

The Survival of the Author

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In spite of Michel Foucault's questioning of the functioning of the author and Roland Barthes's declaring the death of the author in the early 1970s, the author has remained alive and well in art history. Art monographs, ranging from the hagiographic to the scholarly, remain the largest genre of art publishing. The value of art works is still largely dependent on the name of the artist. Newly discovered works by named artists are sought after by auction houses and dealers.

This paper will look at some of the instances of, some of the reasons for, and some of the implications of, the survival of the author. It will deal mainly with art history and the author as artist but much of the material could be transposed to other disciplines.

At the end of the 1960s Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and others described the lessening importance of the author's voice in the understanding of a text. These writings were lumped together, as is well known, under Barthes's rather dramatic proposition of the death of the author.

We do not have to look any further than the daily newspaper, though, to be reminded almost constantly that the author has not died. The recent controversies about Brett Whiteley, Helen Darville/Demidenko and Helen Garner stem from the importance of the concept of the author. Whiteley's work is valued and analysed according to his personality and life (just one recent headline read, 'Buying a piece of Brett').¹ Helen Darville was championed when it was thought that her life explained her work, but censured when it was discovered that it did not. Jenna Mead has accused Helen Garner of displacing in *The First Stone* an 'analysis of events and their consequences ... in favour of [her] own fantasies,... [and] accounts of her dreams',² amongst other things, of the falsity of the author putting herself into a supposedly non-fictive work.

In a 1976 article, 'The Death of the Artist as Hero', Bernard Smith identified three occasions in the history of Western society during which the artist hero flourished, and associate each of these with a major shift in the mode of production.³ The first instance, according to Smith, was the birth of technology (in ancient Greece), where charismatic innovators were seen as being aided by divine support. The second was at the separation of the fine arts from the

crafts and trades in the Renaissance. The artist hero was epitomised by Michelangelo, described by Vasari: 'He was sent into the world by God to artists to learn from his life, his character and his works what a true artist should be'. In separating from craftsmen, artists came to think of art not as an economic activity but as a calling. The third occasion of the prominence of the artist as hero identified by Smith is the political and industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century, when art came to be viewed not as an exceptional kind of work but as an exceptional kind of play. Increasingly estranged from technology, artists' work took on an 'increasingly fictive, ideological form',⁴ embodying a memory of freedom in the productive process, but purchased, ironically, by captains of industry. Smith pictures the artist pitifully pleading his 'other worldliness all the way to the bank'.⁵

Without going into the history of art writing, suffice it to say that the art monograph, on the life and work of the artist hero, became and still is the most popular form of art book. Despite the criticism of art historians such as Griselda Pollock,⁶ who has written extensively on the insidiousness of the way an artist's work and life explain each other in monographs, and on the way the concept of the artist/hero/genius (promoted in monographs) excludes all others than the Western, white male, the monograph and with it the idea of the artist/author persists. Partly, we could assume, because, as Barthes observed, knowing the author/artist supposedly gives easy access to the text/work: 'When the Author has been found, the text is "explained"'.⁷

So did Barthes and Foucault get the death of the author wrong? Or have we got them wrong? How would we assess their work today? What relevance does this have for present day art history, art writing and art practice?

Terry Eagleton has suggested that theory 'tends to break out with peculiar virulence when we are no longer sure what we are doing'.⁸ He sees the late 1960s as such a time, claiming that liberal humanism was on the one hand a plausible, productive ideology for that society but on the other hand, as 'the notion of an autonomous, unified, self generative subject [was] shattered by both post modernism and monopoly capitalism', it became implausible. Liberal humanism failed to answer enough aspects of lived experience. But although Barthes and Foucault sought to undermine it, liberal humanism is still, Eagleton suggests, 'the dominant ratifying ideology of cultural studies'. The need to retain the artist/author/hero, the exemplar of individuality, remains ingrained.

While, when placed in the context of the rest of Barthes's work, 'The Death of the Author' can be interpreted as radical and has been seen perhaps even as prescriptive—the author must be killed—it is, however, basically a descriptive text. As Griselda Pollock points out, the essay was about a system of relations and writing associated with the classic realist novel.⁹ Barthes describes a breakdown in the authority of the author's voice initiated by writers such as Proust and Mallarmé themselves, rather than by critics or theorists. As Barthes noted, 'the new criticism has often done no more than consolidate [the sway of the author]'.¹⁰

Having observed the trend of authors to write themselves out of their texts, Barthes then looked at the implications of this—that the removal of the author transforms the modern text in several ways.¹¹

First, time is disrupted. Instead of the author preceding the text the author is created by, and at the same moment as, the text. Every text and every author exists in an eternal present. Second, no writing is expressive or original. The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior. Third, without an author it is futile to claim to decipher a text. Fourth, the death of the author does not imply the death of the critic. Although nothing can be deciphered or pierced, it can be disentangled. Meaning is ceaselessly posited and ceaselessly evaporated. Fifth, the reader, previously ignored, is created as the 'someone' who holds together all the traces by which the written text is constituted.

