

## **ART Unlocking Fear: Exploring New Activism in Australia - Using the Art Installations and Interventions of Freya Pinney**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper grew from an indepth interview and pschyoauto/biography with Brisbane based artist Freya Pinney. In large part this paper introduces Freya's art activism to a wider audience interested in the role of art in a time of terror. Underpinning this paper is an innovative method of interview including a shared analysis of the transcript offering a rich focus on the interconnections between micro individual biography and macro social experience. Three themes emerge from the rich data of this interview, collaboration with the transcript and writing of the paper. First there is the wider context of community fear in the 'Howard Era'. Second there is the particular ground on which Freya's work thrives as a challenge to existing sociological and psychology accounts of identity wherein binary oppositions of belonging and exclusion dominate discussions of community panic. In particular we explore Holistic and Artistic examinations of the spaces 'inbetween', which might render visible new spaces for national identity not dependant on nostalgia, belonging or shared experience. In this paper we argue that Freya's installations *Insecurity I* and *II* also reflect a new feminist activism transforming shared cultural fears through individual phenomenology and bodily awareness of emotion and reaction. Third as an 'artist under surveillance' Freya Pinney's art and activism signals new directions in art and politics for a younger generation of Australians who are creating their own activist legacy after the Babyboomers and in a time of surveillance and fear.

The inspiration for this paper grew from our existing research interests, supervision relationship, and our desire to rework standard in-depth interview methods and data mining techniques, so as to include collaborative analysis and writing and enhance the nexus between teaching and research. In its existing form a Minichielloian (1995:220) in-depth interview file begins with a diagram of the interview site, and

cover page. The file then proceeds with three columns with the interview transcript in the central column, where the interviewee is central. The left margin is professional development and reflects on the interviewer's role, strengths and weaknesses in listening and asking probing questions. The right margin identifies themes, coding categories, key words and ideas for further reflection. A series of research interview transcripts usually includes an additional personal and analytical file representing a chronological diary recorded as the study evolves (Minichiello et al. 1995:224), which was not relevant in this case of a single interview transcript. It was replaced with interviewer and interviewee analysis of the transcript and joint drafting and writing of this paper to consciously expand the impact of the interviewee and breakdown the research separation of object and observer. In part this method came from Freya's artistic engagements with the power of the text and the engagement of the audience in surveillance.

So we begin with an exploration of the wider debates on cultures of fear and the link between macro politics and personal experience. Brennan in his examination of collective trauma argues that:

The present state of our world and the war in Iraq, with Australia being a member of the 'Coalition of the Willing', provides immediate challenge to those of us who seek a harmony of mind body and soul. Each of us lives in a social matrix where relationships are easily fractured. Our world of meaning is also fractured. The individual's capacity for finding a stillpoint, their centredness...is often uncertain, ungrounded or non-existent. (Brennan 2003:24)

However, what strikes us about Australian collective trauma, is that few of us have been directly traumatised. And significantly, those who have been individually stressed and socially fractured are most often marginalised from this collective sense of fear of terrorism. Thus, lying largely outside of this shared sense of collective fear are those most traumatised. Indigenous Australians who suffered the fracturing of stolen generations have been largely unable to convey to the wider population the fear of white controlled institutions of education, health, family services and prisons that direct contact and ongoing trauma has produced. The treatment of detainees and their consequent mental illhealth has only sustained media attention and wider support where Australian citizens have been unwittingly involved.

Oddly then our fear arises at a distance to trauma, filtered by the media and manipulated by governments particularly for electoral gain. Thus Maddisson (2004:22) notes that at the heart of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a sense of disconnection from the society in which they are located and a lack of a sense of belonging. However, as a nation we seem to be suffering instead from some yet to be identified 'low trauma high fear' social disorder. For this reason within this introduction we have moved to thinking about the role of 'fear reactions' in producing a shared sense of belonging.

