

WHERE ARE MY FUCKING FLOWERS! LIFE, LAUGHTER AND DEATH IN THE WORK OF ISHKAR RICHARD

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Zen Marie reflects upon the work of his student Ishkar Richard and its challenge to traditional patterns and habits of mourning.

HOLDING BACK THE TEARS

It is singularly difficult to write about the work of an artist post-traumatic event. The difficulty is that readings of the work are usually dominated by the event. Traumatic, tragic, romantic or fatal events more than color meanings ascribed to such work – they become foundational.

To listen to the music of Nirvana implicitly refers back to Cobain's suicide and to think about Winehouse's phrasing cannot but call up her excess, overdose and untimely death. However, music is perhaps a little more flexible here. The lyrics of Cobaine and Winehouse are never just read, they are heard. Heard and danced to, with phrasing, melody, a crushing riff or an ecstatic bridge that takes us beyond narrative and interpretation. Music moves temporally and viscerally in a way that images do not. Or at least images do not do this obviously.

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I want to consider the work of Ishkar Richard in a way that goes beyond not only the context and narrative of his death, but also the strictures of the image and its interpretation. His work moves beyond obvious narrative implications as it seeks to commune with an elsewhere, an otherness, or a beyond which itself is difficult to locate and decipher, let alone to name.

Let me briefly sketch the narrative we are departing from. Ishkar's older brother Bivash Richard committed suicide on the 19th of June 2012. He was 23. Ishkar Richard committed suicide two years later, on the 1st of August 2014. He was 22.

I met Ishkar at the Wits School of Art when he was a second year student. It was my first year teaching at the school. I watched him move from animation to collage, from collage to painting and ultimately to large figurative sculpture and installation.

It was clear: this kid had chops!

The works that Ishkar made, especially in his third and fourth year of art school are almost impossible to read outside the death of Bivash. Looking at them retrospectively, it is as if they prefigured his own death. And yet in order to do justice to these works, ever more complex questions have to be asked.

MIND FUCK

The sculptural installation *Mind Fuck* shows a human figure covered in torn up notes from university textbooks. The shredded notes form a mound that is approximately human shaped. At least we imagine there to be a human figure inside



because of the protruding feet. The work exuded a kind of realism that worked to disarm the viewer. The first, immediate response being to question if there was a real human inside of the mound. Perhaps a student, consumed by the pressure of exams, the pursuit of knowledge, and the overwhelming need to accumulate information. After some time, watching for signs of life, comes the realization of the inanimacy of the object.

While a haunting and dark work, Ishkar's humor is nonetheless present here.

He showed this work twice, once on the Senate House Concourse, the ground floor of the building that services among other things the senior management offices of the University. It was here that I saw the unease with which staff and students approached the work. This unease turned strangely into laughter as more than one person remarked: “This is Wits pushing a student over the edge” - a not uncommon quip that riffs off the university’s catch phrase “Wits gives you the edge”. The work was not contextualized on the Concourse. It was not flagged as art. There was no title, just a pile of shredded text books with two takkie covered feet and jeans covered legs sticking out.

This was a work that deftly engaged in both the in which site it was shown (the university and its seat of power) as well as a personal narrative that was important, yet importantly not proclaimed or foregrounded. It floated in the mix, for those who knew, supporting but not dominating the work’s presentation.

Ishkar’s is a dark macabre kind of humor and one that is not shy of engaging with real and difficult material. It is through a head on engagement with anguish and the impossibility of understanding that Ishkar plays, using all the material and emotional resources at his disposal.

Surely this is a meditation on the recent death of Bivash? An attempt to gain access and seek answers to ultimately unanswerable questions of his brother?

In a sense Ishkar gives us a view into the answer that he came up with – it is a mind fuck. The living do not get the luxury of a satisfying commune with the dead. There is perhaps a different commune that

we do not understand or a commune that comes not from the dead, but is a projection by the living.

The reading of *Mind Fuck* in terms of the death of Bivash, satisfies me as little as it must have satisfied Ishkar.

The attempt to understand death is a futile occupation. Messages do not come back from the other side. At least not in his aesthetic practice nor in this so-called séance. It is the living, the practice of life and its attendant forms that speak here, not the dead.

To situate Ishkar’s final project exclusively as an attempt to understand death and reconcile with the dead, is to miss the complexity and ambition of his work. He was not merely attempting to obtain answers from the beyond – he was also playing a sophisticated albeit macabre game with the living. Implicit in this work was an institutional critique that was squarely lodged within the structure of higher education through the site in which he showed the work – he was blunting the edge of WITS.

Ishkar never attempted to *drown* this work, or any of his others in the narrative of death, at least not explicitly. I do not know if he ever did this in private, but in public he pushed away from locating the work as homage, or attempt at catharsis. He was much more astute. Shortly before his death, Ishkar was interviewed about his work. He described his experiences as as an art student as follows:

Doing a Fine Art degree is very much like trying to be a psychic medium. I’ve spent four years trying to convince myself and others that I can speak to the dead when the truth is I can’t even see the dead much less hold down a conversation. I think

this is true for anyone doing a degree in the arts, who work with things that I think are very difficult to quantify; I spent my first few years wishing for a textbook and some equations to solve but I eventually got used to not having these things.

