

Video Installation, Memory and Storytelling: the viewer as narrator

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Abstract: Much has been written about memory and its link with the visual where memory is likened to our recollection of vignettes or visual traces. Conway (1999) tells us that the brain takes in experience as word and image. Gibson (2002) suggests that “imagistic cognition” is a process whereby we run image sequences through our heads while trying to make sense of experience. He links this psychological phenomenon with notions of film editing theory and practice. He goes on to suggest that the power of the cinema is linked to this primal experience of remembering that elicits the intense pleasures of childhood and access to a means of navigating the self. This paper will explore the role video installation can play in creating an open, enticing, non-threatening and immersive environment, where viewers can transcend the everyday, reflect on their own memories and recall their personal stories. I will argue that there is a symbiotic link between what I will call the viewer as flâneur and the producer of the work such that a new form of storytelling can be created through this relationship.

Résumé: Il existe une littérature abondante sur les liens entre la mémoire et l'image, notamment en ce qui concerne le traitement de traces visuelles par les fonctions mémorielles. Conway (1999) insiste quant à lui sur le fait que le cerveau assimile l'expérience à la fois sous forme de mots et d'images. Gibson (2002) quant à lui souligne que la "cognition visuelle" est un processus qui nous fait défiler des séquences d'images dans notre esprit au moment où nous tentons de donner une signification à ce que nous vivons. Il rattache ce phénomène psychologique à certains aspects théoriques et pratiques du montage cinématographique, jusqu'à suggérer que le pouvoir du cinéma est lié à nos expériences mémorielles les plus profondes, en rapport avec les plaisirs les plus forts de l'enfance et avec la possibilité d'explorer sa propre identité. Cet article analyse le rôle que les installations vidéo peuvent jouer dans la création d'un contexte ouvert, attrayant, non-menaçant et immersif où les spectateurs peuvent dépasser le quotidien, réfléchir sur leurs propres souvenirs et se rappeler leurs propres histoires personnelles. Selon moi, il existe un lien symbiotique entre le

spectateur comme flâneur et le producteur de l'œuvre, qui rend possible une nouvelle façon de raconter une histoire à travers de nouveaux types de rapports.

Key Words: Flaneur, Actor – Network Theory, Video Installation, Remembering, Viewer, Storyteller

In many video installations, meaning-giving is contingent upon the viewer's self-directed wandering, where a new mode of spectatorship is created that can effect a profound transformation. I want to also argue that this viewer autonomy and mobility transcends cinematic passivity and immobility. When the artist is concerned with narrative on a very personal micro-level, the sharing of an intimate memory in a non-linear way can act as a deep trigger for audience-directed remembering and storytelling... Here, the work of art is the catalyst rather than the focus of the viewing experience.

The artist and the artistic work

Frequently there is an assumption that the artist is in control of the artistic work and that it is imperative for success that the viewer must engage with it in the way dictated by the artist. The relationship between the artist and the artistic work can be seen as an inter-connected network. Equally, both the artist and the work could be seen as “actors” in that network, interdependent through their interaction. However, in such a network there are also other actors at work – for example, the viewer and the place or space of viewing. It is worth emphasising here that actors in a network can be animate or inanimate. Actors and network define each other, and thus all of these actors must be in place and must interact in a particular way if the network is to function successfully (Usher:2006): Thus actors are defined in particular ways, for example, the viewer could be passive, and as we shall see, this is often the way viewers are configured. But equally they can be active and I shall say more about this when I discuss the flaneur later. I would argue that dominantly a network of artist/art work/viewer/space has been weighted heavily in favour of the artist, the work and the space of showing. Whilst viewers are always necessary for the network to function, their place has not always been commensurate with the other actors. Their position in the network has very often been a passive one in the sense that they have not occupied a position equally powerful in determining the work or its meaning. This is a network where the viewer enters the world created by the other actors in the network rather than playing a significant part in creating that world.

I would contend therefore that the balance in a network of this type needs to be altered in favour of the viewer so that all the actors interact on an equal footing. Such a network would then function to empower viewers where they can create their own stories. Rather than being meaning- takers, they become meaning- givers.

Video installation

The advent of new media, including experimental film has provided an opportunity for audiences to experience film in a more interactive way. Structural film explores the idea of film beyond the constraints of narrative construction of time, place, character and response, indeed the very reading of conventional film language. (Oprey: 003). These new film-making media explore the relationship of the viewer to the screen and have at their core a reflexive intent to alter the traditionally disempowering gaze and inherent voyeurism in traditional narrative cinema. Video installations explore concepts of real time, the framed image, the functionality of the tools of cinema where the audience, the object and the artist co-exist in the same specific space. Artists like Peter Campus (*Interface*, 1972) consciously explore the intention of the experience, the presence of the self and the relationship of the viewer to the object. Traditionally synonymous with a single screen and a captive, immobile and frontally positioned spectator, the cinematographic spectacle now undergoes a strange fate as myriad screens and the duration of the spectator's physical itinerary determine the duration of a narrative, the time of a fiction.

