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Sandra Bridie, b. 1956

B. S. Hope:

Portrait of a Mentor

(a fiction)

1997

Conversation between artist Sandra Bridie
and curator B. S. Hope, November 1997

Sandra Bridie: Seona, I was wondering what you finally thought about the selection of photos I/we presented at West Space as part of *Curated?* Did you think you were being presented, or curated, into a kind of bracketed or mini retrospective, or that the project *Portrait of a Mentor* came across as more of a collaboration?

B. S. Hope: I don't know how hokey the photos looked to the outside viewer. I guess I found the experience a bit revealing –there is no way I would initiate a project where I presented eight photographs of myself to the viewer.

So regarding your question about collaboration, I don't think the work was that. I don't know how well it fits into an idea of curation either. My participation in the project was active enough, especially when it came to selecting the photos, and also in coming up with the idea of the representation of an activity through existing and relatively unremarkable old photographs. I suppose I took on the role of 'quality controller', but certainly not co-author. I had the right of veto over any photos you chose or aspects of the text you used to accompany the images that I felt were unsuitable for whatever reasons. I resorted to this, saying 'no way!' a couple of times when your comments about me got downright slanderous! But the project, the presentation of me as a subject for a work, was clearly seen through your eyes as an artist, and through your relationship to me.

I don't know whether the kinships that you portrayed in the work – between artists and curators – are often commented on, but I know they do exist beyond our own partnership.

You vetoed at least one choice of mine. I remember you wouldn't let me comment further, or go into more detail, on your show *Geo-organic*. I thought the extra page of text I intended to include on that subject was pretty gentle and constructive.

Regarding the Geo-organic reference that still exists in the piece, I would say that although you presented me not in 'the best possible light', the comments you made about 'curating the crap' out of the work, and my betraying the artists in that show by not clearly conveying my intentions (well, you cite Ian Matthews as someone made uncomfortable by the experience of being involved in that show, but I will now own that he wasn't the only one) – all those comments were fair enough. But, as I said at the time, you didn't need to harp on about that point to quite the degree that you originally intended in the catalogue text, so I was happy that the rant was amended somewhat for the final copy.

I suppose what I wanted to do was to present the fraught nature of that exhibition, not as an isolated incident; you are not the only curator who has 'done over' the works of artists. I guess I wanted to open up a dialogue about responsibility, intentions, the uses a curator might be putting the artists' work to without their being fully aware of it until the show comes together.

Could you talk a little about the purpose of a show like *Familiar Paintings* at Parallax Gallery in Sydney in 1979? I remember that show being so personal and so intimate, and such a strange thing to see in a contemporary 'cutting edge' gallery. I interpreted the show in the most literal way: as a fond gesture, a recollection of the activity of painting that linked together your favourite aunts and uncles. From looking at the pictures, I don't think any of the 'artists' (if that is indeed how they saw themselves) had strong aspirations – even towards early modernism. All your relatives were competent enough painters, though, at rendering what they saw, or what they were copying.

Oh, no, that was not my intention at all. My intention had been to be counter-subversive, by showing unambitious and conventional hobbyist paintings in a gallery that still maintained the rhetoric of the avant-garde. I wanted to stop the viewer, to make them think about the conventions under which they habitually looked at art; how the space defined their attitude to the work seen within it. In this case in this gallery it was usually art that decried the conventional.

Most visitors and those who were associated with the gallery didn't know at all what to make of that show. They weren't quite sure how

to look at the work – except for a few people I spoke to who also had hobbyist or aspiring ‘painters’ in their own family background.

Yes, I agree, though my intentions for the exhibition belied another, more unconscious purpose. It was only later, after the original context for Familiar Paintings seen in that space had subsided, that I realised that this show was more about something else. Ostensibly the exhibition was about a resistance from me to fitting into what I was beginning to think were narrow and almost puritanical ideas about contemporary practice, and the purity of the art object in the ‘white cube’. It was that, of course, but it was also a personal statement about my resistance to fitting into my family’s gentle insistence that because I was ‘the artistic one’, I must become the first successful artist out of a bunch of hobbyists. It was always as if I had no choice in the matter. That all seems quite an immature rebellion now, and a weak premise for an exhibition; rebellion against the strictures of the taste of a gallery, and against what I perceived as the family consensus that I should become a painter.

