# RealTime

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## Cover: *Dots Obsession 1999*, Yayoi Kusama

The 2000 Biennale of Sydney has got off to an unusually good start with a high degree of reviewer unanimity that this Biennale has got the goods, offering an invaluable retrospective of works from significant local and international artists, something that Documenta X did too in its own epic way in 1997. This smaller, but still considerable gathering has the added bonus of being free. Several works have already grabbed the public imagination; one of them is Yayoi Kusama's *Dots Obsession*.

The catalogue entry reports that "From her childhood Yayoi Kusama was plagued with a nervous disorder that made her hear voices and see visions. She accepted these things as mysterious signals from nature, from the universe. She came to feel that these signals enveloped the world, as if with a curtain, or a net, and started expressing this in her work via polka dots. 'One day', she writes, 'looking at a red flower patterned tablecloth I turned my eyes to the ceiling and saw the same pattern everywhere.' After-images seemed to cover everything and it seemed as if she herself would fade away into that dot-filled world…Drawing was one way for Kusama to take a stand in this world, by giving reality to what she saw. And so she began to paint polka dots. While dots or spots are simple geometric figures, they are also organic shapes that suggest cells, molecules, particles and seeds that are the fundamental building blocks of life" (Yuko Hasegawa, Catalogue, 2000 Biennale of Sydney).

In *RealTime* 38 (August-September) there'll be a an extensive response to the 2000 Biennale of Sydney 2000.

# Editorial

## Artists in limbo - between Nugent and Ralph

Hearing Prime Minister John Howard on radio extolling the virtues of small business as the backbone of the nation, an otherwise taciturn cabby turned to me and said, "That man's idea of small business is a boss and upwards of 20 employees...he wouldn't know a small business if he fell over one." You get that same feeling about the government's failure to understand the lives of artists with the nightmarish tax limbo that has suddenly opened up in which it seems all too likely that many artists in this country will become lost souls, unable to claim for materials and services basic to their practices unless they are phenomenally successful and don't have that other little earner that keeps them alive and practicing their art. Artists have been refused exemption from the Ralph legislation (New Business Tax System [Integrity Measures] Bill 2000). Primary producers, on the other hand, have been granted an exemption if they earn less than $40,000 from a second income.

When the successful implementation of the financial recommendations of the Nugent Report was announced in the recent Federal Government Budget, ArtsPeak, the peak arts service organisation, sympathised with those outside the ambit of the major arts organisations: it "drew attention to what it called the 'yawning gap' between funding for smaller companies and individual artists, and the Budget's support for major arts companies." (*Sydney Morning Herald*, May 11). Little did ArtsPeak know how much more sympathy and support those artists would be needing now. With the Budget announcement of the rescue and advancement of the major arts organisations, Dr Helen Nugent said that Arts Minister Senator Richard Alston and the Government should be "hailed as heroes by all those who care about the performing arts" (*The Australian*, May 12). What kind of hero is he who will make a misery of the lives of artists in his determination to eliminate the tax claims of 'hobbyists' for their trips to Paris to paint watercolours of Notre Dame? What art does this man see? Nor is it writers and visual artist alone who will suffer. There are many performing artists supporting themselves by other means, who will fall foul of Ralph, no longer able to validly claim for classes, research, equipment, travel.

Although anxiety about the likely impact of the Ralph report has been around for a while, it's only been newsworthy since Robyn Archer railed against it at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards: "While the Nugent report gives $70 million extra [including State contributions] to the elite arts...at the same time the Ralph report results in legislation that has the power to thrust literally hundreds of thousands of artists—many of them writers—into dire poverty...Are these the artists...of whom we will soon be demanding half of their income at source [under the GST legislation if they do not have an ABN number]—their meagre income–and forbidding them from reclaiming 10 per cent or more of the cost of the tools of their trade?"

As we went to press, visual artists in several states were organising protest rallies and *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that "Greens Senator Bob Brown vowed to move an amendment to the proposed laws...and yesterday the Democrats joined the campaign. The Democrats arts spokesman, Senator Aden Ridgeway, will move to ensure that professional artists making no more than $40,000 on a second income be exempt from the crackdown on non-commercial losses" (*SMH*, June 2). Last week, Opposition Shadow Arts Minister, Duncan Kerr, said that in the unlikely case of the Democrats moving on this they would have Labor's support.

The National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) web-site at http://www.culture.com.au/nava details the requirements of the legislation, as summarised here: "Under the legislation as it is proposed, most artists will no longer be able to offset the cost of their artistic practice against other income. Under the new legislation, an artist must pass one of four tests in order to continue to offset costs: the amount of assessable income from a business (read art) activity must be at least $20,000, or in 3 out of 5 years deductions must be less than income, or the value of assets used to carry out the activity on a continuous basis must be at least $100,000, or your interest in real property (read studio, workshop, office but not private dwelling) must be at least $500,000."

In a further irony, the Australia Council GST seminars have packed out and there's been a late scramble by artists to get ABN numbers. The B is for business. These people are serious. But, as Tamara Winikoff of NAVA has said, "What [the Ralph legislation] implies is that most artists are simply hobbyists.' She is reported as estimating "that there are about 18,000 practising visual artists in Australia earning less than $10,000 a year."

It's a grim scenario, one in which there is little room to move. As an artist you need an ABN number to avoid being taxed at source at 48.5% where you are paid fees or commissions or grants. If you're not GST-registered (not the same thing as having an ABN number) you will pay 10% GST on all the materials for which some of you might have once been tax exempt. And, under Ralph, you most likely won't be able to claim on them anyway. Let's hope that the Greens, the Democrats and Labor can unite to make this appalling situation at least tolerable. Robyn Archer has noted that the Government seems to have made it up with the major arts companies after the 'elite arts' slurs of the last election, but it has a long way to go with the majority of practising artists whom it would like to behave in a business-like way, ABN numbers and all, but seems determined at the very same moment to knock out of the running altogether. KG


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# Contents



## Departments

# Random's integration of new media into dance

*Sophie Hansen*

**Wayne McGregor's Random Dance Company has been hailed as Britain's answer to the integration of new media into dance.**

As numerous British choreographers experiment on the small scale in academic and out of the way contexts, McGregor has succeeded in bringing the technology debate onto middle scale stages across the nation. Through a trilogy of full evening productions which began in 1997, with *The Millennarium*, Random has explored alternative environments for dance.

Working with technology as a source of inspiration for choreography and as a filter through which to run his ideas about movement, McGregor has not ventured far into the 'build-it-yourself' technological experimentation which characterises much of Britain's more experimental artists in this arena. Brief incursions into motion capture have produced stimuli for choreography on bodies, rather than leading to the construction of installation-based work explored by artists such as Susan Kozel. Collaborations with animators have led to the construction of projection-based spaces for dance rather than to the creation of CD-ROMs or online choreography, as explored by artists such as Bruno Martelli and Ruth Gibson.

Random is first and foremost a touring company, funded to create work for large audiences and to engage with them in a discourse about dance, sneaking technology in by the back door through its relation to choreography. The fact that the company has been able to scale up the level of input of technology is testimony to McGregor's growing choreographic invention. Taking energy from his collaborators, rather than becoming lost amidst the melee of intervening media, McGregor has defined for himself a context which sits somewhere between mainstream dance innovation and esoteric new media experiment.

Random performed *Aeon*, the final piece in the trilogy which began in 1997 with *The Millennarium*, at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. I have seen this company at close quarters, having worked with McGregor at a time when Random was growing in ambition and scale. Now with 8 dancers and a full evening piece which is burgeoning with design input from a range of collaborators, Random is clearly on a roll.

*Aeon* opens with a giant amorphous image projected onto several layers of screens. This image dances eerily into shapes which ever more resemble the human form, until suddenly the section ends and tiny Claire Cunningham leaps on stage amidst an assault of projections. Timo Arnall, who produced the searing imagery of McGregor's last production, *Sulphur16*, has collaborated with an architectural photographer to animate a moving environment of cityscapes with a lumbering, ominous choreography of their own. The disorientating effect of these images, surging over the angled screens and buttresses of Vicki Mortimer's set, frames Cunningham in an alienated world.

McGregor then introduces his dancers one by one, in a series of razor sharp solos. Springing from behind screens into pools of light, the soloists battle the oppression of the environment and find inspiration and relief in their introverted movement sequences. Sharing a common vocabulary of flickering, reflexive movement with blurs of gestural activity at the extremities, each dancer is given the space to show themselves. The addition of new males to the company introduces a weightier accent to the choreography, to contrast the sparky electrical feel of seasoned Random dancers such as Odette Hughes. McGregor himself does not perform in *Aeon*, and although I missed seeing his dysfunctional movements fire off his attenuated limbs, I am sure it is this new perspective which has enabled McGregor to tune his choreography more finely to his dancers.

Random Dance Company, *Aeon* photo Alan Mahon

At the end of a trilogy's worth of technology, McGregor returns to the engine of his inventiveness, the old-fashioned and enduring human body. Stripping away the technology in the final section of *Aeon*, McGregor focuses upon his choreography and demonstrates the intensity of his connection with the raw expressiveness of movement. The screens rise, the projections fall away and the music softens from the blare and bite of zoviet*france to classical Corelli. Ben Maher's refined costumes are typically inventive. They sample references to historic periods in jewelled sleeves and extravagant cuffs to contrast the cyber-feel of the earlier sections. Maher's pastel shades and the calm of Lucy Carter's lights introduce a gentler mood to the choreography which takes the dancers into intense communion through duets, quartets, sextets and some glorious octets, where one feels McGregor flex new found muscles with admirable control.

More a beginning than an end, *Aeon* is the definition of context in which McGregor will now develop his choreography. While new media sneaks increasingly into the British mainstream through the use of projections, film and sound experimentation in work by established choreographers, genuine inventiveness in its use is generally still confined to the fringes. The inclusion of technology-heavy installation work, such as Carol Brown's *Shelf Life*, or Kozel's *Contours* in the same season as Random, nevertheless shows that the climate in the UK is changing. With Random trail-blazing an acceptable path between dance and technology the ensuing exploration of the many facets of this relationship can more readily be explored by a new generation of artists.

*Wayne McGregor has taught choreographers in Australia through Chunky Move, as well as having collaborated with Company in Space.*

*Sophie Hansen is Creative Centre Manager, The Roundhouse, London and* RealTime*'s London dance correspondent.*

# Do you have time for a quick chat?

*Sue Moss*

**The seductive power of cults frames the territory of *the chalice*, a collaborative work by Two Turns Dance Company.**

In *the chalice* which incorporates dance, puppetry, video, soundscape and design, Wendy McPhee and Michael O'Donoghue explore the 12 stages of an individual's journey into the world of the cult.

Greg Methé's design suggests the cross-cultural elements of cults through a strong, yet spacious entrance, emblematic of a Shinto shrine. Above this hangs a nine-stranded necklace. A pile of books rests either side of the central gateway.

The use of books as a symbolic device contributes to the imagistic intensity of *the chalice*. They signify altars, are scattered in despair, become pathways, and represent containers of tired knowledge systems. The interminable weight and demand of the word always refuses to reveal meaning to the frenzied and compliant recruits.

Puppeteer Philip Mitchell manipulates one book as a mirror for video images of a disembodied eye, mouth and fractured face. He kneads clay on a tablet of books. While his hands shape and spawn human replicas he repeats: "Do you have time for a quick chat?"

In *the chalice* the dancers are separated by, and converse across, a central space. It is this terrain of the middle ground where the energy of submission, conversion, denunciation and acceptance is situated. McPhee and O'Donoghue alternately climb and fall onto and across the central structure. Spinning like rejected angels, they use each other's bodies as levers, ladders and platforms to reach imagined higher ground.

The crack, hiss, static and distortion of Poonkhin Khut's unrelenting sound score accentuate the dancers' spatial travails and the constant reappearance of disembodied menacing icons. At times I missed the silence that might realise my aural response to the dancers' body score.

Ambiguity of power relations between each recruit and the charismatic cult leader emerges as a central motif of the work. A powerful sequence features a gag of rope placed across a dancer's mouth, containing and suppressing utterance, difference, desire and question. This image inscribes the mouth as the only place where obeisance is avowed.

The dancers' portrayal of simultaneity or contrast (for example, McPhee's writhing body and O'Donoghue's muscular and compact tautness) is often relieved by the intervention of the third: the third person portrayed by Phillip Mitchell, the third image of the dancers' shadows on a blank quarry wall, and the connecting/separating third of the space between the chalice cups.

The chalice is symbolically represented by a gesture that unites thumbs and fingers in a cup shape to trace the centre line of the body passing from lips, throat and heart to the genitals, all sites of vulnerability, violence and desire.

We witness the recruit's territory of disorientation, love and quest for stillness. These recruits are not resilient. They comfort and brutalise each other through a journey of confusion, momentary salvation and ultimate exhaustion. The high production standards of *the chalice* effectively exploit the unresolved contradiction of cults where surrender and conformity jostle with cruelty, denial, and loss.

the chalice, *Two Turns, director Annette Downs, dance and choreography Wendy McPhee & Michael O'Donoghue, puppeteer Philip Mitchell, design Greg Methé, sound-score Poonkhin Khut, digital video design Benjamin Wright, lighting Tim Munro, multimedia visual artist Chantelle Delrue, Peacock Theatre, Hobart, April 5-7, Earl Arts Centre, Launceston, April 12-15, Cygnet Town Hall, April 19*

*Sue Moss is a writer/performer who works in collaborative performance and recording projects with musicians, dancers and visual artists.*

Phillip Adams

# As Phillip Adams shows me around his apartment...

*Philipa Rothfield*

**Born in New Guinea, Phillip Adams learnt to dance from the white woman in the local ballet hut.**

***He then trained at the Victorian College of the Arts, after which he moved to New York where he performed with Trisha Brown. Phillip Adams is Artistic Director of a new company called BalletLab based in Melbourne. His recent work,* Amplification *was shown in Melbourne, Sydney, Glasgow, and will soon be seen am in Mongolia.***

***I think we should start by describing the room that we're sitting in today.***

I've surrounded myself with mid-century, modern contemporary furniture. I have a passion for mid-century modern. I guess that comes from my fascination with the 50s. I would classify myself as a modernist in my aesthetic and my thinking. I try to come up with large things in the way that the designers of that period did with furniture and architecture.

*How do you judge your own work?*

First of all I try not apologise for it. I think that would be a grave error, especially for someone like me because I feel I'm out on a limb. I come from the absolute rawness of moving an audience. I've always wanted to make them feel an emotion. Yet I've been heavily criticised that I'm cutting my audience off. I wouldn't go as far as saying it's existential but there's an apocalyptic tone in my work. It's there in *Amplification* and in my newest piece, *Ei Fallen*.

In preparation for *Amplification*, I went to a hospital to interview patients for up to half a year, talking about the impact of car accidents, and seeing *Crash* the movie, seeing what it's like to be in an actual situation where there is no way out but death.

*Ei Fallen* translates from the German, "egg fallen", based on the nursery rhyme Humpty Dumpty. I took Humpty as the metaphor for suicide. All the King's horsemen arrive and discover the broken egg. And they think: how are we going to put him back together again and put him back up on the wall?

**I see the work as...not to draw inspiration from the world of design, but to make it design.**

It was a metaphor for what it would feel like to be on the precipice, to be in mid-flight and then the actual smash, at the bottom with the ambulance arriving, or emergency people, seeing the dead body. What would it feel like to actually experience those 1 or 2 seconds? I'm fascinated with that, the impact of the crash, as in *Amplification*, *Ei Fallen* is about the actual fall. The performance I choreographed for Mardi Gras was inspired by a friend who was dying. He kept on attempting suicide. So I talked to him about what it felt like to do those things, drive the car off the cliff, shoot up, OD, cut his wrists, whatever, jump out of a window. When you see that work you're not going to pick that out of it. What you'll basically see is the usual Phillip Adams start, highly technical. Then the piece starts to turn on itself, you start to get a bit dark and a bit depressed by it, and then you realise gee, that's really sad. You know then the egg's left alone and in the end it's beheaded. It'll be performed at the Melbourne International Festival this year by Chunky Move.

I want to talk about *Upholster*, the next work that I've been working on.

*Perhaps you could describe what we're sitting on first.*

We're sitting on a pair of 60s Jetson chairs. The upholsterer and I took the sides off, washed them by hand and put them back on. Then I chose a chenille, Armani olive green, to give it that luxury hotel foyer 1960s New York feel. To top them off they are amplified with a red cushion. I made the cushions.

*Upholster* is about the idea of facades, covering up things, hiding or purporting to be somebody else. We are clothing. What we are underneath is the padding and stuffing. It's what we cake around it which is the stuffing or the fabric which forms the body. With a designer I've been reconstructing the pleat: cutting the pleat in half, re-sewing it to the back, and then I've done another pleat that's sectioned onto a poodle skirt. So we have a tapestry of deconstructed clothing.

I think there is a lack of design in contemporary dance in Australia. I see the work of *Upholster* as not to draw inspiration from the world of design, but to *make it design*. In doing that I'm building the set live as the piece goes. So the dancers are given a real job, a real project to put together, where the materials stuff it out.

We all have a cover, we all have a front that we hide behind. No matter what, who you are, we've all got a thing. But what's underneath that is what's more interesting. And I think the emotion comes from underneath—'I'm trying to find out who I am.'

*Do you want to be in Australia, do you like being here making work?*

I couldn't be happier. I think like the choreographers who seem to have infiltrated themselves back nicely in Australia at the moment (Lucy Guerin, Rebecca Hilton). Without the time spent in New York and Europe where I performed for 10 years and danced and did some bits of my own work, I wouldn't be who I am today. I was a student at VCA. To come back now and to implement my own world within that context seems to be working okay at the moment.

*Do you want to show your work overseas?*

It is important to me to have my work shown in an international context. I was lucky enough to go to Glasgow for New Moves (new territories) dance festival where I showed *Amplification* which received an excellent response. I was a little nervous, wondering how my work would stand up in an international arena. This year I'll be going to Manchester (UK), and to Mongolia. It will be the first chance for the Mongolian people to actually see contemporary dance. I'm showing *Amplification*. I'm interested to see how it goes down.

This couch is Hotel Foyer 1957. Beautiful isn't it? Your parents probably sat on this stuff. It's been remade. You could say..."as Phillip Adams shows me around his apartment". I'd love you to write that.

# Mapping the wild edge

*Nicholas Mills*

Bonemap's *the wild edge* creates a complex, multi-layered, intrinsically real journey of the "ephemeral body" in an ongoing exploration of the contrast between the tropical North Queensland landscape and the "wild edge" of urban and built spaces that we humans inhabit. Using performance, film, exhibition, installation, sound and online art, the 3 performances of this bold, seamless multimedia presentation at the Tanks Arts Centre in Cairns (as part of Australian Dance Week) were a milestone in the project.

*the wild edge* is a postmodern slideshow of the 'Deep North', its beauty, unique man-made intrusions, and curious social and physical contrasts. Using video material documented at sites as diverse as the Chillagoe Marble Mines, the Powerhouse in Brisbane, a cattle station in Toomba and the New Parliament House in Canberra, the collaboration takes place at each juncture, and another layer is created for the evolving work.

Bonemap's work has involved journeys to the Body Weather Farm in Japan and Australian field trips with Singapore artist Lee Wen. These investigations place the work on another wild edge—the Australian engagement with the Asia Pacific region.

Rebecca Youdell & Russell Milledge, Bonemap

A choreographer and accomplished performer, Rebecca Youdell's classical dance background informs her current movement practice ever so subtly, while training and discipline is obvious in her total control. Her ability to imitate the spectrum of human-animal expression is boundless. Russell Milledge has made a successful transition from 2D practice into movement, finding his niche in slow-emotion expression. Together, Youdell and Milledge have found a balance in style and form.

The soundscape created by Michael Whiticker and Paul Lawrence illustrates the tension in the movement, while traditional instruments, voice, sound devices and digital editing create an evocative and emotive soundtrack. Whiticker's dominance and focus on instruments is beautifully complemented by Lawrence's more discreet and quirky play with various installation elements. Pre-recorded sound also contributes to what amounts to a sophisticated live film score.

Form is a key element: Glen O'Malley's rich photography provides a classical launch pad for the human body as it traverses film, X-rays, performance, sound and installation. In the 'round' of the Tanks, the installation had a decidedly urbane nature, and in itself provided a perfect site to explore: the wall of X-rays dividing the dance floor, the hanging ice block (dripping water, and filled with stones ready to drop into aluminium bowls), rocks, a field of blue tutu's. The bone, as chief icon, represents decay, the transition between life and death, the connector between ephemeral worlds. Far from being morbid, it symbolises the built presence in the ecological landscape, the natural physical decay that occurs and its inherent beauty.

