Penny Bovell

Postcards and Visions: Musings on the effect of sky gazing and painting

The Verge Gallery
12 - 23 June 1998

Let me describe the experience.

The viewer stands squarely in the middle of the gallery. On one side is a large scale painting, 1.7 metres by 2.7 metres, a vista of the sky including a close up of a passing cloud. What is it really but layers of blue and grey paint? The viewer is so close to this large image in the small gallery that the paintwork is overwhelming. Too much colour, too close, too big.

Seabird 17.4.1993 11:20am

It is a studio painting. Painted away from the sky, having evolved from an internal process that relies on memory and the experience of fleeting glimpses. The large cloud rains paint.

The paint was applied in thin layers to give the effect of air. The space in the painting is voluminous and seen from a point above the horizon. The passing cloud sits in the space as if it were a mass of cotton wool in a shoe box. By the apparent light and colour the time could be the middle of one of those days with intermittent showers, when the sky is still blue and the clouds wet and heavy.

On the opposite wall of the gallery is a small painting, unframed, the size of a postcard - a plein air study of a vista of sky. There is a hint of the sea shown as a watery green smudge, but, generally, the earth is not the most important feature. A small picture of infinity - here is a paradox. An original postcard? The word postcard is usually associated with mass production, but it is also linked to the tourist idea of holidays by the sea.

To the side of the gallery are two wooden 'shoe' boxes of sky paintings. These studies are made from various sites along the Western Australian coast. I have looked out toward the horizon, contemplating the weather and the ways to paint it. They stand as souvenirs of holidays over a number of years. They also represent an accumulation of ideas used as points of reference for larger studio painting.

The boxes provide different views - the viewer cannot see them all at once. The images are filed away to frustrate the experience of looking. Although the works on display include glimpses of the earth, most of the paintings are of the sky above the horizon and portray a sense of weightlessness and emptiness. A conscious turning away from landscape painting.

The two paintings sit in juxtaposition. Both are paintings of the same weather at the same site, however there is a subtle shift in the physical and temporal space in the images. Paradoxically, they are painted at different times and places. The large image is painted in the studio a number of years after the study was executed. They are placed opposite each other. One is large in scale and of a close up view. The other is small and an image of a vista. Both are naturalistic paintings - or nearly. The colours match the 'real' view, grey and blue for the sky, blue and green for the sea.

There are a number of paradigms at play: the plein air study and the 'finished' studio picture, the abstracts of scale and distance, the contradiction of the sublime and banal. There are disruptions. The mixing of styles: naturalistic painting and painterly abstraction. Where is the viewer to stand - in the picture or looking at it? These are the aspects that culminate in the works and their installation in the gallery.

Each day (in the gallery) I choose from the file another small image to sit in juxtaposition to the large scale work. Offering two different ways of painting and many viewing opportunities.

Western Australians are only too familiar with the vastness of space, living as they do on the edge of an enormous continent. In support of my work, this catalogue essay explores some of the general ideas associated with the sky. In art history the sky has been used metaphorically for a host of ideas such as flux (formlessness), absence (by implication presence), distance (otherness), and sublimity (transcendence). Equally, it can be recognised that the metaphorical use and reuse of the sky permeates into ideas of the nostalgic and the kitsch.

This essay does not develop an argument in the academic sense, the ideas are musings that will probably be frustrating because they are not exhausted or contained. My recent paintings attempt to communicate things beyond description within the tradition of representation (a tradition commonly perceived as limited). They therefore present a contradiction. Represention of the sky attempt to fix something that is formless. Formlessness seems an appropriate subject to highlight the irony for a philosophical quest. At any rate I thought it a playful thing to parachute into the open space of ideas associated with the sky and painting. The sky is the limit - to mention the obvious aphorism, and one of many associated with aerial matters.

Air presents a paradox. Not only is the sky in a constant state of flux, but it is also synonymous with distance - the horizon, the line that divides the earth from the atmosphere always remains distant. In her book *On Longing* Susan Stewart described the sky as "a vast, undifferentiated space marked only by the constant movement of clouds with their amorphous forms."[1] A vista of the sky implies a sense of longing, of desiring to be in another place, or far away from the self.

