

2002 Samstag essay

Making the Makers

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Art is a mirror which goes fast, like a watch, sometimes. - Franz Kafka¹

How is it that art is always ahead of us? How is it that artists, who work so slowly, with such care and patience, who sleep in, and can't start, and don't know where they're going, always arrive before us? How is it that art knows what artists don't? How is it that art makes makers to make itself?

Art is a regime of value, a discipline of making, and a mode of attentiveness. It is in the regime of value that our society reveals its most divided relation to art, and the dominant regime of value (though not the only one) is the economy. At the big end of town, art is the investor growth commodity par excellence, as the trade in impressionists, abstract expressionists and Young British Artists attests. As for the rest of us, there is a culture of grudging public support for contemporary art (witness the MCA débâcle), which must increasingly justify itself in terms of 'accessibility' and 'relevance', which we may as well call by their proper names 'marketing and public relations' and 'expanded market share'. Somewhere in all this there is a sense of art as important, but not that important, not in a way that counts. Balanced between the oppressiveness of 'regime', and the subjectiveness of 'mode', discipline is a strenuous engagement both with the self and with society, an unwillingness to accept the given complacencies of either. Discipline is not a refusal to compromise, but a refusal to compromise except on your own terms. The discipline of making is the delicate negotiation of this compromise. Attentiveness is where we come in. Art sharpens our focus, reminding us that our ways of seeing are in fact ways of not seeing. Art is a mode of perception that involves being always innocent, forgetting everything in order to learn again what we thought we knew. It is the quality of the attentiveness we give to art that gives art everything it gives to us, that shifts and unsettles the regime of value, and ultimately, that makes the makers. The artists of the Samstag Class of 2002 are already ahead of us, exploring territories we will later discover were under our feet. The excellence of the Samstag Scholarships is that, more so than prizes or competitions or sponsored exhibitions or gifts of works, they are directly focussed on the middle term, sponsoring artists in perfecting the difficult discipline of making.

Annie Hogan's photographs of the untenanted interiors of Brisbane rental properties are heavy with phenomenological suggestiveness, almost like illustrations for Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. The notion of the house as an armature of the self is a familiar one, and Bachelard's work takes us from the attic to the cellar, through all the cupboards and corners of being. But Hogan's work is different - less sentimental, more rigorous, arriving at a crueller truth. For if the lived interior is always full of 'personal effects', Hogan's interiors are stripped bare: the boxes have been loaded in the car, the carpet vacuumed, and the room made ready for the next inhabitant. The home is revealed, poignantly, as a place of transience. What Hogan shows us is the shape of being without the being in it.

The distinctiveness of Hogan's approach is its drive towards abstraction, in both pictorial and philosophical senses. By her use of deep saturated colour, her distorted perspectives, and her framing of curtains, blinds and walls as fields of colour, her images emphasise the purely pictorial over photography's traditional role of 'evidence'. But if these techniques lean towards aesthetic detachment, her frequent use of diptychs restores intimacy by undermining the distance of photography's single perspective. *Comfort*, for instance, places the viewer inside the room, feeling the smell of the carpet and the cool slanting light. Without this delicate balance of detachment and involvement, Hogan's titles - *Precarious, Nebulous, Bittersweet* - might seem either ironic or obvious or both. Instead they perfectly complement the rigour and restraint of the images, creating a desolate and poignant sense of the 'lived'.

Mathieu Gallois offers a different take on suburban alienation. *Frontier* was a full-scale polystyrene replica of a project home, erected amongst other 'real' project homes in Sydney's southern urban sprawl. For Gallois, polystyrene is associated with 'newness, consumerism, insulation and material alienation' and thus relates to 'the experience of life in the suburbs'. However, in making the work Gallois enlisted the support of local residents, developers and building suppliers, a negotiation with the community that was gently at odds with the superficial 'alienation' of the work. It is this ambivalent commitment to collaboration and critique that is distinctive about Gallois' work. For if, on one level, *Frontier* is a scornful monument to the Dream Home, the process of bringing the work into existence entails an act of generosity and a kind of sardonic good faith. Battered by the elements and acts of vandalism, the work was eventually dismantled and removed, an inevitable sequence of events which gave it, despite the flimsiness of sarcasm and polystyrene, an improbable weight and poignancy.