But you did go to art school to begin a painting course, didn’t you?

Yes, without any real passion or desire to be a painter or to study painting, so under certain duress. I dropped out after one year and went to university.

To study, among other things, Fine Art.

Mmm.

Are there any other anti-social projects you have in mind?

By now I have outgrown that impulse, although there is one exhibition I still have a hankering to curate, in one of the most institutional settings possible – the National Gallery of Victoria. It is in response to an exhibition that sticks in my mind as the most overblown exhibition I’ve seen: the Rupert Bunny exhibition at the NGV about six years ago. We went to see that show together, remember? It will never happen, but to counter that show I would love to curate an exhibition titled something like, Rupert Bunny, Failed Painter. I have always thought he was such a grandiose and dreadful artist. I would like to mount a critical reappraisal as an actual exhibition of an Australian

artist in a national gallery, to encourage critical viewing from the public, and debate.

So poor Rupert would be the subject of your slights?

I should probably put my energies into something more constructive, you're right, but it would be good to see some informed criticism on the history of the collection of certain artists, artworks, artefacts, etc. by the curators at the NGV.

Could you talk about *French Fictions*?

OK.

I can say now that my approach to curating French Fictions was very much informed by your comments and the long discussions we had over the failure of Geo-organic in 1985 in Wellington. The preparation for French Fictions began in early '86 and the exhibition was seen in various French institutions in late '86-'87. Here I enlisted your help, or your suggestions as to how we might approach the text for the show.

I selected four French artists who have a strong textual, I would even say literary base in their work: Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski, Jean Le Gac and Marcel Avant – who play with ideas of authorship so the viewer is often confused as to whose work they are actually looking at, or whose voice is the protagonist's, or which figure is the narrator in their photo-stories. It did not seem to be a betrayal, in this case, to play with the form of this exhibition, but we needed our text to be sympathetic, and to be a response to the work on show. So, between us, we devised a playful way of writing the text to accompany the show, utilising our (in your case quite sophisticated, in my case 'school girl') French skills, to create a kind of a game for the viewer versed in French. After consulting the artists, who were delighted to have another game-like text playing a part in the show, I wrote a text unravelling the complexities of the artist's work for the viewers; how the writing functioned with the images, where the work could be seen to be a fiction, where biographical details of say, Boltanski, could be proven to be false, Le Gac's proxy 'le peintre', etc. I wondered aloud if this was a French phenomenon or not – to fuse an approach usually seen in other media, particularly literature but also film, with photography. So, Sandra, your text was (seemingly) a direct translation of mine into French.

It was only as the viewer read on that the disparities between the English and its French translation became increasingly apparent; your text disagreed and at times even became playfully argumentative with mine. We received quite a lot of feedback from viewers who found the exhibition enlightening and entertaining. They enjoyed our game, because it was light-hearted and it wasn't at their cost, and because it was specific to the audience who were able to read both languages.

Finally, because we are running out of room, I would like to ask you a question about why you wanted to become a curator in the first place: is curation an act of deferral, deferral of your own hand on the work, for you to assimilate into your own oeuvre the objects that artists make? To ask the hard question, why don't you make artwork yourself? What do you gain from a kind of second-hand act, or creation at one remove? Were you any good at art when you went to art school for that one year? What is the difference between curating artworks and creating them?

