

1998 Samstag essay

This Thing Called Art

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Is art, in its essence, a sensibility or a capability?

That is to say, is it a matter of feeling (enlisting reason, memory and imaginative fancy) or a matter of mere manufacture? I believe many of the significant debates surrounding contemporary visual practice can be expressed in the form of this enquiry. While it is reductive, even falsely oppositional, to characterise sensibility and capability as each other's extreme, and while it deprives these faculties of the mutuality which is their common circumstance in the world, nonetheless this thing called art cries out to us to be named.

This nomination is a valid commission of art criticism. I would venture to call it a professional obligation, save that the contempt in which it is held in the review columns of our national press indicates a contrary status. Like recitation, nobody does it anymore. It's dispiriting to reflect on the number of prominent Australian critics, especially in the mass media, who fall silent at this decisive juncture in the critical process. They stop their mouths with deprecations rather than assent to an object, a *thing*, whose constituent material or method of fabrication disconcerts them.

Promoting this taciturnity to the class of an aesthetic judgement, they render naming a transgressive act. That's why the question - sensibility or capability - can be so defensibly and productively applied at this moment in culture. In answering, we name the thing.

We name it art.

As in so many other significant contexts, it is Aboriginal society that supplies us with a powerful model for such an articulation. For the ancestral beings in the great creation sagas of Central and Eastern Arnhem Land, the deed of naming conducted that which was simply a psychic possibility into a state of physical reality. Grasses, rocks, animals, waterholes were 'told' into existence. The Wagilag Sisters and the Djang'kawu Sisters gave to airy nothing a local habitation and a name long before Shakespeare's Puck. Long before Yahweh.

The recipients of **The Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships** for 1998 allow us a promising, if less primordial, opportunity to contribute to a congress of naming. Here are five artists whose individual practices and collective project - to conscript them in a notional unity - beg nomination.

Craige Andrae is a questioner. His interrogative stratagem stems from Marcel Duchamp, as does, conceivably, his investment in a store-bought inventory of glass, timber, steel and other sub-industrial merchandise. He has also resuscitated Duchamp's dust, inviting that substance to colonise several of his faux-museological shelf constructions. More provocatively, a dust of deceasing flies and expended maggots distinguished an eerie vitrine he exhibited in the 1996 Adelaide Biennial.

Andrae's experience as a designer of commercial interiors and museum displays is a continuing source of subject matter and thematic content. There is a sense in which his 'art' is the advanced condition of his 'work'. He is exceptional among younger Australian sculptors in literally producing 'art works'. Yet these aren't empty takes on the evacuations of cultural consumerism. They have an effect of extreme substantiality on the viewer, causing one writer to allude to their 'sheer clunky thingness', a phrase that belies the inherent elegance of Andrae's every installation.

Proving he is not tethered to conventions, least of all his own, a recent enterprise involved the unexpectedly poetic planting of sixty small, white crosses on a lawn behind the Museum of South Australia. Opportunely, this work, *Memorial*, figured in an exhibition called *Obiter Dictum*, a thing said by the way.

At a polar remove from Andrae, the painterly program of **John Derrick** is determined by Realist, arguably Social Realist, principles. In a recent body of work in the oil-on-canvas medium he catalogued the occupants of 'nursing homes' and 'special accommodation houses', terms which achieve the chilling ring of Nazi euphemism.

That these portrayals of incapacity and convalescence risk impropriety is part of their power. Is Derrick's observation invasive, we must ask? Are his images compassionate ex-votos welcomed by their subjects or voyeuristic trophies they're too weak or weak-minded to repel? Which is their genre: the portrait, the interior or the still life? If they deal with the institutional abjection of the marginalised, why then are they outrageously beautiful?

With his liking for the kiss of light on crumpled dressing gowns, for infirmity-issue fabric folded into flounces, and for human assemblies masked in the rueful incognito of their own emotion, Derrick is a Watteau of malaise.

