

RICOCHET

Notes prepared for March 2008 NZ Post
Wellington Readers and Writers Week panel
discussion on the topic of Image and Text,
with Paula Greene, John Reynolds, and
Roger Horrocks (Chair)

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1. My approach to this discussion is as a poet. I view art with poetry as its horizon.
2. There is a zig zag course in these notes. The first **zig**: how many people in the audience today have a copy of Pound's *Cantos*? I want to say, *The Cantos* could be **the** giant bridge text of the twentieth century for this discussion. *The Cantos* is not about image and text but interpretive liberty; (transitional) catastrophe in reading; the alliance of comprehensible and incomprehensible; compression and release; lyrical moments and pure **tosh**; the ply of voices; the representation of great space with fugitive pattern and intimate proximities. All this in *The Cantos* repels reading and recruits it. You have no option but to live with the peculiar ambiguity of this text, and watch, listen, **surf**, with little totalisation, for years rather than minutes. To continue my lateral introduction to my topic – *The Cantos*: where reactionary and progressive reading models clash. It is a mode of pleasure, X-pleasure, **play**, I say. Broadly speaking, in recent history, the reading public has evolved and can now meet *The Cantos*' mash-up with more comfort. It has more comfort with inter-texts. It is this drawing-alongside of a present audience that reveals the breakthrough status of a poem written between 1920-1960. But sadly *The Cantos*' specific currency has diminished, even as its compositional strategy gains mass adoption. Again: *The Cantos* is perhaps the evolutionary marker in our *English* present. **You** don't **read** the Pound *Cantos*. It fields a different trance of language as a plural category. You are offered an endless or networked image repertoire changing each time you give it the attention it deserves. You are a bus chasing a dog. I want to say *The Cantos* economy, the organizational model for the supply and demand of representational experience, is of a different kind, not degree, to how one customarily makes sense of texts. You encounter a representational diversity, a plastic wealth (see later), something distributed in space and of motion. The bus and the dog are in a long-running flow experience. With *The Cantos* the book tries to become massive and an internet, to make itself a fit object of capture. Time, text and echoes in *The Cantos* are liquidated.

3. That's enough now. It sets the scene for a discussion of "image-and-text" hybridity. This discussion is not about stranded things involving words and pictures uncommonly put together, but good neighbours. It is about the unitary physics of media, the closely adjacent physics of art knowledge, about how interspersed our tools of representation want to be, and can be, with changes in economics and technology.
4. Image and text, the crossing of the pictures of writing and painting, is a huge old boulevard in Western art. To think otherwise is to think that the title of a painting is not a part of the painting; that context or the management of expectations set by a tradition does not matter; or that meaning exists independent of language, independent of what can be thought of or talked about. However, within this old field, new evolution is occurring now at a break-neck speed. Art is an archaic ingenuity, a rare representation, a distinctive labour performed upon meaning, and a new species of it is emerging at great speed now. It started with film, then went to video, and now it is driven by digital media. I am going to drag this talk to test my still dumb sense of the present. As Walter Benjamin noted (in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) the new medium that began with movies was not defined by the combination of speech and images in a volume unseen before. It was defined also by the economics of production and distribution of these very costly things. As a result came the biggest change of all: the development of a new mass, a new global audience, generating a distinctive chemical switch in the operation of meaning: where "individual reactions are pre-determined by the mass audience response they are about to produce". Movies caused a migration of authorial expertise from Director (read 'writer' or 'painter') to audience (read 'the reading public' or 'viewers'). That is, movies were a new **medium** in which an audience found itself to be a mass. Supply created its own demand.

5. So when I talk about image and text I have a simple curiosity: what is the history of this hybrid, and what is its present and future? And with this question: I am not looking for categorical preservation (image, and text) but for categorical destruction and invention.
6. If you have a historical materialist disposition like me there is something completely satisfying about the Paul Valery that Benjamin quotes at the commencement of his great essay:

“Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are occurring in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last 20 years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art”.