Has Barthes's perception of the death of the author been realised in art history today?

In her introspective study of her own writing on Van Gogh, Griselda Pollock contends that while there have been changes in art historical writing since Barthes's essay these have largely been to no avail in decentering the author/artist. For example, the enhancing of the idea of Van Gogh the maddened eccentric with solid art historical research has moved Van Gogh into the company of the explicably great artists and accelerated rather than restrained prices for his work.¹² Pollock describes visual art as still having an economy of authority. And it is this economy of authority and the art historical monograph that constantly fuel and refuel each other.

Josué Harari claims that Foucault's questioning, 'What is an author?', was an examination of the way power is exercised concretely in a particular discourse.¹³ The author, a theoretical source of knowledge, is also a source of power. The name of the author serves

to characterise the existence and operation of certain discourses within a society.¹⁴

Foucault, however, also questions the construction of the death of the author, saying that this new emphasis on the writing merely replaces the notion of the author with that of a transcendental anonymity. Foucault proposes that the development of the analysis of the author-function could usefully lead to the examination of the modes of existence of a discourse—where it comes from, how it is circulated, and so on.

Griselda Pollock sees Foucault's work as more useful than that of Barthes in contemporary art history, and extends Foucault's contention that we should re-examine the empty space left by the author's disappearance,¹⁵ we should 'face up to that space—the author as part of the way discourses work'.¹⁶ In her article, 'Agency and the Avant-garde', Pollock analyses all possible methods of dealing with her own writing about the artist/author, Van Gogh, in the light of Barthes's and Foucault's work, and concludes that she will have to represent the name 'Van Gogh' as a series of manoeuvres which encountered and intersected with the formations of the Dutch and Parisian avant-garde in an oblique fashion.¹⁷ Her last sentence reads, 'The book is then about the transitions of early European modernism in the 1880s grasped through the discontinuities, disruptions and failures which are what I shall produce as "Van Gogh"'.¹⁸

I would like to look at several contemporary issues related to the work of Barthes and Foucault. The first is the status of the art historian.

Pollock's last phrase in the quotation above, and indeed the last phrase of her article, '... I shall produce as "Van Gogh"', highlights what is often overlooked in art history writing—that art history is involved with not one author but two—the artist and the art historian.

It has, of course, been one of the ironies of contemporary theory, often pointed out by its detractors, that all voices/authors disappear except the authoritative voice of the theory writer, that all meaning disappears except the meaning of the theoretical text concerning the loss of meaning—the joke about the post structuralist complaining in an argument about the importance of the transitoriness of meaning, 'but you don't understand what I mean'.

While we have become conscious in art history writing of the role of the artist/hero, by trying first to think of the artist as merely a producer, and then of the artist's name as simply a function of discourse, what of the function of art historians or historians or critics in general? How are our voices/names used to give authority

to texts, to affect the discourse in which our texts circulate? Does the fact that in many cases we are now consciously trying to affect the discourse in which the artist's name circulates mean that our own voice has become more authoritative and manipulative?

I would like to compare two pieces of writing, one by Drusilla Modjeska and the other by Mary Eagle. Modjeska is a writer rather than an art historian, but has written on art and artists and is presently preparing a book on Australian women modernist artists analysing their work largely through their own writing, mainly letters. Modjeska believes that the points at which an artist's biography and work connect are extremely important and she is focussing her work on artists such as Grace Cossington Smith, Grace Crowley and Stella Bowen, who have left reasonably large bodies of letters and, in Stella Bowen's case, an autobiography.

I am using short passages of writing from Eagle and Modjeska to comment on the authorial voice. The two passages come from articles in a recent catalogue on Ian Fairweather. I choose Eagle to represent the voice of the art historian mainly because I think she has one of the most intuitive and insightful approaches to looking at and analysing art of present day art history writers, and therefore one could perhaps expect from her a fairly strong authorial voice. On the other hand, Modjeska wants to use the artist's own biography to explain the work and we should therefore perhaps expect that her own authorial voice would be relatively quiet.

