

A Pathway to Truth about Self

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A little over 10 years ago, my Nan died of cancer. She'd left me a trunk which I opened 10 years later, and in which she had placed her travel journals. My Nan and I were close and re-reading her journals with my life experiences as an adult, was an event I found, as in her life, educational. Reading her journals, I began to consider the way my Nan portrayed herself. For the first time, I read her journals acknowledging her as the writer with something to say, rather than simply gathering information from her journals about Australia and the landscape which was how I saw them when I was younger. I also, and more importantly, saw her for the first time, not the way I portrayed her, not the way society wanted her to be seen, but as she showed us she was, and I suspect ... in the way she wanted to be seen and remembered.

My Nan managed to portray some complex aspects of herself through her 30 years of journal keeping. Over time I could see her inconsistencies, her lack of constancy, but rather than see them as faults, failings or weaknesses, I acknowledged them as being part of a living, changing, doing and being person - a person transcending the societal expectations for her age, sex and situation, and as an individual embracing a self of her own making. I too, now question the expectations aimed at me and my responses to them, and begin to question, my decisions or lack of, which contribute to who I make the choice to be.

When I began this research, I thought I would follow in my Nan's footsteps and re-travel her journeys through her journals. I thought by engaging with the places she visited and creating journals of my own, some form of dialogue could be continued between us. I did find a dialogue, a cognitive one, which was far truer to our relationship than sharing our knowledge of places. This dialogue has been the impetus for exploring the concept of 'self'. Through the power of story through her journals, Nan was able to convey an understanding of herself, which has driven me to consider, in this fast-paced, busy, online world, how I would portray my, self.

Confining a person to a single aspect and saying that 'this is self', is a challenge. It often presents a single view and a constant one, which is often desirable in society, as it provides reliability, sameness and consistency, but may not be ideal as a person. Realistically, the concept of 'self' falls along numerous continuums, encompasses many theories, and crosses many fields – and is considered conceptually, theoretically and in nuanced ways, dependent on the specific field from which it is being viewed. The concept of self for some can be simplified – but, it is not simple. By attempting to clearly define self, the understanding of self becomes limited. Once self is viewed as having a changing nature, one is acknowledging that the dynamics of society which are pushed in towards self, can also be pushed out, back into society (Coats, 2012) by the self.

Transmodernism utilises modern and postmodern concepts in a space which, can be explained as "... valid modern ideas [being] kept but ... transformed by being placed in a new understanding or context, and also transcended by the addition of an explicit transcendent framework. This transcended framework may be clearly religious, or possibly

spiritual in a general sense, or possibly idealistic." (Vitz & Felch, 2006, p. 205). This transcendence moves beyond a position of autonomy or, helplessness in an undefinable abyss to a framework which "... transforms, transcends, and transects the modern and the postmodern self." (Vitz & Felch, 2006, p. 205). The transmodern self with the body as the centering principle is a self which grows from a place of continual change, and presents "... a vision of the self as a constructed coherence, self-aware and self-reflexive, but also culturally indebted and embedded and fully embodied ... thoughtful and critical[ly] responsive to our histories, our social stories, and our bodies." (Coats, 2012, p. 85). The transmodern self while existing within and acknowledging society is a continually changing self, accessed via individual pathways towards a truth (Luyckx, 1999). This truth unlike truths which came before, is not owned by religion or a hierarchy, but remains unowned although affected by the culture one lives within (Luyckx, 1999). The complexities and conceptualisations of self are continually changing and move, not necessarily progress, from the known to the unknown. Self acknowledges from modernity "the striving for meaning beyond self, the desire for coherence, the push for freedom," (Coats, 2012, p. 81) while knowing simultaneously the real limits of the body, relationships, language and culture (Coats, 2012).

For me, the contemplation of the death of my Nan, began a questioning of what was left behind and what it said about her. Questions that began me thinking around who she really was, what she did, what she left behind and ultimately what I will leave behind and say about myself. Through this questioning, I realised that complexity of self, is at the heart of my understanding of self. Rather than presenting a neat single and unified self to the world, that is constant, it is important that I acknowledge the many aspects of who I am. The challenge for me lies in presenting a non-static concept in a static form.

My-self, is being told as a story through multiple voices. Two voices are represented in writing and tell the story of children and toads in Far North Queensland through both picturebook and exhibition simultaneously. While they tell a story which is easier to read on



Figure 1: Karen Argus, 2015, *There was a Long Dark Hole*, triptych, 3 x 1.83m (h) x 1.2m (w), collage and paint on canvas

the surface, they also suggest aspects of who I am. Additionally, the materials used, tell further nuances and add depth to that story while the techniques also tell something more of self. The use of collage is deliberate, the materials used were deliberately something else before they were used, and this also says something about who I am, who I have become and

what I exist within. Coats (2012) refers to two aspects of creating as a single entity in my mind, but which for me, are quite distinct: materials and technique or method. Coats (2012) sees the shaping of pieces for collage by artists like Eric Carle, what I would refer to as material use, as “their concern [being] mostly to create forms and colours, and textures that suggest the things they are trying to represent,” (Coats, 2012, p. 86). In my work, the cutting and forming of shapes from the dreams and ideas represented in childhood paintings, makes a point about the way that society has played a role in forming my, self and provides me with an opportunity to show this shaping by tearing and cutting the material. What is then created with those parts and pieces, the techniques used, say something more. Coats (2012) refers to the works of other collage artists who “create pictures that are more than the sum of their parts ... [who] call attention to the materiality of their subjects, to the ways that our worlds are composed by an overlap of found objects, everyday experiences, and trace memories,” (Coats, 2012, p. 86). Another layer to this self is the use of the picturebook and exhibition formats.

