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Terror of History History of Terror: Exploring dialectic process visually

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Abstract

The work *Terror of History History of Terror* (TOHHOT) is made of discs of bread, words, a cello bow and a wire coat-hanger. It is a visual unit that was part of a larger work in progress throughout 2006–2007. In the larger work I set out, amongst other things, to investigate and experiment with the visual properties of apparently everyday materials. I start with and depart from the assumption that such materials carry a relatively fixed range of associations, alone and in relation to one another, within the various contexts in which they are used or known of. This includes aspects of language, such as words and sentences. This work can be seen as a contribution towards generating provisional visual stimuli that might trigger interruptions to our habitual, usually unexamined, expectations of ‘meaning’. The provisionality extends to our language of everyday contact and exchange.



Terror of History History of Terror (TOHHOT)
(Installation: bread, cello bow, wire, 2006)

***Terror of History History of Terror:* Exploring dialectic process visually**

Mehmet Adil

The work *Terror of History History of Terror* (*TOHHOT*) is made of discs of bread, words, a cello bow and a wire coat-hanger. It is a visual unit that was part of a larger work in progress throughout 2006–2007. In the larger work I set out, amongst other things, to investigate and experiment with the visual properties of apparently everyday materials. I start with and depart from the assumption that such materials carry a relatively fixed range of associations, alone and in relation to one another, within the various contexts in which they are used or known of. This includes aspects of language, such as words and sentences. This work can be seen as a contribution towards generating provisional visual stimuli that might trigger interruptions to our habitual, usually unexamined, expectations of ‘meaning’. The provisionality extends to our language of everyday contact and exchange.

The piece *TOHHOT* came about in July 2006 as a quick response to both the Israeli attack on Hezbollah in Lebanon at that time and the representation of those events in the Australian media. With a degree of naivety and innocence, I simply asked: ‘Does history follow terror or terror follow history?’ There are many answers (or perhaps no answers) to this question. It seems to me there is no simple ‘either/or’, that we cannot settle either for simply bringing to consciousness the dynamics of this binary or for getting lost in the generated dynamics of it. Living in the awareness of this unsettlement may well be a kind of freedom, yet it certainly does not suggest easy comfort. Nor does it free one from serious engagement with life’s concerns, responsibilities, relationships, developments, surroundings and so on. In this vein *TOHHOT* engages the question/equation *Terror of History History of Terror*.

In the environment of confrontations of this riddle — where abstract noun wars (on poverty, terror, truth, global warming etc) and concrete noun wars (such as the ‘war on drugs’ — in short, ‘war on

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everything') have become a common element of our daily aural and visual consumption; where mediated images of 'real' wars are seen or heard of every day and simulated electronic war occupies many youths' leisure hours; where discourses of identity are propagandised; where the sensibility of common decency may seem disavowed on many fronts — in this environment 'the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist' (Bourriaud 2002: 13). An artwork by Joseph Beuys comes to mind here, one he made in 1974 whilst working in Northern Ireland during a hectic period of the civil war. It is called *The Battery*. A pile of daily newspapers has been neatly folded, stacked and tied securely in a bundle, lying on the floor as if ready for the regular round of rubbish collection or recycling. The floor is wooden; the newspaper is *The Guardian*. Headlines, stories and images on the page at the top of the bundle are clearly visible in photographs of this work. These visible words and pictures concern several violent contemporary events in Ireland and other parts of the world. The jute string tying the bundle creates a cross on the top of the bundle, dividing it equally into four, and here Beuys has painted the string, drawing attention to the shape. This constructed object is simple and humble yet has great complexity in its conception. Ordinariness and extraordinariness in the daily lives of individuals, a society, the wider world, a posited world beyond, are touching, shocking and banal all at the same time. They are also questioned, thus unsettling habitual thinking.

As I see it expressed via the Bourriaud quote above and through the Beuys artwork, attention is drawn to the quality of relationships within the practical engagements of daily life, with all its images and effects. My work *TOHHOT* occurs in this arena, where it can be seen as an equation in which the main factors 'terror' and 'history' are snarled up together. We may conceptualise the equation as linear, T-O-H-H-O-T, as the text itself *Terror of History History of Terror* alludes to linearity of writing and organisation of thought. Or it may be thought of in circular fashion, where the discs of Lebanese bread allude to this circularity. For example, divided into six parts, with

one letter of TOHHOT in each, the motion does not begin or end but might circle endlessly.

Then, materially, there is the daily bread, a wire coat-hanger, some familiar words. The cello bow at the top of the piece, suspended on a deformed/re-formed wire coat-hanger, creates an emphatic line, moving from left to right in a rising trajectory: an arrow perhaps — time, progress, a teleology. At the same time the cello bow is threaded through a disc of bread, it is made of wood and horsehair; it constellates music, the experience of which cannot be matched by words — can go beyond separate languages. The apparently abstract nature of the concepts is brought into ‘conversation’ with the potential of abstractions to crystallise into forms no longer connected with relationships, where the simple application of words will not suffice. The meaning of materials in artworks is at times the materiality itself.

If one thinks about the experience of daily life, it seems to me, there is generally a pervasive intermingling of thoughts, feelings, memories, familiarities and their disruptions, amongst what we otherwise objectivise as the ‘events’ of the day, the ‘history’ of that day. In the context of thinking and the registering of feeling processes, Bourriaud’s suggested relational aesthetic (referred to above) of actual ways of living and interaction, rather than idealisations or ideologies, links sensory, cognitive, experiential, active and reflective realms in suggestive ways. This is where I would wish for art to *do* something other than simply exist as an object of celebration or lament, a monument amongst others.

Together with other elements of the larger work of which it came to form part, *TOHHOT* examines processes at work in the nexus of individual and social experience/memory as reflections on the importance of examining our own cultural processes, by which we come to view our past and present, and contemplate the future, and the relational grounds on which we do this.



Joseph Beuys, *Battery*

(*photograph: collection and copyright Caroline Tisdall*)

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