2008 Samstag essay

Alternative Realities

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"*That's something that tends to happen with new technologies generally: the most interesting applications turn up on the battlefield, or in a gallery.*"
William Gibson, Spook Country, 2007:63

Novelist William Gibson spent decades writing science fiction. His most recent books, however, have arrived abruptly in the real world through the portal of the internet and virtual reality. In his 2007 novel, *Spook Country*, new media art specifically locative art, geographically tagged artworks, virtual reality in particular places with a special viewing visor is subject and inspiration. New media art has emerged, as Gibson's character suggests, in the vanguard.

To the extent that the Samstag Scholars for 2008 take the temperature of contemporary art in Australia, the diversity of media employed by this year's successful applicants suggests that creativity may not only be expressed in moving image as effectively as in static images, but also that non linearity, compaction of history, and the new portals available to all, are as intrinsic an influence on today's graduates of art schools as the art that has gone before.

That is not to suggest that the media dominates the subject; more that the possibilities of new technologies have been absorbed seamlessly into artists' practice, whether it be the compelling tableau Hayden Fowler unfolds between the human world and the artifice of the goat, or Joshua Webb's apocalyptic landscapes pointing to a centralised trauma, a critique of the political and cultural systems which sustain us. Tracy Cornish creates installations and short moving sequences based on the codification in data transfer, a visualisation of the information stream which goes to the heart of abstracting the photographic process. And Giles Ryder, whose work probes minimalism in a specific, Australian sense, gives us colour and movement in neon in a manner which requires interaction with the viewer. All are imbued with a sense that, reduced to its elements, the world is not quiet and Rothko-esque but frenetic and technologically driven. On the edge of this group are the traditionally-made cinematic still photographs of crowds by Simon Terrill.

It was Auden's view that art may change nothing. Whether or not you subscribe to that idea, this art reflects a world in flux. It evinces a mood, an entwining of cumulative experience and experimentation on the way to a new age. It offers us perspectives on new ways of interacting and the formation of communities in the virtual world. The contemporary art market's vindication of new media in the marketplace was visible on 27 August, 2007 with Shaun Gladwell's five-minute video *Storm Sequence* (2000) selling for $85,000 at a Sotheby's auction. (Gladwell, incidentally, was a Samstag Scholar in 2001.)

The reach of the Samstag Scholarships, which offer recently graduated Australian artists the opportunity for overseas study, is visible through a list of its alumni since the inaugural awards in 1993. And for this year's recipients, the opportunity to learn new skills in specific technologies available internationally is essential to their ability to further their practice. The diversity of their preferred destinations is also telling in favour of the regionalist model of art influence, with Helsinki, Amsterdam, New Haven, London and Munich as centres of excellence. And all of the work from this year's recipients confirms the influence of globalisation on a cultural psyche.

The internet, the ultimate self-organising system, is both subject and transmitter for **Tracy Cornish** who began exploring the connections between art and science when the limited nature of available theory on process-driven photography became obvious during research toward her PhD. Quantum physics, specifically in areas of complex systems and network theory, and the non-linear connections between many systems, became her tool in uncovering the data codes and patterns which are now the platform for her art.

She sees the evolution of photography as an allegory for the evolution of information culture. In *[photo:fugue]*, DVD sequences transmit photographs as pure information, rather than as objects, with a soundtrack also created by digital translation of image scans into frequency. Cornish suggests her work process is half planned and half self organising, a feature of any complex system where the process may dictate the outcome.

emission glitches is a moving field on a grid of colour, with blurry sections which randomly form, coalesce, resolve, and then dissolve once again into part of the grid. It is a physical representation of computer glitches, giving "form and function to programming errors - presenting them as artefacts"[1]. It is also meditative, colourful, arresting.

Pixellated information is also the subject of *dissolve*, which was made via the transfer of static photographs into coloured fields. While the imagery is information-based it reads, as do many abstracted images, like landscape of sorts. Its circular image dissolves and resolves into areas of light and dark expressed through colour change.

Giles Ryder's work is also preoccupied with abstraction, but his interest is in minimalism. He started life as an artist later than some, having worked as an industrial painter on Brisbane's Story Bridge for six years before entering art school. The industrial influence, alongside that of the great abstractionists such as Rothko, is visible in his art with

glossy, hard surfaces of colour evoking car culture. He also uses neon signage and the reflective surfaces of advertising and consumption, and pared back, pearlescent and glossy striped paintings. All of these require interactivity with the viewer - the position from which the work is seen directly influences its effect.

In a recent (2007) exhibition at Peloton, a non-profit space he directs in Sydney, minimalist stepped coloured shelves, suggesting Donald Judd, protruded from the wall. Coated in reflective and glossy surfaces they were paired with a series of visceral, synthetic shapes made from expandable aerated foam, spray painted in bright colours, on aluminium rods - anything but sleekly sculptural - in the centre of the space. A pair of minimalist striped paintings, auto-lacquer on aluminium, completed the group. This collision of styles describes Ryder's interest in a reduction of form, colour, line and medium as a parallel to the compaction of modern art history.