Often participants become part of the work itself. Many installations intentionally subvert linearity and conventional narrative structure and not all are meant to be seen in their entirety. There can be a plethora of styles. Some are mainly concerned with the relationship between the viewer and the viewed; others are more focused on the tacit and physical elements of video and film production and editing techniques. Some necessitate the viewer watching a constructed piece in its entirety, sitting down in a darkened space where narrative construct is played with but where the viewer is as passive as in traditional cinema. This is evidenced in a work such as Bill Viola's "The Raft". In others, viewers physically interact with the image. There are yet others utilizing multiple screen displays and split screen where the viewer's visceral experience is part of the artist's intention for the work. Some installations are stand-alone gallery pieces while others form part of a mixed art show, yet others being screened in site-specific spaces. Each of these variables present affects the experience of the viewer and

the impact of the work on them. What is emphasised as important therefore is the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Films are now more frequently screened in alternative spaces to the conventional movie house, for example in gallery spaces. Traditional cinema art with its established language has been transmuted into an artistic work with an alternate language. The viewer in turn is now placed in a position to redefine film in terms of this new space.

Film, video, computers and DVDs have become integral components of any gallery. Increasingly the viewer “experiences the space as a phenomenological gesture in which the experience is mediated through the body and its experience of place”. (Harris: 2005) What has become paramount is the setting and independence of the viewer. Dominique Païni has written widely about this audience behaviour in relation to video installation, in particular he argues that the meaning of many video installations is subject to the viewer's self-direction:

Some of these installations effect a profound transformation creating a new kind of spectator who, in fact, harks back to a forgotten but enduring heritage, bringing back the window-display effect that was given architectural and scenographic form by the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth-century (Paini:2000: 41).

This is important as the roaming of the viewer often determines the construction of the video installation. Viewers observe a work for the duration of their choosing before "moving on" to something else.

The viewer

At this point, I want to consider the important role of the viewer in this relationship- why does the viewer go to a video installation exhibition, what do they want to see and experience? I would like to make an analogy between the viewer and the flaneur. The literal meaning of flaneur is someone who engages in aimless, pleasurable wandering (Benjamin: 2002) and is term that has accumulated significance as a way of understanding urban phenomena in modernity and has been defined and redefined by many scholars.

Typically, a flaneur is described as a spectator rather than a participant who can walk into and out of a space at a time of their choosing, in this way manifesting the connexion between the

outer world and inner consciousness. A flaneur brings into being a personal reading of a space, at once alienated, detached yet observant, casual, yet with a purposeful gaze. For Benjamin's Baudelaire, the flaneur was an anonymous and idle figure, an observer of city life. Further, Nedra Reynolds (2001) defines the flaneur as someone who strolls through urban spaces, observing, collecting and cataloguing. Here, the flaneur is imbued with an active role where the act of observation can be directly related to storytelling. My definition of a flaneur, then, is a wanderer who yet has the intention of wanting to be part of a particular place rather than being simply aimless. While these experiences may be random in the sense of being undirected they nonetheless do have intent. My flaneur wants to "read" a place, become part of it and create their own story.

A viewer at a video installation exhibition can be understood similarly. The definition of the viewer is indeed fluid. There is the conventionally understood perception of the viewer as a passive observer of the work, admiring, seeking entertainment or endeavouring to understand what the artist means by the work. Then there is the viewer as participant where this passivity is charged with engagement, interpretation and response to the work in terms of what meaning it has for them and where it intersects with their lives. The viewer becomes transformed to viewer as meaning-giver rather than simply meaning-taker. Some will want to visit an exhibition because they have read about a particular artist and want to see what it's all about. Others will go to see what's on display but without having a particular work they want to see. For example, in a gallery such as the ACMI Screen Hub in Melbourne, Australia, which is a public dedicated video installation space, many of the visitors to this space may be viewing a video installation for the first time and may feel somewhat ambivalent as to how to read or navigate through the works. Many wander in and tentatively move through the darkened space from exhibit to exhibit pulling back the curtain of dark enclosed spaces. Sometimes I have observed that they appear to be somewhat overwhelmed by the "artiness" of the experience, like entering the world of a refined other where they do not really belong. Some viewers go to experience or look at a particular work and there is of course the difference between the "educated" viewer and the uninitiated audience. Some will spend a day gallery hopping feeling somewhat tentative as to what is an appropriate response but nevertheless picking up a particular experience that may linger long after. Others feel lost as if such work is outside their understanding and unfamiliar like in relation to traditional film-going with which they are familiar.

