

2006 Samstag essay

The memorable: ephemeral

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'At times it seems to me, said [Cornelius] de Jong, as if all works of art were coated with a sugar glaze or indeed made completely of sugar, like the model of the battle of Esztergom created by a confectioner to the Viennese court, which Empress Maria Theresia, so it is said, devoured in one of her recurrent bouts of melancholy.'

W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*

In 1969 Barry le Va concocted a haunting installation of glittering shards of glass, red iron-oxide powder and pools of oil, which occupied an entire floor of the vacated Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, in the final days before its demolition. A membranous, yet spiky (metamorphosing) mass, it was a transitory installation that nonetheless vividly persists in the memory of the former director, Martin Friedman, who earlier this year described it as 'a magical work...a solemn reflection on dematerialization.'¹

It does seem remarkable that more than three decades later, the ephemeral nature of such works - an abiding aspect of much contemporary art - continues to provoke debate. At the 2004 Artists Week - part of the Adelaide Festival of Arts - Dave Hickey expressed his discontent with the present condition of international culture in the arts. The specific targets of Hickey's rancour were twofold - the ascendancy of neo-medievalism ('a trading of post-modernity for pre-modernity') and the hegemony of 'governmental institutions and their curatorial clerisies.' Holding the latter accountable for the privileging of time-based or ephemeral work over object-based art, Hickey postulated that video and installation art (unlike painting and sculpture) have no lasting impact on the viewer's consciousness - as a consequence of their transience and their disavowal of formal values.

Undoubtedly, mass media images from Abu Ghraib, the Holocaust or the Vietnam War have become seared into the collective memory, but notwithstanding the subjectivity of recollection, the primacy, the equivalent and enduring power of the moving image - however fleetingly glimpsed - cannot be denied; the dance-hall tango scene in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1969), the fluttering banners of the massed warriors in Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), the plastic bags swept up by a gust of wind at the end of Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999).

Painters Claudia Chaseling and Christine Aerfeldt aside, four of the six 2006 Samstag alumni - collaborative artists Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, filmmaker Pia Borg and multidisciplinary artist Andrew Best - might be considered to make work that is to a greater or lesser extent, ephemeral. Embodying the nomadism that is now emblematic of Australian contemporary art practice, in the last two years Cordeiro and Healy - whose collaboration echoes (in some respects) that of Christo and Jeanne Claude - have created installations/architectural interventions in a range of locations that includes Basel, Switzerland, Weil am Rhein, Germany, Kathmandu, Nepal, Taiwan and Martin Place in Sydney. The impermanence of such work raises an allied issue, concerning the (continually evolving) interrelationship between works of art and their photographic documentation. Cordeiro and Healy, who are represented by a commercial gallery, have for example elected to authorise photographic images of their projects. Certainly a more expansive (and permanent) narrative is made available to the practitioner - the peregrinations of Shirley Tse's blue bubble-wrap works are a case in point - through the associated, strategic use of photographic imagery.

Making a virtue of the fleeting quality of his collaborations with Jeanne-Claude, Christo has noted: 'There is a simplicity in these projects - they are temporary, almost nomadic. This impermanence translates into an awareness of the vulnerability of things, of their passing away.'² It's unlikely that those who witnessed the grand gesture of Christo and Jeanne Claude's *The Gates* (2005) - the largest public art work in New York's history - will soon forget the experience. As John Kaldor observes, 'Although *The Gates* was temporary, it has left an indelible impression on the city,' marking for many visitors, 'a poignant end to the healing process of 9/11.'³

Sean Cordeiro and **Claire Healy's** collaborative art practice evolved out of a period of escalating involvement (from concept to realisation) in each other's individual projects.' Dual authorship' says Healy, 'was necessary and inevitable'.⁴ The previously-signalled audacious scale of Cordeiro and Healy's site-specific installations/architectural interventions was confirmed by the *Package Tour* (2003) work for *Sculpture by the Sea*, in which an army tank (with an ocean view) was effectively neutered, or at least rendered homely, by an incongruously suburban array of household items that included potted plants, deck chairs, milk crates, a boogie board and a barbecue.