Well, that's a long string of loaded questions, and quite accusatory in tone at that! I'm used to that coming from you by now, and of course we've also discussed or argued these issues at length over the years, anyway. I was good enough at painting when I went to art school, but I found that painting was not the medium to take me where I wanted to go. Either it was too silent for me as abstract painting, or else, when painting figuratively, I found my works were too inarticulate, competing and losing against language or the text. My bad figurative paintings, to me, merely served to illustrate ideas that could be verbalised more satisfactorily than painted. Painting seemed to be the wrong medium for what I wanted to say. I'm talking about my own attempts at painting here, and not casting judgment on painting in general, of course. I was skilled and informed enough at painting, but my pictures (or I) lacked resolve in them.

After I left art school and before I went to university, I took a year off and dabbled in other forms, such as found object work, assemblage, Xerox art, etc. These were much more natural mediums for me, I could travel quickly through ideas, but once again I reached an impasse, the mediums had exhausted themselves. So I left behind the idea of becoming an artist, but I still mixed with artists and was very interested in their processes, and how one person's work engaged with another person's, in group shows, etc. From here, intuitively I began piecing

exhibitions together, making selections for group shows, and devising themes or contexts to hold the work together. Gradually my ideas became more consolidated and comprehensive and I began applying for shows and grants where my ideas as a 'curator' could be played out.

So no, I do not feel that curating is an act of effacement or deferral, it's an involved process. I see it as much the same as, well not making a single object to hang in a show, but I utilise the same skills as an artist in preparing an exhibition: working out the content of the show, the venue, the placement of the work. It's the same type of process of selection I learnt from using found objects, photocopying, etc., except that text is incorporated and people are negotiated with. This is a process many artists use when making work, as well.

Would you say that you see the exhibition as a kind of artwork in itself and that you are the creator?

I am sure you could read a type of 'signaturing' of my projects; they have certain thoughts directing them that are peculiarly mine. It would be interesting to look at them together in that way, certainly. But no, they are more a record of responsiveness – to processes and ideas, about institutions, galleries, artists and myself. These components are more or less pliant, more or less compliant.

You must remember that often in a show an artist might not want to do what the curator wants her to, that the curator might place a reading or intentions onto the work that the artist has not vouchsafed. All of these conversations are 'up for grabs', and the artist, if they feel they are being misrepresented, they have their right of veto, to bow out of the exhibition. Sometimes this observed mis-serving of the artist's work happens too late for the artist to renege on the show. Sometimes the artist can be resistant to the text of their work and this can create an interesting frisson in the exhibition; some of the best works in exhibitions I have curated are those where the artist resists my premise. These vicissitudes of the relationships between curator, artist and exhibition space are there to be apprehended by viewers as part of the curated exhibition.

B. S. Hope - Portrait of a Mentor

I have known Seona Hope since she was my history tutor at art school in 1974. For some reason, she took an interest in my photographs and assisted in my transition from art student to practicing artist by including me in her 1975 exhibition 'False Photographs'. I have been involved in many Hope projects as exhibitor and collaborator since. My intention here is to present a photo portrait of Seona. Here, I am turning the tables on the curator; she becomes the subject of the work rather than the orchestrator of exhibitions of the works of others.

We spent one rainy afternoon in July this year, sitting on the floor of Seona's living room, drinking tea, eating cake and going through boxes of photos and slides. The images you see on the walls here, culled from hundreds, represent Hope in the main in her art-related roles; as curator, researcher, talker (something she's not bad at), and opening party animal. Also, after much deliberation, we include one photograph of a deeply personal note.

As artists, we are often on the defensive around the curator, seeing them as people who need to interpret our work for us, as if we can't speak or write for ourselves. With Hope, I have found curating to be a dynamic process, often exploring and questioning distinctions between creator and commentator.

So, this is an affectionate sampling of images, marking the trail of my relationship with someone I see as a mentor and a friend, but also someone I can have a ripper of an argument with.

Sandra Bridie, August 1997



November, 1975
(My collection)

This is the earliest photo I have of Seona, and the crappiest of the selection that you see here. Taken most probably at an end of year exhibition at art school, where she was my second year Art History tutor, she stands in front of the work of I-don't-know-who, (someone who went on to become a geometric abstractionist, no doubt).

