

Towards Trialectic Space: An Experiment in Cultural Misunderstanding and Disorientation

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Biography

Clive Barstow's exhibition profile includes forty years of international exhibitions, artist residencies and publications in Europe, America, Asia and Australia. His work is held in a number of international collections, including the Musée National d'Art, Paris. Clive is Professor and Dean of Arts & Humanities at Edith Cowan University, Honorary Professor of Art at the University of Shanghai for Science & Technology China and global faculty member of Fairleigh Dickinson USA. His recent exhibitions include "Giving Yesterday a Tomorrow" at the Hu Jiang Gallery in Shanghai and recent publications include "Encountering the Third Space" at the University of Oxford UK.

Abstract

This paper presents a praxical model of collaboration between artists in Australia and China in which the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of language (Ang 1997) within Homi Bhabha's (1994) thirdspace theories are examined. To avoid the polarities of othering (Dervin 2014), I adopt Henri Lefebvre's model of cumulative trialectics (1991) as a new *thirdspace* that more accurately represents the complexities of modern day geographies and hybrid communities by extending the binary analysis of the past and present beyond the real and the imagined. Trialectics expands our understanding beyond physical geographies by suggesting a cerebral space that searches for new meaning and is therefore more radically open to additional otherness towards a continuing expansion of [human] spatial knowledge and imagination.

In this paper and through exhibitions in Australia and China, I suggest that cumulative trialectics can contribute a form of transference beyond praxis. Lacan's (1977) *vel* (of meaning, being and the void of non-sense) introduces an element of a *meaningless nothingness space* in which misinterpretation can be celebrated, an equation that can offer a disjointed time (and place) within which the imagination of

the viewer engages (as transference). Julia Lossau describes thirdspace as a space that ‘...tends to be transformed into a bounded space which is located next to (or, more precisely) in-between other bounded spaces, like a piece of a jigsaw’ (2009). This bounded space as a mechanism of transference is examined in my own hybrid jigsaws as a response to and reflection of the collaboration.

Keywords: thirdspace, hybridity, collaboration, globalisation, trialectics.

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Since the publication of Homi K. Bhabha’s influential text ‘The Location of Culture’ (1994), much postcolonial theory has focused on a broadening transnational approach that interprets today’s world as a place of ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2003, 1). Arguably, contemporary critical literature and theory (Papastergiadis 2003; Ikas 2009; Dervin 2014) may have succeeded in developing a unified position in its attempts to de-centralise modernity within a more fluid and globalised dialogue. While many Asian-Australians have maintained their transplanted collective traditions largely intact (Grishin 2013, 10), visual artists in particular have focused on a more individualised response (John Young, Ah Xian, William Yang) perhaps in an attempt to visualise their new found personal and hybrid identities in reaction to feelings of dislocation from home. Often, these individual identities are firmly situated within the binary polarities of cultural exchange in which Bhabha’s (1994) thirdspace theory¹ operates. Bhabha explains the thirdspace in these terms:

The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences...Hybrid hyphenisations emphasize the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities. (1994, 86)

It could also be said that Australian art history has been characterised by a constant and continuing dialectic between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art (Grishin 2013), echoing the binary polarities of thirdspace exchange. However, it is clear that Australia is already ‘Asianised’ (Lo 2012, 1). In reality therefore, Eisenstadt’s multiple

¹ thirdspace is not ‘anything goes’ but offers a focus for discursive interaction between important marginalised groups. The broad terms of *thirdspace* and *postcolonial* can therefore be misleading in their definitions of a social interaction that is specific to groups brought about through diaspora or social exclusion.

modernities involves multiple languages both spoken and written, presenting inherent problems in terms of understanding meaning, and 'meaning making' (Crouch 2007, 112) ranging from simple instructions being misinterpreted, to deeper assumptions surrounding collective truths, shared semiotic codes, and histories that are formed within culturally and politically constructed systems. Habermas, in his definition of the everyday concept of the lifeworld, asserts:

Narration is a specialized form of constative speech that serves to describe socio-cultural events and object . . . This everyday concept carves out of the objective world the region of narratable events or historical facts. Narrative practice not only serves trivial needs for mutual understanding among members trying to co-ordinate their common tasks: it also has a function in the self-understanding of persons. (1989, 136)

Once narration loses its descriptive meaning, history and truth codes can become contested and subjective, and often replaced by a hybrid language of non-sense, an in-between language that perhaps better represents thirdspace polarity and the void between. Lacan refers to this as the *vel* (or the splitting of alienation), best described as two elements colliding, those of *being* (subject) and *meaning* (other) in which a third element is produced that reflects a *nonsense* (unconscious non-meaning).