With shows at the Next Wave Festival in Tokyo, Umbrella in Townsville, and the new Powerhouse in Brisbane, *the wild edge* will continue to develop. Its flexibility in delivery is embodied in the exploration of various built environments and our habitation of them. Each new site will add another exciting layer to the work.

*Bonemap*, the wild edge, *Tanks Art Centre, Cairns, May 13-21; World Dance 2000, Tokyo, August 1-5, Umbrella Studio, Townsville and Forts, Magnetic Island National Park, August 14- 27; Brisbane Powerhouse Sept 9-24. info@bonemap.com*, or go to www.bonemap.com

*Nicholas Mills is an artist/designer/writer and is an Arts Project Officer in Cairns.*

# Love & menace to a heartbeat

*Francesca Rendle-Short*

*No don't do it, you want to scream. You'll get hurt.*

At one time you see them there, a long way off, upstage in a far corner but achingly close because of the drama of the figures, their movements, the eyes that span the distance to hook you in. Their eerie skull-capped faces. Stark yellow vinyl raincoats (you can just about smell the plastic). Striped-naked bodies. These masks—in slow mo—chart moments of excruciating love and tenderness mixed with a nearly intolerable menace and violence. To a heartbeat music.

*You're too young. Innocents.*

But these characters don't hear you. None of them do. They live dangerously. Teetering near the edge, sliced up and *on* the edge. They tip over, reappear, disembodied, provocative *and* sexy. For these characters—and not just the masked innocents—love to seduce. Whether they're kids teasing each other mercilessly, fat controllers or simpletons with plywood teeth, they suck you into a world of suspended disbelief, vulnerability.

This is a dance work that pulls you in, eyes singling you out of the crowd of the audience, tempting—oh so tempting—you onto another plane. Do you dare? Take a risk?

They play with you. Humour, laughter, followed quickly by moments that take your breath away. To leave you very nearly desolate, unnerved. It's raw, confronting. Guaranteed to get you. And all executed with precise movements and an acute sense of timing whether the characters are synchronised swimming on highways, near-to-bursting roly-pollies on a construction site or sculptures of roadkill.

This is physical theatre that dares to *do* something. This is a piece of work that is screamingly simple and naive at times—its striking aesthetic of witty primary colours, circus acts, the tap tap tap of feet in lines and circles—all the while swiping at an all too familiar landscape with its searing underscore of comment and satire. And, what's more, it's a work that changes, a work being developed *in performance* (I saw 2 of 9 in Canberra).

Clearly Kate Denborough has drawn a group of dancers around her who work well together (Gerard Van Dyck, Phillip Gleeson and Tuula Roppola) as Kage physical theatre. Denborough knows what she wants. And she gets it. And judging from comments afterwards (in the post-performance forum, a feature of The Choreographic Centre) she likes to keep a tight reign, and does. Bold and confident throughout.

What remains long after the performance, are the acute visuals—just like seeing the suite of Jeffrey Smart paintings that inspired the work—coupled with snatches of music. Oh the music: the original score by Franc Tetaz holds the pieces of the work together, swimmingly. (And it seems fitting to discover the music was incorporated into *No (under) Standing* through express post dispatches.) From nostalgia to funk, to one of the final vignettes when a slow drawl of a piece emerges (along with sheer testosterone) with its melancholic slide guitar. It takes us to the final ecstatic, captivating and strangely private moment.

This is a piece—uncanny as it is—you won't want to let go of. It sticks.

*Kage physical theatre*, No (under) Standing Anytime, *devised/directed by Kate Denborough, The Choreographic Centre, Canberra, April 26-29 & May 2-6, Next Wave Festival, Athenaeum, Melbourne, May 18-28*

*Francesca Rendle-Short is a writer and editor, and author of the novel* Imago, *Spinifex Press, 1996; Fischer Verlag, 1999.*

# Dance takes on performance

*Sarah Miller*

**I've had this creeping feeling over the past few years that the smartest performance work is coming not from a theatre base (physical or otherwise) or even from the visual arts.**

It seems to be dance that is taking performance and turning it on its head. Somewhere along the way, some dancers have stopped being dancers or choreographers and become dance artists, much less concerned with step-making and much more with the art of performance. This is *not*, I stress, a move away from craft but towards it. Of course, it's not a new move but such work seems increasingly visible, no doubt facilitated by the sophistication of work seen in Australia over the past few years of the calibre of Alain Platel, Kate Champion and Wendy Houstoun for instance. There is far less bleating from mainstream reviewers about whatever happened to 'real' dance and much more acceptance of contemporary dance generally. [*Not* on the east coast. eds.].

The shift is more apparent among more mature artists for whom just possibly the purely physical experience of being a 'dancer' may necessarily have had to change. Here in Perth, this shift in focus is experienced increasingly through the work of a small group of dance artists who often work together in various configurations and under different company names. In this emerging body of works, text, light, film, movement, space, sound and bodies collide. There is discernible content. There is humour. There is complexity and contradiction. There is a willingness to experiment. Gone are the vapidly sentimental and earnestly wafting performances of a couple of years back, which just goes to show that if you give artists a bit of time and money to work through stuff and keep developing their practical, conceptual and expressive skills, good work will emerge. This work has an edge and it's pretty sharp!

Jane Diamond, *Cats'n'Dogs* photo Ashley De Prazer

A perfect example was Bill Handley's *Cats'n'Dogs*, performed by Jane Diamond and presented by ID339 Dancegroup as part of a double bill at PICA earlier this year. *Cats'n'Dogs* was a wickedly edgy performance teetering on the smart side of madness. Jane Diamond, performing the role of Dulcie, a fanatical AFL coach, hard balled the audience (her team) as she relived her glory days on the field with "Dicko, Crawf and Simon, Mel, Chesty, Wheaties and Brim", sex in the bunk of the Tasmanian Princess and other extraordinary moments in a life lived for football. Performed fast and hard, this monologue was not a dance piece per se but a glorious moment of vernacular performance, yet I doubt it could have been performed by anyone but a dancer and Diamond made this piece so completely her own. Whilst Dulcie is clearly a heterosexual gal, definitely a woman who loves men, with her football tucked under her shirt like a pregnant belly she conforms to no stereotype unless it is the rapidly disappearing Australian tradition of idiosyncratic characters; a rare experience for middle class Perth in the mid 90s.

Sue Peacock's *Near Enemies*, performed by Paul O'Sullivan, Sete Tele, Shelly Marsden and Sue Peacock, made up the other part of the bill. This was a far less resolved and more rambling work which nevertheless tightened up dramatically over the course of the season. Performed in a cabaret set-up with a smoky late night dive atmosphere, this meticulously performed work stretched to achieve a level of theatricality that it never quite attained. Drawing on everything from stand-up to conjuring tricks to flash tango numbers and even a gangster shoot out and quieter more romantic moments, *Near Enemies* is much more a work in the making. Hopefully it will get the time it deserves to develop further.

Paul O'Sullivan returned to PICA in April with his most recent solo show, *Anomalies*, with dramaturgy by Sally Richardson and movement direction by Sue Peacock. Paul is an amazingly relaxed performer who effortlessly creates an atmosphere of intimate domesticity as he asks the really big questions: "why is the ocean so full of sea sponges?" and "are aliens real?" In *Anomalies* Paul stretched himself beyond what might have easily slipped into a too cosy retreat into the domestic to comment on our contemporary moment. In this case, to expand a statement made by a visiting alien that "what impressed him most about humanity was that it seemed we were at our best when things are at their worst." Paul went on to ask whether the converse may also be true. "Can we be at our worst when we have very little to complain about?" This was a genuinely interesting piece of work, however the moment he donned a pair of black rimmed specs complete with fake fleshy nose to become a stuttering John Howard, incapable of saying sorry, it flashed into brilliance. The everyday suddenly transmogrified into an entirely more sinister experience.

Most recently, Company Loaded returned to PICA to present 3 works in progress. This company was conceived by Stefan Karlsson and Margrete Helgeby to provide a vehicle for mature dancers working with a wide range of choreographers. For *Project One* (their second project) the choreographers were Stefan Karlsson, Sue Peacock (working with theatre director Sally Richardson) and Lucy Guerin. Joining the choreographers were dancers Claudia Alessi, Paul O'Sullivan, Sete Tele and Margrete Helgeby who had to withdraw from the programme due to injury and was replaced by Shannon Bott.

This was an interesting programme which at times indicated that an increasing theatricality or use of text is neither necessarily nor inevitably desirable. This was particularly apparent in the work of Richardson whose use of cut-up bits of Shakespeare was infinitely literal and often naff. Mind you, it's always tricky talking about works in progress given that what you see at such an early stage may have little or nothing to do with the end product. Karlsson's contribution was by far his most mature choreographic effort to date. This was the most complete work on the night and was beautifully performed by the 3 male dancers. While working with a quite conventional vocabulary it was complemented by a great sound work by composer Cat Hope and lighting by Mark Howett, who did a beautiful job lighting the entire program. Lucy Guerin's contribution made no attempt to present itself as a resolved or finished work and, perhaps perversely, I found it the most satisfying and complex. The concluding contact-inspired trio between Alessi, Tele and O'Sullivan was just extraordinary.

It would be nice to take for granted [sic] that all these artists will get the opportunity to keep working and developing. Of course, now that they're mere 'hobbyists' as opposed to professional artists, life is likely to become even more difficult than it has been to date. Never mind the tall poppy syndrome, we seem to want to mow down even the modest sized daisies.

Cats'n'Dogs *and* Near Enemies, *ID339, PICA, Perth, February 17-27;* Anomalies, *Paul Sullivan, PICA, April 6-16;* Project One, *Company Loaded, PICA, May 4-6*

# New texts for old

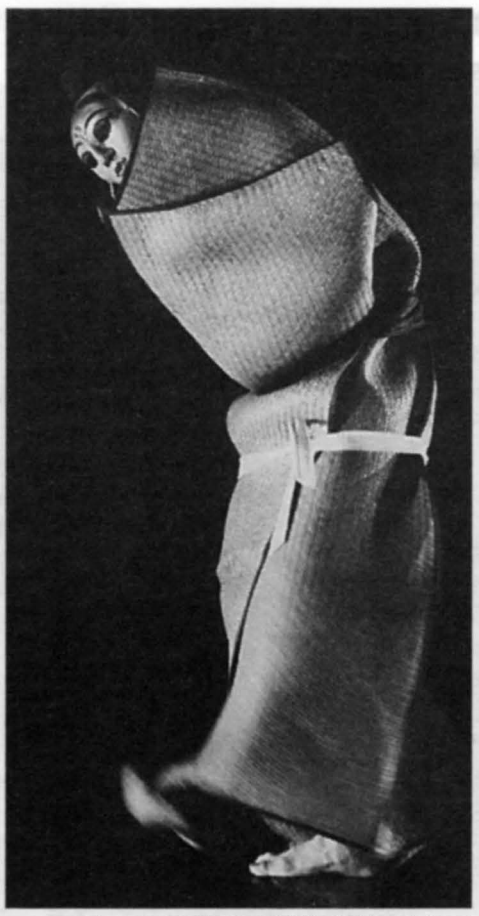
*Philipa Rothfield*

***What is missing from the preoccupation with tradition...is the experience of modern Chinese people who have had to live their lives with the knowledge that it is precisely the notion of a still-intact tradition to which they cannot cling—the experience precisely of being impure, "Westernised" Chinese, and the bearing of that experience on their ways of "seeing" China.***

Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: the politics of reading between* West and East (University of Minnesota Press 1991)

It is a perilous path to tread. On the one side lies authenticity, on the other, the level playing field of postmodern pastiche. Wu Lin Dance Theatre (Tina Yong & Sun Ping) address issues of Chinese culture and identity. If their work is not to be placed within Chinese traditions of performance, how might it be understood? Wu Lin are themselves aware of these dilemmas, having once written a paper entitled *Is it traditional or is it contemporary?*

*NUSHU, The Women's Script* is inspired by historical texts, written by Chinese women. It consists of a series of narrative depictions of women in China. The piece moves from male despotism to the articulation of female anger, to an envisaged sense of equality between the sexes, a familiar feminist tale. Surely the highlight of the work was Yong's evocation of anger, a duet performed in perfect harmony with the drum player, Junko Sakamoto. This was the moment where the many incarnations of woman as object ended and women's agency emerged. This produced the finale where the 2 sexes breathe each other's air, moving their Chi in and out of each other's territory, finding ground, losing ground, regaining ground.



Wu Lin Dance Theatre, *NUSHU. The Women's Script*
photo Jim Hooper

In performative terms, it was Yong's clarity and focus which gave depth to this piece, as well as the wonderful musical compositions of Wang Zheng-Ting. Yong was deeply immersed in the predicaments and bodily formations of the choreography. Watching Sun Ping, I wondered whether I required some literacy in Chinese acrobatic dance. The question of tradition did not arise in regard to Yong because her dance is clearly hybrid, having been successively inscribed by ballet, Indian dance and Chinese imagery.

In narrative terms, the piece was a bit jerky, consisting of episodic, staccato moments with no link between patriarchal domination, the eruption of fury, and the even-handed finale. Although some of those moments were beautiful and poignant, others looked like they needed development. I imagine that some outside direction would be of great assistance to the company. And yet, what kind of eye am I to suggest—a Western gaze, which might require that Wu Lin commodify their cultural identity as recognizably Other? If Rey Chow is to be believed, Western perspectives have already infiltrated (post)modern Chinese sensibilities. For a while I wondered where *NUSHU*'s final battle of the sexes was situated: in China (old or new)? In Australia? Or in Wu Lin's own imaginary? But now I think that there are circles within circles, that we cannot sustain the old myths of China over there and Anglo-Australia over here. *NUSHU* is not the repetition of old texts but the emergence of a new one. If it could be clearer, it would not become a better translation but would rather move more deeply into a script of its own making.

NUSHU, The Women's Script, *Wu Lin Dance Theatre, performers Tina Yong & Sun Ping, music Wang Zheng-Ting (composer, sheng), Junko Sakamoto (drums), Dong Qiu Ming (dizi, xun), Theatreworks, Melbourne, April 12-16*

# Trouble with destinations

*Zsuzsanna Soboslay*

A loping slinking soundtrack slides across 50s mid-West domesticities, panty-twitch desires. This *Happy Valley* is soap opera scrapings, crackling radio, gluey mores of a country town. A horse and prairie loping in there somewhere. If home is where the heart is, then both home and heart are struggling here: the women stretching, straining from it (and each other) as if elastic, snapping in return. Unhappy valleying: conformity versus distinction, families, neighbours trying to keep each other tame. Rebecca Hilton's choreography is inventive, quirky, freshly detailed. Hands, limbs, torsos, pushing, pulling, softly slapping tools. Emotionally, the dancers are better informed as the performance season runs: the piece is becoming crazier, more seedy and disturbed. The mother figure is perhaps the best fleshed out, Jo Lloyd infusing her performance with muted longing, with mildly tempestuous flicks, pigruts and kicks like a chained mare.

Belinda Cooper, *Audible* photo Ant Geemnart

A radio voice croons: "I went away for a while. I travelled, but not far enough. Something kept pulling me back. I gave in. I went home", but here, the daughter does depart, after her struggles, simply walking out the door. We need to see more of her struggle, feel more her imperative to leave. The scenes, for example, where mother and daughter parallel each others' dance needs not just mirroring, but subtle (perhaps rhythmic) distinctions between them to clarify their mutual rebellions, abandonments and griefs, to articulate the struggle forwards and backwards between generations to do with knowing and liking—or despising—where and who you are.

Sandra Parker's *Audible*, too, has developed since opening into a dance that is rougher, showing more jaggedness and verve, appropriate in a piece about bodies riddled with and ridding themselves of lovers/others. But these 'others' are not full bodies, only things which have disturbed already shaky cores: *you journey from person to person; it's hard. What is an arm beyond pointing, or clutching at its own straws.* In fact, there seems no 'other' in this investigation: angular bodies jump against their own edges, are dissected by their own awkward clothing, swish in introspective pain. Where there is partnering, I can't hear or see beyond the defence-lines spoken at one point by a dancer at a microphone: "You don't know what I'm thinking: even if you ask me I can lie."

There is a timidity to reaching out, reflected perhaps in the piece's relationship with spoken words. There seems a palpable distrust that breath can continue with integrity into language; thus, the projected sentences are so thin as to be easier ignored. I suspect they have been edited down—a pity, as there are elements which lead me to suspect the piece's intention is somewhere really valuable. This could be an interesting investigation of discrepancies between interior and exterior worlds (as attempted in the miked breathing of a dance segment), but my suspicion (even after a second viewing) is that this is a work which can't grasp its own material, generally displaying a reticence of emotion (resistance to self-reflection?) and at other times, a strange inaccuracy. "She watched herself waiting," speaks a prone body, "she was completely still," whilst others neither illustrate nor counterpoint her text with a jagged dance that is hard to incorporate in the watching.

Technically, as always, Parker's choreography and spatial patterning is very capable—although those straight gyrating arms are starting to bother me—and I admire the beginnings of a relationship to text that the dancers themselves have explored. I come away retaining most from Elizabeth Drake's soundscore, and perhaps in there lies the clearest intention: like a train, the voice and breath, sometimes husky, sometimes sharp as slicing knives, move towards another, never reaching a destination.

Audible, *choreographer Sandra Parker; composer and pianist Elizabeth Drake, dancers Joanna Lloyd, Belinda Cooper, Olivia Millard, Tamara Steele, Carlee Mellow;* Happy Valley, *choreographer Rebecca Hilton; dancers as above, sound design Katie Symes & Rebecca Hilton, lighting Efterpi Soropos, costumes Anna Tregloan, Dance Works, North Melbourne Arts House, May 4-6, 9-13*

Ingo Kleinert, *100% Tracey 95.6* at 24HR Art

# Hottest little gallery in the world

*Suzanne Spunner*

**24HR Art, the NT Centre for Contemporary Art, opened 10 years ago in Darwin. It is called 24HR Art because it began life in a disused 24 hour petrol station.**

In 1994 it moved to its present site, the former Parap Cinema beside the Saturday market. 24 HR Art has been dubbed the hottest little gallery in the world and, despite the installation of ceiling fans, on a steamy day in March or November, it is. Not surprisingly, at one point its logo incorporated a melting digital watch showing 24.00 over a ubiquitous tropical sunset.

24HR Art is, like the 12 other contemporary art spaces dotted around the country, jointly funded by federal and state or territory governments to exhibit and promote cutting edge art. Although it can sell work, it is not required to; its charter is to show work that is not easily marketed either because it is ephemeral or installation, performance or multimedia-based or simply new and unfamiliar to audiences. However the gallery is significantly different from the other contemporary art spaces that make up the national chain because it is in Darwin and the NT is different in ways that qualify, constrain and expand the opportunities for contemporary art practice.

When viewed creatively, these constraints, in particular a small population and vast distances, have become its greatest opportunities. Even remoteness from the southern metro centres of influence is not always a bad thing as Thelma John, former Assistant Director said in 1994: "Biennales in distant cities represent what we, the inhabitants here like to think we have escaped from." Remoteness is relative and 24HR Art is in the midst of the land and the Aboriginal artists who work in and from it. It is also closer to Asia and so an ongoing dialogue with contemporary artists from South East Asia has been a feature of its program through artist exchanges, workshops and residencies.

Contemporary artists and curators continue to be inexorably drawn to the NT as a site of the exotic, the authentic, the 'other' Australia and come to make contact with the land and (Aboriginal) culture. 24HR Art has frequently brokered and mediated that contact, to ensure it is a 2-way exchange that feeds and informs local artists and audiences. Visiting artists and curators invariably call in and get a fix on the place, they are welcomed and briefed at the centre before they venture out; visits to artists and communities are arranged and specialised guides found to introduce them to the country and the art, even to billet them and drive them back to the airport. Local artists have made many valuable and lasting professional contacts during the long drive to Kakadu.

24HR Art's strength has been its democracy and inclusiveness. The themes for the Annual Members' Show have been well chosen to trawl up potent images already rife within the community: dogs, cars and tourism had something for everybody, as did snakes, serpents and crocodiles, and roadtrains coming at the height of Jabiluka protests attracting the yellowcake spin. This year the decade was celebrated with a reprise of the first show, *Ideal Format*, with 300 postcard size canvas boards being sent in by past and present members. The responses to *Ideal Format10* typify the diversity with a number of artists making pieces related to the recent demolition of the Hotel Darwin, others responding to the issue of mandatory sentencing, while another artist makes a feast of Hockney's *Grand Canyon* in 8 tiny panels.

