

## ***conditioned and conditional freedom***

**By Beth Jackson**

As an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others. This paradoxical product is difficult to conceive, even inconceivable, only so long as one remains locked in the dilemma of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity. Because the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings.<sup>1</sup>

This difficult and abstract extract from Bourdieu's writings is nevertheless a vital description of how the habitus functions, collectively and individually. For me, it seems to say, that we (as individuals or as collectives) cannot be separated from what we are and do. Our very efforts to observe, to objectify, to do or even to be, reproduce the conditions necessary for this being and doing. Yes a paradox but also an elemental truth – we cannot ever truly step outside ourselves, see ourselves as it were – even though this seems to be the beginning point for all/any knowledge.

Looking back over the project of *Habitus-Habitat*, by looking now at the collection of words and images it has generated, I'm amazed and impressed by how productive the project has been. The project has its own generative schema, its own habitus, a mediation which informed artists' practices and in turn enables all of their resultant artworks to be 'sensible' to us. This schema remains in most part invisible to us in the present and yet, upon reflection, its unfolding pattern appears, as the wake of water from a boat, a rippling, shimmering fan. The river banks of historical circumstance (language, culture, and economy), the limits of these resonant waves, are malleable – open to

interpretation. From our conditioning past comes the conditional future. These residencies were small exercises in creative freedom. The resultant artworks reveal the journey of the artist, leading deep into the national parks of Queensland, from habitus to habitat. The individual artists restate a wider collective pledge to care for these environments, as world heritage and future legacy.

In writing this reflection and virtually retracing their journeys through pondering the outputs – actions, thoughts, perceptions, expressions – I continue the affirmative dialogue habitus-habitat.

### **Actions**

Certain actions have taken on symbolic value in this project.

Walking. Jill Chism undertook the 57km 'Wet Tropics – Great South Walk'. Her artworks proceed from this experience. Walking along these paths through the national parks can be a meditation – a simple repetitive exercise, focusing body and mind while also relaxing them, bringing them into close relation and creating heightened awareness. While walking, sounds and smells become part of the foreground of visually dominated perception and a deeper feeling of the landscape emerges. Chism constructed a series of arrows, each time in different materials – in sticks, in pine needles, in dung, and so on. A symbol of direction and deferral, literally made over again, mirroring the relationship between 'knowing the path' and 'walking the path'.

Gathering. Through walking, being in the landscape is made active. Jill gathered rubbish on her journey and reformed the bits and pieces into temporary artworks, describing contours in the ground, circling rocky outcrops. Removing the rubbish is a real service to the environment – and these artworks restore respect.

Observing. Observation lies at the core of the National Parks experience and the habitus-habitat dialogue. Glen Skien recorded the bird-life he observed in the Eungella National Park in the Mackay Highlands. His artwork *Eungella* is a collection of unique bird profiles collaged upon individual tags detailing the

date, time and location of the sighting as well as the species of bird. The artwork testifies to a wealth of knowledge and experience which the artist must have accumulated over years, but it is also a humble homage to creatures which he so obviously admires. They are portraits of a fellow artist kind – singer/dancer/craftworker – and the habitus-habitat dialogue resonates in this reflection.

Writing. Glen Skien and Jill Chism were diarists, recording their experiences and making the act of recording part of an art practice. In this way they observed both the environmental habitats and their own habitus - that invisible framework which 'makes coherence and necessity out of accident and contingency.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Thoughts**

The diaries of Chism and Skein are records of the artists' thoughts and thought processes enabling us to share their journeys and experiences through the medium and method of language. Language is, of course, that collective inherited structure and the stuff from which the habitus is formed. Within our efforts to communicate are the mechanisms of inculcation and appropriation which work to reproduce language as an objective structure (reality if you will). The artist also makes an effort to go beyond or before language, into an abstraction of thought itself.

Marion Drew's separate and solitary visits to sites on each of the Great Walks create remarkable photographic records of place-time, linking individual artists journeys within a visual and speechless meta-journey. These images become another layer within the generative schema of the Habitus-Habitat project.

Under the surreal glow of artificial light, Marion Drew's night-time scenes are auratic. The long exposures reveal plays of light that are also flows of time, so that, for example, streaming water becomes a zone of glowing diffusion. This image treatment is at once encompassing and alienating – we feel drawn into a site-specific moment, a heightened sense of 'placement', while equally acutely becoming aware of the 'other', of the living presence of an eco-system within and without the penetrative presence of light.

