The Call of Duty

Once I made it a habit to start any lecture on my work with a *caveat.* I would explain, quite clearly, exactly what I was not doing to do. This disclaimer would, I felt, absolve me from the usual assumed responsibilities of an artist talking about her practice, giving an end to tedious chronology, pedantic exegesis of technique, and the pathetic account of my years of struggle. I do not bother to this any longer, as sometimes I need to remember what I have done and the occasional plaint does no one any harm. My writing has followed the same strategy, though the warning I issue precedes the text. Increasingly I am asked to write about the work of other artists, and I have to make it clear that I will write in a certain way, following my own interests of the moment, and my manner may not suit everyone. There are many things that hold my attention in the world, not least what artists do, but my style may appear oblique. I try to avoid interpretation – for meaning is a very mutable thing. I try to avoid flattery – for it should be flattery enough that I have accepted the proposition to write. I try to avoid criticism – for that would be impolite as well as inappropriate. Once the terms are agreed, I provide the text, and if it disappoints, either its recipient or me, well, then I am sorry of course.

This is part of a rather long introduction, which I hope yields more than a prevaricating persiflage. In a sense, the preamble is the whole text, in that there is nothing, as yet, to follow. Let me explain: I have been invited, somewhat to my surprise (I am always surprised, 'who, me?' I ask disingenuously) to write about the Liverpool Biennial – no, rather to write about writing about the Liverpool Biennial, or at least this is how I have understood the request. I try to be a good girl about these matters (this is what people hate about me, I was told recently), so this is what I set out to do. However, dear Reader, you will soon see how easily deflected I am, how my purpose, my capacity for stick-to-itness, is feeble. That's the problem with giving *carte blanche,* even to a woman as reliable as I am, you get what you get, and *tant pis pour toi.* No excuse though, I am telling myself sternly, for this text is no more than an approach to an experience.

Indeed, I was delighted to have the opportunity to visit the Biennial in its last days, as I am a biennale hound. I was even able to persuade some of my students to come (more of whom later). It was a lovely day, and after my whirlwind tour of the works thanks to my charming guide, I arrived at the station with a little time before my train back to London, time enough to learn that there would be no train home. On approaching the station, my taxi driver had muttered darkly that this might be the case, something he deduced from the flow of traffic about the station. Insistent enquiry revealed that a bomb had been discovered next to the track at Runcorn. Actually, this bomb had been there since the Second World War. It had even been there at 11 o'clock that morning when my train from Euston had innocently passed it. Somehow, between 11 o'clock and 5 o'clock, the bomb had become dangerous.

It was only while on the third world train from Liverpool to Manchester (from where it was promised a train to London would eventually leave) that I realized something about a work in the Biennial (the second work I had seen that day), a work I had quickly dismissed as uninteresting and awkward. The work was a replica of a World War II bomb, by Paolo Canevari. It was a rubber inflatable suspended over a narrow street between the buildings. The Biennial catalogue notes describe it as 'temporarily frozen in the action of falling'. It isn't, of course, for it is perfectly obvious how it is held, but one accepts the hyperbole, the metaphor out of necessity or force of habit. It is also described as a 'potent reminder of the damage suffered by the city during the war', and, in case the local reference is insufficient, it 'also offers a powerful visualization of contemporary fear'. There is nothing wrong with these notes; indeed, they may be useful, like any instruction for use. Yet the work does not, did not, perform these functions, elicit these allusions, or at least, not directly. There is the work of art and there are the effects of the work of art, and this is not the same thing. So I want to think about the Freudian concept of '*Nachträglichkeit*', in relation to my experience of the work of art, this or any other, and to ways of negotiating biennials in general and works of art in particular. Three works will be cited, and other railway incidents will lead me to a brief discussion of traumatic neurosis.

The Standard Edition of Freud's work, edited and translated by Alix and James Strachey, renders *Nachträglichkeit* as 'deferred action'. It is also called 'retroaction', and in French, '*après coup*'. It refers to the way in mental functioning – the pysche – that events in the present affect those of the past. In this *a posteriori* structure, the past is no more than a set of memories, which are reworked and reinterpreted according to present experience. This has particular relevance for psychoanalysis, obviously, which is not concerned with the truth of events but rather with the way events are remembered, represented and recounted. As well as Freud, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has some things to say about this, arguing, in Seminar 1, that a psychoanalysis aims at the reconstitution of the analysand's history, though that history is only 'the present synthesis of the past'.[1] It is not so simple, for either Freud or Lacan, to merely place the accent on the past, for history is only the past insofar as it becomes a history in the present because it was lived in the past. It is a matter of restitution for Freud, not a return to the historical origin of an experience but to what Lacan calls the 'point-source', [2]the place from which details, events, are remembered or invented. It is a singular experience, and from the point-source, psychoanalysis will work towards the general. There may at last be an anchoring point where the movement of speech, of signifiers, stops, completing signification in its last term, 'sealing (…) meaning by its retroactive effect'. [3]