A distinguishing feature of 24HR Art has been the generosity and panache of its openings. They are significant events with well-chosen speakers, interesting catalogues, themed art food and special entertainment where every opportunity is taken to involve different elements of the community. A feature of *Snakes and Serpents* was a regular gig for the local snake guru who brought his bag of live and deadly pythons into the gallery every Saturday morning during the show. Since returning to Melbourne 3 years ago, my children have been appalled at how boring art openings are in the big smoke and have stopped coming with me: "You call that an opening! Nobody spoke, nobody sang, nobody performed, and where was the food, and why did they all go home so early?"

Over the decade, contemporary art has successfully insinuated itself into the social life of the community. Going to see the latest exhibition has become part of the ritual Darwin Saturday morning activity: go to Parap Market, have a laksa and a satay, order a green pawpaw salad, buy a bunch of giant heliconias and then check out the art. The daunting task for the Director and the programming committee is to tune the mix, follow the harder more conceptual show with another more accessible one, and provide a window for every opportunity.

At times, 24HR Art has been required to function more like a community art space, responding to groups as diverse as the Homebirth Association and the Greek Glendi committee; but this too has been a strength. It has taken on curating and exhibiting Year 12 student work in an annual *Exit Art* show and offers an exhibition in the first year out to a graduate artist chosen by the Director from the Northern Territory University Art School. Under the direction of Steve Fox it initiated a prison art program focusing on Aboriginal artists which resulted in a near sell-out show at a commercial Aboriginal art gallery in town.

24HR Art has promulgated both celebrations and critiques of the place in important exhibitions like *100% Tracy* which focused on artists using corrugated iron as a way of reconfiguring the traumatic experience of the cyclone, and more recently with *Veneer*, which interrogated the new built environment of Darwin and the erasure of the tropical vernacular architecture. At the same time, 24HR Art functions as a cosmopolitan centre and point of connection for the dissemination of the hot issues, current in the rest of Australia and internationally, and last year it jointly hosted NxT, the first NT Multimedia Symposium.

Ten years on, 24HR Art's achivements are manifold and manifest and a real home now exists for emerging and established contemporary artists in the NT.

*Suzanne Spunner was invited back to Darwin by 24HR Art to join in the 10 year celebrations and wrote an essay for the catalogue of* RESITE *which examined 24HR Art's history and locale.*

# Homeshow with a difference

*Bec Dean*

**My eyes tick-tock in the darkness, penduluming between 3 projected images, constantly changing.**

Features, gestures, figures, objects and surroundings repeat in structure whilst their substance, their colour, style and form shifts. Swiss artist Annelise Strba's *Sbades of Time 2*, photographs of her family in their homes during different stages of life are gently infecting, like the soft pulsating rhythms of the electronic soundscape accompanying her slides. I sit playing psychic tennis with the woman sitting beside me as the music's metronomic pulse dictates the measure of time in which we have to place these captured moments and decipher their progression, the connection of child to girl, woman to child and also, their relation to home.

*Home* is where I stand at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, a central nexus within which 14 artists from around the world have contributed to a dialectic on belonging. *Home* in this remote, post-colonial city is a deliberate fissure of expo and high art, a kind of fin de siecle exhibition for Perth at the end of the 20th century. It ruminates on a plurality of experiences, from the confines and obsessions of suburbia to the reclamation of land and histories once lost. *Home* by the very nature of its thematic, positions its artists as ordinary people representing various and particular habitations of place.

Out of the ordered calm of Strba's enclosed installation, the main gallery space buzzes with activity. Families crouch together on the floor to view the anamorphic transition of Matthew Ngui's *Blue Heeler to Kookaburra*. School children normally forced to walk around the gallery like chickens with their wings trussed play in the inter-connected tent structure of Lucy Orta's *Life Nexus*, as others relax on the woven fabric-covered couches of Joseph Kpoly's *Viewing Platform*. However distanced culturally and thematically, these works resonate against each other as a function of their interactivity, and reclaim the gallery space as a zone of experimentation and play.

Laughter is also found in the most unlikely of places. I take a seat in a row of chairs facing the video projection of what I believe to be another ethnocentric, white-boys-in-the-wilderness documentary, an intrusion on the lives of the Inuit of Iglooik. What I see is *Qaggig* (Gathering Place), a re-enactment of an Inuit camp of the late 1930s, re-created by contemporary Inuit in the style of a soap opera. Families gather in a communal igloo and discuss marriage and the practicalities of the day over tobacco, and with a sense of humour about the process and the presence of the camera that transcends anything purely didactic or historical.

In the *Palace of Blue* I watch as local artist Rodney Glick's constructed suburban dystopia builds around me. Deep chiaroscuro photographs of decrepit suburban interiors, streetscapes, clouds, and a lonely figure are projected against a wall. The assembled interior of cabinet, carpet and brutishly constructed piano that surround the projection seem, as arbitrary signifiers of domestic space, gathered from a random trawl through a swap-meet. This already disturbing fiction is embellished by the tiny, naked hobby-shop figures of women displayed atop building blocks inside the *Lounge Room Cabinet*.

Likewise, American artist Jeff Wall in his photographic light box *Jello* repeats this undercurrent of tension in white suburbia. The scene recalls Renaissance compositions of The Annunciation, only within the fabricated set of an 80s-designed kitchen splattered with yellow jelly. Surrounded by this ectoplasm of rage, a fallen, defeated girl rests against a fridge, eyes searching the floor whilst another stands towards the viewer mesmerised, clutching a bowl of jelly.

As I stand in front of Wall's *Polishing*, a portrait of corporate and social impoverishment, the melodramatic, trumpeting soundtrack to Sarah Morris' *Midtown* invades its peripheries. Itself a video of the displacement of white collar workers in the architectural jungle of midtown Manhattan, Morris' camera voyeuristically attempts to engage unsuspecting workers in some kind of noir thriller-of-the-city. Architecture as an oppressive construct in South Africa is also documented by photographer David Goldblatt. The stylised, brutal forms of Afrikaner Protestant churches are captured starkly in black and white, their spires and steeples dividing the sky.

At the threshold of the exhibition space, a computer links users to the Makrolab, a 'self sufficient' living and research unit installed on Rottnest Island, just off the coast of Western Australia. Besides its function as an ecological laboratory, Makrolab by Slovenian artist Marko Peljan and his group, Projekt Atol intercepts and tracks communications transmissions from all over the world and beyond. In this context, its function is almost a reflection of the objectives and rhetoric of *Home*, to provide a platform through which communication and a sharing of experience from diverse locations can converge.

Home, *curated by Trevor Smith & Tom Mulcaire, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, February 5-April 25*

# Makrolab: war, performance & the art of living

***Sarah Miller***

Wadjemup, better known as Rottnest, is an island of astonishing albeit stark beauty. In summer it reminds me of Sicily, all dazzling blue seas and skies, great snorkelling and cycling, pristine water with more fish than you can imagine, bleached sands, wind twisted she-oaks, saltbush, pig face and the pink and white salt lakes shimmering in the heat haze. In winter I think of the Orkneys or some other place I've never been, grey green grasses and ducks, sudden squalls blowing across the darker wintry blue of the Indian Ocean. In either instance, it is a peaceful place, no cars only bikes and the odd tourist bus and service vehicle. Outside the settlement there are relatively few people even during peak holiday periods.

It is also, however, an island with its own tragic history of death, despair and incarceration. At different times, white adult male prisoners and juveniles have been imprisoned here; but most horribly, it made an ideal gaol for Aboriginal warriors separated from their homelands, language and people. They died on Wadjemup from disease, ill treatment, neglect and broken hearts. In the ugly tourist settlement of Thompsons Bay with its trashy souvenirs and even uglier tourists exposing far too much over heated flesh, is an overgrown field. The sign, 'respectfully' flanked by wheelie bins, notes this is an unmarked graveyard for the Aboriginal dead. I remember Sally Morgan's famous painting *Greetings from Rottnest* depicting happy white holiday makers oblivious to the Aboriginal dead beneath their feet.

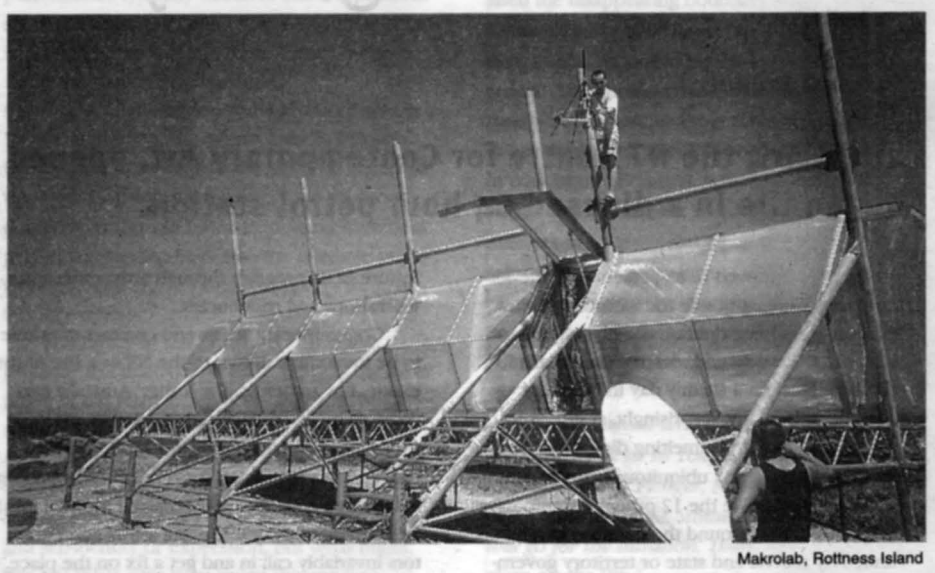
I turn my bike around and head out through the centre of the island, away from the trashy settlement. I want to reach the far side—it-feels-clean side—the windswept end of the island, where Makrolab perches like some strangely animate silver spacecraft overlooking the pristine Indian Ocean.

There is something poignant about Makrolab, an ongoing research project taking place over a 10 year period. At any given moment it may comprise architecture and modular environments, sensors, sustainability and energy production systems, food production systems, communication consoles, networks and integration systems, publications and lectures—some of them more potential than actual—but all of them suggestive of possible futures, a kind of ethical ambition, a way forward. According to Projekt Atol, the force behind the project, Makrolab is conceived as something that "constantly investigates and moves between reality in all its complexity and art in all its creativity."

WAR. Such a hard word. Such an intransigent reality. A reality I only experience through the media—an endless series of impossible images—a cacophony of catastrophic experiences…for someone else. And yet, war is part of the history of Rottnest and was the starting point for Makrolab, an autonomous modular communications and living environment, a wind and solar-powered research station, capable of providing 3 people with independent life support for 40 days.

Makrolab's beginnings lie in performance. When the wars that eventually brought down the former Yugoslavia began to rip the Balkans apart, the idea was born to create a performance space that was mobile and self contained. Initially the plan was to make a stage for a continuous 7 day and night performance on a small island in the Adriatic. The project was conceptual rather than actual. Still, the concept and ideas, drawings and diagrams were all recorded in a small booklet, and read by curator Catherine David, who consequently commissioned the creation of Makrolab for Documenta X (Kassel, Germany 1997). So Makrolab came into being, an environment simultaneously inhabiting the space of the everyday yet utilising sophisticated technologies most often derived from the military but also from environmental research.

Makrolab represents a movement from "concept to material consequence; from a quality which becomes a process", and becomes a machine built as "a combination of various scientific and technological logistics systems. Makrolab makes use of scientific and technological tools, knowledge and systems but it projects them into the domain of art…because in art, the notion of freedom is still respected…"



Makrolab, Rottness Island

Thus Makrolab is simultaneously an art project, an experiment in sustainable living, a research laboratory, a stage for performance—a home. This tiny research station, sleeping 6 at a pinch, is surprisingly comfortable, the coffee is great and the view is to die for! It's just a pity that the server fails to deliver almost daily. Still, experiments on this scale are bound to push the parameters of readily available systems and as the founder of Projekt Atol, Croation artist Marko Peljan says, technology is vulnerable. "We have the impression that it is perfected but aircraft for instance have to be checked almost daily." Makrolab itself demands constant monitoring and daily maintenance. You have to think about everything: paper, water and how much is used; who takes the trash away. It's something most urban dwellers take utterly for granted.

Three primary global research fields have been identified within the Makrolab frame: telecommunications, migrations and weather systems, and during its 3 month domicile on Rottnest Island, various artists from Australia and Europe (net artist Francesca da Rimini and sound artist Carsten Nicholai among others) have taken up residence for several weeks at a time.

Makrolab has now left Rottnest. Packed down and freighted back to Slovenia where it will re-emerge in September in its next incarnation. In 2001 it will go to the Scottish highlands and after that the desert of Israel. Finally in 2007, Peljan would like to put Makrolab on Antarctica where he hopes it will remain as a research station for artists-in-residence.

*For this article, Sarah Miller spoke with Marko Peljan, Ljubljana-based performance and communications artist and writer, founder of the arts organisation Projekt Atol. Makrolab was part of Documenta X and was installed at Rottnest Island as part of the Art Gallery of WA's* Home *project. Peljan's visit to Australia was assisted by ANAT, the Australian Network for Art and Technology.* http://makrolab.ljudmila.org

# Mildura's Palimpsest: the sigh of the land

*Stephanie Radok*

**When people find out what Palimpsest means they have no trouble seeing it as a word to describe the earth.**

In aerial photographs of Mildura it is possible to view a graphic juxtaposition of the land and human use of it, or perhaps more precisely, Indigenous and non-indigenous land use. Like mirror tiles on a Hundertwasser building the squares of water, irrigated land, shine up at the sky while the old serpent of the river winds and coils on its slow, almost impossible journey to the sea. The Murray is one of the slowest rivers on earth and there is now practically never a day in which we do not read in the newspaper of its slow agony and the suffering of the land around it. Salt from ancient seas rises to the surface of the land because too many trees have been removed. Held up by a series of locks, the river doesn't flood any more and therefore doesn't take River Redgum seeds out to new locations. Excess fertiliser in the water breeds poisonous algae. And so it goes. This is a familiar story, but a story of such pain that we might weep to read it.

Art dealing with ecological issues and local histories and narratives is what *Palimpsest* is all about. Located in Mildura, the site of the famed *Sculpture Triennials* (1961-1988), the *Palimpsests* follow on from the *Triennials*, showing sculpture, drawings, paintings, site specific, conceptual and installation art out in the country. *Palimpsests*#1, #2 and #3 are boldly uncurated. Peter Stitt was employed to facilitate *Palimpsest* #3. There was no selection of, or invitation to, the 65 artists from Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and the ACT who answered the calls in art magazines to be involved. They arrived under their own steam and set up their works alongside those of locally based artists. They did it because of the opportunity to be involved in a large exhibition and because they share a commitment to art that considers the environment in ways botanical, zoological, historical, ecological, social and agricultural.

Annabelle Collett, *Fruit Picker's Skirts, Mildura Palimpsest#3*

This year there was a Science/Art symposium accompanying the exhibition. An inaugural event, it contained much more science than art and a sense of promise in speaking across disciplines and professional boundaries. There was a sense of urgency in many of the speakers' words and while there is no suggestion that art can save the world, some form of connection to it is vital.

The Aboriginal histories of the 'Sunraysia' area are ongoing; nearby are Lake Mungo and Lake Victoria. European history here is also multi-layered. The stories of irrigation, pioneer families, migration from Europe, soldier settlers after the First World War, wine, dried fruit, archaeology, travel, rural mythology are all in the area. These histories reflect events in other parts of Australia and can be found here and there in *Palimpsest*. Among artworks of note were Sherna Teperson's coat made from fake grass; Andrew MacDonald's wind-powered etching machine; Dragan Kostelnik's coloured flags; a performance by the Jabiluka Action Group; Judy Holding's blue cut-out shapes; Danielle Hobbs and Vicki Reynolds' tail made from carp scales; Janet Gallagher's rootlets made from flywire; Ing Flint's woollen spiral and woollen hills; Neil Fettling' s shelves of rusted objects from Mallee dumps; Steve Davidson's crushed glass; Antonia Chaffey' s long-term project of reclaiming and making reparation for her family's history in the district; Jill Antonie and Maree Clarke's *Native Garden* of multiple concrete Aborigines; Lee Salamone's 150 upside-down oleander branchlets standing over blue pigment-filled cracks in the cement; Annabelle Collett's 25 brightly coloured skirts around the 'waists' of palm trees; 50 fridges from the dump painted by some 'Jean Dubuffets'; and Anne Bennett's real estate office sale of Paradise.

Martin Sims' *Hay Plains NSW* work in progress takes an infamous 'horror stretch' of road, an element from the Australian mythology of the drive, the trip and the car, and makes it possible to reconsider it. In the lunch break of the Science/Art Symposium, delegates walked out of the La Trobe campus in Mildura into the sunlight and across a stubbled field to a large open marquee. Here, very fine food and drinks were served. The soundspeakers in the tent emitted night noises, crickets peacefully whirring, then periodically a very loud noise like an aeroplane landing which made people in the tent duck and look around. This was a tape of the Hay Plains, a place you pass through quickly, unless you roll your car or have a head-on. Sims' black and white photograph of a white line flashing between a vast expanse of sky and dark earth was shown at the Madden Avenue Warehouse accompanied by the same tape. This work in progress reveals the Hay Plains as not just flat, featureless nothing but a quiet place full of intensity and peace, a place with its own life that is fitfully disturbed by the metal beast with headlights noisily speeding over it. This work quietly asserted a sense of the depth that can be achieved by listening to the land.

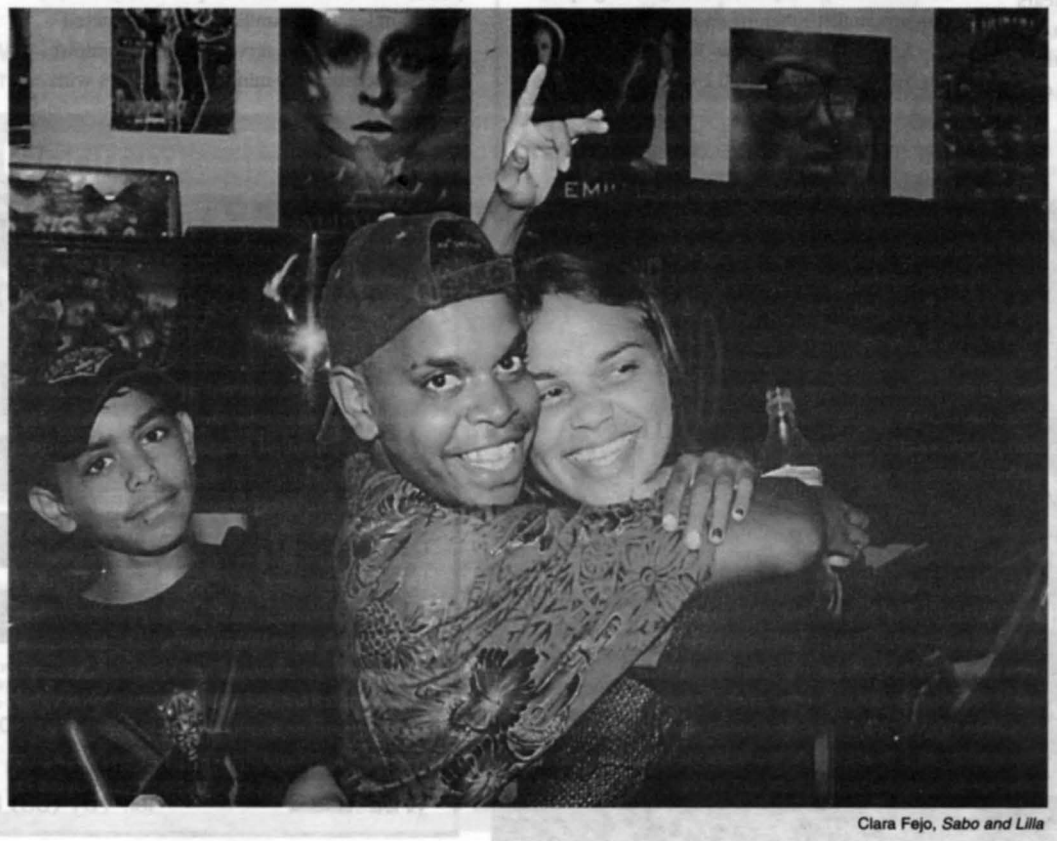
Palimpsest, *Mildura Arts Centre, Madden Avenue Warehouse, Mildura, March 2000*

# Making space in Alice

*Astri Baker and Clara Fejo*

If you're young, with no money, and especially if you're black, there aren't many places to hang out in a town like Alice Springs—a few youth services and the game shop. After that there's "walking around" town. Even in the game shop, young people experience constant observation and harassment by police who, lately, seem to be making a practice of searching, breathalysing and threatening to charge kids with loitering. Detectives drop in asking young people for information, expecting them to know all and tell all.