At the heart of actual trauma is the problem of integrating into our system of meaning experiences that others around us cannot relate to (Maddison 2004: 24), whereas, at the centre of fear reactions, are stereotyped unrealistic projections and transference. In classic psychoanalysis first order, or the most common, projections between counselor and client are familial – such as the 'good father' or 'bad mother' and are focused on authority and rejection, love and hate (Sherwood 2004). It appears that projections at a collective level are more likely to circulate around race, religion and war with core narratives of oppression and victimisation. In both individual and collective cases of projection the emotional reaction and physical response is wildly out of proportion to the real threat or risk inherent within the situation (Sherwood 2005:13-14).

Noticing our collective hyperarousal around terrorism could open up new spaces for understanding our collective fear and our uncentred ungrounded and mistaken claiming of victimhood as if we shared a trauma. Australia Day 2006 saw a massive outpouring around our perceived 'lack of shared experience' and 'fear of difference' as a new and many-cultured nation. The Governor General suggested school children could learn the national anthem so as to promote a shared Australian identity. But for belonging to emerge sharing has to be relevant, and a turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century difficult to sing dated tune is pushing at the limits of relevance especially for school kids. What Freya's work encourages the audience to notice is that belonging really grows from two places, shared experiences, which is the quick fix leaders demand, and careful integration of experiences and beliefs we do not have in common, which is harder. However taking the time to really experience differences we fear, creates a space inbetween incommensurate differences to build shared experiences and ties of belonging that can be sustained.

It is from within this context of complexity of experience that we turn especially to the work of Freya Pinney and her psychoautobiography of art and intimacy in a time of fear. At its heart the interview transcript is a narrative linking a personal journey and a political era through art.

...well I am currently in a cross-cultural homosexual relationship with an Iraqi woman who considers herself to be a Muslim and the life I am in has a different types of relationships with the Arabic community. I have spent time in Middle Eastern countries with her family as well as in Australia.

And one of the most interesting experiences for me with that context has been experiencing textual isolation within a country where I am part of the dominant culture, so to explain that a little, to spend time perhaps up to two weeks at a time, immersed in the Arabic community in Sydney in which I might not hear anyone speak English for that entire time. By not necessarily engaging in public transport, or not attending general large supermarkets so to shop completely within the community itself, medical services within the community, traveling and spending time with family and extended community could mean that at times I might go without meeting anybody who has English as their primary language and with each other why would they bother? They don't have to engage in English.

So that was a really big experience for me experiencing I guess an 'aestheticisation of language' where language isn't just about meaning in terms of its translation, and body language of course is very important, but also just experiencing language as noise. (Freya Interview 2005)

Through her installations Freya seeks to explore the individual and intimate impact of the global trend toward increased surveillance, which has been a core response to the 'War on Terror'. We have all experienced the national campaigns to be 'Alert but not Alarmed' and to call the hotline to report unusual happenings we might have seen. This campaign, and its subtle training in what to look for and who to tell, has now filtered to the level of our everyday lives. Brisbane City Council buses now carry a photo of a backpack and the slogan 'A lost bag? Or something more sinister?' We are discouraged from thinking 'lost bag – how can I help to return it? Instead we favour fear of the unknown and encourage the reporting of difference.

Certainly, we know that for sometime now there are cameras through out our city, particularly in Brisbane. I can remember there was the large focus on the placement of cameras

throughout the mall. They were installed as part of a much larger policy relating to the regulation of public spaces in the inner city. I mean those sorts of surveillance mechanisms have been around in our communities for some time. But never before have people really considered what is being scrutinised or what is being put under surveillance. Until these large campaigns, which specifically related to how to report things, sent to individual households, with new notions of how to view what we are seeing.

Really it means that in our communities people reflect on rather than engaging in what is different or engaging in some new experience or when they hear a different language, being excited about meeting someone from a different culture. In fact they are being encouraged to report it as something that is unusual or new, report anything.

And it is a real shame because of what it will mean. I think people are interested to in fact engage in an understanding and getting to know and appreciate different people. Now they are far more likely to be fearful of it and therefore to report it. (Freya Interview 2005)

Surveillance in reaction to difference discourages us from really engaging with that difference or attempting to understand the experiences of others. It also uses fear reactions to manufacture consent. Hyperaroused fear prevents us ever questioning the dominant paradigm of terror that is everywhere, out there around the globe in an 'Axis of Evil'; within our own community as 'Something more Sinister' and in ourselves as a fear of difference.

