

MASON Penny
Seeing and Reading Vital Signs

Abstract

I have recently completed a body of works titled *Vital Signs* in which I inscribed paper and stone surfaces with text-like characters, to explore the suggestive and subliminal properties of repeated rows of marks and shapes. The technical basis involved the delicate stippling of inks across the work surface. The resulting marks subtly mutate and break down, while the lines they generate waver uncertainly, sometimes crossing into the path of the line immediately above or below to create a striated, ambiguous surface. The resulting works are unrestrainedly suggestive in spite of their means of production, which retains formalist strategies (from an earlier period of my work) designed to produce an inscrutable lack of reference points.

In this paper a range of interpretive categories for considering the issue of representation in abstraction are examined in a discussion that focuses on the nature and variety of responses to *Vital Signs*. These ideas are woven around the ambiguous character of *Vital Signs*. Various themes determined by the construction of the mark in different contexts including its opticality, its tendency to generate visually-based narratives and its deployment as hand, machine and digitally generated text are investigated. Each of these avenues provides opportunities to explore and synthesise aspects of subjectivity that scrutinise the nature of the relationship between viewer and image. The tension between my own motives and those of viewers underpins this investigation.

Biography

Penny Mason was born in Hobart in 1950. Since graduating from the Tasmanian School of Art in 1970 she has participated in group shows and undertaken regular solo exhibitions. The more recent include *Simuland* at Australian Girls Own Gallery, Canberra in 1996, *Outlines* at Nisart, Launceston in 1997, *Configurations* at University Gallery A, Launceston in 1999 and *Vital Signs* at Poimena Gallery, Launceston in 2002.

In 1999 she undertook further studies gaining a Master of Fine Art and Design at the School of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania. She is represented in public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and the Centre for Precision Technology, Hobart.

Seeing and Reading Vital Signs

The impetus for the series of works titled *Vital Signs* was derived from a longstanding interest in the formal problems intrinsic to mark-making on a two-dimensional surface. In these works, visual ideas centre on the phenomena of figure/ground relationships and the organisation of rows in an exploration of spatiality, opticality, texture and movement. In the past I have sought to repress any tendencies in the work that might suggest or even hint at the representational or mimetic. I have been surprised however, at the extent to which viewers see 'things' from their real or imagined worlds in *Vital Signs*. Viewers have endowed *Vital Signs* with references that allude to technologically-generated effects such as textiles, as well as geological and landscape features. The most commonly mentioned references, are anthropomorphic, with viewers describing cascades of figures looming out of mesmerising picture fields which shimmer and blur. I have been further intrigued by how these images also form associations with the delicate patterns of the human genome map.

In this paper I borrow an idea from *The Optical Unconscious* by Rosalind Krauss¹ in a discussion of the various means by which the viewer is rendered a captive of the picture. In view of the above responses to *Vital Signs*, this investigation will incorporate debates about the relationship between form and content and the possibilities of interpretation by way of an examination of the latent and manifest meanings apparently evident in *Vital Signs*. Emphasis will be placed on the relationship of these works to the formation and interpretation of pattern in fields of scientific data and invented text.

In a sense the foundations and principles on which the first of the *Vital Signs* works were made have been undermined by the viewers' imaginations. At the project's outset I devoted much attention to my longstanding interest in concerns and ideals of culture derived from abstract painting. However, viewers

who wilfully prise images and narratives from these works have compelled me to acknowledge what I initially sought to suppress in the works. As a result, my original preoccupation with the principles by which painting and drawing can be renewed has been greatly extended by acknowledging and working with ideas that focus on the 'look' of the work as well as its means of production or motives.

