

# Blue Oyster art project space.

## Taking Sides

The issue of 'substance' is a defining quality found in the work of Ben Pearce and his installation *Nervous System* (19 April – 28 May 2011) created for Blue Oyster Gallery, Dunedin. The faux classroom arrangement with blackboard, school chairs and desk is more than a mere allusion, it operates as a contentious investigation of the human condition that is founded on the difficulties in describing 'substance'.

The word 'substance' is commonly used in relation to superficial understandings of depth or solidity. The etymology of the word, however, is more accurately described as to 'stand beneath', pulling away the layers until you get to the essential nature or core of something. In conversation with Princess Elizabeth in 1643, Descartes tried to conceptualise the difference between the physical substance of the human body and the ethereal substance of the human mind<sup>i</sup>. His belief that these two distinctly different types of substance were incapable of coexisting in a single human vessel became known as the Cartesian Impasse. Many philosophers have, over the centuries since Descartes introduced his dualist structure to the world, developed theories that attempt to offer a way forward, but the problem of how to describe and rationalise this contradiction has not gone away.

Pearce's own exploration of the duality of substance, particularly the role of ethereal memory, has been an integral focus of his practice since 2006. His second solo exhibition, *Strange Lingo*, at Wellington's Aaron Laurence Gallery featured a school chair complete with a contorted trumpet-like funnel holding on to its host for dear life. The beautifully crafted woodwork of the funnel, combined with the ingrained ageing of the chair, gave a jarring impression that was difficult to reconcile. It wasn't just the fact that one component was old and worn while the other was new with a smooth, satiny surface; it was that they appeared to inhabit two very different states. It was a sparring of substance. Not so easily tied to Descartes' neat categorisation of the split between body and mind, this work resolved to fight with itself. A kind of residual memory resonated in the very fabric and structure of the school chair, imbuing it with a life essence that was difficult to ignore, while the funnel in turn took on an almost sentient quality, becoming something more than an object, a unique organism free from any single reference to time or place.

The funnel has become a recurring player in Pearce's work, assuming various guises over the years. As a tool to speak with, or as an instrument to hear by, it provides access to interior spaces as well as escape to open spaces. It is sometimes closed and sometimes open, but it is always present in some form. The funnel form has in the past been an intrinsic element in Pearce's practice, a conduit to negotiate what G.N.A Vesey describes as the "causal connection" between the mind and body<sup>ii</sup>. Vesey suggests that Descartes' failure to clearly define the interaction of physical and ethereal substances within an individual could only ever result in the connection being expressed as a causal one. The funnel therefore has been an essential link that allows Pearce to tackle the problematic territory of memory and the mind while still being able to explore the physicality of the body. In many ways this simple form becomes the binding element, a way for Pearce to negotiate these very different substances without fear of being trapped in one state or the other. In *Nervous System* the funnel has become an invisible system no longer reliant on a physical manifestation; it has in effect become a pivotal presence that allows Pearce to engage with the opposing notions of substance in a more sophisticated manner.

In *Nervous System*, the chair finds itself located in a school room context and has been stripped back to the bare bones, quite literally a skeleton of what it was before. This is particularly evident in *Checking Real*. Reminiscent of the school yard rhyme 'sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me' this work takes the words to heart, attempting with little success to hold itself together. It is a carcass that struggles to assert its physicality while desperately holding on to its sense of self.

References to the body have become increasingly apparent in Pearce's work. The veiled suggestions of the corporeal in *Curse* (2008) and *Chest Pains* (2010) have given way to direct references in his current practice, suggesting an increased sense of conviction. In *Body has been* Pearce has dissected the school chair leaving only a remnant of its metal structure to act as a support for a chillingly accurate human ribcage and spine. This work

hints at the potential to find new ways around the Cartesian Impasse. Pearce describes the work as a self portrait: “I think of it as me, I was once that size and somehow have absorbed that person”. This reinforces the idea that the body and mind are more than ‘causally connected’, that there is an embodiment, an essential link that cannot be separated simply by putting a division between the two. Rom Harre calls this process the ‘personal embodiment’ and suggests that in order for union we must first accept that there is also separation. Only when this occurs can we become embodied<sup>iii</sup>.

Other works in the installation also explore the notion of isolation or separation from the body. In his research Pearce was particularly interested in case studies of individuals that had experienced lobotomies and the phenomenon of the phantom limb. It was not a macabre fascination in the horrors of medical science that led him down this path, it was an attempt to gain insight into what connects the ethereal mind with the physical body. *Spoke Enough* features a pair of ears sitting within the confines of a glass case that barely resembles the chair it was modelled on. The work struggles to declare itself in the midst of its classmates. It has an identity issue. Is it a case in which to display treasures, a glass house to nurture and grow, or is it a cage, a vacuum of deprivation where these dislocated appendages are destined to only ever know silence? Pearce describes this work as an eternal act of futility, a stalemate where neither substance can declare victory over the other.

In the works *Breathing Out* and *Curse Control* the organs are removed from the body in order to accentuate their individual struggles. The blackened lungs of *Breathing Out* relate to Pearce’s asthma condition that he believes is triggered directly by his emotional states. He also sees the lungs as providing the necessities of oxygen that allows the brain to function. This is where the Cartesian Impasse becomes difficult to rationalise. If the brain, arguably the corporeal home for ethereal substance, is completely at the mercy of our bodies then surely the balance falls in favour of physicality? There is the distinct impression that this is indeed a battle, body and mind pulling at each other in an effort to gain ground and take advantage of the others weaknesses.

It is this tension that is at the core of *Nervous System*. It is a difficulty in being able to neatly allocate each element to its definitive categorisation that makes Pearce’s new works intriguing. His early forays into the nostalgically charged trappings of childhood, such as trikes, toy trucks, teddy bears and action figures, appear at first glance to be superficial reflections of memory. In the context of the *Nervous System* installation, however, they become significant markers of the way individuals - and in particular Pearce himself - develop an understanding of the differences and similarities between the ethereal and physical substance.

The sense that *Nervous System* is indeed a classroom provides a welcome entry point into what might otherwise be considered too difficult or personal to engage with. *Humiliation Study*, the only wall-mounted work in the installation, suggests a blackboard of sorts. Its fragmented parts offer some relief from the cerebral pursuits of the other works in the installation. Made up of signs scavenged from an industrial site, the work provides instructions and numeric order in an otherwise chaotic setting. This is also apparent in *Breaking Up*, an enclosed chair this time made from actual discarded blackboards. Pearce describes this form as being like “origami or a folded dart (a clever trick and skill)” that evokes a feeling of order. He then goes on to suggest that it is not just an easing of the tension between the two substances it is in effect, “control of the mind over the body”.

Pearce considers *Breaking Up* to be a new direction in his practice and in doing so declares his position. It is now not a question of whether there is a balance between the ethereal and physical substance or even whether the connection between the two is essential or causal. What he suggests in this final work is that he has taken a side. There is a feeling of liberation about the *Nervous System* installation, a sense that a shift has been made and that Pearce is now able to move forward. The Cartesian Impasse has not necessarily been breached, it has simply been re-negotiated in favour of harmony, if only for a time.

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<sup>i</sup> Ed. Vesey, G. N. A., (1964) *Body and Mind*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London. p. 52

<sup>ii</sup> Vesey, G. N. A., (1965) *The Embodied Mind*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London. P.109

<sup>iii</sup> Harré, Rom, (1991) *Physical Being*. Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford. P.13