However, as with the flaneur, the viewer does not come as an empty vessel to the artistic experience. As Deleuze (1986) tells us, the very act of watching a moving image creates independent thought. This experience can take place just through the act of coming into contact with the work. Here the work generates thinking but does not formulate or shape it.

Abigail Housen (1999) suggests that viewers of art use their senses, memories, and personal associations when viewing a work and they make concrete observations about the art and become part of its narrative. They establish their own framework for looking at the art based on what they know about themselves and the world. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the work intricately combining the personal and the universal. I would argue therefore that when the viewer adopts the role of flaneur, they become empowered in the viewer and viewed relationship and a more equal balance, a better functioning network, is created between the work, the artist and the viewer.

It is because moving images can mimic so precisely the way we remember that -“the cinematic arts have always been powerful catalysts to consciousness and desire, confronting us with our presumptions and granting us vivid insight into our hopes and fears” (Gibson, 2002, 7). He suggests that there is clearly a symbiotic link between memories and the visual and I would argue that video installation can provide the ideal vehicle for such interaction. As Lyotard (1979) argues there are ‘potential stories’, where small parts of a story are told and the interpreter then pieces together the information to create the whole story. Indeed the excitement of video installation is that it can provide much more than one potential story which predicates a set outcome, but rather offers the possibility for infinite stories. It allows the audience the freedom to pick and choose what to watch and listen to so that they can make meanings that are relevant to them, similar to the way Gibson (2002: 7) describes the experience as--

...the ‘chancey’ manner in which viewers move through the open range of the Screen Gallery, partly according to their own free will, partly in response to the prompts of personal memories and partly because of particular opportunities offered by the physical layout of the gallery.

The viewers’ very presence in the space viewing the work provides the environment for viewer-lead interaction and storytelling. The viewer is and can be an equal partner in the network of artist/ work/ space and viewer.



Fig 1 The Drowning, *“Rose Stories Revisioning Memories”*, Diane Charleson 92006)

Reflecting on my practice

I would like to go on to discuss this proposition in light of my own work -- *“Roses Stories -- Revisioning Memories”* (2006) --a four screen video installation and a two screen installation entitled *“Dancing with Mrs Dale”* (2008). *“Roses’ Stories”* was based on my own memories of the stories that my grandmother had told me as a child. Each screen represented these stories and memories in a different form. One screen featured an actor telling the stories, which was looped and continuous, another screen showed interviews with her children sharing their memories of her, this also being continuous and looped. A further screen showed a series of Super 8 films recreating these memories shot as home videos and the final screen was a digital computer based photo album with images of my grandmother and others. The exhibition was held in a vault like basement gallery with interconnecting rooms. Each screen was large and imposing and was placed in situ with furniture representative of the period .The story screen was placed behind a laminate table and chairs, the interviews in an old lounge room and the super 8 films emanated from an old projector sitting on a sideboard.

The whole atmosphere was imbued with nostalgia and a sense of immersion in somebody else's past. Viewers could move from screen to screen in any order, could view just one screen or any combination of the above. My aim was to share a very intimate personal moment with an audience in order to trigger and elicit personal storytelling. I placed a journal in the gallery and viewers were encouraged to write their own stories in it. I was particularly fortunate to be able to sit in the exhibition for two weeks so I could observe the viewers and indeed interact with them after the viewing experience.



Fig 2. The Crossing, “*Roses’ Stories: Revisioning Memories*”, Diane Charleson (2006)

There was a wide selection of viewers, some being random blow-ins who took a quick look and left and others who lingered for a long time soaking up the atmosphere. Some viewers returned to the exhibition many times. One Polish woman, for example, visited four times for lengthy visits each time. She said she had been haunted by the experience and that it had triggered stories of her parent's experiences in the Holocaust. Many people wrote in the journal and many spoke to me at the gallery for lengthy periods telling me intimate family stories.

I believe that this engagement was possible and so successful because it had been my intent with the work to create an environment that would elicit stories from the viewers. The subjective and very personal nature of the work created an intimacy allowing the viewer to feel empowered. It was this experience they commented on rather than individual aspects of

the work. Thus the artist, the work and the space, all were interconnected and in harmony with the viewer. By opening up my private and personal memories and family stories to others, I offered to the viewer a point of comparison between their life experiences and mine and in so doing I provided a means of self identification for them. I would argue that it is the depth of honesty with the self and the ability to place this within a more universal context, offering challenges for reconstruction that provides the most telling outcomes. (White: 2004). Indeed the more subjective the more universal point, as the individual is never totally isolated. (Mansfield: 2000). People make sense of their experiences, claim identities and interact with each other and participate in cultural conversations through storytelling. Storytelling is reversible in that an audience can take his or her consciousness of the storytelling experience and in turn become a storyteller in their own right, making it an experience for another audience.



