





A close-up photograph of a person's lips. The lips are painted with a vibrant orange-red lipstick. The upper lip is coated with a thick, glossy, white or light pink substance, possibly a lip gloss or a different shade of lipstick, which is slightly uneven and has some texture. The background is a warm, golden-brown color, possibly the person's skin or a backdrop. The lighting is soft and focused on the lips.

VAGUE POSSIBILITIES

22 FEBRUARY - 25 MARCH 2011

SASA
GALLERY

On the possibility of vagueness in “Vague Possibilities”

The new vague

Those French, they have a way with words, *non*? You can't *not* hear the hip privilege of rebellion nor fail to envy the audacity and enterprise of an art that receives the critical award of being dubbed *la nouvelle vague*. The new wave! Think of the impact of this phrase—imperative, heroic. Suddenly, the division between what is an emergent new school and what is crusty and fusty old school is made clear and urgent. Suddenly art seems to have a particular velocity—that is, speed in a certain direction—not just tidal drifts or tectonic movements. Art that causes waves rather than ripples is a scandalous art. It goes after the big splash. French bourgeois decorum counters the enthusiasm of its boisterous, successive *nouvelles vagues* when it tut tuts with the figurative language of “*Pas de vagues, s'il vous plait!*” Aiming to keep things cool and quiet, it requests: “Keep it down; no waves, please, no scandal.”

Waves (*les vagues*) can be superficial disturbances in a medium but they peak and break and burst and scatter energy; unlike the oceanic profundities of an art whose provenance and worthiness are proved in the verities of tradition and the deep currents of ancestry. The latter is an art that proves itself by differentially referring to its metaphysical origins. To “truth”, for instance, as one nationally prominent and conservative Australian art reviewer repeatedly insists in high dudgeon, as he admonishes contemporary art for its superficial shock and awe tactics and falsehood. Traditional values are unwavering because they are historically sturdy, solid, immutable and unmoved. A wave of feeling, however, is an intense motion—a sensation that accumulates as emotion: untrustworthy and suspect because abrupt and swift and because it sweeps you away, off your feet, only to dump you later. When a wavefront hits it is a sensation, a phenomenon; but it can become eventful—demanding confidence, conviction and fidelity from those pledged to it, those who ride it and travel with it rather than those who choose to be safely left behind it.

The French new wave, *la nouvelle vague*, contains an ambiguity which we see comically—although can't hear—as a pun on the English “vague”. This is not just my own frivolous mistreatment of a word. The French have three uses of their *vague* (all pronounced the same) compared to its bare, sole service as the English adjective.

The feminine noun, *la vague*, is what we in English also refer to as the sort of wave that washes ashore on a beach: formed out of an undulating motion of a medium that accumulates into a surge of energy. But *le vague*, the masculine noun only one vowel apart, is an empty space. Not quite *le vide*—the unambiguous and inhospitable void into which Yves Klein leapt—which suggests both a physical vacuum and mathematical annulment of number. Rather, it's more like a type of vacancy and blankness in which you can loiter, or which draws you in. If someone is daydreaming they might be *dans le vague de ses reveries*; if distractedly remote and faraway they might be described as having been *perdu dans le vague* or lost in space. It's this masculine noun that comes close to the French adjectival use of *vague*, and which matches the English meanings of being absentminded or having one's head in the clouds, or if an object of attention is blurred or one's attention itself is unfocussed. When the French describe a surge of vanguardism or of fashion with its impatient youthful fervour as a “new wave” they must hear the pun and the irony that we English speakers see: “the new vague”!

But the vague may not be as scatty or nebulous as all that. Both the French and the English words derive, through an Anglo-Norman route, from a Latin source in *vagus*, a word that denotes uncertainty but also implies being unsettled. Unsettled: firstly in civil jurisprudence, as with a court case that remains open-ended and still arguable (that is, wavering in judgment) because no settlement of dues can be reached; and secondly in a terms of political or civil identity when a person is described as being without a regular or fixed address. *Vagus* indicates the itinerant movements of a vagrant transferred to a mental disposition for digression, to fugue-like wandering or roaming. Vagueness and vagrancy have a correspondence in the association of civic dispossession with conceptual indistinctness: falling off the grid, through the net, or being under the radar.

We could say that vagueness, in accord with vagrancy, defines something that remains undecided and that eludes a determinate position. It may seem awkward but this also aligns with the image of the wave's motion. Let's say this: like vagrancy, vagueness is not actually a condition of truthfulness but of more or less intelligibility; and we should think of this “more or less” not just as a matter of degree but as a vector, that's to say as a motion, as a wave of possible situations and as a wavering judgment. The vagrancy of the vague surges up through

this linguistic genealogy in the manner that an unconscious, repressed wish is insinuated in common speech with a symptomatic *double entendre*, compromising an otherwise civil, polite, unequivocal utterance with an obscene overtone and undercut. It gives the vague a new twist, no? Yes, vagrancy is the new vague.

