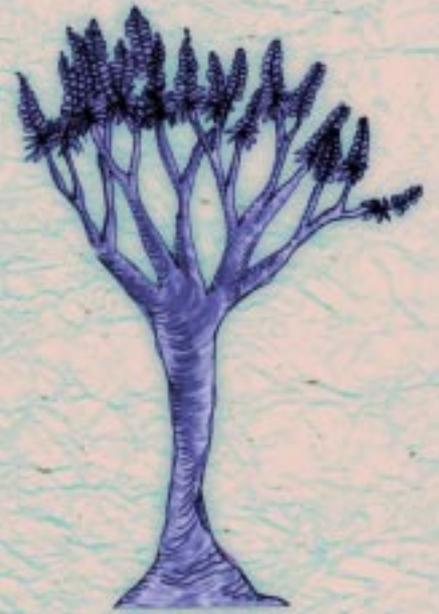


PRINTED MATTER



Dianne Longley



**Robert Steele Gallery
187 Rundle Street Adelaide**

What really matters: the print, the personal, and the unpredictable

Printed matter. Writing. The Word. The Law. Reason. Truth. The important stuff of life. What matters.

What has mattered most in western society over the past five hundred years is written language, a development providing a formidable basis for economic, political, scientific and some might say, intellectual, ascendancy over the rest of the world. The exercise of power in our culture remains dependent upon the written manipulation of language, not by poets and artists but other, more rationalist “custodians of the word”¹ who control the means of communication.

In an essay entitled “Origins of the Game of Cards”, in *Cats, Cakes, Clothes and Cups*, Dianne Longley compares today’s “new information revolution”² to another seismic literacy shift which took place in mid fifteenth century Europe, when mass produced printing was invented³. Unlike earlier printing developments in China⁴, the technology of moveable type rapidly transformed an oral society into one predominantly concerned with matters visual and literate; above all, printed matter, not memory, assumed the role of Truth and, in time, was aided and abetted by familiar platitudes such as ‘don’t believe all you hear’, ‘put it in writing’ and ‘seeing is believing’.

In the beginning then was The Word and the earliest printing presses were at the service of texts of religious instruction. Thus printed language assumed pre-eminence in the externalized (read masculine) activities of theology, commerce, law and science, while matters closer to the heart and senses - creativity, the arts, fleshly delights and everyday domestic life (read feminine) - were designated trivial and left, unremarked, to the socially disempowered.

So subtle and profound is the demarcation, there’s a constant risk of mistaking this system of power, prestige and control as sufficient for and central to individual and social well being. For many, however, what really matters occupies a less visible but intersecting universe, or exists in another realm altogether; a domain somewhere beyond authority and status, situated at the back door of western

women friends; those most privy to the cat and cake domain. Under Longley’s sharp hand, these are then manipulated into hybrid creatures of teacup, glove and pussy cat identity. The tarts, of course, take on a whole new resonance as they trump the masculine image of card playing, so beloved of Cezanne and B grade Hollywood westerns.

Life as a game of chance has long been a theme pursued by the artist and played out by her idiosyncratic cosmology of beings and symbols. Traditional and computer generated prints in *Printed Matter* continue this exploration using a stage metaphor to present the vicissitudes of daily life within small theatres. These framing devices recall Renaissance stage settings under a proscenium arch (*Theatre of Arbitrary Preceptors, Theatre of Diminishing Departures*) or are enacted within a more contemporary box set, referring obliquely to the pervasive influence of television and computers in our lives (*Theatre of Imperfect Imbalance, Theatre of Insignificant Coincidence*).

Such theatres of life, however, are presented minus a pre-determined script; their small dramas remain open-ended in terms of meaning so the viewer/player in this game is given room to manoeuvre. In *Theatre of Diminishing Departures* Whirling Dervishes, acrobats and animals occupy a dreamscape scenario, offering a range of possible meanings around the concept of movement versus stasis. Occupying centre stage in *Processional Conformity* is an enigmatic joker, surrounded by a coil of creatures spiralling towards him in a relentless vortex of conformist behaviour.

On first encounter Longley’s philosophical reflections may suggest playful whimsy but as is the case with parables, further investigation reveals elements of disquiet; there’s something else lurking in the wings. *Acquired Nonchalance* features bears performing headstands, but these and other creatures act out their surreal roles, oblivious of a solitary figure being savaged by a wolf; this is the

civilization. Artists, of course, have always been aware of significant slippage between the public world and its shadowy 'other'; that mundane world of the domestic, of unuttered or unutterable emotions, imaginings, dreams, and that elusive stuff we call spirit.

Here in this private space are to be found elements of chance, surprise and delight. In her exhibition, *Printed Matter*, Dianne Longley explores these spheres of intimacy, familiarity and the unexpected and she does this in relation to the history of printmaking, language and games of chance. Essential to her vision, however, is the use of verbal language to probe, explain and poeticize this history. She reminds us, for example, of the little known fact that as well as servicing Church and intellect, Gutenberg's new machine also printed playing cards, barely keeping up with demand across Europe⁵.