Cordeiro and Healy's fundamental concern with complex notions of home (in both a material and cultural sense) and in particular its impermanency, has been powerfully expressed in three key works from the last two years. Recalling Gordon Matta-Clark's architectural interventions, the award-winning *The Cordial Home Project* (2003) involved the 'preservation' of a house destined for demolition and its dismantling and onerous reconstruction as a precisely-stratified formalist oblong - from foundation rubble to roof tiles - within Artspace gallery at Woolloomooloo in Sydney. For Healy the work also invokes Hiroshi Teshigahara's existentialist film *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), in which the protagonist is fated to endlessly shovel sand, in order to preserve her entombed home in the sand dunes.

*'Stacking the house and reconstituting the elemental compounds in this way created a layering of absences. In our finished work there was no space to reside.'*⁵

Since this chaotic mass of building material was the only 'house' the artists were in a position to purchase, Cordeiro and Healy represent a generation of Australian citizens, for whom an egalitarian dream of home-ownership has dissipated. *The Cordial Home Project* was therefore a powerfully symbolic work - a house in its most reductive form; distilled, fragmented and ultimately useless/untenable.

Bound with orange twine, the household contents of an abandoned studio in Weil am Rhein in Germany were vertically reconfigured for the project *Deceased Estate* (2004), in which the less than striking individual components became cumulatively transformed. Cordeiro and Healy's achievement in this massive, free-standing agglomeration of household items was the retention of a confounding quality of spontaneity - unlike the similarly domestic constructions of Adam Dade and Sonya Hanney or Damian Ortega, with which they might conceivably be compared.

In 2005 Cordeiro and Healy lived on-site for a month at Milaby farm at Ballidu in Western Australia - incidentally tending to a flock of sheep - during the construction of the *Maintenance* project. Suggesting multiple readings (as distress signals, warnings or alternatively as suture) transformative Buddhist-orange, geometric oblongs and circles were applied to the windows and doors - described by Cordeiro as a violation of the membrane, the link between nature and interior space - of a derelict farmhouse. This preoccupation with transitional space was also the impetus for *Tollgate* (2004) - a revisualisation (with the ingenious use of red lighting) of a disused border post between France, Germany and Switzerland, as a mysterious site of meditation or worship. Cordeiro and Healy were abetted in their cultivation of a sense of ambiguity by the language barrier. 'It was impossible to inform people what it was we were actually doing. Perhaps this was to our advantage.'⁶

Physical, immersive, intrepid, but never polemical, Cordeiro and Healy's work nevertheless resonates with socio-political commentary. Preceded by a challenging three-week trek through the Annapurna Mountain Ranges, where dwellings were carved into the cliff-face, the site-specific work *When the bulls fight the calves get crushed*⁷ (2005) was constructed at Siddhartha Gallery, Kathmandu in politically unstable Nepal. Intended to evoke the 'vulnerability of existence in the midst of greater forces,'⁸ the project assumed a more fraught aspect, when a state of emergency was declared during the period of installation and the gallery director placed under semi-house arrest.

At first glance the urban landscape paintings of **Claudia Chaseling** suggest aspects of Australian modernism of the 1930s, yet the reality is rather different, for her work denotes an intriguing hybridity of influences. In 1999 as part of an Australian National University exchange program, the German-born and educated Chaseling - now resident in Australia - visited indigenous communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia before returning temporarily to Berlin in 2000.

The lyricism of the four-panelled work *Losing Perspective* (2004) clearly quotes from the Romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich, but an intriguing point of difference is Chaseling's trademark deployment of a fine all-over tracery of cross-hatching - a technique more customarily associated with Australian indigenous artists.