So it is this way, through the mechanism of deferred action, that a work of art, in this case a particular work of art, has an effect. I met a work, but I did not register it until my memory of it connected to other events, other experiences or transposed references. In the encounter with the work of art, as in an analysis, it is the particularity of the encounter that is important. One goes case by case, work by work. It is a movement from the singular to the universal and back, and this, in an analysis at least, is the basis for a more general intervention. It occurs retrospectively, through the functions of time (both synchronic and diachronic), condensation and displacement (or metaphor and metonymy), in a causality after the event.

The oscillation of tenses in deferred action is not a simply switching on/off. Freud took the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* from the work on traumatic neurosis of his mentor Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot demonstrated that certain neuroses, following physical injury, had the same structure as hysteria. The symptoms displayed had no direct relation to the nature of the injury and moreover, only revealed themselves after a delay, which Charcot described as an '*élaboration'*, a period of psychical working-out. The clinical work developed in response to particular kinds of accidents, such as those incurred in railway travel; indeed, some conditions were identified as 'railway spine' or 'railway brain'. The events were traumatic in that they left no visible effects that corresponded to those that might more usually be expected. The application of 'trauma' changed, to indicate conditions where there was an absence of visible effect on the body, a lack of existence of organic lesions of the nervous system. In short, the less there is to see, the greater the efficacy of the trauma. Temporal separation of cause and effect is not contradicted; rather it is concealed in a cohesive narrative, one that binds together each element, each detail. In the train, the work of Canevari had an effect on me, but the bomb on the line at Runcorn is not the point-source of that effect.

The second work of art I want to take up, briefly, is the project of Jill Magid, working with Citywatch (Merseyside Police and Liverpool City Council), whose role is the surveillance on the city by CCTV. The project is thoroughly described in the catalogue, listing both the events of the work and their supposed effects, revealing, 'systems of technology, limited by our fears, as offering poetic potentials and new forms of interaction'. The day before our visit I had screened an extract of Jean-Luc Godard's film, *Le Mépris,* to students in my seminar series, in which we have been working on love. The keenest group borrowed the video, and consequently, were able to recognize not only the music from the film now used as the soundtrack to Magid's video, but also to know that as Magid travels round the city of Liverpool as motorbike passenger in her 'last tour', Brigitte Bardot does the same in a car in Rome, and Bardot dies at the end of the movie. A week later, the same group of students presented their own seminar, and one

young woman wore a red coat, a dark wig, yet said nothing, until the discussion that followed, about Magid's work in Liverpool. Her identification is partial, marked by a few signifiers (the coat, the wig), yet like the recognition of a tune from a film, provokes a response, a memory, in a few people (this is not to say that the response or memory are shared). As always, some would recognize the references, while others were in the dark. The demand to know more is beyond the work of art, which remains a mute object provoking a narrative, yet finally, is not itself the story.

Moreover, anticipation is linked to retroaction: the future affects the present, a future anterior that is never to arrive (somewhere Lacan calls it the mill wheel turning). It is a future that is arranged to end in failure, a missed encounter, like the failure of fortune-telling. Even if events foretold are unfulfilled, the prediction exerts some consequence. In the summer I was driving back from Bordeaux, listening to a review of the Liverpool Biennial on the crackling car radio. I have forgotten most of what was said (though no doubt would recall more if I were lying on the divan of my analyst). However, I did remember the ABBA house, a work by Peter Johansson. The real title of the work is *Music Royale,* though it is unlikely to be called this anywhere but the catalogue. I recognized the work when I saw it, and so greeted it like an old friend. I knew it already. It was exactly as it had been described on the wireless: a bright red pre-fabricated house of wood, glass and metal, housing music equipment and loudspeakers, as well as a more or less colour co-ordinated kitchen, bathroom and so on. Installed on the South Lawn at the Pier Head, like a bad neighbor, the house emits day and night ABBA's 'Dancing Queen'. I am told in the catalogue that the work, 'highlights notions of consumer culture and identity. Furthermore, it is sculpture, not a house, 'a shiny music-box', that 'works as bait, luring us inside'. Though it would be delightful to think of *Music Royale* as a shimmering lure, I have to say there was more of a tendency for visitors to hang around outside it or indeed, get away from it as quickly as possible, even on the part of its invigilators. I had to insist that the sound was turned up, for it was at the level of a polite murmur and the radio programme had made it quite clear that the sound was **loud –** so that was how I wanted it. (And I must admit, having