In this passage by Eagle the writer freely uses the first person singular pronoun, and speaks of her own personal reactions to the paintings:

The idea of form is the most entrenched of all aesthetic preconceptions. The artist labours towards a conclusion and those who view the work expect to find it complete in its own terms—but a painting by Fairweather is as roving as his life. In *Monsoon, Monastery, Shalimar* and *House by the sea* all is passage, flux, overwriting. Most of what is visible on the surface comes to the eye as merely a trace of what was there before. Once we begin to see a sequence of many layers of paint, the uppermost seems provisional, merely this layer we are looking at. Or rather, looking through. I am conscious of looking in. Fairweather's paintings tend not to face the viewer. Looking in, I see that the painting also looks inward, each layer responding to the one before it. What I witness is interrupted conversation. This dialogue does not include me, the viewer, and hardly seems to spring from the artist.¹⁹

In comparison, the passage by Modjeska:

This exhibition, with its emphasis on the late work, does not show the toil and struggle that were the base ground of Fairweather's art. It avoids the swampy, compulsive repetition, dark and musing, that spawned the great works. Yet mother and child are Fairweather's single most common motif. Children with their lips glued to the lips of the mother; babies held by the breast, sated by the breast; babies threatened by the breast, undone by the breast. In a 1950 gouache with its innocently domestic title, *Tea Cosy*, a child with those familiar, tenderly lifted buttocks, leans into the grasp of a huge smothering mother. A sort of obstinate repetition that has its most extreme manifestation in *Hell* 1950. There the neurosis is stark. A dark devilish hominoid creature, a warped and deformed man, trapped in dependence and weakness, for all the world as if he were a child, is taunted by a crowd of threatening mothers. In these pre-raft works the women simply are; it is the boy-child, man-child who must struggle to become.²⁰

I contend that while Modjeska does not overtly write herself into the analysis of Fairweather's work as does Eagle, paradoxically her voice appears much stronger. Modjeska the author/writer claims equal billing with Fairweather the author/artist.

It appears that Eagle has slipped into the position claimed for the art historian by Griselda Pollock. Pollock writes, 'The art historian then occupies the place of Barthes's reader as the point at which the potential meanings converge'.²¹ In using the first person pronoun Eagle becomes the single viewer/reader, the single point of convergence of the potential meanings of the text. On the other hand, in its use of language Modjeska's voice is recognisable as authorial and hence authoritative.

But the issue is more complex. What of the names 'Mary Eagle' and 'Drusilla Modjeska'? Operating within the discourse of art history the name 'Mary Eagle' signals knowledge and authority. Can the name be divorced from the text? Can Mary Eagle or any other art historian become, as Pollock suggests, Barthes's reader without history, biography or psychology? I would say not.

Conversely, the name 'Drusilla Modjeska' signals literature, a personal response or interpretation. Is the authorial voice of the writer hence less insidious than the voice of the art historian (or other academic)?

J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton argue that one of the reasons the author has persisted in art history is because of the desire to read expression in, or into, painting.²² They claim that there is no way in which direct, unmediated feeling can be put into, and disinterestedly taken out of, the surface of a painting. This, however, has not stopped

some critics and art historians making statements that ensure that 'the experience a person has in front of a painting' and 'what the painting expresses' are 'glued together'.²³ Christie and Orton state that it is useful to see critics, art historians, and so on as cultural managers who 'establish the expressive meaning for paintings because of the stipulative power we permit them', and that the personality of the artist therefore becomes crucial for making credible expressive claims.²⁴ In order to legitimise them, claims about the meaning, content, effect or expressive quality of the surface of a painting are made with reference, not to a gloomy, suffering, sorrowful paint surface (which would be an absurdity), but to the biography of the artist—the gloomy, suffering, sorrowful person.

Christie and Orton claim further in the same article that biography is unavoidable because humans are irreducibly narratable and narrating beings: stories are the primary means through which we begin to approach the possible connected meanings of the world. They also contend, however, that the biography of an artist rather than being a single narrative must be indelibly plural and written as a pattern of possibilities.

As the importance of the artist is diminished, will the authoritative voice of the art historian, particularly the writer of monographs, become the main player in the economy of authority?

The second issue concerning the present day author that I will touch on is that of the voice of the other. It is now fairly well accepted that the cultivation of the artist hero was at the expense of others: women artists, those from non-Western cultures where the culture producers were not considered authors, and so on. The death of the author in terms of the Western, white male author has on one hand allowed the authorial voice of the other to be heard, but paradoxically at the same time the concept of the death of the author has undermined the value of any authorial voice. We are aware of the western imposition of the importance of the author onto Aboriginal art, in giving Aboriginal art legitimacy in the Western art market. The lack of a recognised author, which has led to Aboriginal art being seen as generic and hence reproducible, has resulted in dozens of instances of copyright infringement. Recent reports of the forgery of Aboriginal art in London²⁵ seem on the one hand a repetition of this generic perception of Aboriginal art but on the other a quick cashing in on rising names still, however, exercisable because of the lack of knowledge, understanding or proper recognition of the individuality of Aboriginal artists. Respect for the artist's name and

knowledge of the artist's work is seen as an important deterrent to the misuse or forgery of Aboriginal art.