The works were arrived at through a drawing operation which was rule-driven and being only very marginally self-correcting, thus shaded with the principles of automatism. Seeing what might happen – openness to unpredicted effects took precedence over adjustment and finetuning. The resulting stippled, layered and striated surfaces were created through the strictures of a number of injunctions. 'Never reload the brush before a line is completed' - thus the marks that comprise any given line mutate in unexpected ways. 'Always finish a line' - thus sometimes a line fades out completely. These processes which mimic a rather crude mechanical device result in softness and suggestion. The spaces created are ordered yet disintegrate – are shallow at the same time as hinting at deeply articulated distances. In some instances the figure/ground relationships produce an effect of flickering backwards and forwards in the manner of a *Gestalt* illustration. They also have a tendency to snap in-and-out of focus like magic eye pictures. Together, these unstable effects produce an awareness of the dynamic interplay of physiological and cultural processes that blend immediate experience and culture in the acts of seeing and recognising. The terms of visual perception seem to manifest themselves as interludes of exposed possibilities.

A number of theoretical avenues are opened up by the fact that people become voluble and full of ideas in the face of the *Vital Signs* works. First, the tendency of viewers to see 'things' in the work conforms to the assertion by Rex Butler in his essay for *Art Monthly* "A Return to Pollock", that the abstract always becomes figurative because as a viewer we always return to referentiality.² In Butler's opinion "We cannot grasp materiality in itself but only as a sign".³ The essay "Life after the Death of Painting" by Yves-Alain Bois in *Aesthesis and the Economy of the Senses* "provides a useful summary of the motives that drive modernist painting, most of which lie outside the world of 'things'. He notes that in some instances (such as the Dadaists) artists critique other human activities while others direct their attention to the possibilities of art as a theoretical model in itself. Transcendental models can be detected in both groups of examples when the spiritual and intuitive are given precedence, while other artists adopt strategies based on objectivity and empiricism.

Second, I look at some of the ideas addressed by Rosalind Krauss in *The Optical Unconscious*. Her example of Ruskin being made a captive of the picture when he sees "...pattern in the carpet, in the sea, in the aspens. Sees their form, their 'picture'..." probes the very origins of pictorial representation.⁵ Although I will concentrate my attention on instances of *Vital Signs* forming semantic connections to science I am also interested in the propensity for viewers to twist their perceptions into particular configurations. I believe that in this sense the viewer and the picture are in fact mutual captives.

Third, it is possible to work through the experience of individual *Vital Signs* works (with their animated propensity – to switch, focus and unfocus, shimmer and blur) between understanding them as formalist objects that seem to stand apart from the real world and as representations of the world. I consider the effect of the viewer's reception (of these works) in an account that folds the autonomous, stand-alone motives of the work alongside questions of their legibility as images or narratives, including those that refer to science and technology.

Considered in formal terms there are many affinities between *Vital Signs* and certain paintings by a number of modernist painters mentioned by Bois including Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Elsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, Christian Bonnefoi and Robert Ryman.⁶ The minimal use of colour and finely-grained all-over effects are immediately obvious as are the diminution of subject matter and the freestanding object status of each work. Bois asserts that each of the abovementioned artists "...strove to find the zero degree of painting, the 'absolute' painting that would be entirely motivated, whose compositional arbitrariness, would be entirely subsumed in its fulfilment of historical necessity. Indexicality, monochromy, grids, even chance paradoxically, have been the major tropes of such a modernist urge to motivate painting" throughout the twentieth century.⁷ Traces of each of these figures of modernity are scattered throughout *Vital Signs*.

Bois links the entire history of modernism in painting to this issue of 'utter motivation', the quest for which he argues is impossible. He divides this history of motivation or rather non-compositionality into four periods or "...runs of the modernist game..." These motives include: the will not to compose, in which subjectivity is downplayed when art eschews mimetic representation; the questioning of the origins of composition in either arbitrary or conversely scientific programs; the practice of anti-composition by Abstract Expressionism which gives precedence to subjectivism; and finally the explicit reaction against Abstract Expressionism found in Minimalism and Post-Minimalism.⁸