A picturebook is a “social, cultural and historical document” (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2010, p. 1), as well as, a text that cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which it is constructed (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2010). Throughout the twentieth century the picturebook was an artifact of culture that contained visual images and words (Kiefer, 2010) and was predominantly in a book format. The most obvious changes which have occurred are more recent, and revolve around the physical makeup and the type of audience that responds to them (Kiefer, 2010). Less obvious, but equally altered has been the generation of meaning structures, through and at times beyond, the interaction of both text and image, image, or text alone. Picturebooks, have a variety of formats and come in modern, postmodern and now, transmodern forms. The transmodern acknowledging the embeddedness of the self in larger cultural systems and indebted to both, the modern and postmodern. So while postmodern picturebooks, are ever changing, with the potential to “break boundaries, abandon linear chronology, emphasise constructedness and intermingle and parody ‘genres’” (Watson, 2004), the transmodern demonstrates an “assembled quality, its indebtedness to history and social systems, its material embodiment, and its challenge to reach beyond itself and find meaning and fulfillment” (Coats, 2012, p. 87). “Picturebooks and their readers exist in a world of many narrative options.” (Mackey, 2008) and within these options come both the tacit and explicit awareness of conventions and expectations. So, expanding these conventions, sees the exploration of my work into picturebook text, in the exhibition format - beyond pages designed for a book being placed on exhibition walls - towards a blurring of the forms and formats of both picturebook pages, as artwork collages and sculpture in an exhibition form.

By taking the text into an exhibition format, the confines of the book are extended and the text enters a space which merges the expectations and conventions of both picturebook text and exhibition, where viewers look at the picturebook text with the expectation of seeing art, and view art with the constructedness of picturebook conventions. Every exhibition harbours an idea - and the ideas that underlie the spaces may be widely different as to their nature and objectives (Kossman, Mulder, & den Oudsten, 2012). In this case, the union of words, pictures and space, picturebook and exhibition conventions, along with the combination of art practice and materials – all work to form complex narratives and in turn complex representations of self. Through these collages (Figure 1 & 2) the construction of the narrative is revealed visually, materially and cognitively. While an exhibition is a narrative unfolding in space and time, and as a medium it distinguishes itself from other narrative formats in as far as the visitor, viewer, or reader, physically moves through the space

(Kossman 2012), the exhibition brings with it conventions, but also options. The nature of an exhibition is that the viewer can move about freely. They may cover the route quickly or slowly, attentively or hastily, or focused on a particular interest. The viewer may crouch in order to discover detail that elude others, or look up - and by walking through link separate scenes to form a narrative chain (Kossman, 2012). While designed as a linear route, which is the picturebook text where a linear chronological narrative unfolds – complexity exists in the layers. This narrative isn't written in one voice – but is a multi-voiced narrative, which looks at different ways to view the same story but also ways of expressing various aspects of self.



Figure 2: Karen Argus, 2015, *I Wait*, triptych, 3 x 1.83m (h) x 0.6m (w), collage and paint on canvas

The narrative that forms the chronological component of this exhibition is written from life, an experience of teaching Prep to Grade 3 students in a small school in North Queensland. The narrative recounts an event which occurred multiple times at school, each time it rained. Outside the classroom was a large tree and at the bottom of the tree, going down into the roots was a hole – a long dark hole and inside the hole were toads – if you believed the students, there were thousands of them. Some of the narrative is written, some of it is understood through image and social meaning, but some is also acknowledged in space. What becomes evident is that an exhibition is more than simply items on display – the walk emphasizes a connectedness, an interrelatedness amongst the parts and the person. The work in this case could be presented in two different spaces, simply, and with a voice in each space. But each voice also represents an aspect of my, self - and within my person they occur together ... not as separate entities – they are layered around and at times upon each other. This layering presents the essentials and the details across the various mediums – some

of which are digested more easily than others (Kossman, 2012). As individual pieces, the works are made up of layered narrative fragments – and these layers control and structure the density of information – all which add to the complexity of understanding – adding sounds and flavours that enhance or oppose one another. Out of these pieces the viewer composes their own story – a story that is the mix of their experiences within the exhibition space, and those external to it (Mulder, 2012). As the exhibition medium allows you to accommodate several variants of the same narrative simultaneously, the challenge is to provide each viewer, with unexpected views on the subject (Kossman, 2012; Mulder, 2012).

This research is a work in progress. As I move towards combining experimental works with those more established or considered – as I learn more about concepts, and apply that knowledge to my understandings visually and theoretically – and, as I journey creating my own narrative of self, combinations of self, become apparent. These understandings are varying narratives with tensions between the personal, professional, social, imagined and the real. It is an understanding of self, that subscribes to a view that each individual converges toward an un-owned truth, where there is active tolerance, and all are equally positioned to decide their common future (Luyckx, 1999). It's a work in progress because I can't quite tell you what self is, but I do see it differently to a developmental view where I shed my childhood to become a teen, my teen to become an adult – but rather, take them with me always. Relishing the inconstancy of still loving the rush of riding my bike down a steep hill, with writing an academic paper, the challenge of playing a game of basketball with drawing alone in the quiet, to paying bills and spending time with family.

As I explore in more depth concepts of picturebook, exhibition, structure and purpose and as I grapple with combining creative and professional responses with professional and personal understandings, experiences and learnings, I continue to explore materials, play with methods, read, document and remain open to the changing thoughts and ideas that arrive. Not working towards an improved understanding of self, but some understanding of self nonetheless – which will in all likelihood remain inconstant and changing. I continue to work reflectively, reflexively and responsively through the challenge of whether this picturebook exhibition will be able to convey the complex understandings I have of self.

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