

## 2000 Samstag essay

### The World is not Enough

© James Moss

*.....the surface of the world is now totally known to us, but the images that serve us by allowing us to look at the world, have become just as unknown as the unveiled world itself.*<sup>1</sup>

The relatively new global-cultural paradigm we have learnt to call 'post-modernity' will be recognised in future histories as the time when life finally caught up with art. A distinctive characteristic of the 20th century is the extent to which this age has been recorded in a vast array of images, the agency through which we have, in effect, come to know the world.

This comprehensive knowledge of ourselves and of our global environment - this ability to 'see' the world from a potential infinity of perspectives - has demonstrated that our perception of reality is entirely subject to context and point of view. As a consequence, the established narratives of meaning which had so long sustained us, have been supplanted by a relativistic, discontinuity of meanings that are simultaneously liberating and disconcerting.

The rise of the image as a deconstructive force in orthodox perception, had a particular precedent in the avant-garde art of the early decades of this century. Contemporary with this artistic dismantling of reality was a similar sacking of the citadel of classical physics, by the Theory of Relativity. As cultural paradigms go, relativity theory and Cubism are practically identical; the re-definition of the meta-illusion of space in art, mimicked the absence of space as an absolute in modern physics.

Commensurate with this trajectory in the sciences, relativity became the touchstone of modern art and has, with the passing of the century, become the condition of post-modernity.

Scratch contemporary culture and you'll find a surface of relativities; which is another way of saying that our perceptions of the world are now conditioned by diversity, the 'democratic' effect of which has been a collapse of the distinctions separating - amongst other things - truth and fiction, the literal and the symbolic, the real and the hyperreal, the image and reality.

Given the above has credence, what does this mean for artists in a world where there is little distinction between art and life, a world in which images have ceased simply to be descriptors, reflections of a basic reality, but have become the very texture of reality in all of its diversity? Well, contrary to the expectations of many, the transmutation from reality to hyperreality hasn't changed things much at all. Irrespective of whatever version of reality holds court, it simply provides another context in which artists can work and, given the expanded nature of our current realities, the contexts for artists are likewise expanded.

Of course, what is real in relative terms also conditions what is true. And artists, who are inherently sceptical of the truth, now find themselves at play in an increasingly discursive realm.

The relative unknowability of the image is exploited in the photographic work of [Troy Ruffels](#) via the multifarious and multilayered points of reference encoded therein. Ruffels's images negotiate the plethora of intersecting concerns which have incrementally colonized the once contradictory space between the twin poles of art and life; the continuing ubiquity of the modernist grid now extrapolated into an increasingly fragmented illusion of repetition that draws as much from Mandelbrot as it does from Mondrian - the conflation of macro and micro elements that constitute the Euclidian and quantum dimensions of the world as we know it, and issues environmental that continue to haunt us in contradistinction of our facility to simulate natural realities.

All this is further compounded by Ruffels's use of state-of-the-art digitalisation, in which the photographic analogue is transformed into a second-order electronic code that adds another chapter to the teasing out of the tangled threads of reality and abstraction.

Things digital also feature in the work of [Károly Keserü](#), although, in a sleight of hand, his paintings quote the pixilated surface of electronic imagery while simultaneously referencing the grid, post- impressionism and a variety of expressionisms. A diversity of perspectives and points of view merge into single images, and while this work displays a quotational aspect of sorts, it's clear that the quotational devices apparent in the painterly innovations of the late seventies and early eighties, were clunky by comparison with the smooth interstylistic conjunctions of late 90s neo-retro.

In addition, Keserü has superimposed the cool ironies of postmodern inversion that privilege the 'other'- folk art and craft - over the grid matrix of modernist aesthetics, toying with history by constructing a modernist/folk-art hybrid he calls *folkmodern*, while simultaneously creating a conjunction out of the once great divide between art and craft.

The duplicity apparent in the cheating heart of post-modernity is again invoked in the only other painter in the Samstag class of 2000, [David Ralph](#). The denotative aspect of Ralph's work seamlessly connects formalist photography, photo-realist painting, and the longevity of the surrealist impulse, while connoting a post-Watergate vision of architecturally inspired conspiracy theories, dreamscape settings of a corporate noir, the silences of which are eloquent of an interior monologue on the condition of late capitalism.

The style and technique of Ralph's work mimics the smooth and invisible workings of the modern corporate sector, however these interiors have a distinct retro, even metro look, their aesthetic functionalism the product of a time which perceived of 1984 as the future.

The condition of silence and the depiction of absence are two of the most potent devices in the avant-garde repertoire, not unbefitting of the secret codes of modern art. The installation work of **Sally-Ann Rowland** is a chip off the old psychoanalytic block, a kind of waiting game in which all but the most minimal of narrative devices situate the work on the edges of memory - a mnemonic event-horizon, where time and space take on the qualities of slippage not unlike those experienced by Dave, the spaceman in **2001 - A Space Odyssey**.