Inert in his metallic cot, *Karl* has the lolling bulk of a hospitalised odalisque. Apart from his distracted eyes, he's as factually banal as a cadaver. But in those eyes Derrick assigns the outward register of inner anxiety. We know this man to be of the tribe whose diurnal hours are absorbed, in the artist's words, by slow regimes of 'sleeping, eating, smoking and fighting with personal demons.'

Abjection of a less corporal kind than Derrick's is the premise of a precocious and entertaining body of work by **Christopher Howlett**. His sculptural attitude is that of a larrikin who has just ransacked a Manchester shop. His methodology locates somewhere between pillow-fighting and animatronics.

It seems contentious to state, since it contradicts the kinetic clownery of his work, but Howlett is a classical sculptor. Succinctness and formal certainty are brought to bear on even his zaniest structures. He lends a standing mattress the demeanour of a caryatid, if admittedly a disorderly one. When Howlett's rude upholsteries gyrate, let alone when they crab-walk out the door, we remember the mobility that ancient carvers dreamed of bestowing on stony limbs and draperies.

Galatea steps off her pedestal, breathing.

Soft Accompaniment, whose horsy form has been marble-ised by the night sweats of numberless sleepers, hints at a fragment from the Parthenon. For this sculpture, Howlett lists his materials as 'pillow fabric, stuffing, succours and canned laughter', annexing components beyond the tangible repertoire of everyday statuary. Other works have been built from 'suspense', 'relief', 'uncertainty', 'temper tantrum' and 'silence'. In the commixture of these ingredients a category of practice, sculpture in this case, commences to dissolve.

So dissolved are categories of practice in the present productions of **Shaun Kirby**, it's impossible to refer to him as a painter, a sculptor, a bricoleur or an installer, though he is each of those. Certainly he is an artist, but one for whom art is less a defining noun than an indefinite article. Flux, not fixity, is his element. His avowal is for ambiguity of meaning, or multiplicity of it, to the extent that any uni-dimensional reading of the work depraves it.

This is not to rank Kirby as an author of artistic non-sequiturs, though he can be relished for his irrationality. As with any playful undertaking, including the most playful of all - psychoanalysis - grim belief is required to begin, as well as to conclude, the session. We come to Kirby as player-patients. He's our compere-therapist.

The title of his recent miscellany, *International Headache Conference*, advertised a pedigree at the fantastic end of art-historical style, as though early Dada was projectile-vomiting toward the late Surreal. Comprising several independent conceptions in apparent conversation, this crypto-aesthetic event was dominated by a pavilion propped on a Dali-esque armature of sticks. An architectural escapee from the wilder backwoods of the psyche, it boasted the appellation, *Next To Nothing*, a position it dared to occupy authoritatively.

More outrightly performative in approach, **Anne Walton** enacts a pursuit of the private and the socialised self. In her efforts to establish visual and aural counterparts for a variety of irreducible propositions at the delta of identity - interdicted femininity, hysteria, the phantasmal, the invisible, the unspeakable - Walton proffers herself as an experimental subject. Though not a Body Artist as such, her body's fibrous entirety is pressed into service as an executive instrument.

One of Walton's sustaining preoccupations is with language, or, more correctly, with its imprecisions and corruptions. It would be hard to dispel from the mind the image of the artist, clutching her tongue with her hand in *Slips of(f) the tongue*, as she attempted discourse with her audience. Or that of Walton repeatedly sucking in and releasing the business end of a household torch, so that her face, now illuminated, now obliterated, oscillated between ecstasy and trauma. This action, too, was twinned with suggestively pre-verbal utterances.

Torches figure prolifically in Walton's presentations, either as quotidian realities or plaster simulacra. They can be understood as sculptural shorthand for the shedding of light, memorialising, perhaps, a timid infant's battery-powered conquest of the dark. Walton herself functions as a psychic light-shedder, broadcasting in bright trajectories across the shadowed terrain of the long-forgotten and the subconsciously suppressed.

Sensibility or capability? This quintet of Samstag scholars more than persuasively confirms that art is in the province of the former, regardless of how loosely or laboriously it is made. There, nourished by the honest ministrations of contemporary artists like Andrae, Derrick, Howlett, Kirby and Walton, it is alive and well, and happy with its name.