

Charles Robb
Catacoustics II

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Under three notes

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1. Representing notions of the self is an ongoing concern for the Brisbane-based artist Charles Robb. Whether it be in the mode of the portrait, bust or monument; bound up in the activities of the studio and art's presentation—the self is performed and then re-performed. In past projects fraught visages and troubled masculinities have been used as a critical device to explore spatial and social hierarchies. In *Catacoustics*, this impetus is found in the reflexive account of the artist's role in the studio and amongst the mechanisms that produce, frame and present art practice.

In “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated,” the artist Robert Morris writes on Morse Peckham's position regarding the place of sociability (or what he terms behaviour) within art practices. He notes that writers like Peckham divide art into two categories. The first involves the “artist's role playing” and the second the “general semiotic function of art.” Role-playing in this instance can be understood as both the artist's process and the

broader social framework that constructs these identifications. So this might mean the mode of making in the studio and how this work is valued, named and understood by others. What's interesting about Morris's use of the term role-play from this historical vantage point is not only an expansion of what constitutes the art object but also the signposting of the performative that the term role-play connotes. For Morris, the focus on art's process was not only a record of "mutable stuff which need not arrive at the point of being finalised" but of the forms of conscious or unconscious "behaviour aimed at testing the limits and possibilities involved in that particular interaction between one's actions and the materials of the environment." What Morris describes as the "systemless collection" of modes of making, biography and interpretation can be figured in an artwork like *Aluminium, Asphalt, Clay, Copper, Felt, Glass, Lead Nickel, Rubber, Stainless, Thread, Zinc* (1969). Lucy Lippard, describes it as a process driven work that "underwent drastic changes during the show, but the results were less important to the artist than the fact of changes and his three-week commitment to continue the changes." Morris's paradigmatic scatter work made an audience aware of the art-work's making and that this making was part of the artist's labour and therefore their everyday life. This did not necessarily result in audiences participating in socially engaged practices as we know them today or the 'experience' as it was otherwise known in the late 1960s. The social is framed by the artist's subject-hood and actions representing and performing what Lippard would pertinently describe as art's "submerged iceberg."

Lucy Lippard. *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972 ...* Edited by Lucy Lippard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, 1997.

Robert Morris. "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated." In *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, by Robert Morris, 71-94. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993.

2. Robb's Catacoustics project is made up of an arrangement of objects, materials and situations. Multiple decisions, discourses and encounters are grounded in site contexts ranging from the artist's studio, the gallery, Bribie Island's Ian Fairweather memorial rock, to geographies associated with mining and the petro-chemical industries, reflected in the materials used to make the artwork. The project figures a space that spans geological time to the here and now of the audience experience. There is a complex dynamic in the work that can be read and felt using frames of knowledge and language from an array of disciplines. But underpinning this is how power and meaning is distributed within the field of sculpture. There are certainly forces enacted within the materials that aren't visible but a more pertinent enquiry would determine the difference between a casting sprue, furniture, a maquette, a doorstep, a trophy, a plaque, a platform, a tarp and a pedestal. How do dominant paradigms privilege one object, labour and/or process over another? How does the horizontal axis affect the reading of the clamped-together, cast surface of a boulder that memorialises the absent figure of the reclusive and romantic artist?

Bruno Latour suggests in *Reassembling the Social* that sociology should be seen as involving a "tracing of associations" that can open interrogative research to "heterogenous elements [that] might be assembled anew." Tracing or what John Law terms the "ruthless application of semiotics", has been elaborated as actor-network theory, which traces associations among people and 'things'. These actors are etymologically derived from an assembly of matter, a concern or an inanimate object. At the forefront of Latour and Law's writing is not a necessarily a coda for how to make cultural production but a way of reading and articulating the complexity embedded in things that constitute culture, rather than considering it as unfathomable or beyond reach. The big picture is considered an aggregate of "devices, inscriptions, forms and formulae, in a very local, very practical [and] very tiny locus." There is obvious value in mapping the complex relationships between objects, materials and social contexts. This perspective resists reductive measures that can easily serve dominant paradigms. Whether these entities are on a level playing field is doubt-

ful. How do we determine the politics of this dynamic? Where is the subject in all of this? If a “ruthless application of semiotics” is actually applied, this cannot be an innocuous process of describing complexity for complexity’s sake but an interrogative mode of interdisciplinarity.

Bruno Latour. “Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: or How to Make Things Public.” In *Making Things Public, Atmospheres of Democracy*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 2005. Cambridge, Mass: MIT.

John Law. “After ANT: complexity, naming and topology.” In *Actor Network Theory and After*, edited by John Law and John Hassard. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/The Sociological Review, 1999.

3. The science of catacoustics is the study of reflected sound—an echo. The project brackets the memorialisation of Fairweather’s practice in the midst of repeated forms and images that reverberate different stages of production. Any one of the late artist’s paintings is a moment of stasis in the gestural act of the drawn line continually reiterated. Fairweather would almost exhaust the painting’s support under the weight of a technical process that would last for months and sometimes years. Often in works like *Last Supper* (1958) and *Epiphany* (1962), Fairweather replayed narratives that art has historically used as a vehicle for experimental modes of production. The content of the work now arguably found in the style and process of mark-making that Fairweather used to repeat and synthesise different ethnic traditions embedded in artworks’ abstracted form.

What does it mean to repeat something and to what end? To begin to answer these questions we might like to think about Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration. Giddens notes: “every act which contributes to the reproduction of a structure is also an act of construction, a novel enterprise between structures and agents of the critique of cultural production, enterprise, and as such may initiate change by altering that structure at the same time as it reproduces.” This repetition has a critical agency that doesn’t rely so much on negation but on generating a structure

anew—it is looking in two directions at the same time. From a practical and material perspective within the field of art, repetition positions the unique and the singular as a type of impossibility. The notion of the original now understood as a script that Hillel Schwartz describes as underwriting at the same time as it is “underwritten by the materiality which [it] claims to bring to mind.” What can also be gleaned from the mode of rewriting is the system that is employed to replicate. And how this perpetuation of a script is indexed to the representational association to its subject; the photograph and the cast object pivoting, stretching and shifting across time and space.

Anthony Giddens. “Living in a Post-Traditional Society.” In *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, 56-109. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

Hillel Schwartz. *The Culture of the Copy: striking likenesses, unreasonable facsimiles*. New York: Zone Books, 1996.

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