

DROPPED/FRAMED
GARETH LONG:
READING FORM AND REVISING NARRATION

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Fig.27

Gareth Long's work is both extended and compacted—it reaches out into grand narratives and crushes video time. His activities have involved the extension of fictional space via the complete revision of its component parts. He has demonstrated a continuing interest in finding new ways to express video in forms that discard all the component parts of traditional electronic media; at times even the image has been dispensed with. Art becomes a terrain that lends itself to the corruption of form for its own sake. Within that context, Long takes known modes of communication and expression and, as the result of a process, transforms them into new forms.

An exhibition of Gareth Long's work requires attention and distinct stages of engagement. Extensive reading and a commitment to the potential of the text sit at the heart of his practice. They are both integral to the initial moment of his idea formation and an essential component of the viewer's experience. This is combined with an interest in film and video. Yet in his case, the notion of extended reading is matched by a desire to engage with the clip, or the short video segment, rather than complete narrative films. His well-regarded lenticular works are exemplary in this regard. Stills from digital sources, fixed in what initially appears to be a static photographic form, turn out to be short moving sequences made possible by a series of ridges that contain a number of still images on the surface of the work. If the lenticulars are at one extreme of a practice—stopping motion and turning it into locked form—then his use of reading and text are behind elusive and complex works that require time and thought, and even secondary reading, on the part of the viewer. The presentation of an artifact within a gallery space is, in his case, not the beginning or the end of the process. It is the presentation of process in singular form. The fact of a book on a desk that appears to be a standard edition of *Don Quixote*, for example, may or may not be part of a precise re-coding of text. A book, in French, on Québécois direct action may or may not be an authorized history of a complex moment in time. Both are records of processes that can be seen and talked about. Importantly they also exist to be read, understood and considered alongside all other books.



Fig. 28

Long's sources are worth considering for a moment. His literary references, apart from *Don Quixote* and Flaubert, have shifted recently into the mid-20th century. In each case he looks for a moment of rupture or misunderstanding and capitalizes upon it in order to extend and create re-readings of accepted hierarchies and structures. J.D. Salinger, who clearly moved beyond a certain modernist trajectory in literature, became interesting to Long only when he came across recent book jackets. They appeared to align the novels with a particular lucid modernist aesthetic, in contradiction to the neurotic-confessional content of the books. Alain Robbe-Grillet is another reference point here. Employing a highly stylized mode of existential writing, deeply evocative and predictive of a new conception of cinematic space, Robbe-Grillet only creates problems when considered alongside the trajectory of pure modernist literature and film as separate entities. The psychological component of Robbe-Grillet's work—its problematic play with voyeurism, power and authorship—is echoed in Long's



Fig. 29

artistic methodology that finds new spaces between the text and image. Where the lingering descriptive trajectory of a Robbe-Grillet narrative remains contained within the covers of a book, with Long we are in a position to witness, via the lenticular technique and his rethinking of books, an equally detailed yet peculiar perspective on the extension or contraction of perceivable time and space.

Long has taken apart certain key components of ‘the text’ and the expression of narrative. We have the lenticular moment—forcing an extended experience of a fragment in time—activated only by the movement of the viewer. He has exploited a passive device for conveying machine-free moving images. The lenticular is a post-machine that cannot be controlled by an ‘on’ or ‘off’ switch. The only way to turn it off is to turn away or stop moving; and even the slightest turn of the head will reactivate the scene. We are trapped in front of one of Long’s lenticulars—unable to escape a continual ‘movie’ that can never take us beyond a second or two of action. In opposition to these endless, enduring, non-controllable ‘films’, we have his use of ‘the machine’ as something built in order to create a parallel object alongside its original source. With some of his literary works that machine remains a book, in the Deleuzian sense, where the reprocessing of information via software adapted, or written, by Long has completely transformed the contents and its potential. The book has not been destroyed; it has mutated and started a growth of its own—a semi-autonomous production no longer in the hands of the original author or the artist.

Think of the idea of a machine ‘machine’—a device for building a new ‘relative’ of an original source. Long is looking for a way to escape from the acceptance of the notion of an original and a copy. There is no such simple relationship within his work. He is developing something that is not intended to disturb or reveal through simple-minded corruption or revelation. Instead—alongside him—we are invited to witness the creation of new parallel objects that appear, or better, are spawned from sources. Both the sources and the results are revealed as autonomous entities. His intellectual machinery is complex but transparent to those

who care to investigate the component parts. What is created is a three-dimensional representation of a representation—a redoubling of artistic distancing towards the generation of new forms. This commitment to reprocessing goes beyond the constraints of a straightforward parodying of easily understood relations of production. Long shows us an alternative taxonomy that renders the typical notion of an artist's practice into a fully-fledged praxis. One that blends theory and practice, while leaving a large deliberate space where the viewer can engage in positive speculation—both about the potential limitations and possible expanded horizons of critical cultural production—today and the day before yesterday.

The edges within his work are often provided by contingent factors. The covers of a book; the pragmatic requirements of a desk; the machine required to run the software; the existing formats available from his lenticular makers in New Zealand. There is an attempt here to show the workings and reveal the imposed limitations of processing. Each project is new and each project adds to an extended terrain of possibilities. We are invited onto an expanded plateau where readings, re-readings and processes are part of a cumulative project. At present only part of that terrain is occupied, but each new addition to his output extends this meta-work via reconfiguration, testing and display.



Fig.30