Within this context, I consider the role of art to be engaging in a critical discourse in public spaces...Visual arts have the potential to create environments in which people can be exposed to confronting difference and engage with it on a personal level. For this reason there is great potential for creating positive cathartic experiences...allowing people to work through their fear of difference without reacting in terror. (Pinney 2005:2)

As key art events like the Sydney Biennale attest Australians like to see emerging artists as 'trail blazers, mavericks boundary riders' on the cutting edge of something new that could make a difference. Freya is instead immersed in something that is darkly dominant and impossible to get outside of or set a boundary to ride on its edge. So there is a most interesting socio-psychological element to her interest in surveillance, art and fear. To some extent this interview does suggest that there is a certain kind of personality and artist that risks sedition with questioning and

demanding something more of the audience than an aesthetic appreciation of beauty. However, there emerged even more strongly a personal narrative of being 'inbetween' and looking for a way forward from within shared cultural rift. Also this intimate discussion of personal experience reflects an intense awareness of a personal connection to this new era of terror and surveillance.

...partly it's also being exposed to other people's cultural experiences. And because it's an intimate relationship you get to know somebody else's way of thinking and you take the time to understand how their experiences of life have formed their identity. And for me experiencing what it means to be caught between cultures; and what racism, growing up in an everyday sense, means to a person's identity.

And how different and how much a text advantage your own identity formation has growing up when you are part of a dominant culture in a country when everything is textually very easy for you. And how much that contrasts with somebody else's experience.

And I guess to have empathy for that other experience but then to start to make sense for instance of how my own identity changes through that process and how my own cultural identity becomes displaced when I'm immersed within that kind of cultural environment, and I have to have a different role and I experience a different cultural identity that is neither part of the dominant culture that I am from, nor can it ever be part of the other culture that I am immersed in. But that is somewhere in the middle in that state of in-between. That my partner has had the same experience from a different perspective and that we are both put in the position of in-between simply because of our relationship, that can't have a formal role within either culture. (Freya Interview 2005)

To understand both how this experience is drawn into Freya's art installation and how she draws a meaningful link to the audience and the wider cultural war on terror we must introduce the second theme that emerges within the transcript of the interview – abject subjectivity and the horror of inbetween inside and out as a metaphor for the 'terror within and without'. The initial response of 'horror' arises in the actual art installation act of tongue writing on glass and on the flesh of another human body.

Felicity: So you have said that tongue writing is at once erotic and horrific, tell me what you mean?

Freya: I think that there is something kind of titillating about the notion of a tongue licking naked flesh. I think just the concept of that is the basis of so many porn films. So people have an erotic reaction to someone licking an intimate naked

body. But in fact seeing the point where through that process of licking, it is actually liquid coming out of the mouth onto the body and staining and marking that body, is actually quite horrific.

To see a close up spy camera feed of an enlarged tongue, acting, as it appears quite independent, of that body, and in fact almost controlling and leaving its residue on that body, is actually quite confronting.

And certainly the use of different kinds of liquids – so blues to reference blue biro and similarly red to reference red biro, but red simultaneously references blood. And some of the most identified, by an audience, as my most horrific work has in fact been working with red ink. Which in terms of the literary tradition I would think would refer to the amendment, the marking, the correction etc...But simultaneously red looks very much like blood. And is quite confronting in that sense of the tongue's process of actually writing.

The emotional response also arises from the 'confusion' of unreadable tongue writing. The audience is caught without translation inbetween the text and making sense of it, while having some other points of reference such as colour to construct meaning and a new shared experience.

Well I think that putting my text, that it is at once erotic and horrific, under surveillance speaks very much about my experience in a cross-cultural relationship. Where it's your relationship that of course is erotic and sustaining at a personal level; but in fact, the surveillance of that by community, particularly within an ethnic community where homosexuality isn't very much accepted at all, you know you are under surveillance, people do watch you. And there is certainly a lot of fear associated with who might find out within the community and what that might mean in terms of shame. A person staying within the community, having a friend to dinner has to do with their sexual identity and generally that is to do with their marriage and their children. So having a role while in a cross-cultural homosexual relationship can prove difficult.