Joshua Webb has also drawn on his experience of working in industrial design to create a bricolage of imagery from available materials. *A new dawn* is an apocalyptic landscape, a desolate place where the rubbish stretches as far as the eye can see. A rising sun and portentous cloud only restore some sense of normalcy. Then, in the DVD version, above this same landscape hovers a distinctly unnatural and amorphous red shape. It moves, drapery floating as if shaped by a benevolent breeze, taking attention from the wreckage.

It's a neat conceptual fit, using a beautiful aesthetic to distract attention from sad realities. The reverse may also be true, with destruction drawing attention away from pursuit of beauty and ideas. Webb is driven by the contradictions in making art and the need to make a space where art may exist in the world we inhabit the rider being that in this period of late capitalism art may be simply a trophy for the rich.

The Gift is a baroque-looking assemblage of smashed sculpture and cultural totems. For Webb, who works across sculpture, assemblage, and painting, the aesthetic he desires drives his choice of media.

Simon Terrill, like Cornish, is a photographer, and they share an interest in the natural sciences involving complexity and emergent theory. However Terrill's interest is in the self-generated energy of the human organism, specifically in crowd behaviours. To create *Swarm*, he spent a day in a light tower watching the crowd attending Sydney's 2005 Big Day Out concert. This is a traditional type C photograph, using a long exposure in which moving individuals in the crowd create a painterly blur, while the static elements are clear.

Between the groups of people is detritus litter, discarded possessions - representative of Freud's suggestion that crowd behaviour takes on its own careless dynamic. And Terrill's view from above allows people to be seen clinically - like insects on a slide, tiny, insignificant - yet part of an organism which is more than the sum of its parts.

His background in the theatre is more obvious in *Footscray Station*. In this work, and another significant community-driven event which produced *Southbank* from the Crowd Theory series, heightened lighting and a sense of staginess, make overt the largely constructed nature of these images.

Brueghel is an influence, but also ideas about crowds espoused by the likes of Baudelaire and Freud. Daniel Palmer suggested that Terrill's work fused "social reality with carefully constructed artifice"[2]. Its impact on the Footscray and Southbank communities extend their influence beyond the event and artworks themselves into the life of the community.

Hayden Fowler's stills and videos also have a strong sense of theatrical narrative. Fowler's animals operate instinctively within a highly sanitised set or background, but represent aspects of human nature.

Fowler grew up observing animals on his grandparents' farm in New Zealand. His first degree was a Bachelor of Science (biology), and the work expresses real empathy with his subjects. These short films are very hands on Fowler builds the sets, choreographs the action and films and edits the final work. He also manages the animals - the cast for *Hunger* were in his Sydney studio for days.

In *Goat Odyssey*, two brocaded goats move through a highly artificial and sterile set (tiled walls like a bathhouse, green carpeted floor, and industrial fan on the back wall). Doors to off stage are built into the set. Frames move on a non-sequential basis, showing goats variously entering, leaving, standing, performing, or on the small stage at the back of the set. At times a goat paws one foot, then the other - expressing something of the frustration and repression inherent in the ambiguous narrative. While goats are an archetype, and have long been part of human history (our only longer history with animals is in our relationship with dogs), they may symbolise fertility, vitality, energy.

In Fowler's *Odyssey*, the movements of frames are labyrinthine, a reference to the non linearity of computer games. The seemingly pointless and random sequence also evokes the human condition. Photographic stills, shot independently as separate works from the video, incorporate a man, naked but for a loin cloth which matches the goats' drapery.

Hunger also takes as its subject sexuality and desire. In this double-framed sequence, on the right, another tiled

background this time dark drips milk from an invisible teat in the wall. Here the milk drips and pools whitely on the black tiles, wasted. In the frame on the left, lambs come and go from a similar teat, falling to their knees in the way of lambs, tails wagging feverishly with the joy of hunger sated.

There is a political dimension to Fowler's narratives. *Hunger's* lambs parallel the profligate waste of the first world with the desperate poverty of the third. The goats in *Goat Odyssey*, the mice driven through the set in *White Australia*, and the cock in *White Cock* are following an imposed order, impotent and powerless despite the expression of instinctive behaviour.

There is a post-apocalyptic sterility in these images, rather like the bleak terrain through which Gibson trawls. However in the work of all of these artists, there is intrigue and interest in the challenges of new modes of interaction and differently-styled communities. Media is chosen, the way it always was, for its ability to give appropriate expression to content.

And all Class of 2008 Samstag Scholars share the desire for an intense period of study and engagement with other parts of the world, as a compelling part of the journey to further an art of ideas.

[1] Tracy Cornish, Samstag Application, 2007.

[2] Daniel Palmer, *Crowd Theory*, catalogue essay, 2006.

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