(Valery, *La Conquete de l'unbiquite*, quoted Benjamin, *The Work of Art...* etc)

7. Image and Text, that segment of art knowledge, can be under-read, as conventionally posed in this country. The reference in the (Readers and Writers Week) programme to McCahon's "I will need words.." sets our topic in a confusing and too-narrow frame. We start with a misreading of a faux discovery. As though there

was a point in visual art history where words were brought into painting for a first time, and that McCahon's alleged fascination with this entry is worthy of ours too, still. It is as though painting was a separate and non-verbalisable media, and its occasional recruitment of the reproduction of words was a step of disproportionate importance.

8. As though there is an ethnographic encounter involved, a stranger/native moment, where the agents of two cultures meet at one time, and history is required to pay attention.
9. It can be of limited interest, this framing of the supposed one-time meeting of two media. McCahon was writing about how he wanted to make a polemic, a poster series almost, as an anti-nuclear gesture, and in a letter to a poet he said "I will need words"; that is, copy, for the posture series. Of course he did and would, for that. But there is much more besides.
10. Image and text: this is a very complicated area of thought, involving unstable and overlapping categories and their combination effects.
11. Standing back: McCahon painted a narrative-saturated art for all his career. It was a ground of his. His art's vocation seems to stand off scripture. Western painting is a Christian art, so it is derived from a massive density of texts. It is rooted in moments of speech, of revelation, annunciations and incarnations, messages of divinity, portrayal of a God who speaks through media – voices, texts, actions – making, crucially for visual artists, the world itself as media, which can leap and rip. Thus the world was turned into a pictorial and verbal state, that is, a temporary theatre of brief lives before eternity – which threatens and ruptures throughout lived experience – becomes the blanket state and exerts itself personally. Western painting derives its work from this auratic archaeology, with its disposition to

depth experience, this *high*, still; and from its audience which enshrines those expectations too. This is too much for here: the point is, the representations of sound and vision in the painting *we* know have always been tightly coupled.

12. Experiencing Medieval Western painting often seems to me like walking on Maungakiekie – One Tree Hill – in Auckland now. The builders are gone. The populations are gone. Their technologies of self and representation, their noises, are gone. Their objects of use and desire likewise are gone. All industry, all loquacity, all image repertoire is extinguishing. And yet there remains this extraordinary smoothed and luminous presence of absence.
13. Sometimes we pose the issue, us cautious painting-centric types, that art is painting and text is an entry of different matter into it. We start thinking of collage metaphors: that text is brought into the painting as an object, *as a conspicuous difference of material*, as newspaper or cloth or a pottery fragment, say. I think this is a mis-categorisation, and a minor field of comment. I am reminded of Plato's lament, that Poetry, which was once taken as the superset, as the distinctive phenomenology of all of art, as art itself, was reduced through time to name a verbal subset. What has since happened for many of us in this discussion is that painting has come to assume the category name "art". So Poetry – capital "P" – has been severed from art, and painting elevated to take its place.
14. But not in McCahon's eyes. That is why he twinned them so often. He returned them to their brother and sister, sibling, relationship. This liberates us to renew our often repressed sense that McCahon was a poet not a collagist.
15. Look at McCahon's *The Lark's Song* once again. Matire Kereama, who wrote the poem on which the painting is based, described an extraordinary arcadian ecstasy where human sing-song on a riverbank in summer rhymed the lark's song

high overhead, and it became a round. McCahon made a painting, set out on two doors presented landscape not portrait, that rhymed the Kereama text, (which rhymed the larks' songs), and so joined painting too, to the round, for the repercussion it produced. Not for the first time McCahon followed poetry's following art's Pied Piper. It inspired him. In *The Lark's Song* McCahon added painting's picture to poetry's to deepen it.

16. I think it is a far more satisfying conception to start out into this territory of media-mixing by thinking, art is an overall category which contains many media but, among these, there are visual and narrativised subsets. That we can only get so far in our discussion if we look at art with painting exclusively on the horizon. Art and painting are different things. Image and text are to be regarded then as of the closest common genealogy, the most natural co-habitants.
17. There is no ethnographic encounter, no stranger/native, here, anymore, then. No supposed painter on a beach seeing the arrival of words in a boat come to land.
18. Why do I bother to labour this revisionist hierarchy? Because I am reframing our slippage across media. So then we can more easily start to think, not about a painter saying, "I will need words", but about an artist who might say, "I will need languages". Who might continue, "I envisage a new trance where signs ricochet. I want to recruit an audience, starting with myself. I want to cause an excitement, a new exertion of meaning: how can I do this with the presence of two languages, say, to make a crossing of pictures, not just one, and in this process cause to emerge a third, being the combination of the representations of textual and visual objects and the change in the nature of reading's demand that this will summons?"
19. Now, stand in the present. Hold on to your hats. I am going to take risks so you overhear the messy collision of thought and work I am in the middle of now.