Fig 3 *Dancing with Mrs Dale*, Diane Charleson (2008)

In “*Dancing with Mrs Dale*”, I explored the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. I invited the viewer to bear witness to a most intimate moment. Home movies that had long been forgotten were resurrected and viewed for the first time. They provided the viewer with a haunting and random selection of memories that allowed for multiple readings and narratives .They signified rites of passage and random narratives of family life. The viewer was invited to stand in a small galley between two large projected moving images. One showed an extreme close up of a middle aged woman viewing her recently found home movies. As she watches the movies her life unfolds before her eyes and she cries. She cries

with regret for what is; the death of her brother, the failure of her marriage, and what could have been. The opposite screen showed these super 8 home movies play as a continuous loop.



Fig. 4. *Dancing with Mrs Dale*, Diane Charleson (2008)

The video installation artist Peter Forgac suggests that when home movie makers made these films they had a plan that he calls a “spontaneous subconscious diary devoted to eternity.” (Gibson,14) Super 8 is the medium of joy and happy memories, of nostalgia and archive and thus becomes synonymous with memory,

The saturated colours seep into one another, the films graininess quivering and accumulating like dust ion every frame. Movement shifts and changes speed, and details of light, colour and texture, like memory itself are fleeting and ill defined. (Crimmings: 2002, 8.)

The role of the family camera was to capture important family moments that would become visuals of our memory. These images were usually being captured through the eye of the father of the family and were often inexpertly recorded. The ensuing style often wandered aimlessly or cut off at a crucial moment in the proceedings. They evidenced the inevitable flicker of the frames going individually past the projector lantern at 24 frames per second, each frame a still photographic memory. The visibility of dust on the lens, the cracks in the projector screen and the difficulty in focusing the projector, all these added to the graininess

and subliminal quality of the images. In *Dancing with Mrs. Dale*, the viewer is confronted by ,“a silent, screen of flickering suggestions of nostalgia and memory...endless cycles of movements and gestures remembered and replayed are stacked upon one another quietly dappling the darkened space with private Super 8 histories.” (Crimmings: 2002, 37)



Fig 5. *Dancing with Mrs Dale*, Diane Charleson, (2008)

“*Dancing with Mrs Dale*” created a triangular relationship between the viewer and the viewed. On the opening night this relationship was further enhanced by the presence of the featured woman standing in the gallery space viewing herself and viewing others watching her and her life. The open ended nature of the screening of the home movies made them accessible for the viewer and provided triggers for multiple story telling; their own memories and stories, and construction of narratives about the life of the woman whose films they were viewing. This was further enhanced by the size of the images, the intimacy of the gallery and the placement of the viewer in relation to the images. Many visitors to this exhibition talked to me of their reactions to the sharing of such intimacy and of their own personal stories and memories.

So the viewer, work and location created the environment for an immersion that allowed for optimum remembering and storytelling – a balanced and functioning actor-network had been created.

Conclusions

In my work, it was my aim to present an open-ended opportunity for audience participation. I wanted to encourage further storytelling and to provide the images and the environment that would enable the viewer to construct their own meanings rather than to have meanings imposed. I would argue that this relationship between video installation, work of art, environment and the viewer provides an ideal catalyst for memory-work and remembering and is particularly effective when it is the audience's story creation that is the primary focus of the work, that is the viewer and what they may do with the work. The focus then is on the viewer transformed first as creators of memories, and then into narrators of the meaning of those memories in the form of storytelling. This storytelling can then have a life outside of the gallery space in the form of told stories, shared memories and story creation by the viewer. It can provide an intimate, womb like environment imbued with images of memories that can act as triggers for viewer-directed storytelling.

Thus when the relationship between the viewer, artist, work and space is equally balanced, a video installation can provide the optimum alternative narrative experience. I argued earlier that the balance in a video installation network needs to be altered in favour of the viewer so that all the actors can interact on a much more equal footing. When viewers are able to adopt the position of flaneur they are enabled to engage in memory-work and to create their own stories. Additionally, the place or location of the viewing is important. If it is one which does not intimidate the viewer, it too becomes a significant actor. Such a network then will be harmoniously interconnected and will empower rather than disempower viewers. By becoming storytellers they become meaning-givers meaning giver to themselves, to the author and to the community at large.

In the contemporary situation it is the case that viewers have become increasingly familiar with being able to control their own viewing experiences through devices such as video-games, remote controls and video online. I believe that video installation art can be designed by the artist with the viewer response as the main aim of the work. Certainly, one would still require the work to have the power or impact to engage and stimulate the viewer but rather

than trying to guess what the artist means by the work, the viewer is given the means to appropriate meaning and become a storyteller in their own right.

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