

The Field: an essay by Alex Michon

'I see you like to read.'

*'Now and again,' Cath put her cup down. 'Most of these books belonged to my father and I've never read them, I just can't seem to let them go.'*¹

Readerly Apparatchiks

Resistance to reading is rife you are probably experiencing it at this very moment. You have picked up this (imposed) text and are hoping it may explain something about the exhibition you are about to view. *I should* read it you think, but I will do it later when I get home, I will read it with a cup of coffee, settle down and read it properly. But you won't, if you read it at all you will probably read it in transit, as a diversion from yet another monotonous journey across the city.

This reading resistance is not without justification. Barthes asserts that most texts are *readerly*, that is presented in a familiar traditional linear manner where the meaning is fixed and pre-determined. Readerly texts, he argues preclude any opening up to multiple meanings. They are merely the apparatchiks of a literary capitalism with the reader a mere bystander to the text's commercialised intent as disposable commodity to be read and discarded. By contrast, he considers *writerly* texts as those where the reader is in a position of control, and takes an active role in the construction of meaning, they are what Barthes describes as 'ourselves writing' where the reader is self consciously aware of the divergence between artifice and reality.²

'The question of fiction is first a question regarding the distribution of places'³

When considering the work of Gary O'Connor the reader/viewer is engaged in a journey through an altogether uncharted location, not easily definable as merely the space between writing and visual representation. The artist's aim is definitely not to illustrate his own text but more specifically to make work in response to it, in a non-linear interpretation...

The visual artist leaves his studio, he goes to the nearest café and pulls his current dog-eared paperback from this back pocket, he is on a break and he is reading a story. He is migrating through time and space; the novella is set in the Fens:

*'The sky out here is so big... This place is bewitching; it will steal your heart without warning'*⁴

The artist inhabits a diamantine plane; shards of mesmerizing fictive possibilities re-group and grope toward an as yet unknowable conclusion. Returning to his studio he realizes he is the author. The work begins.

Writing the Visual

In the olden days you could either be a visual artist or a writer, the two areas of practice operated in their own fields apparently independent of each other. But recently the lines between the two are increasingly blurring. O'Conner took an MA in Writing the Visual at Norwich School of Art and Design, a unique and relatively new course which allows artists

the 'opportunity to explore the dialogue between the practices of literature and the practices of the visual arts. It does so through both creative and critical writing with no prescribed outcome.'⁵

Just stay with that phrase for a while - Writing the Visual – how would that work? And then imagine the mirror image of that phrase, imagine it in your head without words – maybe that is what you are looking at right now?

'Art often functions as a hypertext, translating and transcoding information from one format to another'⁶

One way of understanding *The Field* is as series of meta narratives. First there is the novella itself, the unfolding story which is revealed through your own reading and turning of the pages. Then there is the installation, the *mise en scene* representation of that turning. And finally there is the metaphorical field itself, which becomes the unknowable zone linking the two, it is the place to which the artist returns 'spinning and falling'⁷ questioning whether it is happening at all. As if describing the creative process it is the place where he is not sure where he is going but where he trusts his instincts.

If Music Could Talk

There is a yet another dimension to *The Field*. O'Conner is a musician, has a bona fida band, gets up on stage, makes records, does the whole shebang. His love of music and genuine rock 'n' roll record collecting credentials are inter-woven through the narrative. Fan boy Gary's musical heritage plays an important role in the proceedings. Music is in his head, it comes up from the floorboards, he evokes musical signifiers like rosary beads, The Clash's *Bank Robber*, The Stone's *Sympathy for the Devil*, Devo, Pete Perrett of The Only Ones, Alice Cooper and even Harry Secombe all make an appearance. Music is the motor which drives the text and which obviously drives the artist too.

Out of Your Head

Didn't help really did it? In the end it was just a collection of words strung together ambiguously. Here and there you could maybe catch onto something that was interesting or mildly illuminating. But the exhibition that you have just seen or are about to see is first and foremost made up in your own head. You have seen the installation now read the book.

Alex Michon
April 2009

Written to accompany the publication of the novella The Field and exhibition of the same name at Transition Gallery by Gary O'Connor

¹ Gary O'Connor, *The Field*, 2009

² Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 1986, Hill and Wang, New York

³ Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2007, Continuum, Pg13

⁴ Gary O'Connor, *The Field*, 2009

⁵ Writing the Visual, course description, Norwich School of Art

⁶ *Altermodern* exhibition guide, Nicolas Bourriaud, 2009

⁷ Gary O'Connor, *The Field*, 2009