In a similar vein, writing on Aboriginal art Terry Smith has stated that 'for the context of post-colonialism the question of who speaks ... is fundamental.... The ideal person to speak about an art work is the artist.... This secures interpretation in the authority of the maker'.²⁶ It also, of course, argues against the death of the artist/author.

These supports for the survival of the author, in themselves, must be seen, however, as still Eurocentric. As Smith acknowledges, the Aboriginal artists and/or community might not want to speak about their art.²⁷

A further instance of the viability of the importance of the author is in the area of copyright. In 'What is an Author?' Foucault briefly allies the origins of authorship to the instigation of copyright laws. In his recent article, 'Texts without boundaries: intellectual property rights in the digital domain', Peter Anderson examines Foucault's writing with reference to the copyrighting of work on the internet.²⁸

Nobody aware of the recent establishment of Vi\$copy (the agency to collect artist's copyright fees), the functioning of the National Scholarly Communications Forum, the Australian Copyright Council, the Copyright Agency Ltd., Public Lending Rights, Educational Lending Rights, the Copyright Convergence Committee, and other such bodies, could possibly doubt the lingering importance of the concept of the author (at least to authors themselves) as the originator of the text. The rapid growth of the internet and the complicated notions of ownership, intellectual property rights and authorship pitted against theories of freedom of access and the pragmatics of financial survival have become a lawyer's dream. Anderson argues, however, that the activity of the law in this area, rather than being tied to the protection of the author's rights, might instead be to protect investment in new cultural industries.²⁹ Anderson cites David Lange's argument that authorship will survive but only in a radically personal form. The future will be free of copyright and authors' moral rights, except for the freedom to play in the fields of the word.

While this might seem like sacrilege to authors, the very logistics of maintaining copyright and moral rights in the digital world might in fact finally force the death of the author. I am inclined to believe this after sitting through several conferences on the issues of copyright on the internet. The problem of the policing of work on the internet seems almost insurmountable and becomes more complex every day. Just some of the issues having to be dealt with are:

- Is scanning copying?
- Is the printing out of digital material the same as photocopying? The common sense answer would be that it is but in fact technical and legal arguments can be mounted to say that it is not and, therefore, that it is not controlled by present copyright law.
- Who holds the copyright, moral rights, royalties on works produced in employers' time and inserted on the internet? For example, witness the recent controversy about journalists reacting to their work being sold by their papers onto the internet. Similar disputes are arising at universities conducting distance education courses where subject material is sent to students in subject packages. These packages are written by lecturers, in lieu of orally delivered lectures, but universities claim copyright in them; and it is not too hard to foresee the day when these educational packages will be sold on the internet. Will their authors then have any claim to copyright, moral rights or royalties? Most universities don't, as far as I know, claim copyright on orally delivered lectures. So should they have a claim to lectures when they are written down?
- Authors are now being coerced into selling digital rights as a condition of publication. In doing so they lose control of their work. A student who recently completed a PhD at an English university said that it was a condition of the awarding of the degree that he give permission for the thesis to be placed on the internet.
- Who is responsible for material being sent across international borders and down loaded in countries where it is illegal?
- There is also the vexed question of the appropriation of artists' work both on and off the internet.

In the meantime, though, maybe the internet is reinforcing the idea of the author in another way. I would like to look at another work by Barthes in this context. In his 1971 essay 'From Work to Text', Barthes differentiated between the work and the text; and made several propositions about the text which could be used to support the interpretation of the internet as a text.

Barthes proposed, in summary (and this is a rather radical summary), that:

- the text must not be thought of as a defined object; it is, rather, a methodological field that exists only as discourse and is experienced only as an activity, a production;

- that what constitutes the text is its subversive force with regard to old classifications;
- that the text is plural and in fact achieves an irreducible plurality;
- that every text is an intertext of another text; the quotations from which a text is constructed are anonymous, irrecoverable and already read; they are quotations without quotation marks;
- that the text asks the reader for collaboration—that, in fact, the text compels us to ask who executes work, the author or the reader;
- that the text's metaphor is that of a network.³⁰

If the internet is seen as a text does this enhance the importance of the author? Barthes suggests one final approach to the text—that of pleasure, a pleasure—in contradiction to what he has previously said about the text and the work—related to the reading/consuming of particular authors. In his book *The Pleasure of the Text* he states categorically, 'in the text ... I desire the author'.³¹

In the huge potential anonymity of the internet do we also desire to know who is speaking, to personalise the ultimate depersonaliser?