The ASYASS (Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Service) youth arts project was born out of the recognition that disadvantaged young people are excluded from all sorts of spaces and opportunities including access to the arts. In late March last year, the arts project ran a 10-day focus project called *Ghetto Blast!* at Watch This Space, the local community art gallery. Introducing young people to this new space, essentially an empty white room, was an interesting exercise in itself. One young woman stood in the doorway of the Space and said "so where's the art gallery?" Downstairs is one of many galleries that cater for the tourist market, where you can have a didgeridoo posted anywhere in the world. Outside a paddy wagon cruises the Todd Mall on the lookout for "anti-social behaviour"—a local euphemism for poverty and drinking—anxious to "clean up" the town for the Queen's impending visit.



Clara Fejo, *Sabo and Lilla*

Community arts workers facilitated storytelling, performance, soundscapes, ceramics, junk construction, image making and photography. The arts project usually functions from the crowded drop-in space of ASYASS, so although having access to the gallery was a great opportunity, it was also initially a barrier because it was an unknown space for young people. Spreading the word about the project and drawing young people into the new space involved running part of the project in the already familiar environment of the game shop where young people documented themselves in their space through photography. Days later, we sat with music blaring by the temporary lake at Ilparpa claypans spinning stories together about the images. Posters and video games captured in the photographs provided the ironic titles: *Police Trainer, Hell Night* and *House of the Dead.*

# The 'I' of the beholder

*Maryanne Lynch*

**The female body is a fascinating site. It continues to lure theorists and artists alike, serving as an object for excavation or exaltation depending on its context.**

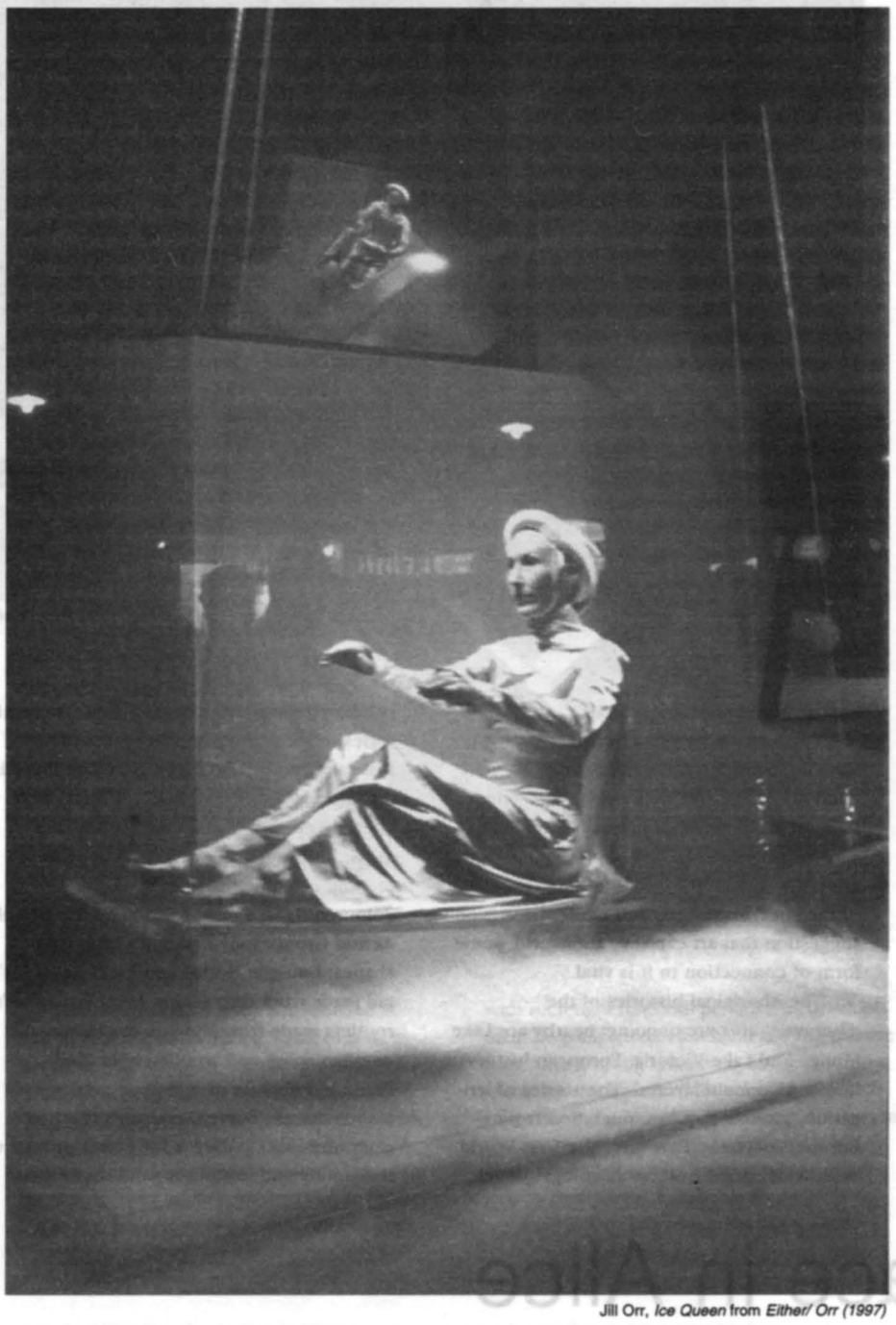
For women—simultaneously possessing and being possessed by this culturally-loaded corporeality—the question mark of identity is even greater.

*eye-deals*, a programme of short film and video works curated by Edwina Bartleme from the Griffith Artworks collection, presents a range of female artists' explorations of this same body. Or rather, of individual bodies, for each of the screened works signals a personal inquiry into the theme 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'

Performance artist Jill Orr's *Either/Orr* (1997) introduces the programme. A 10-minute video, the work was created from performances by Orr in the Myer-Bourke Street windows during the 1997 Melbourne International Festival. In this space more usually reserved for mannequins, Orr and her unnamed female colleague offered another display of bodies, their own. Featuring a series of grotesquely feminine poses that stay far too long, the performances took place in front of an audience which seems oblivious to its own bug-eyed reflection in the glass. On video all of this is captured with carefully casual shots of open mouths, elbows and shoulder bags. Extending the uneasy relationship is Orr's clown-like make-up, heavily smeared across her face in a way that highlights rather than conceals its 'imperfections'—and seen here on the screen in close-up.

*Vivarium* (1993) also translates the familiar emphasis on the 'pleasing' female form into something strange. Directed by Mahalya Middlemist, this 13-minute film shows Sue-ellen Kohler in a dance that embraces all the no-nos of modernism. Kohler's body is all awkward angles, unyielding or mutating, like the lighting that flattens and distorts her shape. There's nothing pretty here; instead, something compelling. Not 'monstrous', like Orr's poses, but powerfully 'wrong' all the same.

Maree Cunnington takes a different route. Her exploration delves into psychology and those emotional and bodily languages that define us. *Secretions* (1997), yet another work originating in performance, depicts a seated Cunnington in repetitive gestures with visual and aural texts playing out the same and other stories behind and around her. Honeyed tears run down her face…even as she seems to be simultaneously retrieving and disowning the texts provoking them. The work is based on the artist's own experience of growing up in a fundamentalist religious community.



Jill Orr, *Ice Queen* from *Either/ Orr (1997)*

Robyn Wester's *Snow White* (1996) and Jan-Nell Weaver and Kelli Dipple's *Surfacing* (1995) come at the woman question from different angles, both familiar: a deconstructed fairy tale and a hefty serve of French feminist theory. Webster's 20-minute video plays with narrative and film conventions, giving alternative readings of a contemporary take on the story of Snow White. Weaver and Dipple explore the elusiveness of female identity using flickering images and sentences, and an unstable geography, to illustrate their thesis. While the spoken text eventually stalls, perhaps because of the artists' inability to push a familiar idea very far, the camera work has a lingering presence.

The contemporary emphasis on instability of gender, sexuality and, more broadly, identity has not halted some familiar questions about female experience, as *eye-deals* demonstrates. Some of the ways in which these questions are asked are perhaps richer than others, but this very diversity of intention and approach itself refuses a female ideal.

eye-deals, *Griffith Artworks, State Library of Queensland Theatrette, Brisbane, March 26*

RT **Go online for...**

### Linda Sproul

Modelling from images from the National Gallery of Australia Linda Sproul poses naked for a life drawing class at the National Portrait Gallery. Naomi Black reports on the latest stage of Sproul's ongoing exploration of identity and self-perception, part of a performance season presented by the Canberra Contemporary Art Space.

### Antoanetta Ivanova

In an interview with Diana Klaosen, Antoanetta Ivanova talks about her *very* short film, *Homo Genesis*, and the challenge of "condensing all my ideas into just 30 seconds...So, the work eventually morphed into a kind of cinematic haiku with sounds and voices specifically related to the human diaspora." Shown before feature films amongst commercials and trailers, the film is part of Next Wave.

www.rtimearts.com/~opencity

# Junk: comic relief

*Alex Hutchinson*

Despite a false boom in the early 90s, fuelled by speculators who bought multiple copies of everything they thought might increase in value which created a kind of media frenzy, comics have never garnered much of a profile. They are novelty news items at best. When Superman 'died', every newspaper, magazine and TV show reported it as a major event while every comic reader knew it was nothing but a sales gimmick and he'd be back in a few months, and he was.

Superhero comics may sell more than their independent brethren but nobody gives them any respect. No, sir. Time and again they save us from the alien hordes or the perils of communism but who fights for them? Who will save the superheroes from artistic oblivion? Probably nobody. But let's fight a little battle for the good old spandex clad, underpants on the outside, defender of everything good and wholesome by pointing out all the ways in which their creation, themes and interaction with an audience make them modern mythology.

To get the obvious criticism out of the way, the following experiment works only with big iconic characters. You will not be able to punch a hole in my argument using Slappy the Squirrel who appeared in one issue of Action comics in 1940. No sir. This is because characters like Batman, Superman, Judge Dredd etc are not the work of a single author. Yes, they had one or more often 2 original creators, but soon after their creation was contracted out to somebody else and over the years there have been (usually) a few hundred different writers and artists involved.

This is important because for comics to reflect culture (as any decent myth should) it needs to be more than the product of a single artist. Superheroes are sets of characters and key events which are rarely static. Batman has already changed from the costumed detective of the 1940s to the camp, almost comic figure of the 1960s, through the grim and gritty Gothic tragedy of the 1980s to the highbrow amalgam of the 1990s. It is this ability to mould themselves to the times that sets comic characters apart from similar characters in any other medium.

Why do they change? To reflect audience demand. The most specific example of this was the 1988 phone poll conducted to decide whether the original Robin would live or die, a decision which resulted in that unfortunate sidekick's demise in *Batman* #427. Likewise, the resultant calls for his return saw a new Robin appear in *Batman* #442. But there are plenty more insidious examples. During the 40s Superman fought Nazis, through the 50s he battled the red menace, and for a brief while in the mid 90s everybody and their dog (literally: go Krypton the wonderdog!) were fighting enemies dressed in turbans in oilfields. Why? Because they are the enemies of America (and Americans buy the most comics).

Let's take Supes as an example. Who is he? Almost invincible, his powers are a childhood cartoon litany: 'More powerful than a locomotive, faster than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.' The blue-eyed protector of Metropolis, Superman flies through the streets of a fictional world straight out of the 1938 New York World's Fair, all art-deco landscapes and mirror windowed buildings. His alter-ego, mild mannered Clark Kent, is a reporter for the newspaper the *Daily Planet*, and both vigorously pursue the 'truth'. Superman is the ultimate boy scout, polite, pure, impeccably intentioned and able to help whole continents cross the street safely. He is a white knight, incapable of deceit, ultra-conservative and honest to a fault. It is no surprise his popularity peaked in the 50s at the height of McCarthyism, when he took to fighting communists and campaigning for truth, justice and the 'American' way. He was as pro-American as it was possible to be, a one man army, protecting the USA from anything outside its borders. A one man global police force.


Técha Noble, *Infinity Iam and the Drop bears*, in *Intensity*, D-constructing City D-visions, curator Jo Holder, City Exhibition Space, Customs House, Sydney

Of course this is not a 'true' reflection of America, but rather a reflection of what America would like to think of itself. But that has always been the role of myth. Epic poets as well as comic authors rely on sales to eat, and to eat they have to make you happy. Comics are also the only 'live' medium on the planet, always moving forward and changing to meet consumer demand. Most of the big guns at DC have been in almost continual production (barring a few months here and there) since the late 1930s. More pages have been dedicated to *Batman* than the Bible. (Go on: prove me wrong. Start counting.) And you can be sure they've got another 60 years in them easy.

So there you go. A radically condensed reason not to laugh at your kids when they read comics. It's just the *Iliad* with pictures.

The reading list: high fantasy in *Sandman* or *Books of Magic*. Articulate, cerebral horror in *HellBlazer, HellBoy* and *SwampThing*. Jokes, ultra-violence and morality in *Preacher*. Deconstructing the superhero in *Astro City* and *Watchmen*. Smart crime in *Sin City, Stray Bullets* and *100 Bullets*. The only comic to ever win a Pulitzer: *Maus*. Underground genius in *Hate, Eightball, Acme Novelty Library, Black Hole, Milk & Cheese* and finally one for everyone, timeless humour/fantasy for all ages in *Bone*.

# Downer for culture

*Peter Eckersall*

ipf
Independent Performance Forums

*Introduction*

*"If every theatre was closed down tonight, most Australians wouldn't know until they saw the demonstrations of actors and other theatre practitioners on their television sets some weeks later." If discussions at ipfs were any indication, this 1994 reflection of Stephen Sewell's (who spoke at the first ipf) has currency still (Sewell, "Living Theatre, Dead Theatre and Australian Theatre", Meanjin, vol. 53). In many forms, the discussion would invariably turn to the 'problem' of theatre in Australia. The path would vary, from questioning the relevance of traditional forms, to investigating the phenomenon of the contemporary musical, or simply worrying about an apparent decline in audiences. Practitioners and theorists constantly felt a desire to reformulate, to once again discuss the 'crisis' in theatre. Whether or not such a crisis existed or exists, theatre in Australia is constantly shadowed by a fear of illegitimacy, and a gnawing sense that its status and identity in the wider cultural milieu is, at best peripheral, at worst, spurious. If our forums were directed towards the articulation of communal identities, then these sometimes tentative, sometimes strident positionings were directed not only to each other but also outwards, towards a larger community that was seen, often as not, as indifferent and potentially hostile.*

*The recent Nugent Report has again officially called into question the artistic, industrial, administrative and managerial formations of Australian arts practitioners, and has formulated a strategy that some see as a shoring up of the conservative vision of arts as keepers of traditional values, with its emphasis on the re-invigorating of major companies, its vocabulary of 'excellence' (an adjective that should never have been elevated to the status of substantive) and its Kennett-style subtext of what is and is not 'world class'. Strikingly though, the Report has emerged at a time of wider anxiety in Australia: a period in which questions of cultural identification and historical allegiance and narrative have a force and urgency that seems to gather each day as we edge towards the international scrutiny that the Olympics entails. The current wave of self-examination in the performing arts finds its parallel in the populace at large. Alternatively, the Nugent Report can be read as a further instrument in an ideological push aimed at the recovery of a supposedly lost Golden Age.*

*Peter Eckersall's essay, the last in this series, is a consideration of theatre practice and its effects and interaction with larger trajectories in Australian cultural life in just such a framework.*

Paul Jackson and Paul Monaghan

• • •

Under the headline "Culture keeps us separate from Asia", Foreign Minister Alexander Downer outlined present-day Liberal-Coalition aspirations for Australia-Asia relations in comments recently reported in *The Australian*. Speaking at the East Asian caucus group in Beijing, Downer reiterated the long-held conservative view that Australia does not fit within a postmodern cultural formation of Australasian regionalism. He argues:

*There are two kinds of regionalism. One is what you might call cultural regionalism, a regionalism which is built on common ties of history, of mutual cultural identity... Australia does not fit into that category... That is clear because of the historic and ethnic cultural differences that Australia has with its neighbours.*

*The Australian*, April 26 2000

Overlooking the wrongful assumption that Asian cultures share a monocultural regionalism, this retreat into nostalgic ideas of a phantasmic cultural certainty expresses a deeper (cultural) anxiety about Asia (however it might be constructed in the eyes of liberal policy makers). Such an attempt to disavow culture's inevitable momentum with regard to Australasian relations is simplistic, ideological and improper.

One might argue that Downer's comments utter a larger and continued sense of unease about the idea(s) of culture(s). Downer's justification of his argument is that Australia shares pragmatic relations with Asia that are somehow outside or beyond the cultural sphere. The opprobrious assumptions that 'the market' is without culture underlies Downer's way of thinking here and should be thoroughly questioned.

A cultural fact, as recognised by postcolonial intellectuals as well as working professionals who are engaged in intercultural activities (people from walks of life as diverse as the academy, arts, business and diplomacy), is that our unconsidered and stereotyped depictions of others might actually speak only truth about ourselves. For the intellectual, or the artist or business person in partnership with another, Downer's painfully inept diplomacy of difference overlooks the inevitability of difference and the subsequent importance of successful intercultural praxis. Such sentiments express a revived sense of cultural isolationism and a spiteful and mean-spirited Howardian narrowing of Australia's identity formations in the early 21st century.

In the political sphere one doesn't have to look far to see evidence of an increasingly hysterical xenophobia and use of anti-Asian, anti-Aboriginal racism as a political tool. Comments such as those made by Pauline Hanson in her maiden speech to parliament in 1996 where she said: "I believe that we are in danger of being swamped by Asians" (cited in Jon Stratton, *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis*, Pluto Press, Annandale NSW, 1998) might be dismissed as the ravings of a lunatic fringe were it not for the fact that they were given voice through our parliamentary institutions. Even more despicable were comments by Prime Minister John Howard defending Hanson as one who is: "...articulating the fears and concerns and the sense of insecurity that many Australians feel..." (cited in Stratton). Howard's recent European tour, where he was reported to be visiting WWI theatres of operation clutching the script-book memoirs of his ancestors evokes images of the kinds of imperial culture that are wrapped-up in the guise of a-cultural pragmatism. As does the recent televisual performances of ANZAC rituals on far away shores that conjoined one imperial generation of soldiers with contemporary scenes from the Australian backpacker circuit. One source reported that the annual dawn service in Turkey is now one of the three big 'aussie' backpacker cultural gatherings and sits proudly alongside the Munich beer festival and the running of the bulls in Spain. (On ya mate!!!)

All this slips under the pseudo-reasoning of Downer's spurious and intellectually dishonest a-cultural logic. It is a painful reminder that, as Stuart Macintyre points out, "The Australian nation was shaped by the fear of invasion and concern for the purity of race." (*A Concise History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000). In other words, there is a direct correlation between how we might perceive ourselves and how we might behave in the world. The political and cultural are interactive and conjoined. Were he not so blinded by Howard-Hanson anglophilia or, as some have reported, frustrated by the requirement that he toe-the-line, Downer might come to realise this. Markets are cultural too and when international relations can be described as pragmatic this is because the cultural situation allows this.

Such anxious and dubious cultural politics can also be observed in the performing arts and the way that they sit uneasily within the ANZAC-philic mainstream. A bit of history might remind Downer and those who think like him that Australasian relations are anything but pragmatic and are in fact deeply cultural and are troubling.

The example of the 1994 Adelaide Arts Festival remains a powerful, and in retrospect, deeply prophetic event wherein Anglo-Celtic and multi-ethnic Australasian notions of Australia's future came into a messy tension. Notwithstanding that cultural power elites might have been threatened by the festival, promiscuously diverse program, the extent to which racism was allowed as a mode of acceptable discourse is frightening, irresponsible and inexcusable.

The 1994 Adelaide Festival, curated by Christopher Hunt, had a specific Asia focus. It was a watershed in intercultural and Asia-Australia relations. The program included 5 Japanese performances and productions from Indonesia, the Pacific, China and Korea. If we were to consider the Japanese performances alone in one location over a 2-week period, this is certainly a record for this country. Unfortunately, for reasons that will become clear, this is a record that is unlikely to be broken in the near future.