It's hard to imagine there was a subconscious prior to the analogical conjunction of dwelling places and the mind. The sparse anonymous room in which, "Real objects are altered, the familiar imbued with a strangeness that occurs in dreams", <sup>2</sup> is a potent signifier of the unconscious whose secret occupant is invariably absent yet whose apparent presence is indicated in the few objects that populate the 'space', but which are perversely thwarted in their state of becoming; books with two spines, drawers without handles and chess pieces in treacle, the absent kings rendering the game futile and unending.

This work is more beautiful than it is bleak, more ingenious than existential, and the engagement it desires is aligned more with the politics of identity than the dialectics of isolation.

The artistic concerns of **Marco Masci** are intricately enmeshed in the twin issues of representation and identity, towards both of which he has adopted a trans-institutional approach. With a background in photography and an eye to new representational technologies, this artist has enlisted "light, image and sculptural form" <sup>3</sup> to express the conflicting nature of belonging to, and yet being absent from, a socio-culturally prescribed ethnicity and gender. Masci's interest in new formulations of materials and media is synonymous with his interests in the new orders of identity, and the conceptual wit that alternates between both foci can be seen to great effect. The 'positive' or central aspect of these images is illuminated and yet arbitrary, and it is only by looking to the edges of these vaguely island-like shapes that they are revealed as contexts of desire.

Revealing, classifying and mapping the collective memory is the creative mission of **Elvis Richardson** and her work takes in "revelations of institutional and private spaces, and representations of sites of violence and crime". <sup>4</sup> Diversity, in relation to both the performative act and the material found, is again the name of the game in this accumulation of levels of data and cultural detritus, the signifieds of which combine to "address notions of loss and displacement within contemporary society, whilst questioning social mores and aesthetics" <sup>5</sup>.

Found: a photograph of a thirties-something woman in a white bikini in a beach-type location, standing in front of dark green, mini-minor deluxe with surfboard racks. She eyes the camera disinterestedly - "...move over a bit so's I can get the car in" - it's high noon, perhaps the sand is hot and she wishes he (?) would get a move on. Like most snapshots it's a perversely unremarkable image, a blue-print of an original 'real' that was lost years ago, a relic/trace of an earlier decade. There is a kind of melancholy in the woman's vulnerability and anonymity, as if this was the last known photograph taken of her prior to her mysterious disappearance.

Lost: a little girl, name of Joanne Ratcliff. Her father appeals on TV for her return and she never does. This case, like the meaning of the image, any image, can never be closed.

Relating to human experience is high on the agenda in the art of **John Harris**, ideally as it is staged within the context of the American sociopolitical landscape. Harris's aim is to make work that addresses the logic of the often absurd and spectacular artifice of 'the empire of signs', and which simultaneously offers itself as critical commentary on the nature of its own potent, post-ideological dynamics.

If this sounds like something of a tall order, it has been the modus operandi of much pop art since the inception of the genre, although Harris's art has little of the dead-pan literalness so indicative of pop. Instead, the symbolic is the dominant code, and encoded in Harris's work is the discursive and ubiquitous rhetoric of dystopia, urging adherence and targeting all levels of perceptual experience from the subliminal to the sublime. Scale in this context is relative, as the miniature *Billboard* suggests, Haiku-like in its semiotics of economy; and this relativity of scale is further compounded by *The Parable of Experience*, a billboard-size set of brackets designed as a device to enclose more than one line of text - a very ordinary ideogram, now ethereal in 'transcendent' green neon.

The hyperreal plethora of belief systems we engage with incurs a multitude of martyrs, and one crosses the dystopian landscape at one's own risk..... on a wing and a prayer.

The radical absence of the aesthetic object and of the object, per se, in the art of late modernism, was often provided with a justification contextualised in the anti-rhetoric of Mahayana Buddhism, or Zen, a disposition towards the world emphasising the value of meditation and intuition. The attainment of perception is the nugget at the heart of the Zen credo, and such an attainment is also the creative vanishing point in the installation work of **Paula Wong**, work that hovers between dimensions relative to a phenomenology of process - consciousness and direct experience - and the material dimension that remains as traces of the passing of the moment.

Meditations on identity, ".....involving repetition such as string making, stitching, typing and knitting", <sup>6</sup> intertwined with the gestural pleasures of randomness and indeterminacy, combine to provide a striking analogy of a personal journey into the light.

And what about the **millennium**? Will the passing of one and the beginning of another have any distinctive bearing on the fortunes of artists in general and this group of Samstag Scholars in particular?

What can I say, suffice that next year, Andy Warhol will be an artist who lived in the last century.

\* \* \*

1. Virilio, P. 'Interview with Paul Virilio' by Jerome Sands, translated from the French by Sheila Glaser, *Flash Art* (#138, 1988)

2. - 6. From written statements by the artists.

**James Moss** lectures in art history and theory at the South Australian School of Art. He has contributed articles and reviews to a range of journals and has authored numerous catalogue essays. His current research engages with contemporary reassessments of history; the deconstruction of historical narratives, relativities of fact and fiction - past and present - and the documentary possibilities of hypertext as a narrative device for re-framing historical events.