Vast is a word that ends with the expulsion of breath. This is a reminder that air is also the thing we stand in, constituting tiny invisible particles contributing to the cellular structure of bodies as oxygen.

"The air is scientifically interpreted as oxygen and spiritually read as the life force."[2]

Air presents the possibility of nothingness and yet the atmosphere is seen as blue sky. Clouds, in particular, represent the concrete manifestation of moving air. They diffuse the light and cast shadows on the land. In mist or fog, air has an opaqueness that suggests 'a strange solitude and remoteness.'[3] If a haze falls over the city it is a reminder that clouds can be made by pollution.

Today it takes three days for a satellite to travel to the moon, dissolving the notion of infinity. The thing that is *not* is also a super highway used to transport people across the globe. In cities, skyscrapers, many constructed of mirrored glass, reflect the air around them. They symbolise progress, throwing back a kaleidoscopic view of the clouds.

Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, refers to the 'air' of an image - "a sudden awakening outside of 'likeness', a satori in which words fail."[4] Atmosphere is associated with an acute sense of awareness that an artist intends the viewer to feel. This acute awareness affects the meaning of a work. The indescribable alludes to meaning. It is found in the quality of light, a sense of space, even the topographical effect of the weather.

In contrast to the speed of air travel, painting and sky gazing is part of a more contemplative process. Gaston Bachelard's poetic reveries in *Air and Dreams*, intended to school his readers in slowness, extending the image by penetrating and amplifying its meaning. Joanne Stroud highlights Bachelard's equation between the multifarious possibilities of painting, sky gazing and poetry:

"How could empty, invisible air mask so many subtle yet distinctive qualities?"[5]

The concept of 'slowness' is pivotal in understanding the nature of painting, portrayed by Bachelard as a drawn out, meditative experience that slips between action and knowledge, thought and dreams. Reverie seems at odds to the critical pressures placed on artists today. Michael Tucker in a recent article in the *Contemporary Visual Art* magazine (issue 15, 1998) identifies these pressures as the forced justification of artwork in the context of the historical, social and political. He uses Bachelard's quote as a contrast.

"Imagination is not, as its etymology would suggest, the faculty of forming images of reality; it is rather the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which *sing* reality."[6]

Bachelard maintained a belief that art was visionary. Of course, not all art is - or intends to be. Today, pictures of the sky sell toilet paper. On television, the Australian drama *Blue Skies* capitalises on a zappy yellow and blue image of a detail of the sky. In the newspaper an advertisement for the Australian Airforce uses a photograph of a cumulus cloud. It sits near a photograph of fighter planes. The cloud appears in the shape of a teapot, or more likely an elephant - the pink variety, from Walt Disney's Dumbo.

If paint (its chemistry, fluid nature, and the process of application) is the embodiment of an artist's engagement with the world, the substance is as elusive as air. Yet, as Derrida has said, the history of painting, 'its philosophy, its models, its concepts, its problems have not fallen from the skies'.[7]

How do you convey ideas with paint? Derrida refers to the uncertain nature of meaning in *The Truth Of Painting*.The meaning of anything is a slippery entity. Lyotard uses the metaphor of clouds to explain the process whereby life (and art) is a continuum with no beginning, middle and end. He wrote in his book *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*:

"Thoughts are clouds. Thoughts are pushed and pulled at variable speeds. They are deep, although core and skin are of the same grain. Thoughts never stop changing their location one with the other. When you feel like you have penetrated far into their or genealogy or even post structure, it is actually too late or too soon."[8]

This narration (being time) does not fit the proposition of 'theory'.

"I would like to plead that if I am unable to take a position, this is due not to a bent toward confusion - but to the lightness of thought."[9]

Both writers discuss the refusal to take certain positions in response to the well-documented reactions to history and theory in French thinking of the sixties . Put simply, Lyotard is using an aerial metaphor to avoid the dogma of writing criticism, he alludes to Sublimity - things that are changeable, indefinable and beyond experience.

Where Bachelard positioned painting as reverie (the opportunity to be distant and near at the same time), Ian Burn's (1939-93) later works presented an example whereby painting could evolve from thinking and words. Here then, are two of the poles between which painting is located: poesis or critical thought. On closer examination both forms involve the other - poetry is thought, thinking is poetic.