While some responses to this festival fare were positive and the Adelaide newspaper *The Advertiser* reported that ticket sales had exceeded previous festivals (eg "The critics sum up", March 14 1994 and "Hunt's gamble pays off as sales soar", February 15 1994) there was also a strong element of criticism about the festival's Asian bias among Adelaide society.

Much of this criticism displayed provincial and racist undertones; local arts 'journalist' and 'shock-jock' columnist Peter Goers described the festival as "heavy on the soy sauce" (*Sunday Mail*, February 28 1994). In *The Advertiser* he wrote: "The 1994 Adelaide Festival will sink without a trace. It was a bonsai festival; stunted, spindly, flimsy, rooted, retentive" (March 14 1994). Elizabeth Silsbury's piece in the same newspaper led with the headline: "Hunt's punt out of tune" (*The Advertiser*, March 14 1994). A letter to the editor suggested that: "Mr Hunt has provided Adelaide with a very selective and...one sided program of esoteric and generally incomprehensible items which appeal to very few and the exaggerated accent on Asian content has arrogantly ignored the artistic preferences of many thousands who are more comfortable with a Western/classical orientation" (*The Advertiser*, March 11 1994). Perhaps the multitude of Asian images at Adelaide compounded to the point where they escaped their hermeneutic otherness and became paranoid performative hallucinations. Nightmare images that lie deep in the Australian psyche fermenting from almost 100 years of fearing Asia. Certainly negative responses to the festival seem extreme given its ephemeral status and reveal a deeper and more dystopic anxiety within Australia about place and its status in the region.

Lest we gain comfort from the fact that we discuss the 1994 festival (and not say the 2000 festival that featured Nigel Jameison's collaborative production of *The Theft of Sita* and Ong Keng Sen and Kishida Rio's *Desdemona*, 2 excellent productions steeped in intercultural praxis), think back one year. In 1999 the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts (MIFA) announced plans for an opening parade beginning at the Shrine of Remembrance and including Japanese Taiko Drummers. While permissions were granted by Shrine and Garden officials (two conservative and generally unaccommodating organisations), moves against the festival's plans followed. Criticised by the right-wing radio-shock-jock Neil Mitchell on radio 3AW and outspoken Asian immigration critic Bruce Ruxton (Returned Soldiers' League State President), the issue gained support from many groups with anti-Asian leanings. 'Remember the war' rhetoric and anti-parade comment was even made by John Howard in one of few comments that the current Prime Minister has ever made in public about the arts. The Shrine parade was subsequently cancelled and the festival launch at a second venue did not include the Taiko drummers (*The Age*, October 15 1999).

We can conclude that the 1994 Adelaide Festival was an apogee for Asian performance in Australia and the negative comment that surrounded Hunt's festival has been noted by box office and public-opinion sensitive festival directors since. Australians, one might conclude, have 'done Asia.' Moreover, the nascent roots of Hanson-Howard Anglophilia–with its associated scurrilous fear mongering of the Asian colonisation of Australia–can also be observed in this event. Such events can only point to the fact that such fear mongering has grown and been given greater rein by the present regime in Australia. This is inexcusable and in the longer term will inflict immense damage on the fabric of Australian culture and society, not to mention Australia's relations in the region.

*Conclusion: the queen visits NIDA*

Although I wasn't there, I'd like to imagine the visit this year of the Queen to NIDA. How she might have been greeted by staff forced to wear their Sunday best. How she might have expressed interest in the list of graduates (Judy Davis, Mel Gibson, Geoffrey Rush, Cate Blanchett...the litany). And how she was entertained. I like to image the young fresh faced talent performing one Shakespeare and one Australian monologue (I am informed that in fact they didn't do Shakespeare but in my imagination they did). I cannot think of a more informative image or event in the theatre world that tells us how far we have retreated into a phantasmic Australian imperialism. The queen at NIDA seems to suggest some ancient and feeble Menzian restoration. It is not a symbol of a debate that has been percolating over the last decade about intercultural theatre practice, however faltering that important project continues to be. It is not even a symbol of a cultural struggle that I have ever been involved in my life. The Queen at NIDA suggests a symbol of something that was supposed to have been fought and won. Won so that we might get on with the main game of building an Australian culture from the reality of our cultural diversity and indignity.

But when Downer says that regionalism is to be based solely on pragmatic relations with no (ac)knowledge(ment) of culture, then I perceive failure. When our theatre institutes buy into ill-fitting nostalgia for empire and whiteness I am doubly troubled. The two combine as an old/new culture war; a faded imperial mindset that is as artistically vacuous as it is politically dangerous, and above all, a missed opportunity. To turn Peter Goers' words back on himself: this is a symbol of a culture that is "stunted, spindly, flimsy, rooted, and retentive."

*Dr Peter Eckersall is a lecturer in theatre studies at the School of Studies in Creative Arts, VCA, University of Melbourne. He is also a performer and dramaturg with Not Yet It's Difficult.*

# Elise McCredie: fits of first-time filmmaking

*Kirsten Krauth*

**Writer-director Elise McCredie's efforts to get *Strange Fits of Passion* off the ground and seen by Australian audiences have been as stalled and bumpy a ride as her central character She's forays into sexual adventure-land.**

*Originally made for television,* Strange Fits *gained international kudos when it was selected for Critics Week at Cannes in 1999, followed by 3 AFI Award nominations (best original screenplay; best performance by an actress in a leading role, Michela Noonan; best performance by an actor in a supporting role, Mitchell Butell) and looked set to be a local success. Then it disappeared.*

*After film distributor mergers late last year, Beyond Films and UIP finally released it on 2 cinema screens in Melbourne where, after poor box office returns, it failed to get national distribution. A few local critics savaged it including Robin Usher ("Whither the Australian Film", The Age, April 15 2000) who argued that the local industry should not seek "international exposure for modest efforts" and should be aiming for the larger scale like* The Insider *or* Erin Brokovich *rather than "a young woman's sexual confusion." It's a curious argument, considering the first feature from Steven Soderbergh (director,* Erin Brokovich*) was* sex, lies and videotape, *an introspective, intelligent talkie negotiating themes of sexual dysfunction. Who knows where Elise McCredie's filmmaking will take her...and why this desire to crush her efforts when they've only just begun? I spoke to Elise about romantic ideals, compromise and the one-strike-you're-out policy.*

**This country is obsessed with the one strike and you're out policy, which puts an inordinate amount of pressure on your second film and is the antithesis of creativity.**

Elise McCredie photo Lyn Pool

*The film's reception must be disappointing considering its selection at Cannes and being well received overseas?*

It's very difficult. I think you assume when your film receives important overseas recognition that your road back home will be somewhat smoother. That certainly hasn't been the case although the Cannes selection at least made it possible for the film to have a cinema release. It was originally made for ABC TV...under an accord between ABC TV, Arena and Film Victoria. Similar to the SBS Independent films, the accord was to make a low budget feature without any distribution guarantee, but definite screenings on ABC and Arena.

*How then did it get picked up for Cannes?*

The producer, Lucy Maclaren, filled in a form and sent the film off and we all forgot about it until we got a 3am fax from the festival saying we'd been selected. It was pretty extraordinary.

*What inspired you to take the plunge from being an actor (in series including* Blue Heelers *and* The Damnation of Harvey McHugh*) to becoming a writer-director?*

I was living and working in Sydney and I started to feel a very strong desire to write. I'd never written anything before and, as the images started to come out, I realised I was invoking a very cold, intellectual world which I think was an expression of my homesickness for Melbourne. Originally I didn't want to direct the film but after a few years of looking for a director and redrafting the script I came to the revelation that maybe I could do it. It was an important transition for me to make, because I was quite frustrated by the world of acting and the limited roles for women.

*How did being an actor help you get such fine, honest performances?*

I work very much with instinct. I believe in finding the truth between the actors and if that means throwing out the text then so be it...often in the moment an actor will come up with far better lines. I think a lot of directors underestimate the input actors can have in filmmaking...also, because I was an actor, there was a shared language that cut a lot of corners.

*How much did the final film differ from the script?*

Quite a lot. I found in the editing room that I lost about a quarter of the original film. There were whole characters and subplots that never made it. In some ways that was quite liberating as we were constantly refining in the editing process. What became clear was that as soon as we veered away from She the whole film fell apart, so all these clever little scenes became an irrelevant distraction to what was the heart of the story.

*Female rites of passage films are a difficult genre as they are working within and against well marked territory. Were you trying to subvert the classic male narrative?*

Yes I guess I was. I felt so strongly that I'd never seen a complex take on the female coming-of-age story and I wanted to explore it warts and all, and not sugar coat it in the typical male fantasy way. I wanted to see a clever girl trying to sort out the confusion and anxiety associated with sex and sexuality, and with the Francis character I wanted to write a very typical female role (the idolised- from-afar love object) and make it a man. I thought the conflict between mind and body was a really interesting one and something I hadn't seen explored before.

I had to struggle a lot early on with people's responses to the intellectual aspects of the film. It was interesting that often people came back to me, after reading the script, saying that they didn't like the character, that she was too cold. I often wondered if this related to the fact that young women were rarely portrayed like this and that people found it quite confronting that she was not particularly endearing.

*Did you compromise and make her 'warmer'?*

I felt very strongly that she was not a warm character and that the whole point of the story was that she was confused, and play-acted being aggressive, but I knew in the performance style you would see beyond the facade—I think Michela perfectly evoked this. I do remember in the editing a push to find the takes where Michela looked least miserable. However, I was pretty hard-line about it.

*The title seems to perfectly encapsulate the film. What is the significance of the Wordsworth poem? Did you use it as a starting point or did it come later?*

I was fascinated by the era of Romanticism and the poets like Wordsworth and Blake who believed totally in the sublimity of nature and God. Their poetry was not at all romantic in the way we would use the word but in a way that demanded the body and emotion be secondary to the greater mysteries and wonders of nature. I wrote the story of *Strange Fits* first and then put in the Romantic poetry. I liked the metaphor and contradiction of a girl who reads all these 'great' male poets but decries them as the patriarchy. I also like that the history of Romanticism mirrors her own struggle, that these poets believed that what held meaning was beyond yourself and adhered to some ideal—in the way She does with intellectual theorising. It was also interesting to place those very pastoral poets in a concrete urban world and see if they still hold meaning—or what meaning we impose on them.

*It's interesting too that your film has been marketed as an "anti-romantic" comedy when I felt that the characters had romantic ideals; they just weren't necessarily fulfilled...*

I guess for me the anti-romantic label was supposed to refer to it being a subversion of the typical romantic comedy. However you're right, they all do have romantic ideals, but are those ideals sustainable now, if they ever were? At least that's what the film is asking.

*Do you think there's a reluctance in the Australian film community (audience and critics alike) to let filmmakers explore, experiment, even make mistakes? It seems to be okay for short films but not in features where narrative is everything.*

The media constantly refer to the fact that the Australian film industry is in crisis, to the point where I think it becomes self-fulfilling and prevents filmmakers from feeling free to explore their artform—because success is judged in terms of box office figures. This country is obsessed with the one strike and you're out policy, which puts an inordinate amount of pressure on your second film and is the antithesis of creativity. We have made plenty of good films in the past few years—*The Boys*, *Head On*, *Praise* etc. I am very angry about this. Recently in *The Age* there was an article demanding to know why we aren't making political films like *Erin Brokovich* instead of films about a young girl exploring her sexuality. What right has a journalist to decide what is and isn't political. I would argue that *Strange Fits* is a political film.

*In the last few months a number of films have been released that are directed by women about women including* Me, Myself I *and* Looking for Alibrandi. *Do you see this as a healthy indicator for women working in the Australian film industry in the future?*

I think Australia has one of the best records anywhere...we have such a high percentage of good female directors. I think in some ways Australia is the best country in the world to be making films if you are female.

Strange Fits of Passion *is currently screening in Melbourne and will be released in mid-June in Sydney at the Valhalla (with no publicity or advertising budget).*

*Elise McCredie plans to remain in Australia to make her second film which she is in the early stages of writing.*

# Sydney Asia Pacific Film Festival connects

*Tina Kaufmann*

Asian films run the gamut of production modes and styles from the big blockbuster music and action extravaganzas of Indian Bollywood, through the fast, cheap, multi-genre movies from Hong Kong, to the low budget, almost cottage industry productions from Vietnam and Thailand. They are exciting, both in content and in filmmaking practice. Then why is it so hard to get Australian audiences interested in Asian cinema? There are small but significant specialist audiences, especially for films from China, Hong Kong, India and Japan but efforts to widen and extend Australian viewing habits usually go unrewarded. The major film festivals, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, manage to maintain and gradually expand the range and diversity of the Asian films they screen, especially when introducing important new Asian filmmakers, but the feedback they receive continually warns that to overload their programs would be counterproductive. Australian audiences should embrace Asian cinema for 2 reasons: they'd enjoy it and it makes sense to exchange films with other countries within the region.

The latest effort to entice Australians to watch films from the region is the Sydney Asia Pacific Film Festival, which packed a solid program of 8 features, 12 short films, and 2 seminars into 3 days at the end of March. The audience at Reading Cinemas in Sydney's Chinatown grew over the festival to pack the final night screenings, and the festival ended up in profit, with its co-directors enthused enough to immediately start working towards next year's event. Juanita Kwok and Paul de Carvalho met less than a year ago, but both wanted to bring more films produced in the energetic Asia Pacific region to the Australian public; working together brought this aim to fruition. They met at the Asian Australian Artists Association's Gallery 4A,

Adam Gungor in *My Tiger's Eye*

and with 4A's support, hope to do in cinema what the gallery is already doing in the visual arts; in particular to explore the emerging Asian identity in Australian film.

The first seminar at the festival featured a discussion on Asian Australians working in local production, with a panel of filmmakers and actors and special guest Brian Lau, director of the San Francisco Asian American Film Festival (now in its 18th year, the festival aims to create opportunities for Asian American producers to participate fully in the public media). From actor Anthony Wong (who works in film, theatre and TV, and has played everything from "a Hong Kong triad member to a Vietnamese doctor to a cross-dressing Indonesian priest", calling himself the "Meryl Streep of Asian accents") to David Chiem, the first Vietnamese to get acting roles on mainstream TV ("they're now starting to write parts for me in the soapies"), to documentary maker Tinzar Lwyn ("I work at the intersection of belonging to the Burmese community but having grown up in Australia"), to filmmaker Chris Scully ("I want to redress the imbalance…get the people behind the camera to work to put Asians on screen") and filmmaker and actor Linden Goh ("you can choose whether to buy into cultural issues, and I have"), everyone had much to contribute to a lively and eloquent debate. As Brian Lau said, "issues of immigration, identity and claiming your own space are universal—the danger is in talking about it, over and over, without getting any further." For a first effort, however, this aired important issues.

Australia's role in the Pan Asian Film Industry was debated in the second seminar, although Australian filmmaker Teck Tan, currently making a Malaysian film in Malaysia with post-production in Australia, argued, "this whole concept of Asia just doesn't exist—it's the countries within that exist—Korea, China, Malaysia etc. How do their films find audiences in each other's territories, where does Australia fit in, and does Australia care about Asian film, are the questions. There's a lot happening in the region, a lot of money, a lot of social and political change—it's a really fertile ground for interesting filmmaking, if Australians only recognised it," Tan said. Filmmaker Pauline Chan believes that the important connections between Australia and the Asia Pacific region are the people. "Hollywood would not be Hollywood without the migrants—Australia needs the enthusiasm and creative input of Asian Australians." Gary Hamilton of Beyond Films, who said that Beyond had a long history of involvement in Asia without any major breakthroughs, doesn't believe that Australia is yet making films that Asia wants to see. Their markets are still dominated by action films and horror, and it would be hard to sell a film like *The Wogboy*. He believes that the necessary first steps would include more Asian faces on our screens, and more of an Australian presence at Asian film festivals, where the Canadians, the Italians, the French all spend money to maintain a presence. "We fly over Asia to go to Europe," Teck Tan remarked.

With a program of films ranging from the gentle Thai ghost story *Nang Nak* and the haunting and contemplative Taiwanese drama *Connection By Fate* to the pop Japanese manga *Perfect Blue* and the frenetic, stylish cop movie from Korea, *Nowhere to Hide*, as well as an interesting collection of shorts that celebrate the work and concerns of local Asian Australian filmmakers, and 2 interesting and challenging seminars, the festival provided a packed and eventful weekend; an excellent start to an ambitious project that deserves to succeed.

*Sydney Asia Pacific Film Festival, Reading Cinemas, Sydney, March 30-April 2,* www.sapff.com.au

# Awaiting real life to reveal itself

*Simon Enticknap*

Now here's a good idea. A festival of film (*REAL: life on film*) about human rights and cultural identity to remind us that abstractions have faces too, that theoretical concepts are merely the crusty coating on a beating heart, that rights are about usage, praxis, being able to do what one does. Take a look over here, look outside the box, says festival slogan, there is real life, if you only care to look. It's like passing through to the other side of cynicism, to a space where the power of the image to do good works is reaffirmed—we care again—if only we can point the camera in the right direction, trust in our motives.

But stare long enough and the conundrums intensify; we become fascinated by difference, the spectacular, suffering, surviving others standing in the non-ideological (and thus completely ideological) space of human rights. Eternal vigilance is the Amnesty catch cry—but who is doing the watching, and who is the object?

In the documentary *Surfing the Healing Wave* we are told that the object of scrutiny is the annual Indigenous surfing carnival held at Fingal on the far north New South Wales coast. Now I must confess here that, strange as it may seem, I don't like surfing movies (put it down to a bad experience I had once with *The Endless Summer*—endless it was). And this is a film with lots of people on boards catching waves. And there are lots of people on the beach watching the people on boards catching the waves. The people on boards catch the waves and the people on the beach watch the people on boards catching the waves.

And yet, in spite of it all, this is a wonderfully invigorating film about how an event such as a surfing carnival is used by Indigenous Australians

*Surfing the Healing Wave*

to network, to renew family connections or rediscover lost ones, and ultimately to strengthen a communal identity. We hear from participants who describe what the festival means to them, we hear their stories, learn something of their history and how they are endeavouring to adapt and preserve their culture for the future. All this is worth seeing and hearing.

And yet, what makes this film so intriguing is that no matter how hard the camera tries to frame the event, it remains elusive, seemingly dispersed across myriad instants of intensity, fleeting handshakes, greetings, momentary exchanges, the brief handover from one surfer to another at the water's edge (the contrast here with the Olympics, which is all about freeze-framing and magnifying symbolic moments—lighting the torch, the relay—couldn't be more marked). There's a sense here of the filmmakers constantly playing catch up, eagerly awaiting the event to reveal itself, to make itself known on film the way they know it and experience it, but never really being able to make it appear that way. There are moments of coming together, even an occasional ceremony, but that's not where the action is, and the more the participants talk about what the event means to them, the harder it becomes to actually see it. I can't see it for the sea, the waves, can't read the faces hidden behind sharply reflective sunnies, can't pick the quicksilver hip-flicks, the jack-knife switch-back jitterbug of the surfers.

You can't capture the surf, man, and that applies equally to this attempt to fix people on film, especially when they can so easily ride over your expectations, turn around and give you what you want while hiding what you don't know you want. The portrayal of human rights here is just as much about what is not represented on film, or rather the complex negotiation and interaction which goes on between people at either end of a lens. It's the process, man, and any film or festival which ignores that, believes naively that 'real life' can be rendered transparently on the big screen, is missing half the plot.

"It's hard to film a community," said Tim Burns, Co-Director, at the screening in Sydney, referring to the inevitable omissions and ellipses which are integral to doco-making. But it is the awareness of this inherent difficulty, and the honest engagement with which the filmmakers attempt to do justice to both the subject and their role as filmmakers, which makes *Surfing the Healing Wave* so beguiling, then challenging, and ultimately subversive.