(Interview with Layla Leighman: <http://10and5.com/2013/11/25/fresh-meat-ishkar-richard/>)

Here Ishkar shows a deft and efficient management of readings of his work that have the danger of reducing the work to the singularity¹ of death or the labor of mourning. He denies a reading of the work as a lament, as he enlarges his scope of engagement beyond *sight*, beyond the image towards the act of *conversation*.

The ineffable quality of making art, of going beyond rationality, coherence, sense or logic is clearly at stake here. He is interrogating fundamental epistemological questions: how we arrive at knowledge through the aesthetic. Ishkar is immersed in the paradox of having to enter the void while being expected to return and report back, to ‘paint a picture’ so that everyone else can ... achieve a moment of sublime excitement? In some ways – and not only in a romantic sense - this is seen as the function and role of the artist – to push beyond all boundaries and deliver sublime identification.

In this structure of the aesthetics of the sublime² it is crucial that we the viewers (or we the not-dead) are guaranteed the safety of remaining alive, at least for the moment. In this the sublime is that point at which we identify with the obliteration of self but with the safety of not being really at danger.

WHERE ARE MY FUCKING FLOWERS?

The work *Where are my Fucking Flowers*, again demonstrates Ishkar's morbid sense of humor and provocation. Having dug a hole in his garden, he puts his head into it, in an absurd, futile attempt to bury himself. The work, described as a performance, explores burial and the act of giving flowers.

Where are My Fucking Flowers he asks, as he attempts to crawl into a hole that is just not large enough. In this sense it could be read as a profane and confrontational attack on both death and mourning. But this is not all, or at least not the only commentary the work offers us.

Ishkar repeatedly used his own body in his life sized sculptures and performances. He assumed the position of the subject / object of this overwhelming and obliterating pressure. In this act of inserting himself as a placeholder for a contemplation of death, he was enacting a dance much in the way the trickster gods have done – like Eshu or Loki he plays, dances and teases with a recklessness that challenges the order and hierarchy of both the living and the dead. The trickster gods are always much more playful than the masters of death proper – compare them to Hades, Kali or Santa Muerte...

It is perhaps all too tempting to interpret *Mind Fuck* as a meditation on the death of Bivash and *Where are my Fucking Flowers* as a premonition of his own. Here we could extend the analysis to employ the temporal based narratological terms of analepsis and prolepsis; analepsis representing a referral to Bivash's death and prolepsis as an anticipation of his own.

However, both these time based narratological concepts are limited when thinking through death. Death exists outside time as it arrests and dismantles



the flow of living temporalities. Death deals with time anachronistically as it plays with figures of eternity and infinity. It is a singularity. Cobain, Winehouse, Hendrix, Joplin, Morrison and Basquiat will forever be 27.

DO WE EVER MORN FOR THE PERSON? OR IS IT JUST OURSELVES? MOURNING AS A METAPHOR FOR CRITICAL THEORY.

On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related. (Butler, 2004 22)

Whenever I go to a funeral, I am fascinated by the ritual of mourning: The shedding of tears in visible and dramatic ways, the intense signification of loss. Who are people crying for? I'm intrigued by people who do not have any close relationship with the dead person, they have not lost a lover a parent, child,

sibling, or relative that was very close or a friend that was important. Their lives are not going to be ruined by this death. Yet tears flow. Besides the form of the professional mourner, as present in many cultures and the political forms of mourning and solidarity in the anti apartheid struggle, there is something else at stake here. The tears are not for the dead, but for the body that produces them. The mourner mourns for the projected or real loss of those closest to them, for real parents, children, siblings etc. More than this the mourner weeps for himself or herself. For the imagined and terrifying death of the self. The shedding of tears here becomes a sign of vitality of resistance to death because the dead cannot cry.

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In this sense the act of mourning says much more about life and the living than it does of death and the dead. I find it difficult not to extend this, even if prematurely and speculatively, to an analogy with critical theory and the production of meaning.

Much as Spivak cautions us, the people or things we write about are often silenced in the theoretical act. What meaning we produce says more about ourselves, our interests, agendas, egos, desires and fears than it does about *the thing*. Mieke Bal also warns against this silencing of the ‘object’ in the writing of theory. As an antidote, she demands that objects are given the respect and the space to speak back to the concepts and theories that threaten to drown them in meaning.

The dead are a radical other that do not speak – at least not on their own. Others can speak for them or through them. This séance is predicated on speaking through the aesthetic production of the artists selected, through their work. But even here their work is silenced by interpretation – in this case, my interpretation. The interpretation of the mediums that speak and media that holds their message.

ENDNOTES

1 Physics: a point at which a function takes an infinite value, especially in space-time when matter is infinitely dense, as at the center of a black hole.

Mathematics: a point at which a given mathematical object is not defined or not “well-behaved”, for example infinite or not differentiable

2 I’m referring here to articulations of the sublime as an aesthetic category from Edmond Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*) to Emmanuel Kant (*Critique of Judgment*). While I don’t have the space to expand on this here, it would be worth further thinking through this category in terms of more recent work by De Man, Lyotard and Hal Foster.