His 1997 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia titled *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn* represented a "development and deviation from the austere language of conceptual art".[10] In this project he returned to painting after years as a formative member of Art and Language and a leader of the Conceptual Art movement. He reflected on the paradigm of the amateur and professional painter; the work comprised of 'found' landscapes overlaid with text. The viewer is drawn into a debate about the value of painting, and particularly the conceit of landscape.

I once sat on a couch placed in the centre of a room at the Tate Gallery, in London. Four of Mark Rothko's large, sonorous paintings hung, one on each wall. The canvases were unprimed. The paint sank into the weave flattening the colour and creating a sense of deep space. These paintings in magenta washes are examples of Bachelard's singing.

Rothko is famous for exploring aspects of transcendentalism by evoking a sense of spatiality and aligning it to the purity of paint and light. The projection of the self onto the world through paint is a common (if not questionable) interpretation of much Art. Expressionism, for example, is based on a belief that the mark can carry the intense emotional experience of an artist. The Abstract Expressionists used scale to maximum effect, subverting the notion of distance.

These artists involved the viewer in a conscious relationship with the work. If an image is large enough (Rothko), the frame remains outside the viewer's visual field. In smaller pictures, the frame works to separate the peripheral happenings from the image - the viewer is drawn in by all sorts of compositional devices. Burn prevents the viewer from entering the landscape by overlaying text on glass.

"One space remains to be broached in order to give place to the truth in painting. Neither inside nor outside, it spaces itself without letting itself be framed but it does not stand outside the frame. It works the frame, makes it work, gives it work to do...It is situated. It situates between the visible edging and the phantom in the centre, from which we *fascinate*."[11]

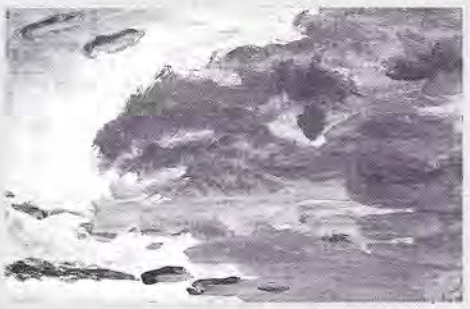
What does an audience bring to a painting? It is important to recognise that their response is activated by moving between works. Imagine looking at a small painting. It can function like a window opening to a much larger world. With larger works one can cross the room to pay attention to detail - imagining another world through the space of the marks. Imagination operates by the adjustment of one's mental and optical focus. The viewer floats in the space, *between* and *in* images.

Pictures engage the viewer in yet another way. They involve a constructed system of exchange. The small picture, pocketed like a postcard, is intimate and containable. Large works are overwhelming, yet also intimate. The postcard is a mass produced object for popular culture. The vision, supposedly the thing that transcends culture and capital. The title of this essay alludes to the distinction between a postcard and a vision, or rather, its ambiguous relationship. To engage in painting today requires a renewed sense of faith. To find a contemporary vision that acknowledges romantic notions while at the same time being conscious of the effects of the social and cultural mechanisms that erode such things as faith.

Michael Podro, in *The Critical Historians of Art*, distinguishes between painting as the demonstration of thought (contemplation) and the active participation in social relations (Hegel's *Aesthetics*). In a sense, imaging of the sky stands as both an act of contemplation and a model for the condition of life. There is a fusion between thought and the social because artists think about everyday life.

Gottfried Semper (1803-79), a contemporary of Hegel, was the first to study individual motifs in the visual arts. He did this to illustrate how artists use metaphors to generate more ideas. Podro states that art history can develop "by the piecemeal adaptation and reapplication of these motifs."[12] What purpose is there to paint numerous paintings of the sky? The answer lies in the convergence of a set of ideas. Painting operates on a multifarious and temporal level - different subjectivities, different modes of representation and different narratives.

The iconography of the sky has its foundation in the areas of astronomy, astrology, cosmology and cartography. Man navigated by the stars and sowed crops in response to seasonal change. In early religious art, the sky was linked to the existence of God and the binaries of heaven and earth, life and death, and life after death. With Humanism perspective mapped solid objects on an imaginary grid, the sky came to represent the notion of flux (weather), otherness (distance) and absence (and by implication presence).