Surfing the Healing Wave, *directors Hugh Benjamin & Tim Burns, screened as part of* REAL: life on film *festival, State Theatre, Melbourne, April 4-11, Chauvel Cinema, Sydney, April 13-16*

# Rich pickings: Brisbane's Animation Festival

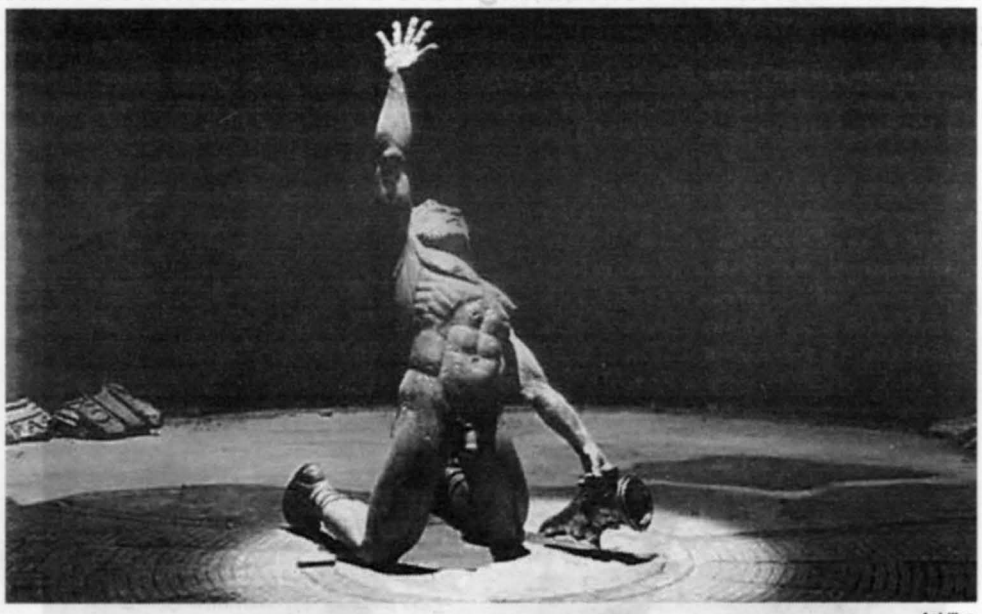
*Anthony May*

**Animation, claymation, digimation, pixellation, dynamation.**

It was syncopation, imagination and inspiration run wild at the Third Brisbane International Animation Festival which brought together the brightest and best from local and international animators along with 3 Academy Award nominated films, an AFI winner and maestro of mythological mayhem, Ray Harryhausen. The 5 evenings, plus one matinee for the kids, were very full, a lot of fun and went very fast.

Tracking the evenings would be impossible so what follows is a personal selection from the various categories in which the festival presented the films. From Films In Competition, 2 films stood out. AFI award winner Anthony Lucas' *Slim Pickings* is a claymation which *RealTime* readers may have already had a chance to see. At first sight it appears to be a simple, sad but affectionate narrative about a poor little creature so hungry that it has to eat its friend, the vegetable. And the curl of the vegetable's stem allows Lucas to tip his hat to the persistent irony of cartoonist Michael Leunig. But the wrinkle in the story, a hidden tomato, opens up a number of themes around love and starvation that extend the film's treatment rather than press a single point home.

*Jazzimation*, from Oerd Van Luijlenborg of the Netherlands, is an eloquent matching of music with a dynamic set of line drawings. Each instrument in the combo has a corresponding set of shapes and lines which sit between abstraction and representative images. Black keys for the piano, horn curves for the trumpet, lines thick and thin for the various guitars and so on. As much a piece of orchestration as animation, *Jazzimation*, is a coming together of editing and movement with rhythm and melody. A dance video for drawings.



*Achilles*

From the Director's Choice category, Italian Gianluigi Toccafondo's French production of *Le Criminel* was perhaps one of the most reflexive offerings of the festival. An overheard comment, "a jumped up comic book", pointed to only one of its sources. *Le Criminel* carries within it a bewildering array of references. From painting it draws on Hopper and Munch. From the comic book, it gets its framing and its sour palette. From Hollywood, it revives Hitchcock, film noir and the gangster movie. From the Human Sciences, it draws its anomie, its urban dread and paraphernalia of criminal category. And it blends them in fluid inks.

At the other end of the scale is the film from France's Berniou, *Ex Memorium*. Computer repetition and transformation produce a series of facial distortions within Polaroid masks that are linked together by a number of Escher-style hands and arms. As the distortions and the linkages progress, the arms turn into fingers which transform into DNA strands and the Polaroid masks reduce into genes tagged onto the strands. But this suggests that I knew what was going on. I didn't, I was just mesmerised.

Of all on offer over the 2 evenings, the most engaging film of the festival, for my money, came from the *Out Of The Closet* category, Barry Purves' *Achilles*. A retelling of the story of *Achilles* and his love for Petrocolus at the siege of Troy, *Achilles* is a sophisticated homoerotic assertion of the complexities of love and politics. With a voice-over by Derek Jacobi, the film takes a fragment of *The Iliad* and expands it into a narrative of complex psychology. The power of reference, demonstrated by Toccafondo in *Le Criminel*, is focused back into storytelling here with compelling intensity.

Of the longer films, audiences were treated to Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead 3* and a marathon of Aardman's *Rex the Runt* series. While the *Evil Dead* films are fairly well known, *Rex the Runt* is perhaps less so. A televisual comedy that is gently parodic of both kids' TV and science fiction, it is very sharp but without the bite of short film animation.

The special event of the festival came on Saturday night when Ray Harryhausen presented a remastered 35mm print of the classic feature, *Jason and the Argonauts*. Harryhausen also conducted a seminar where he spoke on his pioneering work of the 1950s and 1960s. The festival has toured Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth through April and into May. Animation, a sometimes difficult and obscure form, is presented here with an ingenuity that stresses access and enjoyment and it's a remarkable success.

Third Brisbane International Animation Festival, *Brisbane, April 5-9*

*Anthony May is a lecturer in Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Griffith University and a member of the Queensland editorial team of* RealTime.

# Harryhausen vs Hollywood

*Anthony May*

*Ray Harryhausen was in Brisbane recently to present a remastered print of the 1963 classic feature* Jason and the Argonauts. *Harryhausen was responsible for the ground breaking animation (dynamation) in the movie and has become something of a cult figure in animation circles. Although no longer active as a filmmaker, he still keeps a keen interest in the field and was happy to speak about developments in animation and filmmaking in general, as well as a number of other issues such as marvellous dinosaurs, confusing mice and the disappearance of the classical movie star. We spoke in the days leading up to the Third Brisbane International Animation Festival.*

***What do you enjoy watching these days?***

We don't go to the films very often. We have a big library of oldies and I'm sorry if it sounds like nostalgia but they at least made stories that were coherent and they had real stars...I was influenced enormously by films as I grew up. *King Kong* put me in my career. Films did leave a tremendous impression on my youth. Some of the films today, the impressions they leave are very negative...today's filmmakers have seen more TV than movies. Television changed the face of entertainment. It cut out the attention span. People don't have the patience to sit and watch a story develop. They have to have bang, bang, bang, bang instantly.

***Surely there's some television that you like?***

I was highly impressed with *Walking With Dinosaurs*. CGI is miraculous. They looked so real that you expected David Attenborough to pop out of the woods and start discussing the vicissitudes of their intimate lives. But the hype of CGI has been that everything else should be discarded. It shouldn't.

***How close were your links with the major studios when you worked in Hollywood?***

We did things as an independent through Columbia. They never interfered. That's the good graces of doing inexpensive films. So we were very lucky. Charles Shneer and I made 12 pictures together and we weren't interfered with at all. I did my thing the way I wanted to do it. That's why our pictures, I think, are different. They don't fall into the formula that generally is called Hollywood. I had my own studio far away from Hollywood. I wanted to do everything myself.

***But your classic features have a high level of integration between effects and live action.***

I was involved in the writing. I don't just wear a hat of special effects. Mr. Shneer and I and the writer had sweat box sessions long before the director came in. These are not what you call directors' pictures because the director comes along after things have been prepared. Sometimes we integrate things that he would like to see put in but generally he would realise that it is his job to look after the actors, not create the film. Some people may say that's sacrilege but that's hogwash.

***What's your opinion of current trends in animation within live action movies,*** Stuart Little ***for example?***

I couldn't follow it. I couldn't understand why they weren't a bit surprised to see a mouse sitting between them. We always tried to put an explanation into fantasy elements. In *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* we had a wizard who practiced black magic. But he couldn't zap the hero at the beginning of the film. He had to wait for an hour and a half because each time he used his black magic, he got older. Now that puts a limit on the times that you will use your magic.

## FILMshorts

Polish-born composer Cezary Skubiszewski has just won the APRA (Australian Performing Rights Association) award for best score for *Two Hands*. Cezary has a long list of features and TV credits—*The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (APRA winner for Best Album 1998), *Lillian's Story*, *Wogboy*—and has just completed work on the soon to be released *Bootmen* and Ana Kokinos' *Eugenia Sandler*.

*Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet* and more recently *The Cup* have generated an interest in the culture, politics and religion of Tibet. The first Tibetan film festival in Australia *Beyond Shangri La* seeks to go beyond the clichéd world of "happy go lucky Buddhist monks in Saffron robes sipping yak butter" to offer a critical perspective on a people threatened by cultural genocide. Rarely screened films include *The Saltman of Tibet*, *The Trials of Telo Rinpoche* and *The Jew and the Lotess*. Valhalla Cinema, Sydney, July 1-2.

Filmmaking in SA gets another boost with Diana Laidlaw, Minister for the Arts, announcing on May 25 that the State Government would increase its spending on film by $3.6 million, creating 200 jobs, investment opportunities, supporting features by local producers, contributing to script and professional development programs, developing training links with tertiary institutions, as well as continuing to attract film crews from interstate and worldwide. Laidlaw commented, "South Australia has key advantages for independent producers—lower costs, a great range of locations and easy access to these locations, and highly skilled artistic and technical personnel." If you can't make it at Fox Studios, head to Adelaide...

For WA readers who moonlight as auteurs, entries are now open for the WA Young Filmmaker of the Year Award which offers cash prizes, training and equipment use. You must be under 25 years of age and have 2 years of cinematic experience. Other awards categories include Outstanding Achievement Awards, Craft Awards and Genre Awards, culminating in screenings and a gala presentation night on August 25. Entries close July 4. FTI, tel 08 9335 1055, *wasa@fti.asn.au*

# Drive-by screenings and pedestrian anxiety

*Felena Alach*

**When run-away screen artists break out of the black box of the arthouse and sneak into the peripheral view of the passer's eye, such departure threatens the reassuring safe-zone of darkened frontal viewing that most of us seek in our relationship to the screen.**

The installation of 7 different screen-based works into the Perth streetscape under the cunning guise of the display window were the guerilla tactics of the recent *Drive-by* project. With well-targeted hits on high-density traffic in its sights, *Drive-by* effectively aligned the pedestrian with the passenger, challenging coded and accustomed ways of seeing in traversing urban paths. In situating the screen as text(ure) of image woven in time against the info-bite signscape of the night street, *Drive-by* created an interplay between ways of reading and ways of viewing.

Though close enough to some of these practitioners and works to declare myself somewhat of an 'insider' I still see this as an exceptionally engaging project. Against the more static landscape of signs, icons and advertisements that besiege our passing attention, the *Drive-by* screens become a point of surface tension glitch in the smooth facade of the window display. A cusp of refracted light folds inward to reveal the threshold of an 'other' time-space—a Tardis-like twist on the 'proper' of the street creates an imaginal oasis in the regular passage between commerce and transit. This incongruity posed an interesting struggle for passing viewers—the narrative instinct of the 'will to watch' tugging at the scanning view of the streetwise glance, amidst apprehensions of becoming the unguarded object of the spectation of others. (It's that kind of slack-jawed-drool-anxiety reflex that snaps you out of a golden public transport snooze…) Pedestrian attention varied between the nervous correction of interest (the 'move-on-folks-there's-nothing-to-see-here' response) through wandering curiosity towards a more open surrender to the softened gaze of becoming audience.

Vikki Wilson & Erin Hefferon, *A Throw of the Dice Can Never Abolish Chance*

Stepping through the looking glass, the viewer is engaged with a series of textured and complex visions: the lascivious absurdity of (un)dressed meats in a pulsing dance of display in *Rubberneck*; the displaced distance of figure in zones of abandoned enclosure in *Phase Ocular*; the flash-frame congestion of image signal and vehicle experience in *Zero Crossing*; cosmic constellation of motes and spaces into an evolving golden 'becoming' in *The Physics of Leaving Space*; the emergent textural landscape of sensory suggestion in *Formation One*; the strange hyperfiction of fractured entities and impossible domains in *44 Fragments from the Shattered Cast of an Irreconcilable Whole*; and the troubling nexus of trace-memory, obsession and speculation that cluster into the cultural pathogen of Perth's own serial-killer narrative in *A Throw of the Dice Can Never Abolish Chance*. With each work having prescient life in momentary perception as well as in full immersion, *Drive-by* offered its viewers the opportunity to step off the passenger ride of habitual reception and inhabit the space of now as a more active agent of their street sense.

Drive-by*: Vikki Wilson & Erin Hefferon,* A Throw of the Dice Can Never Abolish Chance, *Cam & Yvette Merton,* The Physics of Leaving Space, *Sam Landels & Soban Arial Hayes,* Rubberneck, *Rick Mason & Malcolm Riddoch,* Formation One, *Jo Law, Redmond Bridgeman,* Zero Crossing, *Sarah Dawson & Bec Dean,* Phase Ocular, *Marcus Canning & Emily Murray,* 44 Fragments from the Shattered Cast of an Irreconcilable Whole*; new works at multiple sites around the city; each work rotated between locations nightly, Perth, April 15-28,* http://arc.imago.com.au/driveby

*Felena Alach is a writer and visual artist based in Perth whose contributions to the cultural conversation include text, installation, performance/video and infiltration of the Nintendo generation.*

# Film reviews

## *Girls on Loos: A Theatrical Documentary*

**director Sophie Hyde**
**funded by the South Australian Youth Arts Board**
**launched Ngapartji Multimedia Centre, Adelaide, February 19, Melbourne release soon**

Taboo. It's a delicious word, and the space of the latrine still figures prominently in what we can and can't do and discuss publicly. It also incorporates a whole lot of other naughties: sex, drugs, even death. *Seinfeld* started it all when Elaine, in dire need, begged to share a square. A recent doco on SBS, *Shit of a Job* clogged the airwaves with its expose on sewage plants and the workers who love them. Now we have Sophie Hyde's debut, a doco on what girls do behind closed doors and whether their partners have reason to be paranoid. They do.

Hampered, like most early filmmaking forays, by terrible sound (hard to control in clubs and pubs) and bad miming, *Girls on Loos* is most revelatory in its on-the-spot interviews with girls on the pot. Best friends who like to watch each other pee. The sensual act of putting on your lipstick while strangers are watching. Outside vs in: confessing your life's woes to the next chick in the queue. Boundaries: some people need a door, some people need a door locked, some people have been to Nepal and have moved beyond The Door. Running water and coughing: strategies for the anally retentive to get through public experiences unscathed. Grungy once-offs where every lover seems to be Italian.

The song and dance numbers, ham-acted by a series of buxom wenches in erotic garb, feature voice-overs of lav experiences, and are bound to attract golden shower fetishists. I can't often make out the lyrics—probably a good thing. Watching Holly Myers perform this dunny-drag cabaret evokes the same mix of emotions as experiencing Frumpus, the trakky-dakked goddesses who've been doing the rounds lately (see page 34). These performers play with gender roles, with what's tough and compliant and infantile and sexy, and reveal how everyday life as a woman, the makeup, the style, can be performative, which makes me squirm, feel uneasy, cringe, blush below the belt, and is a good enough reason for doing it.


Holly Myers, *Girls on Loos*

I'm hoping for *Girls on Loos: The Sequel* where we get to see true grit because when you're dealing with taboos, you have to push them to the limit.

*Kirsten Krauth*

## *Looking for Alibrandi*

**director Kate Woods**
**novel & screenplay Melina Marchetta,**
**distributor Village Roadshow**
**screening nationally**

## *Me, Myself I*

**writer-director Pip Karmel**
**distributor Buena Vista**
**screening nationally**

I'm sitting on a celluloid faultline between 2 vast plains of self-discovery and self-improvement: Josie (Pia Miranda) at 17, determined to HAVE IT ALL and discovering a father, a grandmother's secret, her cross-cultural roots, her place. Pamela (Rachel Griffiths) at thirty-something, doubting if she really does HAVE IT ALL but discovering that she still can enjoy the best of both worlds—motherhood/'serious' career, husband/sexual independence etc—only not at the same time. Josie looks forward to Pamela's past while Pamela looks back in wonder from Josie's future to locate the point at which the past went awry. Two ego-hunts advancing and retreating relentlessly backwards and forwards towards the same spot where a little self-awareness lies timidly beneath a tangle of love and limbs, in and out of houses and off to work and school and play and why is everything so so-so, the gap between generations plugged with repetition, the uncanny parallels, the endless slow spin cycle of events. Such sweet synchronicity too, like snoring as a marker for absent male figures—the missing father returned for Josie and the lost husband re-found for Pamela—and the upstairs open window, symbol of freedom, hope, the fluttering, quivering soul…which is too bad if you happen to live in a bungalow.

Two films so utterly of their time, post-war migration like a faded photograph, broken families and teen suicides, safe sex and unsafe spouses, periods and unwanted pregnancies, sex in a Charger or a walk by a Harbour and everybody is known by the places they live and the wheels they drive, all those tribal markers from the lower North Shore to the inner West, a demographic, geographic, ideographic distillation of a culture, the land of Middling Classdom. These are wonderful things to read—not difficult to get into at all—warm'n'funny, a little tragic but poignant too, soaked in the most powerfully piquant pungency of poignancy, plot, plot, plotting all over the place and characters so expertly evinced by their environs that they really should hand out acting awards for the decor. Maybe they already do.

I love this stuff like melting in a hot tub, the thick double-choc coating on a soft centre, or even the ones with nuts in the middle, like these small kernels of hardness where you scrape away the sticky outer layers and end up with 2 women back where they started, reconciled to themselves, society, even men…see, there's nothing that can't be solved by a good long soak in a narrative.

After being lovingly wrapped in back issues of *Cosmo*, dunked in a puree of lightly whisked *Oprah* and then gently laid to rest on a bed of shredded *Dolly* mags, I emerge feeling re-energised, re-focused, a new me! Once I was unsure of myself, dissatisfied with my lot, but now I know I can HAVE IT ALL (at least temporarily, vicariously, on the big screen, which is where it really counts).

*Simon Enticknap*

# The good-ish companion

*Adrian Danks*

**First, I need to make an admission. I have not read The Oxford Companion to Australian Film in the way normally required for the purposes of a review such as this—and I don't think I actually could read it in that way.**

I have done this partly out of a kind of sympathy for the ways that such a book is often read, one entry at a time, in a non-linear fashion across entries, and only when the need arises. Neither have I taken the obvious approach and checked only those entries where my own degree of expertise might show up factual inaccuracies, bland prose or that idiosyncratic detail (that I might closely guard to my own chest) that such overview publications often exclude. I want to both side-step and address some of the common ways in which a publication of this kind can be approached (and has been ad nauseum in the reviews I have read.)

The choice of the term 'companion', rather than dictionary or encyclopedia, seems to both point towards the work's understandably guarded nature and illuminates some of its projected aims and uses. If one views it as a companion, the book no longer need be seen as something which maps out excursions into the territory of Australian cinema but rather as something to take along for the ride (to give us, as the book's introduction states, "a sense of the sweep of cinema in Australia"). When the book is thought of as a full-scale map it seems to come up short.

A more equivocal approach is all fine and good but perhaps counts little for the actual ways in which this volume is being used (as indeed something like an encyclopedia or dictionary which provides a one-stop shop for all queries about the Australian cinema). This kind of publication is a rare thing in the stingy contemporary publishing climate and thus the pressure on such a work to get it right, to be many or all things to everybody, is tantamount (even if unreasonable). We also need to consider whether such a publication is necessary, fills a gap, and complements other publications within the field of Australian cinema. And whether such a catch-all approach (somewhat avoided by the title) is still appropriate to, or indeed possible on, the subject of Australian cinema. A superficial answer might be that it isn't but that this failure is in fact a positive sign for Australian screen culture—a particular orthodoxy, history or canon may no longer be appropriate or necessary to the understanding and conceptualising of this cinema.

The advantage of the heterogeneous and relatively liberal approach adopted by *The Oxford Companion* is that it allows the joining together of approaches that have previously been the domain of separate works (characteristic of such landmark but somewhat limited works as Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper's *Australian Film 1900-1977*). There are short treatises on predictable and idiosyncratic facets of Australian cinema (food, landscape, silent film production, rural myth, etc.), individual films, actors and production personalities, and selected government bodies, cultural institutions and movements. Each of these areas has their more or less successful entries (and in general the 3 editors may have spread themselves a little too thin and covered too much territory themselves), and the liberalism of the companion's approach—which ranges from description to opinionated review, bare bones personal chronology to extended interview—does not exactly contribute to a sense of coherency or even-handedness (for example, though undoubtedly significant and much-loved, why is there a 7 page entry on 'Bud' Tingwell? And why does Pamela Rabe require a 4 page interview?).