The vaguely possible

But does vagrancy have an art form? More or less. It would have to be an unsettled art, rather than an art of settlements. Perhaps this aesthetic form could be more or less the career trajectory of “artists’ residencies”: an ongoing, mobile, occasional placement and an art of unfixed address. An art formed out of opportunities and the opportune relations forged by them, an art of engagement and encounter, and styled upon making the best of the unexpected. (A style of behaviour as well as a movement of art—we could caricature it as “Opportunism” if it weren’t already in caricature form as Relational Aesthetics.) Vagueness is the situation of an unsettled “more or less” aesthetic judgment, where one hedges one’s bets. The “more or less” situation testifies to uncertainty (of outcome, of status, of essence); but it also suggests a range of possible values. In fact, this uncertainty is a crucial condition for possibility. When we ask about the possibility of something eventuating we commit to its high or low likelihood as an event. In similar manner, new waves are eventful for their possibilities. A new wave, in fact, is an upsurge of possibility.

This is an optimistic way of looking at possibility, for it would insist that there are situations where there is more possibly at stake than at other moments. But is not possibility an “all or nothing” situation? Either something simply is possible or it isn’t, because it will be impossible. In this simple sense of the word, “possibility” is the exhaustive range of moves allowable within a programmatic field. These possibilities are never endless, just hard to enumerate. Think of the moves possible in a computer game and you see they’re determined by the game’s script, which has—in its writing or composition—already scripted out all possible options for play. Either you can make this move, among other possible moves, or you can’t. Possibility, in this sense at least, is a virtual reiteration of the game code in its exhaustive entirety. Strictly speaking, to say something is possible is to say it has the ability (not probability) to occur (the Latin source is *posse*), which suggests permission. What is possible is what the system

permits. In this strict sense, there is nothing transgressive or unpredictable within possibility since it is the virtual totality of a system. Call the system art, and we have what Baudrillard acidly dubbed “the conspiracy of art”. The possible is fated because “it is written”. The script of the game is Scripture.

Does anything elude this type of totalising possibility without being impossible? Could we not align the “more or less” possible of the new wave with “potentiality”? After all, potentiality seems to imply degrees of insurgent power (from the Latin *potentia*), and as a promise of things to come it indicates a surge of probable not just possible events. But this is precisely where potential becomes a conservative rather than exponential energy. The potency of potential—as in “star” potential—refers to a stored latent reserve of energy or charisma, like a sacred aura: a capacity that is comparable to a birthright or entitlement, and an inheritance. Potential is not a change immanent to its body but an affirmation of that body’s innate orientation: an irrefutable heritage, a type of native “bearing” of power. Something’s potential is its destined revelation of essence, its power to be true to the promise of its origins.

But what happens if—difficult as it sounds—potential is wasted? Dissipated and vagrant, those guilty of the loss of their potential have committed a crime against their origins, not just a mischief with the code governing their performance. Perversely, maybe we should think of a new wave as a wasting of potential, like a sunburst travelling into empty space. The space of *le vague*. Of the vague. The burst of energy in such a wave (of *la vague*) is full of possibility, precisely as it depletes its potential. This collapse of potential into the possible is just what happens in the etymological collapse of the words that provide the origin of this essay. My writing—its script—is a crime against this origin; a digression into *le vague*, its meaning turns into “vague possibilities”.

Edward Colless
© 2011

Acknowledgements

The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences and the Division Research Performance Fund, the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space and as an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, architects, writers and curators associated with the School of Art, Architecture and Design, University of South Australia in a national and international context.

The Director, SASA Gallery, would like to acknowledge the contribution to the development of the 2011 exhibition program by the SASA Gallery Programming Committee and AAD Events and Exhibition Committee; Professor Kay Lawrence; Dr John Barbour; Professor Mads Gaardboe, Head, AAD; and Professor Pal Ahluwalia, Pro-Vice Chancellor, DIVEASS, UniSA. Thanks to Tony and Connie Perrini for the generous and on-going support of the SASA Gallery program by Perrini Estate; and to Stephanie Britton and the Artlink team for the generous gift of hundreds of back issues of Artlink for distribution to AAD students.

Special thanks to Ted Colless, Ray Harris, Matt Huppatz, Monte Masi, James Marshall and Amy Spiers for their generous participation in this exhibition, catalogue and associated events.

Image details:

Front: Ray Harris, *Slap Happy* (detail), 2010

Middle: Matt Huppatz, *Narcissus and other myths*, 2009

Back: James Marshall, *Untitled Wax Experiment #2*, 2010

Artists: Ray Harris, Matt Huppatz, Monte Masi, James Marshall & Amy Spiers.

External Scholar: Dr Edward Colless, Head of Critical and Theoretical Studies, School of Art, Faculty of Victorian College of the Arts and Music, University of Melbourne.

Curator & Editor: Dr Mary Knights

Catalogue design: Keith Giles

Catalogue project management: Dr Mary Knights & Keith Giles

SASA Gallery staff:

Dr Mary Knights, Director, SASA Gallery, UniSA

Keith Giles, Gallery Manager, UniSA

Julian Tremayne, Installation Consultant

Peter Harris, Technical Officer, Kurna Building, UniSA

Chris Boha, Dr Sue Kneebone, Maddie Reece & Tom Squires, Research/Education Officers

SASA Gallery

Kurna Building, City West Campus, UniSA

Cnr Fenn Place & Hindley Street, Adelaide

Published by the SASA Gallery

University of South Australia

GPO Box 2471, Adelaide SA 5001

Printed by Finsbury Green

© artists & SASA Gallery

ISBN: 978-0-9807261-9-0

March 2011



South Australian
School of Art



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE



Perrini