always had an embarrassing weakness for ABBA, I knew all the words and wanted to hear them). The work had to correspond to the account I had heard, upholding my neurotic identification, structured by the words of the radio critic, even if I did not agree with his interpretation (which, by the way, I cannot remember). The description of the work formed my experience of the work in advance, or rather, I shaped my experience to conform to the description I had incorporated months before. Any disjunction was untenable, disquieting.

During the ill-fated taxi journey back to the station, one of the two students returning with me confessed, guiltily – as though she was afraid I would punish her - that she had not liked very much of what she had seen that afternoon. While she reproached herself, at the same time, she felt that the works were somewhat at fault. They had failed to meet her expectation. In making the effort to take the train, pay for the journey, she expected a greater reward. She wanted (and why not?), pleasure and satisfaction, even catharsis, to fall in love with a work of art. In some ways, I find that I agree with her, or rather, I recognize her desire, even though I know gratification is not on offer (it may occur, but is more of a by-product).

My son, who is much younger than my student, has probably been to more biennials and exhibitions than she has, and so knows that works of art will disappoint him. I have to devise strategies to keep him occupied, engaged, although suddenly he will be captivated. At the last Venice Biennale, I gave him a list of works and artists in each section, and he had to tick them off as he found them, completing the set so we could leave. This was far more satisfying to him than most of the works he saw at the time and yet subsequently he has recalled works, commented on them, and they are more than crossed-off items of categorical collection. This was pretty much the argument I offered to my student; something in which one takes no interest now (the ABBA house – all my students hated that – or the work by Canevari, which none of them could remember) may return weeks, months, years later, as it is elaborated psychically. Works of art can surprise - the encounter with the sublime – in the sudden

realization of something that has been hidden for years, that has been before one's nose for months.

There is a problem both with demand for satisfaction and interpretation. A work of art is taken as a ciphered message, while there is also the overtly declared message of its context, which is supposed to provide the means of decipherment. The Biennial catalogue tells me I will see a 'simple and powerful vision', that I will 'see art that (…) cannot be seen anywhere else', that works of art will 'inhabit and negotiate the intersections between the global and the local'. While this may all be true (I have no way of knowing), it is nonetheless a symbolization made too soon, before I am capable of recognizing or comprehending anything about my experience. Even if I read the exegesis afterwards I am turning it back, for so much is at stake, and as a symptom, constantly renews itself, continues obstinately to impose. In the failure, the gap between language and experience, the impulse to speak does not disappear but finds other pathways. When speech fails, acts become speech.

Let me put it this way: objects or acts are taken for the truth, and one fails to recognize it or worse still, over-determines its reception. The work of art may be offered as a symptom, and as a symptom may appear truthful, while as a work of art, it is mimetic, and therefore clearly incapable of telling the truth. That is, apart from the fragment it retains in the imaginary (the effects of the work), the truth of semblance. The psychoanalyst Eric Laurent has observed that lecturing a patient is not the shortest way to get to the aim of an analysis, for while an interpretation may be masterly, even accurate, something is omitted. The point-source is unvocalised because it goes before speech, and anyway, cannot be spoken, but nonetheless, provokes speech. The target cannot be hit directly, but must be evoked between the lines.

I have to conclude, for in my concern to do my duty I have nearly reached my word count and I must do as I am told, and this is at the point I should start the text following my introduction. So – as quickly as I can – the work of art, through the psychic mechanism of deferred action, forces an encounter with the

impossibility of representation, rather than with its failure. There is no point in waiting for a reply when there cannot be one. Neither resolution nor meaning may be required at all in the encounter with the work of art, whose effects may indeed be entirely dependent on remaining unresolved and attendant. One must be open to surprise, despite the recognition that is brought each time to the encounter as it plays out the same history that is one's own. In any case, one has to find one's own solution, and in that, lies the pleasure, the reward, of exhibition, whatever its form.

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[1] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book 1. Freud's Papers on Technique. 1953-1954.* Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester, New York and London: W.W. Norton 1991, p.36.
[2] Ibid. p.13.
[3] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits. A Selection,* trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Routledge 1977, p.303.