*'Through the line work and grid structure I develop translucence, depth, the reflecting surface of water and reach formal reductive clarity.'*⁹

Although Chaseling's palette is consistently vivid and the pigments unmixed, in the darker, moodier six-panelled *Motion* (2005) the forms have become almost abstracted and in two upper panels a darkly-ominous aeroplane looms, casting its shadow over the composition. Employing a favoured strategy of mutable vantage points, in the aptly-titled *Change* (2005) Chaseling propels the viewer through an almost dizzying succession of perspectives. It is a sensation encapsulated in the deft interweaving of line and colour that generates a rhythmical meshing of arcs and loops in the closely-cropped roller-coaster of *Speed* (2005).

Making numerous preparatory drawings/watercolours, Chaseling's process is extremely labour intensive, involving not only the meticulous application of multiple layers of pigment, but also the incorporation of multiple (layered) images within the same work. Eschewing the flatness of gridwork that is Modernism's legacy, the perception - conveyed through permeable grids that expand rather than constrain - is paradoxically one of lightness and depth. Frequently a final transparent film of red paint is applied to the finished canvas, in order to make the work 'come alive.' In such a way, Chaseling merges an investigation of the history and potentialities of her medium with a contemporary preoccupation with memory, transience, change, movement.

Rather than a contemporary realisation of the Romantic sublime, Chaseling's carefully realised vignettes - layered, sequential, blurred, fragmentary - are an analogue for the subjective, imperfect nature of human recall and for multi-faceted ways of viewing.

Exemplifying urban, deadpan cool, **Andrew Best's** multi-disciplinary practice encompasses sculpture, installation, photo-media and painting. Excavating contemporary culture - fashion, video games, film, nature documentaries and pop - as well as the urban landscape, he displaces 'everyday elements into fantastical scenarios, or into "atoms" of new stories...'¹⁰ These vaguely sinister reconfigurations of the physical and cultural environment contain elements of the fantastic, the occult and the merely strange (*Zombie Gang Member 3, Akira Tamura*, 2004).

The imposingly large and critically well-received *Pauline* (2004) - selected for the survey exhibition *2004: Australian Culture Now* at the National Gallery of Victoria - was a three-dimensional realisation of the 1980s video game *Donkey Kong*, from which the obscurantist Best had removed any identifying figures. Given that he cites as a point of reference the writer/filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet - whose *nouveaux romans* challenged conventional narrative structures, dispensing with plot, character, setting, linear time etc - it is not at all surprising that Best's enigmatic narratives are invariably open-ended.

Alluding to the flawed paradise of Adelaide - a city memorably described by Salman Rushdie as a perfect setting for a Stephen King novel or horror film - in *Paradise* (2003) he constructed a cryptic crime-scene like tableau from a pair of photocopy machines, pot plants, a macabre face mask, a scattering of moths and capsules of nitrous oxide and realistic latex weeds that sprouted from cracks in the floor.

'Within my work' says Best, 'I draw specific influence from the narrative strategies of video games, news/fashion photography and film.'¹¹ Accordingly, the unnamed automaton-like protagonists, temporal discontinuity, and ambiguity of identity and setting of *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) - written by Robbe-Grillet and directed by Alan Resnais - may well have supplied Best with a strategic model, wherein the viewer is obliged to complete the narrative. Death too, takes on the surreal quality of a video game in the photographic series *Knox Element (Fall Series)* 2004, as inner-city youths, apparently falling 'happily, languidly to their death' are captured in the penultimate frozen moment of the photographic image - another kind of death - before they touch the ground.

Christine Aerfeldt's profoundly personal early paintings integrated nostalgic sepia-coloured paintings of old family photographs from Estonia, with bright and polished depictions of kitsch Hummel-like dolls in traditional and beautifully-detailed European folkloric costumes.

Adroitly manipulating scale and composition and espousing a flatness of surface, Aerfeldt paints her theatrical, brilliantly-coloured (self-described) 'psycho-dramas' - rapidly and with a consuming intensity - from digitally-manipulated images. Having experienced a Tuymans-like epiphany in the Prado Museum, for the *Heav'n and Hell* series (2004), Aerfeldt appropriated and rearranged old-master allegorical imagery, such as El Greco's Adoration of the Shepherds (c. 1605). Depicted in reverse in *Wanda and Wilhelm get up to childish tricks in the dark* (2003), the phlegmatic doll duo colonise the dominant, light-drenched position, occupied by the Christ-child in the original.