San Remo 17.4.1998 5:45pm

The history of art allows for a discursive dialogue about the nature of representation - between mimesis and poesis. The sky was perceived as a difficult

and elusive subject to depict. Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869) had a practical interest and passion for the art of painting and poetry. He published *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting* (1831) in which he contributed to the attitudes of the Romantic era of the nineteenth century.

"It must be noted with special emphasis that those elements in a landscape connected with the weather stand in a particularly close relationship to the impulses of the human mind, one might even say in fact that the changes of mood which we find in nature in the changing weather correspond to changing moods which effect the spiritual and emotional life in man."[13]

The eighteenth century correlates to an increase in the production of art and a growing art market. Landscape was formulated into particular perceptions by writers such as Longinus, Kant and Burke. In the nineteenth century there was much theoretical debate about artistic imagination, using romantic or empirical binaries. Edmund Burke (1729-1797) attempted to identify excess and subjectivity in A Philosophical Enquiry referring to the fearful aspects of vastness, darkness and infinity. The necessity to distinguish between empirical and romantic thought therefore is underpinned by the need to control unrestrained feelings that may have been evident in Victorian society.

Hyde Park North 7.11.1995 10:40am

The study and the big picture as strategic painting method was also an example of order. John Constable (1776-1837) conformed to these separate practises. In 1821 he produced a series of fifty cloud studies from Hampstead Heath. He exhibited some of these studies in the Royal Academy exhibitions.

By removing the reference to foreground, middle and distance Constable examined meteorological phenomena as a singular theme. These images were observations of the weather, painted from ground level in midday light. They were analytical and about everyday experience. Constable didn't model the paint to describe the clouds; he indicated them, painting in a way that suggested formlessness and changeability.

Interestingly, in 1818 Luke Howard published his Latin based cloud classifications giving them the names we know today. The emergence of the scientific study of meteorology was influential in providing an ordering system of methodological enquiry for the painting of skies. Constable's studies were clearly rational even though he attributed the sky as 'the chief organ of sentiment,' a sentiment imbued with the idea of transcendence in everyday experience.

"I can hardly write for looking at the silvery clouds; how I sigh for that peace (to paint them) which this world cannot give (to me at least)."[14]

It is possible to learn much from artists, such as Constable, who attended to the weather by faithful rendering. Hubert Lamb, in *Climate: Present, Past and Future*, used paintings in recent centuries as documentary evidence for climatic trends. Stanley Gedzelman typifies Vincent Van Gogh, usually associated with a highly emotive approach to painting, as a 'trustworthy chronicler of the atmosphere'.

"This morning at long last, the weather changed and turned milder - and likewise I have already had the opportunity for learning what a mistral is: I have alreadybeen for several long walks in the country round here but in this wind it is impossible ever to do anything."[15] Letter to Theo from Arles (March 1888).

"February was always a cloudy month in Paris, it was particularly dull and gloomy in 1888. The weather was clear only on the second of the month; seven of the next seventeen days were mostly cloudy, while the other ten were completely overcast. When Van Gogh announced his decision to leave, snow and sleet had been falling almost continuously for four days."[16] Gedzelman (Leonardo 1990).

As Constable focused his attention on the sky Joseph M.W. Turner painted glowing images of storms with dramatic light effects. He was an expressive painter, aligning nature with human passion following the tradition of Claude and Poussin. Many of his elevated views arose from the experience of travel. He was consciousness of a new age with travel made easier by industrial progress (evident in his paintings of trains and steam boats). Andrew Wilton explained:

"They record his delight in the unusual adventures that travel in his day was liable to supply. It is noteworthy that in each case autobiographical detail is subsumed in the dramatic account of climatic conditions..."[17]

Turner's travelogues and Constable's sky sketches record their unique attitudes. The convoluted relationship between the middle class and the industrial revolution meant social change. Affecting among other things increased leisure time, travel to obscure sites (Turner) and a shift in the perception of nature. The illusion of the Sublime eventually folded into the Picturesque - whereby the nature of fine picture making (about nature) was paramount.