A more recent work, *Drive Thru*, appears at first sight to repeat this gesture. A full-scale polystyrene replica of a Hungry Jacks restaurant, complete with street front signage and children's play equipment, it twists the parody of consumerism into a tighter circle. But at the same time, the impermanence of *Drive Thru's* installation at the *Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award* prompts us to consider art itself in terms of the disposable aesthetics of consumerism. The 'take away' component of *Drive Thru* is really its ideational content, the 'concept' of a styrofoam Hungry Jacks. Its temporary embodiment in physical form is neither real nor ideal, but merely a form of 'packaging'.

Renato Colangelo's frame of reference is the family photo album as a repository of personal and collective memory. He is interested in 'exploring my relationship to my family's sentimental past identity', and in the ways Italo-Australians 'are participating in a continuous tradition almost oblivious to the fact that their traditional culture has been modernised and is all but gone'.

If the essence of photography is always to show us the past, this nostalgia is reinforced in Colangelo's work, since he shows us a way of life overtaken by history. There is a 'fifties' feel to many of Colangelo's images, most obviously because his subject matter is often suburban interiors that have remained virtually unchanged since the post-war wave of Italian migration. But this effect also comes, I think, from his studied use of a 1950's camera and cumbersome hand-held flash. In some images the photographer even makes himself visible in the margins of the frame, an outstretched hand casting light on the dramatic *mise en scène*. These hand-printed black and white images evoke not just a way of life, but a mode of seeing, as characteristic of its era as the washed-out colour snapshots of the seventies, or the home videos of the nineties.

Colangelo's *Confrontation Series* is a frank portrayal of the troubles of family life, images rippling with dramatic tension like stills from a post-war Italian realist film. His great skill as a portraitist is evident in *Brigit's View*, which not only captures the questioning eyes and restless at-homeness of its subject, but becomes an eloquent record of a moment, in the moody tranquillity of the night sky and the city lights.

An investigation of the regime of value and the nature of the precious is at the heart of **Sarah Elson's** practice. Working largely with non-precious metals, Elson makes painstakingly delicate repoussé castings of small plant and animal forms - beetles, crickets, seed pods, flower bulbs, roots, fibres and tangled stems. Creating what she calls a 'language of abundance', her forms are riotously organic in their morphology, suggesting all the messy randomness of growth. *Silver Magnolia*, for instance, is a transitional form frozen in time, grotesquely swollen with its enfolded potential. In the texture of its skin, its tracery of veins and its coarse powdery surface, Elson captures metal as a living thing, both fluid and gently resistant, capable of spreading to the papery thinness of petals, or compacting into the woody husks of stems and shells.

An important element of Elson's practice is the way she chooses to exhibit her works. Resisting the conventional presentation of jewellery on plinths, Elson's sculptures are mounted on pins studded directly into the wall, projecting precariously into the gallery space. From a distance they are almost imperceptible, a scattering of tiny seeds. In order to 'see' the works at all it is necessary to come up close, to be drawn into the intimacy of their scale. What is revealed is a kind of botanical cornucopia of casually overlooked living things. Like beachcombing, it is a celebration of the valueless preciousness of the 'found'.

The 'precious' is central to **Timothy Horn's** concerns, although here a playfully camp irony has inflated and transformed it into the 'gorgeous'. The point of reference for Horn's jewellery-like sculptures is the court of Louis XVI, where aristocrats vied with each other to wear bigger, gaudier, more expensive jewellery to each successive court appearance. In this world, size does matter, and Horn has exploded the baroque ornamentalism of courtly refinement to a larger-than-life scale, creating hypertrophic fantasy accessories for the brash, the shameless and the proud. If 'queer sensibility' can be defined in part as a celebration of the fake and the ornamental, and a transvaluation of the hierarchies of 'taste', Horn plays these themes to the hilt, titling his monstrous baubles with trashy sexual puns such as *Golden Showers*, *Pink Bits* or *Bump 'n' Grind*.

Horn explores jewellery as a site for fantasy, self-expression, eroticism and display. His *Cinderella Complex* series, crafted from nickel-plated bronze, lead crystal and Easter egg foil, are like props for an upscale pantomime drag show, what he calls 'a queer rewriting of the Cinderella myth'. *Glass Slipper*, for instance, performs an Alice-in-Wonderland transmogrification of scale, turning a piece of bijou footwear into something both exquisite and monstrous. *Bearded Clam*, which translates details from the interior of Residenz - the baroque masterpiece by eighteenth century architect Balthasar Neumann - hints, as in a glass darkly, at the cruel vanity of fairytale godmothers, discovering something dark and libidinal buried in the folds of genteel ornament, a coiled force, a Sadean civility.