In fact, it is often easy to feel sorry for those writers (and the subjects they have written about) who have followed an encyclopedic approach which pares entries down to relatively dry facts and limited prose and which is now placed alongside the more florid and opinionated entries of other writers. Other inconsistencies include the approaches to individual films which range from short, sometimes seemingly irrelevant, detailed synopses, to accounts of the film's production, reception and the author's opinion of the work. This ends up producing a book that tries hard to please as many of its potential readers as possible (academic, general, popular, industry), is relatively easy to use, is provisionally compulsive and attempts to fill a decidedly unenviable hole (the catch-all book on a national industry).

The book contain some broad exclusions which inevitably entail predictably brief coverage of experimental film, short filmmaking, exploitation cinema, surf movies (no separate entry!) and some aspects of documentary practice (and of course the book tips towards the contemporary particularly in those lengthy, and often not too revealing, interviews in a way that may well look slightly foolhardy in a few years time).

The volume also includes only extremely limited references to a broader film culture, criticism and scholarship. This is particularly vexing for 2 reasons. First, as an act of film scholarship this book needs to place itself, even if indirectly, within a particular critical context and history. Many of the key contributions to Australian film culture, its dissemination, restoration and critical rethinking, have been carried out within this realm (and are mostly not included in this book unless they are involved in film production in some way, such as Albie Thoms, the Cantrills and Joan Long). To many, such entries might seem tantamount to navel-gazing and yet such self-analysis (and promotion) is essential in order to emphasise the symbiosis that exists between film analysis and production, film history and contemporary practice (at a time when the Australian Film Commission, amongst others, needs to be reminded of such things). The book also needs to see itself judged and contextualised within this framework (and not be ignorantly dismissed or criticised for being dated, irrelevant, etc.). It thus needs to promote the culture to which it belongs (and my god it needs promoting). Second, perhaps the strongest on-going aspect of Australian cinema has often been situated within screen culture. For example, the dearth of feature film production in the 50s and 60s is often contrasted with the vibrancy of film culture (including the strengthening of the film society and film festival movements) in the same period. Many of these broad aspects and examples are mentioned but they do not occupy pride of place that a more adventurous volume might grant them (and surely a key function of any book such as this is a degree of iconoclasm, a rethinking of hierarchies, accepted histories, and ways of thinking). Of course this 'companion' needs to be commended for the inroads it makes in these areas, and the space it begins to open up for future histories, dictionaries and even other companions.

In essence the usual suspects get demoted (though at least they still mostly get a mention) while the contemporary, the famous, the emblematic, and the actorly take up more space than they deserve or need (I guess the book does have to be generally popular and used, so I accept this focus, begrudgingly). Still, a great aspect of this book is that it places the extremes of the industry side by side (where else would one page contain roughly equal length entries on John Polson, Eric Porter and 'Possom Paddock'). This non-hierarchical approach also allows those readers both familiar and unfamiliar with Australian cinema to find new pockets of interest, to trace specific threads and stumble across unfamiliar names, films and ways of looking at Australian movies. It is not quite the encyclopedia or dictionary it is often claimed to be (but which it knows it isn't), so be warned not to use it as such (check its facts, its approaches, and regard them for what they are—selective, and built on a history of research both groundbreaking and at times speculative). Also, use this book as a means to help celebrate Australian cinema, to begin or further an inquiry. The editors and writers are to be commended for completing a task, quite well under the circumstances and let's hope that it is the first of many volumes (in various formats) which remap the territory of Australian cinema.

*Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer and Ina Bertrand eds.*, The Oxford Companion to Australian Film, *Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1999*

# Cyber Cultures

*Cyber Cultures: Sustained Release* is a 6 month new media art program developed by Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre and curated by new media curator Kathy Cleland. The program is made up of 4 themed exhibition capsules: *Infectious Agents*, *Posthuman Bodies*, *New Life* and *Animation Playground* and highlights the work of artists who are at the leading edge of innovative developments in digital new media practice. The program also includes the world premiere performance of a new work *MOVATAR* by internationally acclaimed artist Stelarc on August 19.

The first exhibition capsule *Infectious Agents* will be launched at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre on July 7 and the program will continue at Casula until December, and then tour nationally.

Renowned artists in the program include Linda Dement, John Tonkin, Melinda Rackham, Ian Haig, Patricia Piccinini, Peter Hennessey, Gary Zebington, Jane Prophet, Gordon Selley, Martine Corompt, Philip Samartzis, Leon Cmielewski, Josephine Starrs, Mark Lycette, John Lycette, Jon McCormack, Anita Kocsis, Kathryn Mew, Maureen Lander, John Fairclough and Stelarc.

*For a full program contact Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, tel (02) 9824 1121. There will be a profile of the* Cyber Cultures *program in* Working the Screen *a digital media supplement in the next issue of* RealTime. Cyber Cultures *has been supported by the Liverpool City Council, NSW Ministry for the Arts, Australia Council, NSW Film and Television Office and the Australian Film Commission.*

# SCREENCULTUREshorts

Popcorn Taxi continues its valuable contribution to Sydney film culture and the Australian industry with weekly chats and screenings dedicated to low budget and independent filmmakers as well as commercial releases. On June 14 a screening of *Strange Fits of Passion* (see interview with director Elise McCredie, page 15) and Q&A with cast and crew; on June 21 *Star Wars* buffs can meet producer Rick McCallum; on June 28 a *Farscape* night with producer/writer David Kemper, Oz producer Matt Carroll and a series director (hopefully Rowan Woods); on July 5 Oz producer Andrew Mason will tear apart special effects in a special session on *The Matrix*. Check Popcorn Taxi out at Valhalla Cinema, Sydney, Wednesdays, 8pm. Melbourne version coming soon.

As we recover, exhilarated, from the Reconciliation March, the Australia Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board has announced funding for the First National Indigenous Conference and Film Festival, scheduled for October in Broome, to coincide with Stomping Ground. The festival, founded by Indigenous Screen Australia, will focus on workshops, film screenings and policy development. For further information, email the co-ordinator Beck Cole, *b.cole@caama.com.au*.

A survey conducted by ASDA (Australian Screen Directors Association) of its members in late 1999 revealed that 46% earn less than $20,000 per annum in the industry while the majority earn less than $30,000. Only 18% considered themselves fully employed and 30% relied on their partners' incomes to help them remain in the industry. High income earners tended to work in features, telemovies and mini-series whereas low wage earners worked in a combination of categories: series, docos, corporates and commercials.

The *OnScreen* supplement of *RealTime* is funded by the Australia Council, the federal government's arts advisory body, the Australian Film Commission and the FTO (NSW Film & Television Office).

*OnScreen* is submitted to the following for indexing: Film Literature Index, Film and TV Center, State University of New York at Albany, Richardson 390C, 1400 Washington Ave, Albany NY 1222 USA; Film Index International, BFI Library and Information services, British Film Institute, 21 Stephen St, London W1P 2LN, Great Britain; International Index to Film/TV, FIAF Periodical Indexing Project, 6 Nottingham St, London W1M 3RB, Great Britain; APAIS, National Bibliographic publications, National Library of Australia, Canberra ACT, Australia 2600

# Cinesonics: Magnolia

*Phillip Brophy*

## Part 2: Out of breath

*For Part 1: "Singing a new species of film narrative", see* RealTime *36 or visit our website*

In *Magnolia*, a vocal schizophrenia is orchestrated, typical of the pleasurably perplexing arrangements of Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks to which Jon Brion stylistically bows. This chorus of expressive utterances breathes in a continually morphing sonorum which is, literally, breath-taking.

All the characters are at some point out of breath, running and rushing headlong into a story of fatalistic eruption. As with Orson Welles' mix of vocal layers in *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Altman's peak in overlapping dialogue in *California Split* (1977), *Magnolia* features many show pieces where vocalisation and legibility precariously come near to cancelling each other out. Because the film attempts too much? Because PT Anderson is grandiose? No, because the flow lines of character energy chart the ways in which those characters are running out of time as their connections with each other contract into a net of inescapable embraces and releases. Every nano second of the film's editing, cross-fading and mixing volumetrically gauges this momentum with vibrancy and urgency.

The Brian Wilson/Van Dyke Parks connection is not accidental. These 2 artists—along with others like Phil Spector and Jack Nitzsche—constitute a white rock/pop sensibility integral to the post-60s history of West Coast record production. Running parallel and counter to the obvious and comparatively shallow 'mind expanding' gestures which coloured the Haight-Ashbury adventures in poor studio experimentation, Wilson, Parks, Spector and Nitzsche used the recording studio not as a stage for the spectacular breaking of taboos, but rather as a dark closet of manic-depressive, schizophrenic and psychotic fissions which they aurally and musically workshopped. Wilson and Spector in particular led quite tragic lives as child prodigies which blossomed in radiophonic glory and slowly withered through a series of non-commercial catastrophes which are now appreciated as uncompromising excavations of personal grief. Both Donnie Smith and young Stanley in *Magnolia* are personality amalgams of these figures, with Stanley standing in for the celebration of youth and Donny being a sad visage of being trapped by that youth.

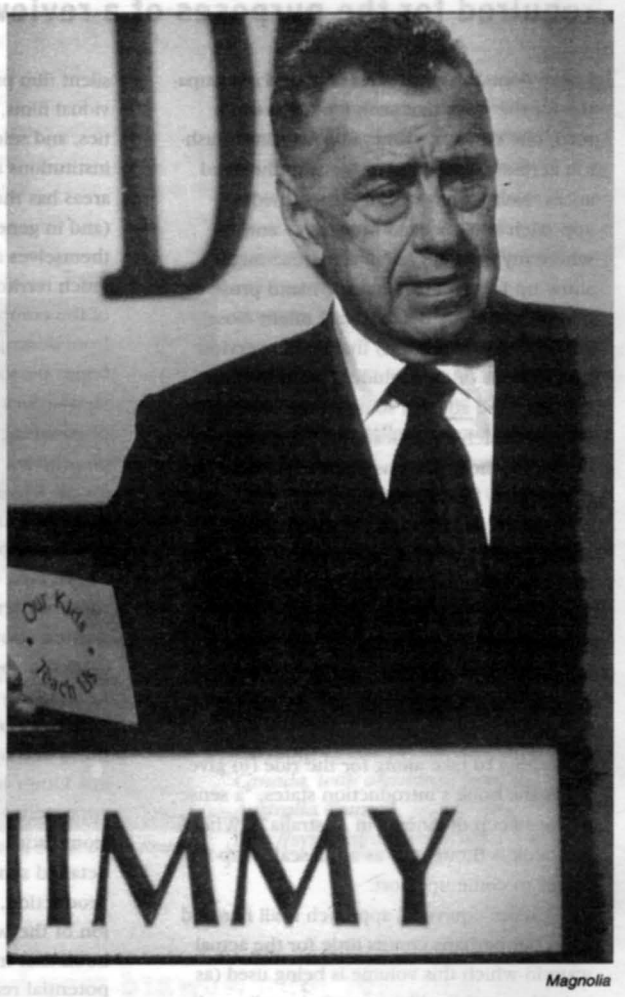
Schizophrenia here is not a term to be taken lightly, and the *mix* of *Magnolia* is crucial to the film's habitation of one's aural consciousness. Many characters in the film quote "You may be done with the past, but the past is not done with you", and the film accordingly lives simultaneously in its past and in its present. Its characters contend with guilt, grief and anguish not for the vainglorious sake of literary exposition and contemplation, but more so to construct a therapeutic realm within which one can experience those sensations through being incapable of escaping them. The characters of *Magnolia* are not 'vessels': they are amplifiers, speakers and transmitters of a psycho-space. They voice the noisy ward within which you are interred for the duration of the film's gathering. Listen to The Beach Boys' *Good Vibrations* (1966, or just about any track from the Wilson/Parks productions of *Pet Sounds*, 1966 and *Smiley Smile*, 1967). The key changes and cascading harmonies are like the Swingle Singers attempting to lip-sync to themselves in front of fun parlour crazy mirrors. The sensation is like having too many people talking to you at once, and the fact that they harmonise in a series of rounds suggests that they have a cohesion and logic which further intimidates the isolation of your own voice. Throughout *Magnolia* Aimee Mann's songs fuse, blend and curdle the score by Jon Brion. On many occasions—and this, for me, is bliss—multiple musics occur simultaneously. The effect is so unsettling one realises why cinema desperately avoids it, especially when pools of dissonance spill into the auditorium.

The skill and craft with which PT Anderson and Richard King have landscaped pools of dissonance and waterfalls of consonance over the undulating emotional field of *Magnolia* will prove a seminal text for the 'de-operization' of the cinema in years to come. A lofty claim on my part, but *Magnolia* is a sign of how one can collapse the architectural fascism which has rendered cinema as monolithic, monoglotic and monogrammatic—as a form predicated on constructing heroic edifices, elevated plains and panoramic vistas of enlightenment. Even though the film appears to have been targeted by many as being all these things and more, I would argue that *Magnolia* eschews the operatic by incisively strewing its high art baggage like the scorched remains at a plane crash site. *Magnolia* is not registered in the hyper-monodical heights of art cinema which tackily imports opera onto its soundtrack with all the subtlety of a drag queen from the 60s. When *Magnolia* employs the most saturated aria—yes, from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*—it does so with a clinical, scrutineering ear. It plays out unedited against a scene of Jim Guerney (John C Reilly) and Claudia Gator (Melora Walters) engaged in a tragicomic first meeting at her flat. The scene is banal, flat, pregnant, empty; all the melodic drama of Puccini eventually withers and seeps into the walls, spent and exhausted. No, *Magnolia* is about as 'operatic' as *Diva* is subtle.

Maybe it is a drained diva that sails along the emotional waves of *Magnolia*. The voice of Aimee Mann is clearly a sono-lyrical love object for Anderson throughout the film. He enshrines it and allows it to mix freely with his film. Her voice is itself ingrained with characteristics which allow her to vocalise a line enriched by a tradition that embraces other singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell and Carole King—each icons of West Coast 70s music, the latter the factionalised subject of Alison Anders' *Grace Of My Heart*. While I don't buy into the rock journo rhetoric which mythologises the singer-songwriter, the maturity and sensitivity conveyed by Aimee Mann's songs deserve the aural fawning *Magnolia* accords them, and the production by her, John Brion and others is far more eclectic and far less prosaic than the 'naturalism' which made West Coast rock the aural equivalent of a smelly crocheted vest. The polyglottic instrumentation of her songs adds much to *Magnolia*'s aural palette, and are measured carefully against her grain: a mix of ennui, insouciance and world-weariness.

This contrast of abject vocal grain against elaborate ornamental instrumentation is signposted very early in the film in 2 important instances. First is when Aimee Mann's voice first sounds with vamped piano chords and a full black screen. Who is she? Where is she? What is her purpose? She is the voice from a nowhere that will map the somewhere of the film. Second, and as equally epicentral to the film's oral centrality—is the bizarre audiovisual zoom into the decaying throat of Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) as he hoarsely whispers through the frenetic cellular activity which signals his body's surrender to cancer. He rasps in the mix the way a tuba or trombone emits a gritty pink noise in digitally-clear orchestral recordings: the grain is unbearably tactile. Just as you could smell death on his breath, you can feel its presence on your own eardrums.

Cancer, of course, is the draining life force of *Magnolia*. The film profoundly addresses this in a series of terse refutations, negations and denials which never let up. Just as Partridge is himself a cancerous cell in the glandular familial spread of all the film's characters, so too does each and every person expel and repeat his infected breath one remove from their own emotional death. In fact all the key emotional points performance-wise are presented through debilitating inversions of vocal power: Mrs Partridge (Julianne Moore) provides numerous black holes of gasping and gnashing as she deals with Earl's demise; Frank Mackie (Tom Cruise) breathlessly vomits years of hatred over Earl on his death bed; Claudia vents a volcanic ocean of steaming rage when her father Jimmy Gator (Philip Baker Hall) intrudes upon her frail sanctity.



*Magnolia*

Richard King's sound design for *Magnolia* follows what could be deigned a cancerous spread: voice and music leaks through thin walls; TVs crackle indifferently, indignantly and incessantly, oxidising the most private domains; car sound systems carry their passengers within their darkened subsonic wombs; music cues well up and spill over into scenes for which they were destined as well as those poised innocently adjacent; and radio playlists infect public spaces like a cold in an air conditioned office. Sound in *Magnolia* is mostly about that which you wish to suppress, engaging you in a wearing psycho-acoustic fight with the film's soundtrack: you strain to hear, you wish for silence, you attempt to focus, you achieve your own noise threshold. And just as the film is structured around song's ability to be 'all at once', its score around a 'complex verticality', its narrative around an 'excess of simultaneity, so is its soundtrack an overload of all that impedes the act of listening. The end result is a story about exhaustion, drainage, and the fulsome quiet which comes only after trauma with substance.

As far as image goes the poster for *Magnolia* features a clear blue sky out of which fall some frogs. That may be one way of explaining the plot of the film. Or as Stanley the child brain says after exhaustive research in his school library about inexplicable phenomenae: "It's just something that happens." The CD cover for *Magnolia* features the eponymous flower with all the film's characters softly superimposed on its erotic petals. A strange orb of flora vibrates at its centre, resembling a strange planet around which the characters orbit. That may be one way of illustrating how we connect uncontrollably to others. Thankfully, I still do not know why the film is called *Magnolia*.

Magnolia, *writer/director P.T. Anderson, is currently screening nationally*

# WriteStuff: the good news

*Hunter Cordaiy*

In the month when William Goldman's newest instalment of his Hollywood screenwriting adventures is published in Australia (*Which Lie Did I Tell?*, Bloomsbury Press) there is some good news for aspiring and practicing Australian screenwriters. OUP has unwittingly published *Screenwriting: A manual* by Jonathan Dawson, Associate Professor of Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Griffith University, an antidote to Goldman's populist yet ultimately cynical view of the screenwriting profession.

The first positive difference between this and other manuals on the market is that Dawson's book treats the writer as a professional, working in a broadly based industry which has a range of forms and opportunities.

The professional writer may have to consider projects as jobs for money, especially early in a career when the need for credits burns so strongly in a writer's eye. While most writers might aspire to write the successful feature film with known stars, great ticket sales and even greater pay cheques, the working reality for many writers is having to write across forms—from commercials to corporate videos, educational programs or episodes in children's television.

This industry reality is rarely described in the 'dream' manuals which have become so popular because they only want to elevate one form, the blockbuster feature film, over all other formats. Most writers know that so few million dollar projects are ever realised, and even fewer million dollar scripts are sold, that working and writing in other parts of the industry is a more likely means of support and credentials.

What is refreshing about Dawson's book is its recognition of this professional reality. The Australian screenwriter has as many opportunities as this book describes, and lately the professional palette has broadened to include video games and multimedia programs which form the final chapters.

The other positive and useful dimension to this book is its empathy with the writer's craft and the often mysterious issues which concern all writers such as…where do stories come from and what is the writer's relationship to his/her characters?

The early chapters describe a landscape in which the writer makes decisions based on practical and professional considerations. The 'hook' or idea is explored in some detail, and for good reason. This is the central element in the script process, and Dawson uses Robert Altman's film *The Player* as an example of writers floundering because their story idea lacks a unique and special hook (or even an inspiring title, which can also be the start of a great script). High concept stories rely heavily on the hook to sell their idea; films like *Wall Street* and *Platoon* confirm that the single word title/concept is the strongest. But this also works for independent lower budget projects, and is a lesson that Australian feature film writers have learnt well, despite an obvious tendency to simply use the title of a book if the film is an adaptation.Would *Sybilla* have been a better title than *My Brilliant Career*?

This practical guidance continues into the body of the text which has a wealth of script examples from recent film and TV series. These 'local' examples make a refreshing change from the usual blockbusters or classics like *Casablanca* regularly quoted in similar books.

Dawson's book is a guide to a form of alchemy that is successful script writing. The latest issue of *Written by*, the magazine from the American Writer's Guild, focuses on a similar concept by spotlighting 7 successful women writers from television. Their struggles and achievements are celebrated in a series of articles and interviews which detail in very practical terms the politics of their craft. As Patricia Green puts it, "The problem for women writers is that action is easier for the business types to comprehend. They tend to be nervous about shows that are nuance-dependent."

