

Ruark Lewis

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## Ruark Lewis

Ruark Lewis is a Sydney-based visual artist and writer. He works in a wide range of media such as painting, drawing, installation, artists-books, performance, public art, theatre and audio-video works. Lewis was born in Sydney in 1960 and attended Sydney Boys High School. While there he became interested in pottery. His formal art studies were in Ceramics at the Sydney College of Arts. During this period Lewis came under the influence of avant-garde composer, David Ahern, and he became interested in an experimental realm that explored the relation between language, sound and art. Under Ahern's encouragement, Lewis moved away from ceramics and began to pursue painting and drawing.

Lewis's newfound interest in language and art found a significant outlet for development in his first professional position, that of a Curator of poetry readings at the Art Gallery of NSW between 1984 and 1988. During this period the repertoire for readings quickly expanded into a forum that combined traditional poetic text with music, film, dance and radio. In addition to the forum providing an outlet to explore interdisciplinary connections, it brought Lewis into the orbit of young artists, composers, poets and scholars such as Martin Harrison, Emmanuel Gasparinatos, William Yang and Ania Walwicz. The curatorial role also fostered in the artist an awareness of the possible intersections between radical modes of creative experimentation, a regionally attuned avant-garde culture and a genuinely broad public audience.

Between 1987 and 1989, Lewis produced his first solo exhibitions in Sydney – entitled *Transcription Drawings*, these works are abstractionist in form and present transcriptions of sound and music. The drawings trace not simply the sound itself, but the artist's embodied translation of that experience. This process, and the performative history it records, is central to understanding Lewis's art.

At the end of the decade and during the early Nineties, Lewis spent much of his time in Melbourne where he again became immersed in a rich creative milieu of writers, artists and composers. These included Jonathan Mills, Rainer Linz and Paul Carter. Evidence of the dialogues and exchanges of this world can be found in the publication, NMA (*New Music Articles*), the ABC Radio program, *The Listening Room* and the *Age Monthly Review*. During this period Lewis's work developed the sound transcription principles of his Sydney exhibitions but on a larger scale, this time using the work of the composer, Robert Douglas.

Alongside sound and performance, the growing influence of literary text found expression in a series of transcriptions based on the French newspaper, *Le Monde* - Lewis worked in Paris as Artist in Residence at the *Cite Internationale des Arts* in 1991 where he began work with the documentarian, Kaye Mortley on a translation of Natalie Sarraute's play, *Pour en Oui Pour en Non*. The Douglas and *Le Monde Transcription Drawings* were exhibited as a solo show as well as part of the Melbourne Festival in 1992. The collaboration with Mortley and Sarraute eventually lead to the publication of Lewis's artist-book *Just For Nothing* in 1997.

Lewis's most significant collaboration during this decade was with the writer, artist and thinker, Paul Carter. Lewis had been attracted to Carter's idea of 'spatial history', first proposed in Carter's highly influential book, *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), which sought to give voice to the multidimensional histories Carter saw as integral to the act of place-making in a post-colonial migrant Australia. An opportunity to work with Carter came in what became an extended multilayered translation on the work of the Central Australian Lutheran Missionary, Carl Strehlow and his son, T. G. H. (Ted) Strehlow, a poet and linguist. Entitled *Raft*, Lewis and Carter meditated through installation, drawing, text and sound the multilingual, bicultural and migrant legacy of the lives of father and son. Lewis designed a lattice-like structure comprised of wooden beams upon which are stenciled 24, 696 characters in the six languages familiar to the Strehlows (Greek, Latin, German, English, Arrernte and Diyari). The raft is also a reference to Carl Strehlow's harrowing death in Central Australia in 1922, which his son memorialized in the autobiographical narrative, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (1969), a pivotal work for Lewis personally and one that he has returned to repeatedly in his work. In addition to what Carter has described as the 'craft of translation', Lewis produced a series of *Water Drawings* which disguise the Strehlows' translated versions of Western Arrernte Rain Songs eventually compiled in Ted Strehlow's landmark *Songs of Central Australia* (1978). *Raft* has been exhibited in Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Hanover, Germany. Carter and Lewis produced a book, *Depth of Translation* (1999), which reflected on their extended collaboration and its significance in the wider context Australian cross-cultural history.

A second project with Carter, *Relay* (1999), was one of a number of public artworks commissioned by the Olympic Coordination Authority to commemorate the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. The project provided Lewis with a new opportunity to explore the intersection of poetic text, public design and history. *Relay* is a prose poem engraved into the granite steps at Fig Grove and refers to four points in Olympic history: the 1896 games at Athens,

Melbourne in 1956, Sydney in 2000 and a future games. Each point is colour-coded as a tier and the poem is accompanied by thirty graffiti clusters derived from the handwriting of celebrated Australian Olympians.

