

useless | history

KATRINA SCHLUNKE

provocation test: a test to ascertain whether or not a person is alive

It also seems to me that there is a fairly solid local consensus among historians of Australia regarding that old question: what's the use of history? We are always being told, especially by professors of Cultural Studies, who are evidently in charge of these matters, that history is no use at all: that every generation writes its own history; that what we old fashioned types are so solemnly doing is slow-dancing, mesmerised by our own reflections, before the mirror of the past.

Inga Clendinnen¹

The simplest of the 'provocation tests' is that of holding a mirror to the lips of the unconscious to check for breath. In the mirror test, if you are alive the glass will be covered with a film of fog as your breath is recorded across its cold surface. In that second you are more alive to someone than you have ever been, for someone thought you might be dead. Can you imagine what that connection, that thin film of breath will lead to? The rushing and the relief and the hard work of waiting for someone to then be better and better until there is a fairly solid consensus that this body, which some thought to be dead, is alive. That what some thought past is present.

This is the problem with the body of history, isn't it? If you think you can know it by simply reading it as a discrete entity, an independent body that can be walked around, wholly mapped, wholly disciplined, then you will never feel its breath. If you are here and the body is there, then you cannot think about the way in which that body continues its own minute motions, has its own momentum. Heart rate slowing, blood vessels pushing, pushing, pushing,

against a loss of fluid and those labouring lungs flooded with the hope of final rest. How will these small changes tell their emerging stories? Neither long enough nor lived enough to be generational, these transformations cannot be told as history. They are the folds of the past from which new words emerge. They are not 'our' histories to tell. For what is life and death, fact and fiction, when this proliferating touching and testing will produce a million more connections and when even the mirror no longer merely reflects but sends us for the doctor, our journals, our video mobiles, our shamed-to-be-alive laughter. Strange that the intensity of this touch, the holding of a mirror, the invention of death and life as two opposites proven in a fog, might be connected to an idea of use—the usefulness of knowing for certain. For what is that hand holding that mirror trying to prove? It is using a rational test to tell us what rational tests do—whether a body is alive or dead. It makes a truth. It is a useful test.

We know usefulness by attainment. That's a word filled with the hope of something we should have done for our mother's sake, attain—yet one of its pasts looks nothing like that present. It has its roots in the Latin *attingere*: to touch upon. To 'touch upon' might describe the passionate paths of the sometimes past, of a cultural congress, but it will not necessarily make my mother proud. As an approach to the past, 'touching upon' will not be asked to dinner where others can see, and can walk easily around its attainment, its ongoing, easy usefulness. Others will not be able to hold up this past since it has come into this ungraspable shape from the touching upon. And if others emerge within it, they will find that they have been joined at the hip. Even if a record is made of unbreakable plates—lets call it a book; people will find themselves stuck to its spine and cut on its leaves of glass. Each nanosecond of changing existence sweating upon another shift to eons of untraceable territory as this invented past folds inside us, crawls down our pants, encounters sisters in our hair becoming skin. Eating this thing entirely is not an option. As autocannibalism is not an option.

Old-fashioned types, perhaps Aristocrat Let or Edwardian Script, let us speak beyond ourselves. Even as simple simulacra of the old, these fashioned types remind us that looks change and looking even more. How do we see now? How could we have seen then? How do we look now, again? What is it about the shape of those letters, the fall of the stroke, that joins us once again to the hand that was held as the final mirror was raised to those lips? Raised as those other hands lay useless that once held a pen that once rose and fell along paper. Downward curves, upward strokes—what are these touchings of old-fashioned types? Do they touch each other in some kind of scripted dance? A writing perhaps. Who is to blame them, in all their stroked gorgeousness, if they should want to be told that they are looking in a mirror? That they can be seen—a hallucination denying the ineffable. For if they can be seen, so the past can be seen, territorialised and completed by merely looking.

Mirrors. Isn't that where this started? Not smoke and mirrors but breath and glass. What kind of past appears upon the surface of a mirror? A past made present because life

has mapped itself through heat and cold. Climatic? Ecological? That breath connecting us to the possibility of every other thing, old-fashioned types included. Reflections, shatterings, pimping and preening, knowing we are becoming. These surface connections matter. Will we be able to call places into being? Show what can't be seen? Make old-fashioned types dance? Slut up? Be still? Listen? Wait? To see the past clear and fogged on cold glass. To feel the past in an ecology of feeling made of more than images. To taste the past in a method of touching upon. We can try. A small sign, taken for wonder, that cultural studies is in charge of such matters.

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1. Extract from Inga Clendinnen's address to the 2003 NSW Premier History Awards dinner, subsequently published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 2003.