I conclude by briefly mentioning one more reason for the continuing survival of the author, demonstrated by the general popularity of the autobiography with both readers and writers. Autobiography outsells and outranks in numbers all other forms of publishing and writing in this country—not the autobiographies of the rich and famous but those of ordinary people. The best selling book in Australia besides the Bible has been A. B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life*. It has been suggested that a reason for the popularity of the autobiography is that we need to know that we are both similar to, and different from, others. As my own father commented when he read Facey's book, 'That's the story of my life'. In fact it bore little resemblance to the actual facts of my father's life but obviously allowed an identification. Ironically, the book of which Facey's family originally requested a publication of 100 copies, thinking it would be of interest only to their own family, has now sold 600,000 copies.³²

Autobiographies satisfy the need to know that in spite of hardship and suffering the author has survived (literally). Autobiographies fulfil both a needed reassurance that the self exists and the desire for immortality. John Colmer claims that the popularity of the biography and autobiography suggests that the often proclaimed death of the author has had little effect on popular consciousness.³³

The fact that the most popular autobiographies are in fact those of ordinary people and the fact that everyone is now able to publish

(autobiographies or anything else) on the internet suggests that the author as the authoritative voice has been replaced not by the reader, the receptor of the text, as posited by Barthes, but by the reader as him/herself an author.

Notes

- 1 Joanna Mendelsohn, 'Buying a piece of Brett', *Australian Weekend Review*, 16–17 September 1995, p.10.
- 2 Jenna Mead, 'First Stone pushes the panic buttons', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1995, p.13.
- 3 'The Death of the Artist as Hero', in Bernard Smith, *The Death of the Artist as Hero*, Melbourne and Oxford, 1988, pp.9–29.
- 4 Bernard Smith, p.28.
- 5 Bernard Smith, p.27.
- 6 Pollock's writings on this subject includes: 'Artists, Media and Mythologies ...', *Screen* 21.3 (1980), and 'Agency and the Avant-garde', *Block* 15 (Spring 1989): pp.4–15.
- 7 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Artist', 1977, in *Image-Music-Text*, Glasgow, 1979, p.147.
- 8 Terry Eagleton, 'Roland Barthes and After', in *Ideas from France. The Legacy of French Theory*, London, 1988, pp.11–13.
- 9 Pollock, 'Agency', p.7.
- 10 Barthes, p.143.
- 11 Barthes, pp.145–148.
- 12 Pollock, 'Agency', p.8.
- 13 Josué Harari, 'Critical Factions/Critical Fictions', in Josué V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, Ithaca, New York, 1979, pp.17–72, 42.
- 14 Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?', in M. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Oxford, 1977, p.124.
- 15 Foucault, p.124.
- 16 Pollock, 'Agency', p.14.
- 17 Pollock, 'Agency', p.15.
- 18 Pollock, 'Agency', p.15.
- 19 Mary Eagle, 'The Painter and the Raft', in M. Bail, ed., *Fairweather*, Brisbane, 1994, pp.24–41, p.41.
- 20 Drusilla Modjeska, 'Painting Mother', in M. Bail, ed., *Fairweather*, Brisbane, 1994, pp.44–53, p.48.
- 21 Pollock, 'Agency', p.10.
- 22 J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton, 'Writing on a text of the life', *Art History* 11.4 (1988): 545–64.
- 23 Christie and Orton, p.551.
- 24 Christie and Orton, pp.551–2.

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- 25 Adam Harvey, 'Black artists fear the black art of forgery', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 September 1995, p.3; John McDonald, 'London dealers join the dots for a rip off', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 September 1995, p.3.
- 26 Terry Smith, 'Second person/first peoples: writing about post-colonial art', *Art Monthly Australia* 64 (1993): 1-11, p.11.
- 27 Terry Smith, p.11.
- 28 Peter Anderson, 'Texts without boundaries: intellectual property rights in the digital domain', *Agenda* 41 (1995): 7-9.
- 29 Anderson, p.8.
- 30 Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', [1971], in Harari, *Textual Strategies*, pp.73-81, pp.74-78.
- 31 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, (1975), New York, 1989, p.27.
- 32 Patti Miller, 'Me, myself and I: the bestselling power of one', *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend*, 17 June 1995, p.23-27, p.23.
- 33 John Colmer, *Australian Autobiography. The Personal Quest*, Melbourne, 1989, p.14.