...So I came to a natural place...tongue writing, as a gestural diary of impermanent traces, and putting it under surveillance - I was doing that before I realised the relevance in terms of my cross cultural homosexual relationship. But I think it does hold relevance, in that if you think about your own cultural identity... If you were in a heterosexual relationship that at a certain point you might choose to get married and at a certain point you might choose to have children...Those kind of choices aren't as seamless and invisible in a homosexual relationship and therefore there isn't automatic kind of social

roles for a partner within that community. You know you can't be identified as 'father' or as 'grand-father' or the 'son-in-law' so to speak, it is far more complex.

So to engage in that full sense of family, to have a cultural exchange with in-laws, you have to be able to fit their cultural reference points in order to have any meaningful exchange. Which means you have to leave some of your own fixed cultural identity at the door, and enter into their space in order to have meaningful relationships that aren't just annoying and confronting and horrific and illusionary.

Our third and overarching theme, which this paper itself plays with, is the text under surveillance. The wonderful thing about an interview transcript is that it places the spoken word under unusual surveillance. Oddly while the voice of the interviewee is paramount the scrutiny is most acute for the interviewer: the acute awareness of blundering down a blind alley with the wrong question or missing the key question that begs to be asked; listening to and then trying to type the vocal expressions and points of connection and disruption largely conveyed outside the spoken word.

Freya: ...So I came to the conclusion that people control their language, they control the conventions they write in a lived sense. So to re-engage in a sense of non-lived space I had to make language that I couldn't see as I was producing it. And that's what led to tongue writing as the only part of the body it was the only part of the body that I could use to produce language that I would have control over at the muscles and yet couldn't visually control it.

[break for lunch orders]

Felicity: So...to which artistic traditions does your practice of tongue writing relate?

It is interesting to select, reproduce and acknowledge a disordered section of the transcript. Spoken language has the advantage of being 'less controlled' ...Still hardly the best question in response to the previous answer. But Freya's next response to a question as to her current use of tongue writing is revealing.

At the moment I am working largely in a live art and video and installation context. I am really considering tongue writing as a foreign language. And placing that text under surveillance in performance and video installation objects. So working largely within a textual environment, recognising that I am working within a text, using the library as a locus of knowledge, thus contextualising the writing of text and placing it under surveillance.



So I work with multiple camera feeds of a live performance, often a spy camera and up to five other fixed cameras. To place every moment ... and angle of that performance under surveillance. And often inviting the viewers to be participants by putting me under scrutiny, photographing the process or engaging right up close, to scrutinise the performance as a text.

This places the audience within a most auspicious sensory and bodily experience inbetween things, in an aesthetically appealing state of confusion and abject horror, engaging in scrutiny while being under surveillance. From within this unusually aroused and centred place there can emerge a new awareness that surveillance does not equal security or automatically create certainty. At the same time states of uncertainty, difference and even horror or revulsion are not of themselves terrifying. Experiences of untranslatable difference are opened up to the potential for beauty and connection and sharing, while surveillance itself is scrutinised and questioned.

It has long been recognised within psychological treatments for panic disorder (Maddisson 2004) that to recover the individual trapped in fear reactions largely unrelated to any actual threat must build a new connection between body, mind and (at a risk of sounding naf) spirit. What is needed is bodily awareness of a physical state of repulsion, as well as mental awareness of negative self-talk that is stereotyped, catastrophised and disconnected from real interaction. Then too, they need their highest emotional and social resources for coping with the unknown.

Freya's art then offers the opportunity for cultural coping with over-reactions of fear when encountering difference. She allows us to become aware of and be in the spaces inbetween things that are different. Her installations invite the audience to ground and centre in their bodily feelings of repulsion and fear, and thoughts of difference, and moments of confusion, and recognise surveillance or ever more surveillance is not the solution. Art itself, like music at its best, and few other states of shared experience evokes a soul connection between the senses of the body, the engagement of the mind and the shared experience of participation. Thus it is uniquely able to bring into question the consent we give from a place of fear and the manufactured security we feel under surveillance.

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