By the end of the nineteenth century the idea of painting the 'real' experience of the landscape had coalesced into picture postcards of tourist destinations and the exotic and spectacular 360 degree views of mechanical panoramas. Thomas Horner's panorama (1829) exhibited at the Regent's Park Colosseum showed London viewed from the top of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. This was a view in hyper reality. Sometimes, in reality, London smog would have prevented seeing such a distant view.

The history of painting contests the experience of looking. It has been jostled between a belief in illusion and the bankruptcy of this belief. In many ways the speed in which we assimilate images today contributes to an all pervasive scepticism about the painted image. An image is only fiction. Illusion is deceitful. This sense of illusion is all too familiar when looking at the clouds, known for their elusive qualities.

In Andrea Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian* (c1455-60) he camouflaged a man on horse back in his cumulus clouds, and in another image, *Virtue Chasing Vice* (c1490), he turned the clouds into puffy faces that blew the air across the land. Both Mantegna and William Shakespeare (1564-1616) demonstrated the deceit of imagery with their imaginative meandering. In Hamlet's speech to Polonius he refers to the shifting forms of clouds and renounces 'being played easier than a pipe'. It is Polonius who appears gullible.

"Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost the shape of a camel?
Polonius: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel' indeed.
Hamlet: Me thinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale?
Polonius: Very like a whale."[18]

Donald Brook describes different modes of representation as being concerned with either the exemplification, symbolisation or simulation of objects or experiences. The mimetic faculty is a desire to make models that individuate experiences.

"We make simulations, which are not distinguishable from their subjects but nevertheless seem to be so, under special perceiving conditions. For example, we make illusionistic oil paintings or we hold up tufts of cotton wool at arms length, and with such devices simulate the appearance of distant clouds that are in truth different in almost every respect from the models."[19]

Hubert Damisch in his book *The Origins Of Perspective* describes Filippo Brunelleschi's (c1377-1446) perspective model, the tavoletta. In the painting of the temple of San Giovanni, viewed from the central portal of the Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, Brunelleschi used a reflective silver surface in the area where

the sky should have been. The tavoletta was a simple apparatus that created the correct viewing distance for the image. By using a peephole in the back of the painting, the perspective was viewed in the reflection of a mirror, held at the front of the image. He marked the sky as absent against the 'placed' building of San Giovanni. Brunelleschi was not contributing to the dialogue between existence and nothingness or the secular versus the spirit. He was, however, demonstrating that the sky was a difficult subject to paint, that its natural form could not be constructed. Damisch is concerned with the contemporary idea of absence.

"But the sky? Doesn't representation of aerial elements, like that of clouds, those 'bodies without surfaces,' as Leonardo describes them, fall outside the skills necessary for linear perspective, which can only function, as a rule of construction, on the condition that everything escaping its jurisdiction be excluded from its field? How is one to represent, feature by feature, a body that has no contours? How is one to trace its 'Portrait'?"[20]

The realistic depiction of objects was created through the principles of perspective. As Damisch insists, the sky was resistant to geometric measure. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) invented aerial perspective, however unlike the perspective models of Brunelleschi, his studies of the structure of the atmosphere (clouds, water, air) coalesced into a much broader view of the cosmos.[21] In part seven of the his treatise on painting the *Codex Urbanos Latinus*, he gave this instruction:

"You will paint the clouds pursued by impetuous winds, beaten against the crests of the mountains and enveloped among them, whirling about like waves dashed on the rocks, with the air itself terrifying because of the dark shadows created in the air by dust, mist and thick cloud."[22]

In the later part of his life, Da Vinci produced a series of absorbing drawings of heavy storms, cataclysmic in nature. The group of sixteen Deluge drawings position the viewer looking through the atmosphere from a high altitude. They depict scenes that document violent natural disaster, showing villages as minuscule 'lego' worlds. The eye travels huge distances in these tiny drawings with the dimensions of six by eight inches.

Leonardo da Vinci demonstrated a multiplicity of motives in these works: the observation of climatic phenomena, the depiction of mythical or biblical apocalypse, and the contemplation of his own death.

The body (rather than the eye) is the primary mode of perceiving the abstracts of scale and distance. It is a juncture between moving air and the rotating earth. It can physically adjust its position to take a different view. It is pivotal - between the inside and outside, the visible and invisible. The eye can shift focus between vista and detail. The mind also makes shifts. It is capable of disassociation, transcending.

