Introduction: The Art of the Real

KERI GLASTONBURY AND ROSALIND SMITH

The following papers were originally presented at *The Art of the Real: National Creative Non-fiction Conference*, hosted by Newcastle University's Writing Cultures research group in May 2008. The conference had two related strands, critical and creative, and essays by creative practitioners of non-fiction have been published separately as a special issue of *TEXT*. This is not to say, however, that the essays collected here are distinct from those works by creative practitioners, particularly in their use of form and in their meta-textual concerns with writing the real. While their dominant interest in the art of the real lies in the works of others, these critical essays also include subjective, experiential and practice-based engagements. All are concerned with ways in which 'the real' can be approached, interpreted and read, and the attendant problems that these textual representations of an order outside the symbolic create.

In the genres that deal with representations of the real, such as biography and autobiography, true crime and history, poststructuralism has problematised any straightforward representation of experience. Common to these genres now is the way in which fact and fiction, act and observation appear like one another. As Mark Seltzer comments, a text within one of these genres 'marks or irritates the distinction between real and fictional reality, holding steadily visible that vague and shifting region between truth and falsity where belief resides'(2). The papers presented at the conference were consistently concerned with this construction of belief as a way of making convincing claims to truth. However, the ways in which belief was imagined or invoked differed according to genre, form and period, as well as disciplinary convention. The three essays published here reflect some of that diversity of approach to representations of the real, as well as the broad range of types of text under examination.

Ross Gibson begins his essay with an analysis of the haiku's intimate and visceral effects upon the reader, teasing out through these texts broader debates between politics and aesthetics also being played out in the recent critical dialogues between the new historicism and the new formalism. He highlights formal representations of the real, in their most refined and ineffable instance in the haiku, as a way of accessing the 'often covert connectivity that subtends and really arranges the world'. These texts become conduits to focussed observation, triggers to reading below the surface and outside the moment, in a practice in which form and context, art and the real, exist in productive

tension. The extract, or 'the aesthetic of the detail', incomplete and gesturing outwards, is key to this process of interpretation and becomes in this essay a way of negotiating modernity.

Cameron Muir's article examines the Burrendong Dam as 'a product of ideological and cultural desires', desires that shape the way we perceive larger national questions of place and environmentalism. It traces a cultural and environmental history of the Macquarie Marshes and their management, from the building of the Burrendong Dam to its present state of neglect and failure. Harnessing the narrative resources of creative non-fiction, Muir uses the story of the dam as an example of the ways in which the humanities might be employed to interrogate conventions, assumptions and divisions such as that between nature and culture.

Patricia Pender's essay also addresses an overlooked cultural icon, but one from nineteenth-century literary history. She examines the figure of Dorothy Wordsworth, provocatively reading her journals as love-letters through Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*. In this move, her essay constructs the revisionist, desiring Dorothy of Frances Wilson's recent literary biography as both the subject of her own desiring writing and as the object, and measure, of different cultural investments in modes of the feminine.

From haiku to tourist brochure, the Burrendong Dam to Dorothy Wordsworth, these essays show the real's provocative place in creative and critical practice. The real becomes a mode both of aesthetic and of political inquiry, as well as a way of marking and tracing genealogies of aesthetic and political investment. These essays share an impulse to convert specific instances of interpreting the real into ways of addressing broader questions of heuristic practice, ones that make their way back into the realm of lived experience. The tension between art and the real here, therefore, produces new ways of making sense of the text's relationship with the world.

Dr Keri Glastonbury teaches creative writing at the University of Newcastle and completed a Doctorate in Creative Arts at the University of Technology, Sydney in 2004, where she previously taught cultural studies and writing. She is a widely published Australian poet and has received numerous grants from the Australia Council, including the BR Whiting Residency (Rome). In 2009 she has an Asialink Literature Residency in India. Keri is also an editor of the publishing company Local Consumption Publications and poetry editor for the literary magazine Overland.

Dr Rosalind Smith is a Senior Lecturer and the English convenor at the University of Newcastle. She has published widely on gender, genre and politics in the English Renaissance, including a monograph with Palgrave Macmillan published in 2005:

Sonnets and the English Woman Writer, 1560-1621: The Politics of Absence.
Her current research is on true crime writing in contemporary Australian literature and Renaissance England.

Work cited:

Seltzer, Mark. *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2007.