I can detect elements of each of these motives in *Vital Signs*, but have increasingly found myself drawn to other elements suggested by imaginative viewers. Their inventions render my initial parallels inexact in several important ways. Each *Vital Signs* work has been built up through the application of a simple rule-driven system that was intended to minimise expressiveness or subjectivism. In fact, the arbitrary mark-making process that generated *Vital Signs* exposed a degree of self-contradiction even as the line was developed. When the ink was deposited on the paper the brush used flexed and twisted while the clumps of bristles dilated and contracted. These sensitive interactions of paper with brush and ink resulted in finely shaded traces to produce, for example, the progress of an agitated dancing figure whose proportions mutate from those of a small child to a gleeful chimpanzee, to an amorphous amoeba form. The lines immediately above or below may cross into the pathway of this particular incident, resulting in the stamping feet morphing into a sequential representation of dividing chromosomes. The motivating injunctions that defined the technique overrode the all-too-frequent urge to add a flourish or deepen a tone. Yet paradoxically, these very strictures have driven the inventiveness and freedom of the work.

These inherent contradictions between the subjective and the objective become even more apparent when standing back from the work, because of the tendency of the marks to further destabilise by running together, creating yet another tier of suggestiveness. References to the body are particularly compelling when individual figures emerge then subside back into a mutating row. The surfaces might also be read like a text derived from a technological device that registers one of the body's many systems. Thus the rules employed are arbitrary, yet point in the direction of the rational and deliberate sciences when the blurry, undulating rows of marks appear to register measurable physical properties.

Similarly, the anti-compositional dimension of the work is betrayed by formation of the overall structure, which, although determined by streams or cascades of disorderly rhythms, generates simple yet compelling tonal harmonies. These undulating marks seem to both register and stimulate emotions, subjective qualities that run counter to the mechanistic processes that drive *Vital Signs*. A further paradox is evident in the overall effect of simplicity and stillness (a hallmark of Minimalism) which is belied by the intense opticality of these works.

However, none of these effects of pulsing agitation subsiding into quietness only to reverse again, conform to the specificity of opticality in the sense that the term is used by Krauss. In fact the responses of viewers to the 'look' of *Vital Signs* cannot be said to correspond to her views on how modernist paintings might be received. For example, modernism's autonomy (or insistence on displaying the condition of vision as abstract) is defied when *Vital Signs* is persistently located (by imaginative viewers) in an historical field that engages with technology and science as well as a variety of pictorial traditions. When the optical qualities of the work bring the unconscious dimension of vision to the surface, distracting narratives and descriptions destroy the extreme perceptual intensity that Krauss asserts, exemplify the instantaneity of vision-in-consciousness character of modernist painting.⁹

Viewers of *Vital Signs* frequently conflate the materiality of the works with imagined signs, seeing in them a deferral to the real world in spite of their unlikeness to any actual 'thing'. Butler cites Jordan Kantor's description of Pollock's line being unable to "...decide if it describes form or exists of its own accord".¹⁰ The marks which comprise *Vital Signs* display a similar ambiguity or indecisiveness when they slip and stutter between the possibilities of a symbolic order and the real. These exchanges between line and figure also recall Fried's description in the catalogue *Three American Painters* of Pollock's line in his all-over drip paintings. He asserts that it "...has been purged of its figurative character... is entirely transparent both to the non-illusionistic space it inhabits but does not structure, and to the pulses of something like pure, disembodied energy that seem to move without resistance through them".¹¹ The vibrating effects in *Vital*

Signs become quite different however, when they are read as deposits of data. The arbitrary rules that govern the works ironically recreate the evidential authority of computer readout, genome maps, graphs etc., at the same time drawing attention to the subtle aesthetic qualities of such techno-data.

The variety of inventions brought to *Vital Signs* indicates that responses to the visual structures are frequently uncertain, a fact that is expressed through debates that focus on interactions between form and content. The boundaries of these debates are far-reaching and flexible, encompassing social structures, politics, history, spirituality, perceptual theory and theory of the unconscious with many of these aspects overlapping. As an example, in *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss provides a provocative and convincing deconstruction of how unconscious desire and optical physiology interact in the structure of vision in Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*. She describes these colourful rotating contraptions that enact "...the images of industry; the flywheels; the turn screws; the propellers..." as producing a hypnotic erotic visual throb or pulse that advances and recedes with all its attendant implications of sexual congress. She argues that this exposure of the temporal dimensions of nervous life is "...fully awash with optical illusion's false induction." Thus vision is secured in the body at the same time as siting the body in the grip of desire.¹² The connections made by both Duchamp and Krauss are elliptical and rely on creative borrowing from the sciences of physiology, psychoanalysis and psychology. This trend continues in the work of many artists who currently engage with ideas drawn from science.