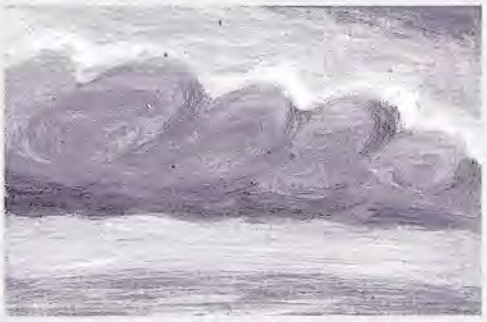
The idea of distance is highly complex in relation to aesthetics and picture making. Physical distance between the viewer and the image, the represented distance in the image and temporal distance are obvious examples. Edward Bullough describes the meaning of 'psychical distance' by illustrating the experience of being in a fog at sea.[23] He argues that there is a process of objectification that relates to the aesthetic principles operating within an art work - operating for both the artist and viewer. In Bullough's opinion the artist must at some point become emotionally detached from the subject, thereby allowing for a deeper and clearer understanding of the work, a crystallisation of an idea.

Brunelleschi and Leonardo demonstrate the diverse use of spatial concepts associated with illusionistic representation. Brunelleschi alluded to the sky beyond description, while Leonardo openly contemplated the cosmos. A large number of twentieth century writers also concerned themselves with life's ambiguities. Marshall Berman points out that Rousseau, Goethe, Baudelaire and Nietzsche were all concerned with the paradox of modernity, at times explaining it through the metaphor of air. Karl Marx acknowledges a society that contributes to the disillusion of meaning through the desire for wealth. The much used phrase 'all that's solid melts into air' aptly describes the analogy of air to the fragmentary nature of modernity.

"To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own. It is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and hold onto something that is real even as everything melts."[24]

Images are made through choice, even acts of uncertainty and hesitation are choices. These choices rely on memory and experience coupled with a reflexive response to methods of representation and a sensitivity to materials. For many artists it is a preoccupation with the possibilities of imagery, rather than description itself, that provides the impetus to work. This is the enigma of painting and it is echoed in the phenomenon of the sky. It raises the question: at what point do optics, philosophy, poetics and *being* coincide?

Looking at a painting is not the same as looking at the real thing. The perception of what is real shifts in time, and between individuals, and yet it is these distinctions (between the real and unreal) that are so compelling to a painter. A picture will always fall short of experience. One cannot feel or smell the wind in a painting. Painting, however, provides a vehicle for the imagination as much as sky gazing.



Abrohlos Rat Island 5.9.1993 11:20am

Remember the dizzying effect of lying on the grass staring at the moving clouds? My son remarked on his first experience of sky gazing - exclaiming it as the best moment he had ever had. A story unfolds as clouds sweep by at variable speeds. Bachelard refers to clouds as vehicles for the imagination. "Clouds help us dream of transformation."[25] He also alludes to the problems of aerial ecstasies:

"Can the study of fleeting images be a subject? Images of aerial imagination either evaporate or chrystallise."[26]

The phenomenon of daydreaming is a spontaneous activity.

"It is carried out in a stream of thought - of recalling past events, imagining alternative courses that a past experience might have taken, or of imagining future experience."[27]

Bachelard, Derrida and Lyotard are preoccupied with moments of slippage - the drift of meaning. Lyotard wrote his chapter on clouds in the context of the law and order of criticism. He understood that amorphous and indefinable space could be untenable, nevertheless this is how he saw it. It is echoed in the ideas of nineteenth century Sublimity.

"I needed a rationality more respectful of the various aspects of thinking, a multiple rationality timorously outlining the condition for a re-reading and a re-writing of Kant's division of reason."[28]

Sky gazing is closely associated to daydreaming - being there but not there. When Podro refers to the generation of metaphors, he meant that artists develop strategies to document their thoughts, memories and daydreams by making associations between things. James Gleick offers a vignette of how the scientist Mitchell Feigenbaum took the time to mull over his ideas. While

The Verge Incorporated
310 - 312 William Street
Northbridge, WA 6003
(08) 9328 3000

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