Shane Fitzgerald's photographs are made entirely from light. He does not photograph 'anything', any object as such, but works solely with the medium of light (which is of course the medium proper to photography and to the organic, physiological process of seeing). From his virtual projections of colour, light and shadow emerge patterns and forms which resemble landscapes. His images could be microscopic views of bacteria, details of surfaces such as skin or leaves, or macroscopic views of the sky, the sea or even the universe. The fact that they are none of these, arrests us in the (automatic) effort of naming, deciphering and representation, suspending the habitus as it were, and locating a still point of wonder. The projective imagination, the play of light on the back of the retina during waking or sleeping, still immersed in the habitus, part of its universalising mediation, but organic and abstract, always open to interpretation.

### **Perceptions**

While Shane Fitzgerald's photographs are abstract and removed, his direct engagement with the Whitsundays is evident in his video artwork. Chartering a helicopter, Fitzgerald filmed an aerial view of the tropical rainforest stretching into the sea over peninsula and islands. The experience of flying makes us conscious of the active nature of seeing, a seeing-thinking which is perception. The shifts in perspective and the encompassing birds-eye view are edited together with the still moments of his photographs in a sensorial abstraction. The relationship between seeing and thinking which is perception, evokes the habitus as a shared imaginary.

Each artist's journey is unique, their experience and expression different, and yet they exist in a relation of homology – of diversity within homogeneity – as interlocking pieces of a multidimensional jigsaw. In Jill Chism's final artwork, her practice of gathering became one of layering, fitting the aspects of her journey into a relational grid. The habitat is full of multiple life-paths intersecting and interfering with one another, just as an individual's habitus is also a decentred complexity.

Brian Robinson has taken a panoramic photograph of Blencoe Falls and printed it at large scale. He has then mounted the print and carved into it another design. The two-dimensional print with its awesome three-dimensional view becomes a sculptural relief work, Robinson making evident the homology of habitus – from place to image, print to motif, actual to virtual and back again in a perceptual economy of recognition. Robinson also abstracted environmental elements into free-standing sculptures, and covered them in black lace, creating, quite literally, a synthetic awareness.

Craig Walsh's work also reveals the homology of habitus, but not through a collaged layering of connection and translation, but rather through a simple and dramatic transposition. Is there a more vivid way to depict the immersive experience of habitat than by becoming a food source? Craig and fellow artists filmed a leech feeding on blood from his ankle - the leech gradually swelling until, completely engorged, it dropped to the floor. As an artwork, Craig's skin is edited out and the leech is projected large-scale so that it appears to be sucking on the gallery walls. Through this simple act of transposition, the artist's body moves from habitat to habitus, from a real link in the food chain to a virtual canvas for cultural and institutional production.

Walsh by-passes subjective experience and the inscription of his individuality. He portrays an equation based on use-value, where his body is merely a host, a vehicle for the reproduction of another species and of the dispositions of his own conditioning. After the leech has fallen, the gallery wall bleeds, and the material conditions of existence are made plain.

### **Expressions**

There is more to the reproduction of habitus and habitat than transposition. Reproduction is not blind copying, but is itself subject to the purposive forces of evolution. And these forces are different again to a determinism, because always correlational. The habitus and the habitat are both orientating, actively remaking themselves as the journey unfolds to reveal the world sensibly to us. Artworks can be part of this sensible revelation. A site-specific artwork becomes an expressive intervention, an orientation and limit within which we can perceive.

Fiona Foley and fellow artists together wrapped a decayed pier on Fraser Island, McKenzie Jetty, in red tape. Red tape is symbolic of the legal and bureaucratic processes threatening to strangle the Wondunna Clan's native title claim to this area of Fraser Island. Stretching around the weather-worn structure, the artwork seems to announce danger, the flaring lines of red stark against the white sand. As if the site of an accident, another break-through bleeding from an old wound, we feel its warning reorienting and redirecting us.

On the other side of the compass, the site-specific artwork of Liz Woods, *Princesse Kondillia*, appears not as a warning but a beckoning. A section of forest path through the Sunshine Coast Hinterland walk, was covered in an ornate decorative pattern – a stencilling of white chalk dust which lasted only one hour. The remaining photographic records are moving. It is as if the work fell like snow and settled into this design – as an echo of the intricate natural designs that permeate the forest. But it is not – instead it is an artwork, a human expression. The photograph creates a sense of infinity, a feeling that the pattern may stretch on forever; and a sense of joy, that to walk this path is not just a matter of duty or a practical necessity or even a meditation, but it may be a creative revelation. It is beckoning and we may not be strangers to beauty and belonging.

### **End notes**

1 Bourdieu, Pierre, 1977, *Outline Of A Theory Of Practice*, Translated by Nice, R., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.95.

2 Bourdieu, Pierre, 1977, p.87.