In normal circumstances this *vel of splitting* is a discarded language because it appears *meaning-less*, devoid of logic and structure, the fundamental constructs of constative descriptive speech. However, this hybrid language displays elements of chaos theory² as utilised by the Dadaists and Surrealists (Hofmann 1920; Rosen 2014), and as such its visualisation could be of some relevance in terms of articulating the poetics of shared personal and cultural identity forming as a way of communicating the state of flux that is inevitable in the transformation between mono-cultural and multi-cultural situations. Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that constative language "has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents" (1981, 293), and goes further by describing the limitations of poetic language as one "striving for maximal purity, ... choosing not to look beyond the boundaries of its own language" (1981, 399). Textual and poetic languages may therefore be too limiting in their ability to transfer meaning within shifting cultural situations, across language groups and beyond their own prescribed boundaries.

² In his essay on chaos theory in practice, Dean Wilcox makes a comparison between the works of Henrik Ibsen and Robert Wilson, illustrating the oppositional forces at play between logic and chaos by stating "it becomes apparent that Ibsen's work is compact with no extraneous characters or images, whereas Wilson's performances thrive on the expansion of a central theme or visual motif" (1996, 2). The reference to a poetic description of identity relates to Wilson's expansion of a central theme.

If culture *shifts*, then so should meaning if it is to truly represent its own indefinable and non-geographic space as it moves toward a newly-forming symbolic language. James Clifford offers a poignant note of caution about the fixity of culture by proposing, '[a]ll dichotomising concepts should probably be held in suspicion...[and] we should attempt to think of cultures not as organically unified or traditionally continuous but rather as negotiated, present processes' (Clifford 1988, 273).

Chinese and Aboriginal culture share the non-fixity of culture as common threads, along with the proposition that both cultures in some way have been formed in and by the West (Fink and Perkins 2005; Bell 2003; Kus 2008). Hannah Fink and Hetti Perkin's description of Aboriginal art probably comes closest to defining the indefinable: 'Aboriginal Art is a protean phenomenon, a way of introducing change to maintain continuity' (2005, 63). Continuity as described by historical texts has always relied to some extent on a common understanding of shared language and our culturally constructed interpretation of meaning within the context of time and place. Ien Ang (1997) in her response to Bhabha's thirdspace asserts that in the context of social theory, misinterpretation and miscommunication are a reality of hybridity, where language is not always shared. In her critique of Felski's "The Doxa of Difference" (1997) regarding incommensurability through language, Ang states that it 'does not imply an absolute impossibility of communication, but relates to the occasional and interspersed moments of miscommunication that always accompany communicative interchanges between differently positioned subjects' (1997, 59).

Henry Lefebvre takes thirdspace into a third dimension by relating it to time and space in relation to the body; he states, 'Both imaginary and real, [speech] is forever insinuating itself in between' (1991, 251). In this respect, Lefebvre offers a more embodied view of the space between as one of a 'quasi-logical presupposition of an identity between mental space (the space of the philosophers and epistemologists) and real space... [which is an] abyss between the mental sphere on one side and the physical and social spheres on the other' (1991, 6). This offers the artist and the collaborator a position that goes beyond its singular spatial meaning, bringing into play a cerebral space that makes reference to its social context while opening avenues for dialogue that can extend to the unconscious and the imagined. For instance, in his analysis of daydreaming and fantasies Freud suggests a similar trialectic space in which the active, temporal structure of fantasy:

...hovers, as it were, between three times—the three moments of time which our ideation evolves...What it creates is a daydream of fantasy, which carries about its traces of its origin from the occasion which provoked it and from the memory. Thus, past, present and future are

strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them. (as cited in Benjamin 1955, 147–48)

Freud's past, present, and future model suggest a chronological and linear model that facilitates the retention of lost memories through psychoanalysis, but beyond this function, this position is countered by many contemporary postcolonial theorists who argue against chronological thinking in the context of representing cultural histories. While removing chronology from our perception of space in Freud's case, Lefebvre's trialectic space extends daydreaming and fantasy to one that accommodates Lacan's non-sense within a new narrative in which time and chronology can be re-imagined. Transnational and inter-cultural collaboration, particularly across languages and within various forms of contemporary media, facilitates the *multi* in multicultural, presenting a moving and discursive process, rather than a scientific ethnography *about* culture. This engagement pushes the definition of multiculturalism toward a broader term of multi-dimensionalism through involvement that goes well beyond the purely cultural debate around geography and ethnicity.