Ever-experimental, Aerfeldt's focus has recently shifted to a range of different objects - albeit talismans that possess an enduringly personal or familial connection. In the dramatic work *Baby owl is caught up in tangles, but whispers a soft song*(2005), Miro-esque motifs surround an unblinking toy owl, perched on the elaborately coiffured head of a woman, whose reciprocal gaze is - tantalisingly - almost conceded, but ultimately denied the viewer.

Artists such as Paula Rego and Destiny Deacon have frequently inserted toys (or animals) into their narratives as a surrogate means of articulating that which may be unsayable. Kitsch items that may nevertheless enshroud memories of childhood or a distant homeland, Aerfeldt's dolls present a tragi-comic duality.' Their robotic play is a repertoire of richly superficial theatrical effects, a sort of burlesque of autobiographical sentiment and cultural memory.'¹² Still, the impression lingers that Aerfeldt's creatures and figurines may well be participants in a more veiled and gritty narrative of cultural/geographical displacement.

Pia Borg, whose black and white, six and a half minute animated film *Footnote* (2003) was nominated for the Palme d'Or in the 2004 official Cinéfondation¹³ selection at Cannes, shares with Best a predilection for non-conventional narrative modes. Informed by German Expressionist cinema and utilising traditional animation techniques, each frame is carefully composed from a montage that encompasses old photographs, found objects, human hair, scanned textures, dust, insects and discarded 16mm footage. Shunning the slickness of digitised animation, Borg expresses a preference for a 'dirty, junky aesthetic,' citing as influential the early experimental work of French filmmaker Georges Méliès.

Moody and evocative, her animations are imbued with a European sensibility and *Footnote* possesses some of the period atmospherics of Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* (1985), although Borg's characteristically sooty realisation is more delicate and the handling of issues of social oppression, far lighter and more enigmatic. Musical scores, clocks, a metronome and dress patterns function as signifiers of constraint or control, as a small boy ineptly attempts to play a piano. Upstairs an odd choreography - derived from the robotic movement of the workers on the factory floor in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) - is affectingly enacted by mannequin figures against a backdrop of grinding machinery, dress forms and spinning spools of thread.

The soundtrack is minimal - the monotonous beat of a metronome, the occasional plucking of a piano note, the tap of a fingernail on a keyboard and the climactic moment, at which the mannequin begins to dance to the boy's surprisingly fluid piano rendition of dance notation, achieves a real poignancy.

Topical themes of immigration and mandatory detention propel the very short allegorical film animation *15281* (2003) and Borg's latest project, *When Objects Dream*, synthesises live action with animation in a commissioned film about the phenomenon of dementia/memory loss.

Wendy Walker, September 2005

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1. Martin Friedman, 'Barry le Va's Secret Sculpture' in *Art in America*, May 2005, p. 141-143
2. Nicholas Baume 'Critical Themes in Christo's Art 1958-'70' from the exhibition catalogue *Christo: John Kaldor Art Project 1990*, Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, cited in Charles Green, *The third hand: collaborations in art from conceptualism to postmodernism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p.137
3. John Kaldor 'The Gates' in *Art & Australia*, Sydney NSW, vol. 43, no I, Spring 2005, p. 18.
- 4-6. All quotes from artists are from communications with Wendy Walker, September 2005.
7. The title of the work is derived from an old Nepalese saying, which describes the plight of the small man caught in the grip of powerful forces beyond his control.
8. Claudia Chaseling was an assistant to both Viennese action painter and performance artist Hermann Nitsch and later to Franz Ackerman in Berlin.
- 9-11. All quotes from artists are from communications with Wendy Walker, September 2005.
12. Edward Colless in the exhibition catalogue for *Heav'n and Hell*, Helen Gory Gallery, Melbourne, 2004.
13. *Cinéfondation* is a category that presents films of less than sixty minutes duration from film schools, first films, fiction or animation 'showing talent which deserves encouragement.'

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