There are several avenues by which the work in the *Vital Signs* project can be related to a current *Zeitgeist* in which artists engage with science. By colluding with inventive viewers I work their perceived allusions and illusions into a series of ironic clashes between science and aesthetics. Thus *Vital Signs* is staged as an invented script that responds to the multiple interactions of languages and feelings, evoked by both art and science. Examples of similar strategies are provided by Sian Ede, in *Strange and Charmed* who describes many instances of individual and collaborative projects in which artists and scientists engage with each other through image-making.¹³ Specific examples that can be related to the *Vital Signs* project are mentioned by Andrea Duncan in her chapter "Inside-Outside Permutation: Science and the Body in Contemporary Art" in *Strange and Charmed*.¹⁴

Duncan argues that contemporary science transforms our view of the body, dislocating and fragmenting our sense of persona, identity, boundary, scale and time and that artists who engage with these developments are stimulated by the scientific method and technology as much as by the research itself. This engagement reflects the view of Steven Rose that laboratories and operating theatres are the ideological and technological powerhouses of modern societies.¹⁵

Of the many examples of artists who derive their ideas from science mentioned by Duncan, the work of Therese Oulton and Terry Winters is the most relevant to *Vital Signs*. Both artists use traditional materials of paint as a means of pursuing philosophical inquiry through abstraction. Oulton's paintings ooze and seep to suggest the viscous materiality of bodily functions and structures. Duncan describes them as capturing instants of "...an uneasy borderline between 'flesh' and 'fluid', between 'form' and 'unform' to suggest a moment on the vital palpating biochemically intelligent flesh".¹⁶ Duncan also cites Angela Moorajani's observation that "...hints of genetic process..." and a sense of continual movement and change pervades her work.¹⁷ Very similar attributes are observed by Duncan in her discussion of Terry Winters' paintings which draw on research into DNA and the minutiae of living creatures. References to the innate pattern-making of living cells and how they can be related to aspects of the built environment are discernible in works such as *Grey Scale Image*.¹⁸ This painting conveys a sense of becoming or emergence or relentless movement towards increasing complexity, qualities that are echoed in *Vital Signs*.

The variety of themes discernible in *Vital Signs* is initially concealed within their homogeneous appearance. The elements and principles that underpin the work are simple with any deviations that occur being the product of the different tools or surfaces employed. The strictures that guide the works' construction maintain its consistent appearance across variations to the making process. Yet when interpretation is taken into account, it is evident that the works contain many of the tropes of heterogeneity. For example, they provide many opportunities for playful re-readings, such as when a figure morphs from a posture of exultancy to gloom. More serious themes are also discernible when the power and authority of certain manifestations of high technology such as gene maps are alluded to. Krauss argues that modernist

visuality is ultimately a display of reason – rationalised – coded – abstracted – the law – only available through the optical senses which are infinitely multiple and unified.¹⁹ However, the variety of thematic structures discernible in *Vital Signs*, as in the works of Winters and Oulton belies their homogeneous or formalist appearance so that these works draw our attention to the contestable nature of science, which is also often presented as unified.