Situated at the opposite end of the spectrum from Scriptural study, cards and other games of chance represented more than trivial pastimes: their territory was marked by unpredictability and their consequence, moral jeopardy. Despite a hidden history, card games' overwhelming popularity firmly embedded them in the everyday life of western society, a place where the dead hand of the Law, Religion and Rationality could be ignored or subverted. Until relatively recently, card games were considered evil and referred to as 'the devil's game'⁶. Even today, the astonishing popularity of internet gambling attracts outraged moral indignation from Church and conservative institutions.

It is appropriate therefore that Longley chooses the suit of cards as the form, subject, and metaphor for this exhibition, dealing a hand, as it were, of domestic and sensory matters. Comprising of computer generated playing cards with accompanying booklet, traditional etchings with photopolymer prints, an artist's book and repurposed etching plates, this new body of work

explores Longley's world of incidental occurrences and accidental encounters.

As her trump card, Longley has created a personalized deck of playing cards, *Cats, Cakes, Clothes and Cups*, which subverts conventional expectations; these are produced using contemporary digital technology rather than the customary offset lithography, and the familiar suits of Diamonds, Hearts, Clubs and Spades have been displaced by less familiar images of felines, food and frocks. This allows a very private glimpse into the artist's world when she's not being a capital A artist and they celebrate Longley's acclaimed 'other' skills of cat keeping, garment sewing, tea making and cake baking.

This essentially female world delights in the sensuality offered by the domestic environment, but extends beyond mere description of cosy comfort to embrace the passion and obsession inherent in these activities; that is to say, the images employ absurd humour and self parody in making strange simple, everyday activities such as a game of cards. Suits are inhabited by animals and objects, as well as human faces morphed with whiskers, cat ears and Alice-in-Wonderland tea cups. Come to think of it, there's something perverse, for example, about the idea of 'owning' a cat or, in my opinion, lavishing labour on cake production when the planet is already groaning with readymade gateaux. (An exception must be made here for Longley's legendary lemon tart and her lascivious *crème caramel*; these are to die for.)

If Longley's cakes are to be taken seriously, as indeed they must, then so are her encounters of the everyday. These are anything but trivial, existing within a world ruled by chance, enchantment and creative licence, where things are not as they seem. Traditional gender rules governing the four card suits, for instance, have been overturned to create an entirely female universe where even court cards - Kings, Jacks and Jokers, as well as Queens - are constructed from photographs of the artist's



same symbolic creature that stalks *Timely Optimism* and *Untimely Optimism*.

Longley is also renowned for the production of superb artist's books and last year she completed her latest computer generated volume during a residency at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, U.S.A. *Sensory Memorandum* represents a serious and sensuous investigation into the vulnerability of sensory data - vision, touch, taste, smell and hearing - in an increasingly rationalized world "dominated by information technology", information "that can be e-mailed, stored, retrieved, and manipulated". An Aristotelian "meditation on living", this "suite of visual poems" celebrates "our sense of self ... mediated via sensory perceptions".⁷

Without doubt we can never be 'sure' of what we are hearing, seeing, tasting, touching or smelling and Longley explains that "our senses are becoming used to being tricked". This unpredictability is precisely why The Word has reigned supreme throughout western history while matters sensual and transient have been significantly devalued. It is pertinent to note, however, that artists such as Longley now intervene in hard nosed computer technology to offer alternatives to how life is and can be experienced. That this message is conveyed on every suit of her personalized deck of playing cards, however, almost escaped my notice; it is the artist who appears as Joker, occupying centre stage on the wild card of opportunity.

Pamela Zeplin
February, 1999



¹ Saul J. Ralston. *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* London: Penguin, 1993, p. 7.

² Longley, D. "Origins of the Game of Cards", *Cats, Cakes, Clothes and Cups: a personal deck of playing cards*, Adelaide: Illumination Press, 1999, p. 17.

³ The first moveable type printing press was invented by Johann Gutenberg at Mainz, Germany in 1452-3.

⁴ The rapid spread of this new technology throughout Europe was largely due to the limited number of letters required for moveable type by the abstract, phonetic-based, English alphabet system, compared to the thousands of pictograms making up the Chinese language. See Miller, C. "Technical and Cultural Prerequisites for the Invention of Printing in China and the West." *Studies in East Asian Librarianship*, No. 21, 1983, pp. 41 ff.

⁵ Longley, D. *op. cit.* pp. 13, 14.

⁶ In 1423 "the problem of gambling with playing cards became such a problem that in Italy, St. Bernadino of Siena, on the steps of the church at San Petronio at Bologna, condemned publicly the evil pastime in a sermon. He moved the townsfolk so much that they lit bonfires and burned their games and playing cards." in Longley, D. *op. cit.* pp. 12, 13.

⁷ Longley, D. *Sensory Memorandum*, Illumination Press, Adelaide in association with Visual Studies Workshop Press, Rochester, New York, 1998, pp. 6-8.

Acknowledgements:

With special thanks to Pamela Zeplin, Shaw Hendry, Anthony Zammit, Olga Sankey, Rebecca Pellew, and Sinbad & Zeppo.

Catalogue published February 1999
Illumination Press Adelaide South Australia
ISBN 0 9586289 1 2

PRINTED MATTER

Dianne Longley

February 17 - March 14, 1999

Robert Steele Gallery 187 Rundle Street Adelaide