Beyond the theatres of memory

It is important to point out that my arts practice is not an illustration of theory, rather it interacts through praxis as inter-dependent elements that represent the incomplete and propositional nature of trialectic space. It is intended therefore that the artworks produced as part of this research will function in their own terms, without the need for a didactic link to the theoretical terms of thirdspace or trialectic theory.

I established a project in 2015 entitled *Third-Space* in which artists from China and Australia engaged in artistic collaboration in the cultural in-between space. As the participating artists did not share a common language, the collaborators had to find alternative ways of communicating. The project resulted in a number of visual solutions (Figure 1) that were, more often than not, representative of the miscommunication that occurred between the subjects, fostering as a result new mediated languages that became *meaning-full* as intimate and shorthand forms of personalised communication and coding.

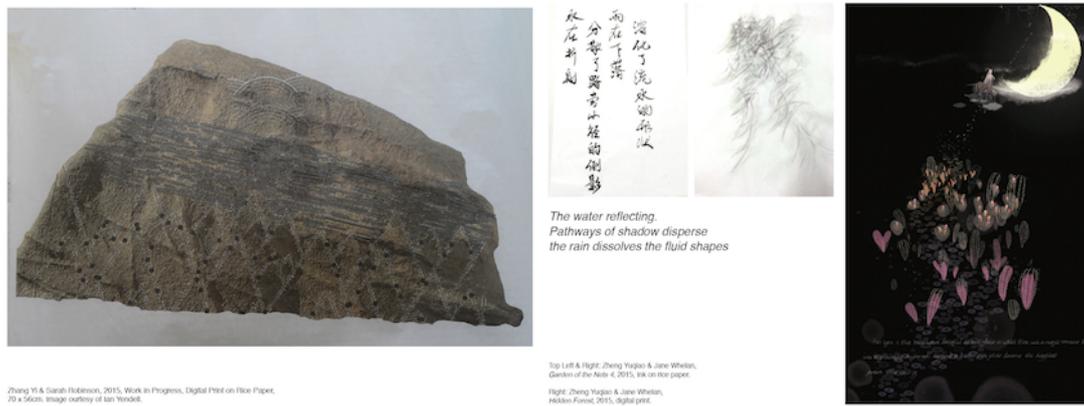


Figure 1: Extracts from the catalogue *Third Space*, (Barstow, Bushby and Franklin 2015), exhibited at Spectrum Project Space Perth (reproduced with kind permission of the artists)

As a participant in the collaboration, I responded to the possibilities of representing a broader hybrid space of contestation and misinterpretation through a visual language that was neither geographically or time specific. Julia Lossau describes thirdspace beyond its singular spatial meaning by asserting that ‘thirdspace tends to be transformed into a bounded space which is located next to (or, more precisely) in between other bounded spaces, like a piece of a jigsaw’ (Ikas and Wagner 2009, 70). My attempts to visualise and *piece together* these narratives responds to Johannes Fabian’s critique of ethnography, whereby he says ‘taxonomic imagination in the west is strongly visualist in nature, constituting cultures as if they were theatres of memory, or spatialised arrays’ (Clifford 1986, 12).

Through my approach to assemblage using multiple jigsaws as a metaphor for social re-construction, heterogeneity is exposed and the theatres of memory are disrupted. In his novel, *Life: A Users Manual* (1978), George Perec adopts jigsaws as a central theme, in which he comments:

“...there is something futile about jigsaws. One carves an image up only so that someone else may slowly reassemble it. Bartlebooth³ makes a career of pointless self-iconoclasm. But he doesn’t quite achieve his goal of turning his existence into an act of gratuitous circularity...The message seems to be that things don’t necessarily fit. (Turner 2005)

Futility is an implied reading within the context of Diaspora and particularly in communities that have been displaced or disempowered. The reconstructed jigsaw therefore acts as a multiple metaphor for the awkwardness and incompatibility of

³ Bartlebooth is the central character in Perec’s novel, into which irony and futility are interwoven in Bartlebooth’s characterisation. Bartlebooth spends his later life obsessively making jigsaws of images from his travels around the world. While completing his 439th and final jigsaw, Bartlebooth dies holding the one remaining piece in his hand. Ironically the last hole in the jigsaw is the letter X while the piece he is holding is the letter W.

cultural hybridity within which the mis-communication of language plays a central role.