Darren Siwes's images have become instantly recognisable. Photographing familiar South Australian landmarks, Siwes uses double exposure to superimpose the ghostly figure of an Aboriginal man in a suit and tie standing in a pose that suggests both a physical resoluteness as well as a 'here I am' gesture of simplicity and vulnerability. The landmarks are focal points of local cultural and historical identity: the Old Gum Tree where the colony of South Australia was founded; the Festival Centre, symbol of the city's cultural ambitions; Mt Lofty House, a grand colonial relic of aristocratic privilege.

The political nature of Siwes' work seems at first sight only too apparent. He comments that he feels little connection to the traditional heritage of Aboriginal art, but instead, inspired by artists like Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett, is interested in exploring the possibilities of Aboriginal art in new forms and new media. His is an identity art, perhaps, but an identity that is, like the figures in his photographs, blurred or partly erased. *Trained Man* shows a ghostly figure on a deserted railway platform at night, the punning title hinting at the suppression of cultural and individual identity, invoking the good citizenship of those who know how to wait, even for a train that may never come.

If Siwes's stubbornly repeated image can be read as a haunting figure of resilience, of survival despite the erasures of history, it is also a very contemporary presence, not only because of the suit and tie, but because the figure is so clearly a representation - a transparent sign of presence rather than its opaque reality - that the viewer is forced to confront Aboriginality itself as not an essence but a sign, endlessly reinvented, endlessly contemporary.

Astra Howard describes her work as 'action research', a hybrid of social science and performance art by which she investigates how people relate to public space. A central problem of the human sciences is the way the presence of the

observer changes the behaviour of the observed. Instead of trying to avoid this, Howard tackles it head on to explore its unpredictable complexities.

An early project involved sitting on a city sidewalk with a huge sheet of paper and a big black texta, making notes of everything she saw. Naturally, the 'subjects' under observation were curious to see what was going on. Recognising themselves as the subjects of research, they responded to their situation in various and unpredictable ways. Eventually the police were called and the disruptive presence of the researcher was removed.

For *Public [private] living spaces II* Howard lived for a week in a tobacconist's booth at the entrance to Sydney's Kings Cross Station, writing observations on people's behaviour in reverse on the glass walls of her observation post. People began to respond by writing back - curious questions, confessions, suicide notes, friendly chitchat. The project quickly became a focal point of discussion and debate throughout the neighbourhood. The unpredictable 'research outcome' from this project was perhaps to demonstrate how a transparent and permeable membrane between researcher and subject, between performance and everyday life, could open up an extraordinary space for subjectivity and self-expression at the heart of one of Sydney's busiest public spaces.

Daniel von Sturmer is concerned with investigating the experience of public space, focussing specifically on the sequestered, privileged space of the art gallery. *General Review of Gain and Loss*, a collaborative exhibition with Leslie Eastman and Andy Thomson, transformed the gallery into a labyrinth of corridors, using screens and windows, camera obscura and video projections to turn the space outside-in, dismantling the various framing devices which separate a picture from its context, a gallery from its surroundings, art from 'everyday life'. *Plane*, where von Sturmer excised a section of the gallery wall and replaced it with plate glass, continued this style of intervention, for as it 'opened up' the gallery spaces to one another, multiplying lines of visibility and points of contact, the solid plane of glass barred access, evoking the 'look but don't touch' conditioning of the well-behaved gallery visitor.

The other element of von Sturmer's practice is video, a medium seemingly incompatible with these spatial interventions. *Science Fiction* features a loop of five 'tricks', simple gags mostly done by running the video backwards - a blob of plasticine 'miraculously' regains its cuboid shape; a blob of blu-tac leaps up to attach itself to a fingertip; the surface of the water in a glass tilts weirdly sideways as in a force field. Projected onto a wall-mounted perspex screen, the video's studio backgrounds blend into the gallery surroundings so that these little stunts become dematerialised presences within the gallery itself, 'works of art' in the obvious, slightly silly sense. Their tricksiness, then, wittily calls attention to the privileges of the exhibition space, where, temporarily, the rules (in this case, of physics) do not apply.

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1. Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*. Trans. *Goronwy Rees*. London: Quartet Books, 1985. 143.

Russell Smith recently completed a PhD at the University of Adelaide on Samuel Beckett and the discourses of authorship, authenticity and value in literary theory. He currently teaches part-time in twentieth century literary and cultural studies at Adelaide University, and writes regularly on the visual arts for *Broadsheet* and *RealTime*.