

Topping, Jane (2011) Something more than breakfast. [Artefact]
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Something More Than Breakfast

In a speech given “here and there in 1994”¹ and reproduced in the essay collection *Curious Pursuits*², novelist Margaret Atwood proposes an essential difference between life and art with recourse to an anecdote. Describing a play performed by her five year old daughter and her friend:

“The play opened with two characters having breakfast. This was promising -- an Ibsonian play perhaps, or something by G.B. Shaw? [...]

The play progressed. The two characters had more breakfast. Then they had more. They passed each other the jam, the cornflakes, the toast. Each asked if the other would like a cup of tea. What was going on? Was this Pinter, perhaps, or Ionesco, or maybe Andy Warhol? The audience grew restless. “Are you going to do anything except have breakfast?” we said. “No,” they said. “Then it isn’t a play,” we said. “Something else has to happen.”

Atwood’s inference is that art needs to be concerned with something other than, *more than*, the recreation of reality in order to be meaningful. But concerned with what? This is a pertinent question and one which may invoke considerable angst. The anxiousness and concern that one’s work should somehow be something *more than* permeates the internal life of the artist. How can we, as artists, make things that are deemed valuable or worthwhile (or even interesting) to the wider world, yet simultaneously vocalise, through the work, a state of urgency, of vitality? How can we, for instance, make the elemental relevant or the political poetic? How can we speak from both within ourselves and to and for others?

The artists exhibiting here, in a culmination of their time on the MA in Contemporary Fine Art course at The University of Cumbria yet also at the beginning of their artistic lives, all succeed in confronting the issue of *more than* within their work by seeking to transcend material or narrative boundaries and to speak with their audience in a poetics of their own devising.

Take, for instance, the intrusion of a new building in a space previously uninhabited by brick or glass. The purpose of the building is noble – to archive and allow access to the history of the area. Yet in its creation, the building has inadvertently instigated a daily tragedy: the death of local birds. Perhaps this curiosity seems unimportant when compared to the moral certainty of the building’s purpose, yet are these little deaths a reasonable price to pay? More than recording a phenomenon, this artist builds poetry from disaster, making us complicit by highlighting the spectacular beauty each tiny death leaves behind.

Can the instinctual love of a material, say glass, be utilised in order to express

¹ Atwood, Margaret *Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems Of Female Bad Behaviour* □ *In The Creation Of Literature*. 1994. Online. Gifts of Speech, Available <http://gos.sbc.edu/a/atwood.html>. 16 August 2011.

² *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing*, 2005, Virago Press.

the artist's dismay at the unthinking destruction and quiet loss of a local cinema, a place of no small importance to the community and yet driven into a state of heartbreaking disrepair via the interests of commerce and with little regard for the desires of the community itself? This work is more than the material at its heart; it is one artist's call to arms.

What if the tragedy is personal, familial? How can the experiences of one woman speak to, or for, the experiences of all? The potent theme of relationships between the sexes is interrogated here via a personal lexicon of symbolic tropes. In a world in which women are fish out of water; flaccid, docile, even dead and men are stalking, staring crows, can we hope to reconcile difference and disparity, transcend (en)gendered stereotypes and create a place of dignity and mutual companionship? Crucially this artist implores us to strive beyond the straightjacket of societal expectations.

Curiosity and the seductive power of technology might draw us to the light emanating from a hole in a wall, but were the scenes beyond merely a reflection, we would not linger for long. Instead our eyes become eager to understand the seemingly improbable and to wonder at the possibility of this apparent magic. More than simply a series of alternative worlds, this artist poses questions around the containment of narratives and offers us beauty beyond our ken.

The anxiety that is, rightly, felt by artists to contribute something more than mere mimesis is not the exclusive worry of artists alone. Yet it is increasingly felt by artists, particularly in a world in which immediate and blatant social relevance of artistic practice is fore grounded over the intellectual value inherent in research of this kind.

In a recent issue of Frieze magazine³, Dominic Eichler highlights this anxious state of being:

“The right to devote time and energy exclusively to making art is still widely considered the epitome of freedom, a great privilege that does, however, bring more responsibilities than tangible rewards. Thus the question of how to live – in the broadest ethical and political sense – is deeply embedded in art and in the way it is received.”

By constantly demanding that their work, in Atwood's terms, is more than breakfast, these artists signal that their future artistic lives are not to become simple generators of personal satisfaction. Instead their work transcends medium specificity and subject matter to operate in an egalitarian and socially inclusive manner. Here the personal is political⁴ and may even offer succor to our communal, often unutterable anxiousness.

Jane Topping 2011

³ Eichler, Dominic *It's Complicated*, Frieze, Issue 136, January - February 2011

⁴ A reference to the seminal feminist text: Hanisch, Carol *The Personal is Political*, 1969. Online. Available <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html> 16 August 2011