20. I am a poet with an uncommon dislike for most poetry as presented but I am also a reader *who only wants to know poetry* (but not poetry books). If you were to know me you would not know that I am always scanning the horizon for poetry, night and day, in undetectable ways. The category, poetry, here is not the book of lyrics. It has never been verse. The category does not represent personal epiphany, does not stand on an implied image of the poet as a clinical case. It is not early Shakespeare with his nice turns of phrase and interesting people and situations. It is less exhausted, more ontologically subversive, more ubiquitous, revealed in paths of fluid logic, tonalities, accuracies to language not expression, abstract emotion, aspects of gliding, disruption, subtlety, in short a great metaphysical layer, a gale of construction and destruction, of surprise and pleasure of thought, resident in the most diverse media: in philosophy, music, movies, painting, video, multisport, business. It is not a question of image and text for me: poetry has already gone from the boundaries implicit in the work *that* term customarily seeks to name. The semiotic national as outbound, as colonist.
21. So I find myself in an electric body. And: why do I have this idiosyncratic vigilance, through daily Board meetings, business cases, transactions of all kinds, risk assumption and avoidance, pitches, meetings, software tools, syndicated activity? It is normal. There is a parallelism, there are eddy forces, at work, in all of us. It is futurism. And for mine: I am fascinated by new compositional appetites in my peripheral motive and my neighbours', in this territory of picture and text. I too conclude: mechanical reproduction (which is digital technology now) is supplying a new medium for art and a new mass or audience demanding it. It is possible this medium is as *a new language*, which is a big thing to say, a new Mandarin, say, a new English, or Facebook and its others, or Windows Office Pro, into which flow raw materials of narrative and pictorial representation and engineering which emerge in ways that are Other to their input selves.

22. That we are at a point in history, give or take 100 years, *exactly analagous* to that found in the 14th century in Tuscany which saw the invention of a *medium*, out of a new superstructural specialization of writing and thought (and trading, church capital, inter-city rivalry, religious organisation and ecstatic technique: concentrations in a powerful city); an irruption of plastic wealth we came to know as modern Western painting. This medium was of course: a complicated structure of perception and knowlege constituting the paradise of the human mind under enlightenment (as Pound said, of “the Medieval dream”). We are at another such point of major mediumistic invention.
23. Again, and again personally: every day poetry as an obscure object of desire takes me and I do not know what will satisfy it yet because its satisfactions are momentary. I try to be attentive to what popular uprising might be trying to occur in this ancient craft of the beautiful. I try to think, and ontologically, and here are some of the questions that take up my attention. How do changes in Valery’s “physical component” affect the art? What can be made of these presentational devices, with their electronic and digital allure, to create presence and expansion; these low costs of production and mass publication, new tools to ravish and astonish? Are not new metrical possibilities and punctuation-like effects offered, like rhymes and pauses and full stops, to create and control speed and segment sense? See how strangeness and richness can be caused by the interleaving of photographs and writing, where you are not sure if you are reading something or watching something, and you invent and reinvent the manner by which this new composition supports interpretative play? How are motion or cadence effects deployable to mesmerize and entrance the reader/viewer? How might the cunning lucidity of an ordinary photo lend stability to a destabilized text, and vice versa? What Greek chorus possibilities, great regularities, can photographs supply to a narrative, to dignify and solemnize, to give it stage presence and processional weight? How might all of these things lend a new capacity for abstraction that

exposes the allure of a reproductive technology to freshly beguile, coax, recruit, seduce, its readers? How can scenes now be made, abstract emotions be set up, of lamentation, exuberance – and made to unfold at whatever cadence suits? Are we not now dealing in 6 dimensional space, adding to height, width, and depth, time, doubling, and media, and if so: how now to *stage* artworks?