An incongruous aspect of *Vital Signs* is the fact the mark made by hand can never be equivalent to the mechanically or digitally generated mark. Yet when creating these works, the sense of my being ‘taken over’ by the process of iterating a particular mark often engendered a sort of trance, not unlike that experienced when operating a machine over a long period of time. If the machine or its output is potentially dangerous, concentration and precision are paramount. In effect the operator has to adopt and maintain the style of the machine. The drawing process for *Vital Signs* produced in me a mesmerising sense that I found as inexorable as the operation of a loom. This effect has been most pronounced during the making of the *Time Over Time II* where I applied a tiny air driven hammer to sandstone. The quirks and inventions that flowed from these actions rendered this technique all the more compelling. The marks are both mechanical and organic. They suggest the mysterious processes of sedimentation and fossilisation that trace vast periods of time. They also suggest the continuing outpouring of an unknown text.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate on the origins of languages, the mysterious and imaginative processes involved in their genesis appear to flow among the strokes, blotches and shades that comprise the *Vital Signs* works. Like the scribbled trace created by the worm beneath the peeled back bark of a white eucalypt, an intelligible communication might at any moment wriggle free. The first Chinese script is said to have evolved out of the crackled surfaces created by the burning of a turtle shell.²⁰ In this sense the *Vital Signs* works allude to the indexical trace created by the processes that scarred the surface of the tree trunk or the turtle shell. Each suggests an illusion of language and text. And, just as (unintended) indexes or traces of physical activity may have contributed to the evolution of ancient languages as is suggested by *Time Over Time II*, the works also seem to indicate a future (as yet uninvented) language.

In the making of *Vital Signs* I imagined what might flow from the capacity of techno-languages to provide previously unimagined linkages between unlike and unrelated ways of being in the world. By taking up ink, brushes, fine paper and stone, I also paid homage to the ancient traditions to which these tools belong, while (possibly irreverently) I have built up cascading sequences of pleasure and uncertainty. The automatist strategy I employed allowed me to play the vector through which this history of written language seems able to speak. I have also drawn attention to the fact that the patterns, surfaces, rhythms and textures, so alluringly seductive in handwritten texts are sometimes equally discernible in the subtle nuances created by output from precisely calibrated mechanical and digital technology.

I have attempted here to resolve contradictions that occur when viewers see ‘things’ from the world of objects in work that has evolved from a non-representational tradition. It is evident that the ‘fit’ suggested by the visual resemblances of *Vital Signs* to the work of a number of abstract painters is compromised by the propensity of the work to resemble and suggest stories. The failure of *Vital Signs* to conform with any precision to the templates of modernist abstract painting is acknowledged when I capitulate to this propensity. However, rather than rejecting these modernist antecedents outright, I affirm my connection to that tradition through the transcendent qualities of *Vital Signs* that occur when they reach towards the history of communication through forms and archetypes found in signs, languages and texts.

¹ Krauss, R. E., (1994), *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT Press, Cambridge, (MASS).

² Butler, R. A., (2002), A Return to Pollock, *Art Monthly*, Number 156, pp 46-48.

³ Ibid, p 46.

⁴ Bois, Y-A., (1996), Life After the “Death of Painting”, in Helen Grace (ed.), *Aesthesia and the Economy of the Senses*, University of Western Sydney, (Nepean), pp 201-219.

⁵ Krauss, op cit., p 24.

⁶ Bois, op cit., pp 201-205.

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- ⁷ Ibid, pp 202-203.
- ⁸ Ibid, pp 203–205.
- ⁹ Krauss, op cit., p 214.
- ¹⁰ Kantor, (2000), in Butler, p 47.
- ¹¹ Fried, M., (1965), *Three American Painters*, Fogg Art Museum, (Harvard), p 14.
- ¹² Krauss, op cit., p. 134.
- ¹³ Ede, S., (2000), (ed.), *Strange and Charmed Science and the Contemporary Visual Arts*, Calouste, (London).
- ¹⁴ Duncan, A., (2002), *Inside-Outside Permutations: Science and the Body in Contemporary Art*, in Sian Ede (ed.), *Strange and Charmed*, Calouste, (London).
- ¹⁵ Rose, (1992), in Duncan, 2000, p. 146.
- ¹⁶ Duncan, op cit., p 155.
- ¹⁷ Moorajani, in Duncan, p 155.
- ¹⁸ Duncan, op cit., p 155.
- ¹⁹ Krauss, op cit., pp. 6-22.
- ²⁰ Barthes, R., (1982), *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, (New York), p. 162.