The past decade has seen Lewis extend his transcription drawing practice through a range of collaborative and solo exhibitions, books, essays and public installations. Collaborative partners have included the poet, Amanda Stewart and composer, Rik Rue. A particularly notable collaboration has been with the composer, Rainer Linz. In 2005 Lewis and Linz created a series of performance texts which Lewis gathered from everyday sources such as newspapers, overheard conversation and cookery books. These were inscribed on a variety of surfaces and then installed in wooden frames to create transitional house-like structures one might encounter on a construction-site. The spaces were then further rendered through the performance of Lewis's readings from the transcribed texts and Linz's sound work which was processed in real time through multiple computers and loudspeakers systems. Entitled *Banalities for the Perfect House*, the collaboration was installed at various sites including the Performance Space. In 2008, Lewis and Linz were commissioned to create a public art installation in Canada for the Toronto Nuit Blanche Festival. Lewis devised a sound poem in the form of a 550 coloured oil drums. Letters were inscribed onto the drums which were then stacked to form an industrial wall across a street. A sound composition was designed to accompany the poetic text which would unfold during the twelve-hour period between dusk and dawn. Entitled *Euphemisms for the Intimate Enemy*, Lewis and Linz were inspired by the work of the Indian postcolonial writer, Ashis Nandy.

It was through the development of the *Banalities* project that Lewis met the artist, Jonathan Jones. Lewis and Jones have since collaborated on a number of large-scale projects that have fused the materials - text, environmental surfaces and lights - which now characterize their respectively distinctive creative signatures. In *Homeland Illuminations* (2007), Lewis fashioned a series of rectangular boards upon which were stenciled a transcribed text of Jones's grandfather's lifestories. These boards were then illuminated with lights. In the same year Lewis and Jones worked on a site-specific show at Singapore's Post-Museum, *Index of Kindness* in which they hung flags with superimposed fragmentary text and positioned throughout the gallery painted objects, often based on discovered pieces of garbage in streets and beaches. In these collaborations Lewis and Jones tabulate the interstices of everyday exchange, the ingrained relation between silence and conversation, orality and print, movement and stillness.

The inscrutable richness of such interstitial zones has provided Lewis with a plethora of forums to explore in his own writings. Following his transcriptions of Natalie Sarraute in 1997, Lewis turned to the poetry of the major Austrian post-war poet, Ingeborg Bachmann, illustrating a newly translated volume of her poems, *Days in White* (2003). In his sound-poetry book, *False Narratives* (2006), Lewis engaged with the conventions of everyday language and speech to create a set of printed cards and lithographs that assemble stories into a concrete poem that can be rearranged by audiences. His transcriptions, carefully choreographed through text, sound and performance, seek to extend an understanding of the original source. The result is always a densely patterned narrative which is non-representational and a balance of the linear and non-linear.

Lewis's art has recently explored two interrelated areas. The first concerns his interest in creating environmentally integrated works. This is evident in the 2007 installation, *Banalities for the Perfect House*, which Lewis created for the artist-run initiative named SLOT in Redfern. For this project he created a seven-metre high facade on the front of a building, upon which was stenciled the reassembled stories of the community. The SLOT project points to the second of Lewis's current concerns: the relationship between his transcription practice and local history. In 2009 Lewis created what he described as an 'ephemeral public art installation' called *Housing the Seafaring Nation*. Three installation sites using billboards and stenciled text were created at Millers Point and attached to the facades of public buildings, including the National Trust Building at Observatory Hill. The texts are storyboards that originate from interviews and conversations with local people. Taken together, these sites re-inscribe Millers Point as the oldest continuing urban community in European-Australian history, one in danger of losing its public housing history to the interests of private development. In this and other contemporary projects Lewis's longstanding engagement with the intersections between a regional creative experimentation and a genuinely broad public interface can be said to have assumed a heightened level of urgency.

In addition to his own publications, Lewis has attracted the attention of various commentators. Most recently, an essay on the making of *Relay* has appeared in Paul Carter's book, *Dark Writing* (2009). A range of interviews with Lewis provide a useful index to his work and thought – some of which have been listed on the artist's website (<http://www.ruarklewis.com>). Lewis's work is held in numerous national and international collections including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Bibliotheque Nationale de Paris, the Kunstbibliothek,

Berlin, The British Library, the State Library of New South Wales, the National Library of Australia and Wollongong City Gallery. Lewis has lectured at the Sydney College of the Arts and is currently Convenor of Visual Arts and Performance at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies in Melbourne.

James Paull