24. When I work I am listening and looking out for what is not yet there, that way. As you will soon see in the Foucault quotation below, I am looking to know mirror-effects in a text.
25. I hold up as a standard: what could I do that my kids, with their fabulous art-receptors, might possibly want to have around them, even if uncritically, initially? Something which is unmistakable , full of infrared warmth, and *profoundly* easy.
26. Sooner or later these things all come back to innovations in the economics of tools yielding innovations in mediumistic thought.
27. Evolution means: sooner or later quantity becomes quality.
28. Re poetics: poetry supplies space to writing. But – if we make a temporary assumption, for a moment, a parochial and false reference point to open up a gap – that image and text were once staged as introduced to each other for the first time, 40 years ago, in this country at least – then by now we must assume that we are 1000 generations down the track and the image and text hybrid has mutated past recognition.
29. There is a Michel Foucault quote that helps frame my search. Foucault talks of writing and visual art as of “the two great mythic spaces of Western imagination”:

“...space that is rigid and forbidden, surrounding the quest, the return and the treasure (that is the geography of the Argonauts and of the labyrinth); and the other space communicating, polymorphous, continuous, and irreversible – of the metamorphosis, that is to say of the visible transformation of instantly crossed distances, of strange affinities, of symbolic replacements”.

30. Foucault offers a way of talking about prose literature and poetry literature, for example. How we all know poetry is strategically different from the representation of characters, events in time, and places, and tends toward infinite readability. Therefore Foucault can be read as providing an image for how writing tends toward pictorial in this sense, how it wants to migrate from one great mythic space to its other.
31. It is a lovesickness for a particular new and digital uncanny that pulls. Through all this plastic wealth I know it is an archaic thing that I am trying to find.
32. The pictorialisation of writing, which is a different thing from writing that is saturated with various kinds of word pictures. Or painting that contains writing. Or writing; or photography.
33. What is a good neighbour? A good neighbour knows how to fit into what you want to do at your place. They are friendly and they keep their distance. He or she is secure and has a good right to be there. He or she is quiet. On the rare occasions when something goes wrong a good neighbour is helpful and does the right thing. When a tree blows down on a road you both use they cooperate to remove it quickly and meet their share of the cost. When you need something to happen that involves you they are available and listen and do the fair thing.

For example when a boundary needs to be repaired they agree on what needs to be done and meet their share of the cost. When a new access way is required they fit in where possible and where reasonable. It is easy to deal with a good neighbour. They fit into the property system. They know what is important to you. They are respectful of how you want to live your life and what you want to do at your place. They quietly go about their business and you do too. They don't interfere. Good fences and good rules make good neighbours. You can talk to these people. They are sensible and share similar interests to yours. They can tell you about their business and how it is from time to time. Like you they are in your community. They are visible. They use some of the same tradespeople that you do. Good neighbours turn a blind eye to each other when it is necessary. They smooth out the ups and downs and act the same regardless. There is a lot you don't know about your neighbours; their finances, for example, or their private life, their strategy with their kids or employees, or why they have the tastes they do, why they drive this car or that, why they play golf, or dress that way. But that doesn't matter. They are just your neighbours. A good neighbour knows that what goes around comes around. When someone buys next door they are not a neighbour yet. They have to earn that status over time. This is because a good neighbour is not something that happens with a property purchase. It is something that happens over time between people who live and work in the same place and share common values and interests. A good neighbour knows how to win your trust and knows that it is important to do this. It is not a matter of one-time investment of capital but through-time behaviour of people. A good neighbour in the country is different from a good neighbour in the city. A good commercial neighbour – the relationship between two businesses with a common boundary, for example – is different from a good residential neighbour. But what makes both good is the same; they have got common interests – in growing capital value, in solving property problems, in being available, and in communicating. That is, a good neighbour is a relationship between two things

(properties) and people. The commercial relationship may be different but it is still built on small acts of reason and generosity.

- 34.** So image and text? No, not that, and not that, but *that*, what? We are being drawn in to the astonishing veil-dance of signs, as in Roland Barthes' remarkable -

“The text does not “gloss” the images, which do not “illustrate” the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty, analogous perhaps to that loss of meaning Zen calls a satori. Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing; and in them to read the retreat of signs”

Empire of Signs (1970)

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