When we came across this photo, Seona - looking horrified, exclaimed, "My God! I look like Mindy, from 'Mork and Mindy', do you remember that program?"

MISSING IMAGE

July, 1979

Parallax Gallery, Sydney
(Slide in Hope's collection)

B. S. Hope stands in the doorway of tiny Darlinghurst gallery, Parallax, on the eve, as I remember it, of her thirtieth birthday. The exhibition she put together was called, 'Familiar Paintings' and was very intimate in scale, containing twenty small oil paintings of; boats on the harbour, still lifes, children playing and the like; the artistic efforts of her relations (she had three aunts and two uncles who painted - mainly as hobbyists).

Hope said, "I realise in retrospect that with 'Familiar Paintings', by tracing the prevalence of artistic - though unremarkable - activity in my genealogy, I was actually working through some much more personal issues than I would admit to at the time. I was trying to assess whether my choice of identification was one of co-option by the artistic majority in my family or of my own volition. Though I did not become the painter my relatives hoped for, (though I did go to art school), I reside, always ambivalently, in the same world as the painter; one suggested to me by their insistence that art must be my calling.

Throughout its existence, (it closed in 1985) Parallax Gallery prided itself on its radical program, and actually used the rhetoric of the avant-garde. I think, at the time, I saw the object of the exhibition – this show of very, very conventional paintings – was to play with the expectations of the visitor used to seeing 'avant-garde' works there.



July, 1982
Holidays, Port Campbell, Victoria
(Hope's collection)

B. S. Hope with British sculptor Strafford James and French writer Marie Breerette (Cathie, Seona's partner and I are out of frame).

A week by the sea, staying in a farmhouse opposite the Twelve Apostles. Marie was very much taken by the heroic story of Tom and Eva and the ship wreck of Loch Ard Gorge. Seona and Cathie went on several day walks along the ragged coast line while Strafford and I rented videos and watched them in our pyjamas. At bed time Marie told us wonderful ghost stories in heavily accented English.

This photo was taken (I like all the glasses) the morning after a night before of roast beef, rice pudding, wine, Scotch and ghost stories.



October, 1985

Documenting 'Geo-Organic', Contemporary Arts Festival, Wellington, NZ
(My collection)

I remember we had a bit of a stand-off over this one.

My criticism was that Hope 'curated the crap' out of the artists' work in the show, using it as a vehicle for her own purposes, those of irony or critique, without letting any of the artists in on the joke.

The text in 'Geo-Organic' was supposed to be a take on 'the curatorial voice in the educational texts of modernist blockbuster shows'. Add to this the overlay of museological display techniques; foam core, works in Perspex boxes on plinths, clichés of authoritative rhetoric in the texts beside the work, and the poor, pure works of the artists were done over completely.

Ian Matthews, who was in the show, spoke to me on this, saying that he had not been informed of Hope's intentions for his work or the tone that the show would take. He felt pretty betrayed by the whole experience.

Obviously, (by the way I am carrying on here) I have not really forgiven Hope for 'Geo-Organic', but future exhibitions allowed her to redeem herself a little.

Hope: "No comment, that exhibition is now a blank spot in my memory."



June, 1986
Photography Collection, ANG Canberra
(Hope's collection)