The first series of jigsaw works (Figures 2-5) were made as an initial foray into the process of re-construction as an individual response to visualize the ideas around hybridity, many of which are a result of interactions with Aboriginal artists from both urban and remote regions of western Australia. These works focused on the construction of Australian landscape from the mythological position of European Arcadia, as a simulation of the natural world in the form of a gentrified mutation of colonial ideals within contemporary parklands. These nostalgic narratives involve early Disney characters as a reference to Freud's fantasy and reality, and as a reminder of propaganda and prejudice through the animalisation of race⁴ (Brode 2005; Willetts 2013).



Figure 2: *Lonesome Ghosts*, 2015. Jigsaw and paint, 62cm x 56 cm.

⁴ Wartime propaganda relied heavily on animation in which animals represented humans within a fantasy world that acts as a stepping-stone between reality and simulation (Glassmeyer, 2013, 99–114). The aspect of animals representing humans, and particularly the portrayal of black people as monkeys and apes in many Disney animations of the 1950's is analogous to the attitudes toward and the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia through their classification as flora and fauna up until the Holt referendum as late as 1967.



Figure 3: *Flora, Fauna and the Ranger*, 2015. Jigsaw, 62cm x 56 cm.



Figure 4: *Buffalo Drought*, 2015. Jigsaw, 62cm x 56 cm.



Figure 5: *Piece*, 2015. Jigsaw, 62cm x 56 cm.

In these works the theme of a shared public space emerges, as evidence of 'restorative' nostalgia as defined by Deleuze and Guattari as a nostalgia that focuses on *nostos*⁵ with aims to reconstruct the lost home, often in association with religious or nationalist revivals (Legg 2004). Where nostalgia serves to retain lost homelands, spoken language has become less geographically bound through migration and Diasporic flows. For those languages that have survived colonisation, the aspect of miscommunication across languages suggests a relationship between body, time and place that is less defined, or what Lefebvre refers to as 'the unassignable interstice between bodily space and bodies-in-space' (1991, 251).

Similarly, the resurgence of Confucianism in modern day China could also be attributed to nostalgia, a yearning for elements of society that survived the Cultural Revolution (Kus 2008). The binding of past, present and future forms a Chinese *dis-orientalism* in which the Chinese avant-garde operates, a position heavily criticised by Rasheed Araeen (2013, 147). Araeen attacks contemporary avant-gardisms, and particularly those associated with the identity politics of multiculturalism, suggesting that artists always serve a Eurocentric bourgeois consciousness when dealing with

⁵ *Nostos* derives from the Greek word for homecoming

oppositional practices; a particularly Marxist criticism and one that upholds 'Hegelian⁶ notions of historical overcoming' (McLean 2004, 298).

The formation of the multicultural colony brings with it a new spatial array and one in which a singular perspective can no longer represent the actualities of complex hybrid societies. This decentralising and re-imagining of space is perhaps best examined within the Orientalism–Occidentalism discourse⁷. When we eliminate a western point of reference, perceptions of the East are literally *disoriented*, creating a situation where nostalgia is out of place and where identity is no longer about place, but about space⁸ and temporality. According to Said, as elements of identity production, Orientalism pushes, Occidentalism pulls. Jonathan Spencer summarises:

In this sense, whereas Orientalism inquires from the outside looking in on China and forces on China conceptions of individual, group and society which gel with western expectations, Occidentalism looks out on the West and examines a range of responses to colonialism and modernity. (1995, 234)

In contrast to the earlier works in this series, Figures 6-9 are a result of direct collaboration with Chinese artists and poets with whom I have developed a working relationship based on image and knowledge and sharing. These works are truly collaborative in respect that they have come about through a more active association involving working together toward a shared idea of imaginary hybrid landscapes.

⁶ Georg Hegel's main position within philosophy was one of absolute idealism as a means to integrate mind and spirit (Geist) without elimination or reduction. Marxism is said to have derived from Hegel's inclusive philosophies. Hegelianism is also connected through Kant and Plato, in the sharing of ideals regarding universalism.

⁷ The word orient derives from the French word "east" from the Latin *orientem*, and as such establishes a single point of reference in the West.

