centre of this work is my assertion that each of these blue tape constructions contains rocks taken from *Double Negative* in Nevada, but how important is the truth of that assertion? In Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, the narrator tells us that the clothes are not real. The readers have the privileged position of being outside the system. But inside the system, in any real world system where people interact, no-one really knows for sure. Belief is a matter of politics and trust and power, negotiation, exchange, consensus. The monocular narrator of Andersen's story may be comforting, but His presence forces the possibility curve of the system to collapse, emptying all the life out of it, calcifying it, reducing it to a feeble moral tale of human weakness and vanity. As Heisenberg noted, in the real world the only systems that exist are those in which human discourse is a determining factor, and there are no independent arbiters.

Derrida's maxim 'There is nothing outside the text' can be read as no *thing* outside the text. Perceptions are given form by the parameters of the system which makes perception possible. Objects and experiences arise within frameworks; stories, systems of meaning. Objects must be embedded in a system of meaning otherwise they can't be understood or comprehended or even perceived. If in fact there are rocks under the blue tape, and not extruded polystyrene, they might come from Nevada, or Mt Ainslie. They might be bits of rubble from the Twin Towers. Whatever, a story is inescapable. An encounter with these objects presumes a story, and produces another story according to the inclinations and attachments of the person doing the encountering.

These rocks suck. They gravitate. I collected them, I wrapped them carefully and shipped them to Australia to be recontextualised. They are invested with my muscle power and imagination, so for me they are highly charged. If it hadn't been for the issues surrounding the rocks - collected like geological or archaeological evidence against the grain of *Double Negative* as an anti-object masterpiece - this work couldn't have come into existence. The rocks opened a niche in problem-space, provided a setting, and an irritant - something for the idea of Krasinski's tape to stick to like mother of pearl sticks to grit in an oyster shell. The dilemma of what to do with them was a hole to stumble around in - they were a focus of my ignorance, my state of not-knowing. But for someone who didn't get their fingers burned in Nevada, it has to be a different story.

Double Negative is conceptual gradient. The creative process entails going down into a hole, into the *hold*, below the Plimsoll line. You empty yourself, make yourself into a hole, and allow stuff to fall into you. After a while things start to coalesce, form clumps. A terrain starts to form. It isn't a product of will; ideas are generated by conceptual viruses,

combining, adhering to each other, forming identities that eventually make themselves felt in consciousness. My body, my experience, produces a kind of psychogeography which favours some connections, some movements, over others. Like a lightning strike in Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, up until the moment of closure which produces an exchange between domains of high and low potential, the exact time and place of contact and the amount of energy involved in the exchange can't be predicted. Up until closure there is always a shifting sea of potentials. At the moment of closure a transition occurs, an idea becomes conscious, dragging a sub-network of conceptual accretions along with it. Once there, it induces a perceptual curve, like the density of a planet inducing the curve in space/time which we experience as gravity. It becomes part of the architecture of experience.

A lightning strike in Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* is a rare occurrence, but when it happens it follows a line of least resistance. The line of least resistance describes the predictable way a crystal will break apart. In his controversial analysis of language formation, G. K. Zipf [6] characterised it as *the principle of least effort*. It's a principle of energy conservation. What appears to be freedom of choice is in fact simply this principle in operation; human action always follows the line of least resistance. Of course as soon as this suggestion is made, people get cranky because they assume it implies that everyone is lazy or unprincipled. And it seems to be counterintuitive - '*humans are not ants, how can climbing Mt Everest be taking the easy path?*' It goes against the popular notion that humans are somehow not subject to the same laws that govern the behaviour of crystals and fluids. But human experience is infinitely more granular and turbulent than a block of calcite. Our worlds are made of infinite convolutions. The line of least resistance is an unpredictable path through material and non-material gradients. It changes from moment to moment, depending on what other people say and do to us, in an environment of what has been said and done.

We can characterise the Museum as the environment in which artworks are both conceived and perceived, a totalised history of actions [bifurcations], ramifications, folds, dichotomies, stories. If it wasn't for the Museum we wouldn't know about Heizer's work in the desert, Heizer's work wouldn't be in the desert if it wasn't for the Museum, Krasinski wouldn't be in the mind of an Australian in Vienna if it wasn't for the Museum. The Museum is the ground against which all the figuration of the artworld is produced. *Resettlings* is a figure against the ground of the Museum. The Museum is a complex system subject to perturbations from within. By trying to blow it up, trying to get out from under its suffocating weight into a rarefied zone where there aren't any categories, the Modernists were producing new categories, new articulations, increasing the complexity of the Museum and its adaptability and power.

I find it comforting to think that, rather than the king of the world, Homo Sapiens is a kind of sophisticated termite. When I look out of the window, I see the trees and the sky and the slopes of Mt Ainslie. But what I'm really looking at are the contours of the infinitely convoluted multi-dimensional wall of the nest. Everywhere I look I see facets and niches in the wall, shelves of one kind and another, and on each shelf there is a conceptual appliance. It's not easy to open up an appliance, but if I do I find other networks of shelves, other appliances - categories, metaphor, patterns of discourse. At the periphery of the network is human skin, the raw data of sensation always already encoded by our sense organs and musculature.

I have the impression there is something other than this nest, but no homo sapiens has a body which can experience it. For us, the sky must be blue.

Beyond the skin there are no categories, no blue; the unknowable virgin river. Its presence can be intuited; everyone has had the experience of momentary category failure which Kant and Burke characterised as the sublime. But we can never be in the virgin river. We can get our toes wet, sail over the top of it in some machine wearing special glasses and report our findings. But we

can never be there. It's the end of being, the end of being human. To be embodied is to be impure, open to dissonance and infection, in a state of constant agitation. People are like routers, with information moving us from gradient to gradient. We only come into focus, experience the feedback we know as selfhood, around our connections to each other, where the code pours through.

Whilst preparing the work for this exhibition, I was reading an anthology of short fiction by Peter Carey. In a story called *The Last Days of a Famous Mime* I was touched by the following lines:

'The mime arrived on Alitalia with very little luggage: a brown paper parcel and what looked like a woman's handbag. Asked the contents of the brown paper parcel he said: 'String'. Asked what the string was for he replied: 'Tying up bigger parcels'. . . 'The string', he explained, 'is a prayer that I am always praying.'
Reluctantly he untied his parcel and showed them the string. It was blue. . .' [7]

Chris Fortescue. September 2007.

1. Murnane, Gerald. *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs*. Artarmon NSW: Giramondo Publishing Company. 2005.
2. For any proposition P, P logically implies not-not-P, and not-not-P logically implies P.
3. Quoted in Lumpkin, Libby. *New Mexico*. In *Sticky Sublime*. Beckley, Bill [ed]. NY: Allworth Press: School of Visual Arts. c2001.
4. Edward Krasinski: *Les mises en scene*. Curated by Sabine Breitwieser. Generali Foundation, Vienna. 12/5/2006 - 27/8/2006.
5. 36 36 55.39 N 114 20 17.28 W elevation 400m
6. Zipf, George Kingsley. *Human Behaviour & the Principle of Least Effort*. NY: Hafner Publishing Company, Inc. 1949.
7. Carey, Peter. *Exotic Pleasures*. London: Pan, Picador Edition. 1981 c1979.