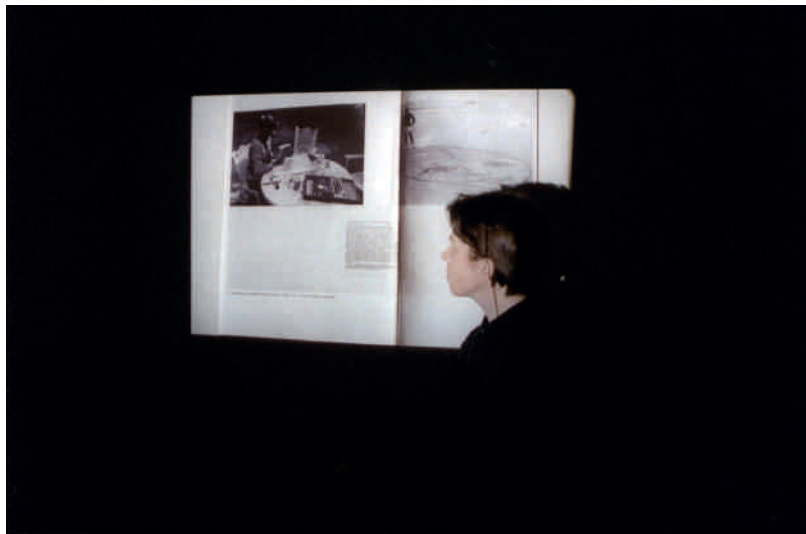
Seona down in the bowels of the ANG selecting photographs for her touring exhibition *French Fictions* which included the work of Jean Le Gac (who's work she is viewing here), Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski and Marcel Avant.

French Fictions was exhibited in Institutes such as French consulates and the Alliance Francaise in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide. She chose to show in these venues, whose exhibiting spaces were often less than ideal, because of the heavy text base of the artists' works, knowing that here at least; the original French could be read and appreciated by the audience.

We provided a bit of sport in this show, for viewers literate in both French and English; Hope had written the notes for the show in English (and also provided an English translation of the texts by Le Gac, Calle, Boltanski and Avant) and I translated her text. Or at least that's how my translation began, as you read on - this text went on for about 1,000 words - you realized that the translation was diverging more and more from the original text by Hope, to become finally, quite another piece of information for the viewer altogether.

This time I don't think Hope's play with curatorial form betrayed the work in the show. Hope had the exhibitor's approval on our text prior to the show. I also think the 'curator's texts' was not in opposition to the play with reality in the French artists' own work.

Visitors to the exhibition seemed to like this game, and enjoyed seeing if their French friends 'got' the curator's text.



November, 1987

Alliance Francaise, St Kilda, Melbourne

(My collection)

Slide presentation to accompany *French Fictions* in Melbourne. Hope is talking about the work of artist Jean Le Gac, to a slide of his work.

Once again we played with the text. Hope read the sections of her talk in English, and I followed, ostensibly offering a translation of the English. The audience very quickly realised that they were being given two interpretations of the work seen in the slides, and in fact two very different stories of how the exhibition came about.



December, 1992

Taken in Hope's flat, Kensington

(My collection)

After much hesitation, we decided to include this photo.

As I said in the preface to this piece, the afternoon we selected of photographs that you see here, was spent drinking tea, eating cake, laughing and chattering, sitting in a room strewn with photos.

When I picked out this photo, however, we both fell silent. Taken a month after Seona's partner Cathie's death, the cast you see over Seona's face was to remain for at least two years before it finally began to lift. I remember this look, that she always returned to this strained, absent expression, especially if there was a lull in the conversation, or had time for reflection.

We include it, I guess, because of the note it struck on the day of our selection - the relationship with Cathie it conjured up to us once more - and because it informs Seona and my viewing of the work, even though it might not inform yours.



August, 1994
Party after Sandra Bridie - Part of a Life
My place, North Melbourne
(Hope's collection)

This work 'B.S. Hope - portrait of a mentor' is probably, I now realise, the reciprocal gesture to Hope's instigating a kind of retrospective of my work.

In *Sandra Bridie - Part of a Life* the viewer, rather than being presented with an overview of the photos I had produced over the past two decades, witnessed my working processes on ten different projects via ten video monitors. Here Hope had filmed my convoluted way of arriving at a photographic image, showing the range of reflective surfaces the original image is bounced off before the final, disorientating figment is caught. Her intention, I think, was to demystify my pictures a little, but what actually happened was that she created through these videos - something she is at pains not to admit - a type of art work of her own.

Here she is stunned and 'red-eyed' by the flash of my camera, at the party after the opening, looking quite relieved that it is all over.