⁸ Within thirdspace dialogue, Papastergiadis offers an alternative cartography for how we view the globalising of culture, but as Ian Mclean points out, this is a mapping of our *spatial* rather than *cultural* identities, arguing for a new position of "the constitutive force of spatial [rather than place] in identity formation" (2004, 297).



Figure 6: *A Happy Occident*, 2015. Jigsaw and paint, 62cm x 56 cm.



Figure 7: *Every Road Has Two Paths*, 2015. Jigsaw and paint, 62cm x 56 cm.



Figure 8: *Uncool Britannia*, 2015. Jigsaw, 62cm x 56 cm.



Figure 9: *War*, 2015. Jigsaw and paint, width 62cm x 56 cm.

Through the various collaborations with Chinese artists, it became apparent that Chinese Shan-Shui-Hua⁹ landscape brush painting comes closest to the idea of a multi dimensional space that avoids the pitfalls of Araeen's identity politics. A link to Daoism materialises in the three main elements of Shan-Shui-Hua art, those of the

⁹ Shan-Shui-Hua translates to *landscape brush painting* and embodies the underpinning characteristics of multi-point and multi-directional perspective as a culturally specific reference to Daoist truth.

path, the *threshold* and the *heart* (Fung, 1960). Essentially painters who work in the style of Shan-Shui-Hua do not present a fixed image from what they see, rather they attempt to paint what they *think* about nature, reflecting not the viewers eye but the mind. Shan-Shui-Hua is a vehicle of philosophy, and one that accommodates various aspects of reality and non-reality across multiple positions, perspectives and points in time.

British video artist Christin Bolewski discusses the differences between western Cartesian perspective and the multiple vanishing points within Shan-Shui-Hua painting in respect of reconstructing digitised three-dimensional space as a continuity montage. He suggests that the 'multi-perspective as well as temporality are important features for both East Asian aesthetics and the medium of film, and the Chinese horizontal hand scroll is referred to as the first motion picture' (2008, 2). The multiple perspectives in Bolewski's *Video Scroll* (Figure 10) have been used as a basis for the construction of *Entering Anarcadia* (Figure 11). This work offers a representation of *timelessness*, tracing the ownership of sacred lands from pre-history to the present day, and making a connection with the social production of time and space as expressed by Lefebvre. This abstract concept of temporality offers a new democracy in which a predominantly two-dimensional postcolonial dialogue could reposition itself beyond the East-West dialogue and beyond the paradigms of polarised cultural difference. The visual representation of this shifting space, more in tune with Ulrich Beck's position of cosmopolitanism¹⁰, is perhaps best represented not by a system or formula of resolution, but by a visualisation that suggests an ill-fitting awkwardness and disorientation as a true reflection of flux and hybridity.

¹⁰ Ulrich Beck discusses the changing context of othering within modern complex societies. He states: "What cosmopolitan idealists dreamed of, namely the inclusion of the excluded other, has become (in a specific sense), reality. You can be an alien, a non-citizen living elsewhere and at the same time be a neighbor, a competitor. The inside – outside distinctions of who is a citizen and who is an alien, who is a member and who is not a member, who has the right to be recognized and who has no rights and can be ignored – don't work any more" (as cited in Ikas and Wagner 2009, 13)

