

Arts & Ecology blog

February 09, 2009

David Cotterrell: Truth in the mundane

MICHAELA CRIMMIN: I went to a fascinating talk at the weekend by [David Cotterrell](#), whose work is being shown for just one more week as part of the [Wellcome Collections's War + Medicine](#) exhibition, where both complexity and the everyday are tackled through art.

Cotterrell's video pieces in the exhibition were made in response to being a [war](#) artist in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, hosted by the Medical Corps of the British Army and supported by Wellcome. He presents an overwhelming sense of the everyday of war, the small tragedies, the waiting, that never make it to the newspapers. This is the real stuff of war, and neither devoid of beauty nor of humanity. Cotterrell's work is also being shown at [Danielle Arnaud; Aesthetic Distance](#) features a series of visually arresting photographic and further video works. There is one more week left to catch both shows. Go if you are interested in understanding war and in a real account of the complexity and the humdrum of war.

In the information that accompanies the exhibition are a number of Cotterrell's diary entries – here's one:

2 T1's and a T4. I assume a T4 is a light injury. I am wrong – T4 means dead. I don't know what to do. My problems of appropriate behaviour are insignificant compared to the enormity of the events taking place. I find myself feeling clumsy and self-conscious.

This personal response is largely denied to all but celebrity journalists; an intensely subjective account of the confusion of war and its paradoxes and contradictions are of no interest to the broadsheet editors. It's simply not the stuff of news. What is different about your response as an artist?, asks someone from the audience. Cotterrell responds that as an artist you're trusted as a sensitive observer. You look at the routine, the banal and the overlooked. This is the stuff of art. Finally it is what artists do with their material that stands them apart from the media. Artists have time to digest. He was quick to say how bewildered he felt on his return to London and that it is only now, a year later, that he has been able to marshal his responses into a work that is nevertheless equivocal.

Another part of Cotterrell's practice as an artist is in a very different context, the world of planning and architecture. He ended his talk by musing the fact that planners necessarily ignore the reality of the chaos of the street.

In thinking about the multiplicity of real and potential we have to be reductive but how much truth is lost along the way? In thinking about the multiplicity of real and potential [connections](#) in ecology, you can't help but grapple with the problematics that come with acknowledging the inevitable complexity of just about everything. At the same time there are so many important findings lost because they seem so boringly everyday. As an example, see a brilliant column by [Slavoj Zizek](#) in the [Guardian](#) last June:

...Bear in mind the lesson of Donald Rumsfeld's theory of knowledge - as expounded in March 2003, when the then US defence secretary engaged in a little bit of amateur philosophising: "There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know." What Rumsfeld forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the "unknown knowns" - things we don't know that we know, all the unconscious beliefs and prejudices that determine how we perceive reality and intervene in it.

Illustration: Supernumary tryptic detail by David Cotterrell, c-print, 2008, courtesy of [Danielle Arnaud contemporary art](#)

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