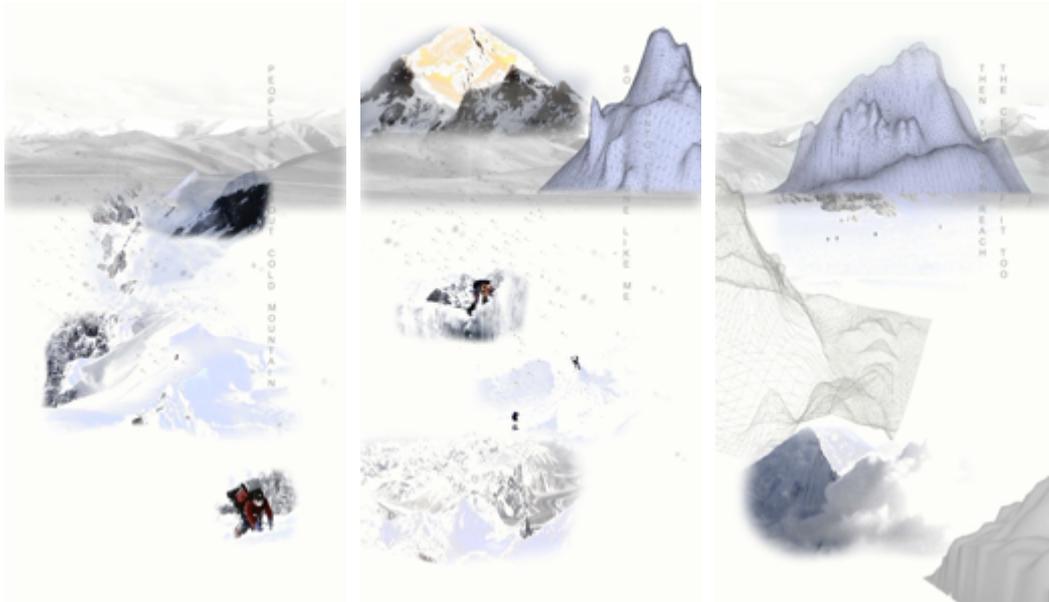


Figure 10: video stills from 'Video Scroll' Shan-Shui-Hua, © Christin Bolewski 2008
(Reproduced with kind permission of the artist)



Figure 11: *Entering Anarcadia* 2015 Jigsaw 230cm x 50cm

Cumulative Trialectics as Transference

The multi-directional aspects of both time and space opens up in these new works a pathway for transference between artist and audience, an entry to retrieve lost memories or construct new narratives. In the framing of these new works, certain elements of psychoanalysis can offer a useful perspective in the area of narrative construction and transference. In his book 'Psychoanalysis and Storytelling', Peter Brooks approaches the criticism and analysis of poetry as a conduit to unravelling Freud's dream theories through our positioning between the conscious and unconscious state. He proposes that:

Psychoanalysis matters to us as literary critics because it stands as a constant reminder that the attention to form, properly conceived, is not a sterile formalism, but rather one more attempt to draw the symbolic and fictional map of our place in existence. (1994, 44)

There are two elements within psychoanalytical theory that I find most useful - those of the chronological transference of meaning and the culturally specific interpretation

of missing information (or erasure). While assembling the jigsaws, I was acutely aware of the cultural implications of the missing pieces, particularly poignant within the context of the stolen generation and the erasure of Aboriginal histories in the early settler paintings I regularly use in my jigsaw assemblages. As Langton (2003) points out:

The very idea of an 'Australian' landscape is based on erasure. This erasure is not simply that of nature subsumed and recast by culture, but that of the distinctly Aboriginal, autochthonous spiritual landscapes obliterated by the recreant settler visions which literally followed the frontier in the canvas bags of artists who came to paint the new land (52).

For the psychoanalyst, Brooks turns to Lacan and Freud in his explanation of the relational aspects of the analyst (the psychoanalyst) and the analysand (the person being analysed). Freud explains, '[the analyst's] task is to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly, to *construct* it' (1937, 258). When this story retrieval is coherently shaped and chronological, or as Paul Ricoeur describes 'at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity', it is the intervention of the analyst that pieces the jigsaw together rather than the idea that lost narrative is simply not there and waiting to be uncovered or disclosed. These new jigsaw works therefore align more closely to the Lacanian theory of transference¹¹ in their triggering of interpretive solutions as a result of a more intuitive and subjective interchange.

Conclusion

Modern hybrid communities are complex, shifting and multi-faceted. As such, language and text have become limiting in their primary role of communicating multi-layered meaning and knowledge. Applying an interpretation of cumulative trialectic space through visualisation offers a transference that goes beyond the singular and the binary. New meaning-making is therefore reliant on a dialogue that cannot be assumed to be either coherent or definitive; rather, it is a dialogue that includes misinterpretation and misunderstanding. This point of conflict as highlighted by Bhabha becomes a point of departure when Lefebvre's cumulative trialectics are engaged - a position in which multi-directional and multi-faceted information becomes disorienting, and as a consequence is more accurately represented visually as a poetic proposition or as an incomplete reflection of our reality.

¹¹ Lacan initially refers to transference as a dialectic of identifications; in later formulations, he adopts the formula that the analysand views the analyst as the 'subject supposed to know.' Transference is thus linked to the fantasy that there is someone who knows, and this differential between analysand and analyst forms the basis of the analytic relationship. The analysand has the assumption that there is an other – the analyst – who possesses knowledge about herself, and who can understand her innermost thoughts. (Jurgen Braungardt, 2014) <http://braungardt.trialectics.com/philosophy/my-papers/transference-in-freud-and-lacan/>

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