Regular television viewers will realise, however, that 'nuance' has a much stronger presence in television drama and comedy than 10 years ago, and this is largely due to the increasing number of women writers. Anne Kenney, executive producer of *Family Law* who also worked on *LA Law*, suggests that male executives just don't understand the difference women writers can make to a show. She uses the example of *Cagney and Lacey*, where the producers would describe to the writers an extended chase scene, then finish it off with the 2 women officers talking about 'women's stuff' in the car. As Kenney describes, the point was that the whole show was about being a woman police officer, not just a few moments before the ad break

# Commuter TV: SBS' Going Home

*Kirsten Krauth*

**Prime Minister John Howard may have trouble saying sorry but City Rail has no problem.**

Every evening I contemplate the parallel tracks of infinity to a mantra—"The 5.15pm train to Hornsby is running approximately 15 minutes late. City Rail regrets the delay and any inconvenience caused..."—spoken in dulcet tones designed to stop edgy types hacking other passengers to death with machetes. This calm assurance of lateness often comes exactly 15 minutes *after* the scheduled time so passengers have had time to check their watches, grimace, call their partners, and think about buying a machine gun.

After negotiating one ticket machine operating for the whole station, the running of the bulls to get a seat, freezing or boiling carriages, an orchestra of pretentious phone jingles, stale perfume and sweaty armpits, no station guards (ever) to check your increasingly expensive ticket and stations so poorly lit you can't read the signs, the last thing most daily commuters probably want is to settle in front of the box, with a nice pasta and glass of red, to see a new concept program which features the same characters every night on a train trip home talking about the latest events (this week the death of John Gielgud, hostages in Fiji, the Reconciliation march) they've just heard on the ABC news.

What's challenging and interesting about *Going Home* is its currency. Written, shot and executed 24 hours before it goes to air, it bridges a gap between soap opera/drama serial and news/current affairs. It's hard work for the actors—30 minutes of fierce concentration—and sometimes for the audience when plot development, for example the guard who gets beaten up in the first episode, becomes farcical. After the first week, the scenario has strengthened although somehow it doesn't quite capture the drama and boredom of everyday life; it is like a controlled experiment with a handful of strangers thrown in the lab each time. If you watch Andrew Urban's *Front Up* (Thursdays, 4pm SBS), the richness and unexpectedness of people's conversation, often defying first appearances, opens up vibrant and clashing inner worlds. *Going Home* needs to capture this more often in its patterns of speech, the gaps, the flows, the awkward pauses. There are too many newsy items and contemporary events covered in an Olympic bid to prove, yes, this did happen today. Sometimes I wish for a beggar or a fundamentalist Christian or a drunk who won't shut up—or silence.

There have been moments of sheer beauty. The appearance of Bradley Byquar (star of Ivan Sen's exquisite *Wind*) as an art teacher working with prisoners, confronted the audience by intricately weaving common perceptions and stereotypes into a dialogue on Aboriginal identity and reconciliation. Let's hope he becomes more than a blow-in…and he just might, because the show's website (*www.sbs.com.au/goinghome/*) adds an extra dimension, where from June 12 viewers can suggest scenarios for the series' development, contribute to forums, email characters directly, and discuss online the issues raised each night. The audience drives the train. As one of the forum participants comments: "Great concept…it's about time something original [happened] in a soap on aussie tv not set in a cop shop, coffee shop or at a beach."

Maybe *Going Home* could start a commuter uprising. The train has plush blue seats and elegant maroon walls (perhaps a reflection of the characters' obsession with State of Origin). The carpets are clean. It looks cosy. Good enough to eat off. It's sponsored by City Rail. And I bet it's always on time.

Going Home, *writers Ro Hume, Dave Warner, Michael O'Rourke; directors Steve Newman Acs, Alan Coleman, Andrew Lewis; performers John Gibson, Camilla Ah Kin, Lyn Pierse, David Callan, Khristina Totos, Rhonda Doyle, Brian Meegan, Jason Chong, Arthur Angel; weekdays, SBS, 7.30pm*

# The dirt on the Dream Kitchen

*Joni Taylor*

**It's getting DIRTY in domestic land. QUICK, the housewife is hiding something under her apron. Afraid of creepy crawlies? "Domestic bliss" spray should get rid of them...for a moment.**

*Dream Kitchen* places itself between interaction and animation. While some aspects demand immediate action, other sections are watched as events evolve and mutate. The cursor is the only indication of any entry points.

The Dream Kitchen is clean. Melamine, minimal, there's a bowl of fruit. It's not contemporary flash but enough mod cons for the average homeowner. But the "player" is not the owner but a secret visitor, furtive, airborne and easily passed by.

There's a quick panic tour. Like an out of control camcorder the effects are dizzily sped up. Seen from below the fridge, towering monolithic stools ascend and giant telephones ring incessantly.

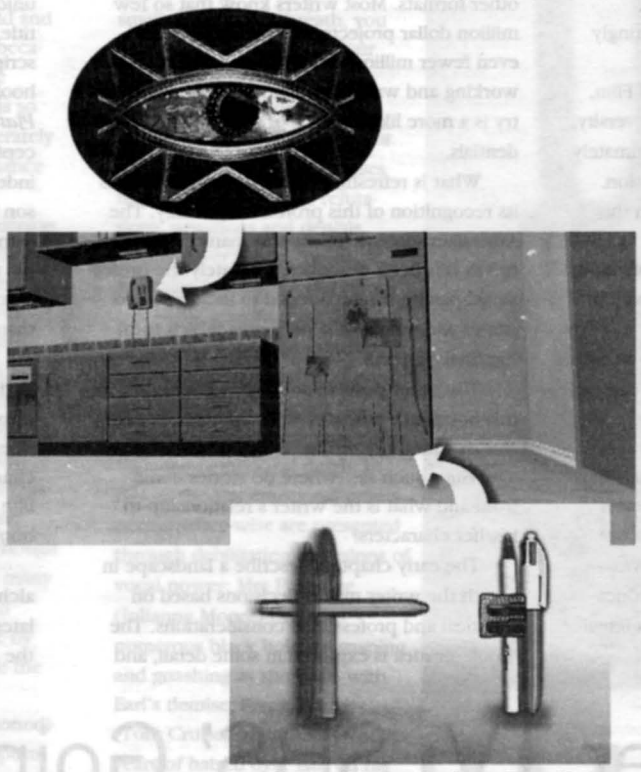
First stop is under the Fridge where inanimate objects take on evil lives of their own. Here pencils turn to pens, and under militant conditions there are burnings at the stake to the chanting of the masses...

The kitchen is getting dirtier. Next stop the Sink. Down the plughole and the pipes reveal a floating dreamworld of garbage, underwater sounds, no air only the throbbing pressure against your skull. Rollovers reveal the floating rubbish transforming slowly (very slowly) into an evil garbage man...recycled scarecrow boy made from the detritus of Aussie junk, Tetra pack shoulder blade, Maccas thickshake arms...

And it gets dirtier...Don't put your fingers in the open Socket...inside reveals a world of cables and uncut wires. Tearing electrocuted screams fry the eardrums, sexual tension between the penetrative and penetrating plugs.

Under the Oven is a cardboard world. Scuffle around it to reveal the macabre forgottens, the dead and decaying. A Frog, a mutant Bug and a decayed Rat with a secret are the specimens to be tampered with. Electrodes, clamps, razor blades and X-rays are all at your disposal. Furtively you experiment to the sounds of electro shocks and metal scraping, but someone is examining you...under the oven no-one can hear your screams...

Dirt. Dirty phone calls. Phoning incessantly finally allows you in. It reveals an Orwellian landscape of clandestine kitchen scenes. The cold metal conductor transforms into an all seeing TV drome. Twenty degraded surveillance images of the Dream Kitchen now filled with debauchery and violence. Broomstick mounted housewife looks down on bondaged victim, the sounds of crossed and interrupted lines, la la land over the airwaves, over and out kind of stuff.



Leon Cmielewski & Josephine Starrs, *Dream Kitchen*

The Dream Kitchen is now disgusting. Oily patches seep from the floorboards, filthy drips line the fridge, dirty phone calls, unanswered message stumps peel off the wall. There are ghosts in these machines, and they're all ours. Play another game?

*Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs,* Dream Kitchen, *CD-ROM, programming Adam Hinshaw, sound Panos Couros, produced and developed with the support of the Australian Film Commission and in co-production with the Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada, with assistance from the Australia Council.*
http://sysx.org/dreamkitchen

# My viral lover

*Mitchell Whitelaw interviews Melinda Rackham*

*Can you explain how you came to make* Carrier?

There are a few sources for *Carrier*: firstly I have hepatitis C virus, and I wanted to redress the social invisibility of this serious health issue. The work also grew out of my research interests over the last 10 years; notions of identity, sexuality, attraction and repulsion, beauty and ugliness and the messy body.

*And the work has had a successful international life...*

Web work is of necessity international, as it lives out there on the global matrix. Yes it has been exhibited in gallery-based shows around the world including Japan, North America and Europe, and soon in South Africa and South America. The Australia Council assisted me to promote the work overseas, which has been quite effective.

*It's recently won the Faulding Award for Multimedia, a prize for writing in digital media. While there's a lot of writing in the piece, it's certainly not a straightforward text, or even a conventional hypertext. How do you feel about the work being treated as "writing"?*

For me the distinction between text and image is minimal. As a "net.artist" I see myself more akin to a filmmaker, but this also encompasses being a "writer." I construct a digital architecture which is in itself a text, whether the individual components contained within it are image, word, audio, quicktimes or VRML.

*The work involves an unusual mixture of modes: there are game-like elements with artificial agents and interactive dialogue, and this is combined with dense layers of visual material. But there's also a whole layer of straight "information" about Hep C. Can you talk about this mixture and your reasons for pursuing it?*

I work on the web because I'm interested in reaching the widest audience possible, and this requires that "information" be structured in differently accessible ways. Some users will want the scientific and medical information, while others want to play a Shockwave game, read the personal stories, or will be interested in the seductive textual elements, which all give "information" in a different way. I think the site is successful because there is a balance of navigation, viewing and content options; it simultaneously functions as an artistic work and a public resource.

Carrier *also makes a detailed exploration of viral immunobiology—and it seems that new media artists are increasingly taking on this kind of technoscientific conceptual material. What's the attraction here?*

I don't think one can work any more in cleanly divided disciplines, everything seems to be cross-pollinating everything else...Reading and researching texts from areas like immunobiology, or more recently quantum physics for my new multi-user VRML project *Empyrean*, is totally fascinating. It's science, it's science fiction, and it's as theatrical as soap-opera television.

*The work revolves around ideas of the virus—and it's a virus which is both biological and digital. Of course digital media have been rife with viruses for some time; the computer virus is a familiar figure. How is the virus in* Carrier *different, or the same?*

The carrier virus sHe is of transient and multiple gender, and is posited as our lover rather than an enemy to be destroyed with antiviral software or medication. We willingly enter into the relationship with sHe, as an exploratory partner, rather than a toxic and scary alien.

*And the work is very open in extending an erotic invitation; it wants to infect us, but not in a malicious way, more like a tight embrace. How do people respond to this invitation?*

Some people find it totally spooky, however most respond positively—with a sense of intimacy and immersion. When you think about it, a virus penetrating your cellular core is probably the most intimate relationship you can have with another species.

*In an essay on* Carrier *you question the romantic notion (from Roy Ascott) of the net's "telematic embrace". Does the work's intimacy involve a struggle with the medium?*

I work on the net and I love the net, however I am highly critical of the net as an artistic medium, and as a social mediator, and use *Carrier*'s perceived intimacy as a vehicle to address what intimacy now means. Is intimacy a shared viral illness with a group of people you have never met? Is intimacy built because the site asks you personal questions to which you must respond to continue viewing? Are we more intimate with our computers than our partners?

*Following that infection which the work invites, there's a viral line here which leads towards a radically altered sense of the self—of where our borders are and what can cross them. This changes a lot of things, like ideas of "sick" and "well." Is there a kind of radical viral identity-politics lurking under here?*

Binaries like "sick" and "well" are only useful to identify points in a spectrum of possibilities. The reality is that human bodies are composed of swarms of bacteria, viruses, and other organisms that we see as agents of illness, and don't acknowledge when we think of our bodies. Evolutionary biology posits that we only evolve with our illnesses, and that the difference and the diversity that comes from infection and contagion is what actually allows us to continue to proliferate and survive in a variety of environmental conditions on the planet. So we have to love our sicknesses, because in fact we are a conglomeration of diseases.

Carrier, *Melinda Rackham,*
www.subtle.net/carrier

## DIGITALshorts

"Macy Gray's album was recorded digitally but we don't call her a digital artist." Hear Mitchell Whitelaw, Chris Rose and international artist Vibeke Sorensen (see interview page 24) debate what a digital work should look and sound like at the Being Digital forum, presented by dLux media arts as part of the Sydney Film Festival, Dendy Martin Place, June 16, 2pm.

The ABC is launching a new website in July which explores the cultural and social implications of one of Australia's pivotal crimes, the 1960 abduction of Sydney schoolboy Graham Thorne by Stephen Lesley Bradley. Matthew Leonard from Radio-Eye and artist John Grech have collaborated to investigate possibilities for feature radio and documentary on the web using the non-linear nature of net material to explore the Thorne case. As Leonard comments, "it was this event which triggered cultural responses like the concept of 'stranger danger.'" Matthew Leonard, *leonard.matthew@a2.abc.net.au*

QPIX recently launched MediaSpace, its first public access digital laboratory, dedicated to encouraging Queensland-based new media artists and collaboration between the arts and sciences. Low cost access to workstations will be offered to artists working in hybrid artforms including dance, visual arts, film, music, theatre and writing. A number of artist-in-residency grants will be offered in the first year under the title *The Chinese Boxes Project*. Contact QPIX, tel 07 3392 2633, *www.qpix.org.au*

# *Parallax* resists cultural amnesia

***Mitchell Whitelaw***

***Parallax*** is a rare specimen, an anthology of locally crafted cultural criticism which tackles, among other things, digital media. Darren Tofts, correspondingly, is one of a handful of figures on the Australian scene to have established a profile as a theorist and critic of digital media. In the local context then, this slim compilation is bigger than it first appears—a too-rare indication of the emergence of a homegrown critical culture.

This is a collection of essays written between 1993 and 1999, many of which have been published in local venues such as *Mesh*, *World Art* and the sadly-missed *21C*; others come from conference presentations and lectures. That the material isn't brand new might disappoint voracious theory-junkies, though only the most avid would know all of these papers. The result is a compilation which demonstrates both the diversity and consistency of Tofts' concerns over the last half-decade or so.

That diversity is considerable, at least in terms of critical subject matter. Tofts takes on new media art, hypertext, the historical avant-garde, Joyce, Duchamp, Beckett, Bacon, digital imaging, Andres Serrano and Troy Innocent. In the process he touches on cybernetics, indeterminacy, the notion of expressiveness in painting, Baudrillard and *Star Trek* (to take a random sampling). The sum is not as inconsistent as it sounds; it manifests a set of specific focii and characteristic approaches. As the names above suggest, Tofts' work articulates the big guns of modernist literature and visual arts with a constellation of contemporary works, artists and cultural moments. This interweaving isn't an attempt to write the postmodern, digitised present into a solid modernist lineage; rather, as Tofts puts it, it seeks "uncanny parallels, incongruous juxtapositions and surprising fusions of ideas between the old and the new, the residual and the emergent." Tofts pitches the project as a corrective to that "digital orthodoxy" which tends to forget these historical parallels, resulting in "cultural amnesia."

The most prominent of the parallels runs between modernist art and literature and contemporary hypermedia—spanning hypertext, the web, and interactive media. So it is that in "Un Autre Coup de Dés. Multimedia and the Game Paradigm" French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé hangs out with cybernetician Norbert Wiener, *Myst* and the Residents' *Bad Day on the Midway*. The ways in which we wrestle narrative meaning from the indeterminate, entropic story-worlds of digital media are echoed, Tofts suggests, in the ways in which we read Mallarmé's nonlinear poetry. In "Hyperlogic, the Avant-Garde and Other Instransitive Acts", John Cage, Marcel Duchamp and James Joyce are brought together as practitioners of that interactive, nonlinear "hyperlogic" more often identified with high-tech hypermedia. The central, and well-supported assertion made in both these essays is that "hypermedia should be considered as an extension of the modernist avant-garde." Tofts isn't talking up new media here, in fact he's quite clear on the point that they "have a lot of catching up to do"; lagging in the shadows of modernist monoliths like *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*.

Tofts' assured literary scholarship underpins these parallel readings, but it also gets a few essays to itself in *Parallax*. "*Ulysses* Returns" is a detailed treatment of the troubled life of Joyce's tome; its many editions, corrections, editorial gaffes and presumptions, all striving for an authoritative, authorial master-text. Tofts good-naturedly points out the absurd contradictions here, as literary scholars scramble to tidy up, straighten out and nail down a work which is very clearly trying to resist such determination. He is more optimistic about a proposal for a hypertext *Ulysses* with multiple parallel versions of the text and additional multimedia ephemera—an appropriately Joycean labyrinth of interminable journeys. *Ulysses* returns again in "Parallatic Readings: Joyce, Duchamp and the Fourth Dimension", a tiny but engaging essay which constructs a kind of crypto-historical wormhole between Joyce's epic and its Duchampian equivalent: *The Large Glass*. What propels the essay is some fascinating literary detective work, beginning with a manuscript fragment in which Joyce's protagonist describes a work which seems to be *The Bride Stripped Bare*. This thread triggers Tofts' refiguring of *Ulysses* in which it comes to resemble Duchamp's collection of notes on *The Bride*, *The Green Box*, and explodes into a million interactive pieces.

Perhaps it's a subjective case of greener grass on the other side of the disciplinary fence, but I find Tofts' literary studies more interesting than his writing on new media. This may also have something to do with the fact that writing in this area, like the work, dates practically overnight. Tofts' "Your Place or Mine? Locating Digital Art" is from 1996, the year of the MCA's *Burning the Interface* exhibition—but here 4 years seems like 10 (remember CD-ROMs?). Of course this absurd time-dilation should be resisted wherever possible, and Tofts' historical perspective is valuable here. Certainly Nam June Paik, John Cage and Merce Cunningham are important precursors for the conceptual and practical concerns of contemporary digital media, and the importance of "the walk" in virtual spaces is prefigured in the ancient *ars memoria*. However Tofts stops short of following these historical contexts through into critical analysis. Not that he's pulling punches, necessarily: his writing seems to reflect a genuine enthusiasm for new media practice, together with an endorsement of some of its dominant drives. "The most likely and desirable outcome of the trajectory of the desktop to immersive, virtual spaces, is the creation of something that resembles the Holodeck on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*." Complete immersion in a seamless "apparent reality" is the unquestioned goal here—a trajectory which seeks a kind of digital literalisation of the overwhelming plenitude of a work like *Ulysses*.

Nowhere is Tofts' enthusiasm more apparent than in his writing on Troy Innocent. "Travelling to *Iconica*" is a glowing account of Innocent's work; Tofts hails the artist as perhaps digital animation's "first major exponent of the art of virtuality." Once again Tofts cheers on the drives which propel Innocent's work (in its quizzical way); immersive virtuality, interactivity, and artificial life. Of course enthusiastic support is preferable to the kind of muddle-headed non-engagement with which mainstream art criticism has greeted local new media work, but still, the pity is that Tofts' writing misses a chance to make some well-informed critiques and ask some curly questions. Is the local scene simply too small, or still too tenuous, to support robust critical exchange? While I'm not suggesting that Tofts' work falls into this category, there seems to be a kind of reverse-tall-poppy syndrome in effect, with an understanding that one just doesn't knock the work of one's friends and peers—at least not in public. For the health of the scene itself, I hope this changes.

*Darren Tofts*, Parallax: Essays on Art, Culture and Technology, *an interface book, Craftsman House, 2000, ISBN 90 5704 007 7*

# California Dreaming becoming a reality

***Kathy Smith***

***We see plenty of evidence of what George Lucas is up to now, but what's going on at the film school he went to in the 60s? What is now the Division of Animation and Digital Arts (in the School of Cinema-Television at the University of Southern California) sits poised at the intersection of Los Angeles' entertainment, multimedia, fine arts and cross-cultural communities. A program of historical and contemporary works from the school is being presented by dLux media arts at the 2000 Sydney Film Festival. The program, ranging from a gorgeous noir homage to the car in the city at night by the young George Lucas to the visual and technological experiments of today, has been selected by Susan Charlton (dLux Project Manager) for*** d.art 00, ***from a body of work proposed by the school.***

***I spoke to Vibeke Sorensen (Chair and Professor) and Mar Elepano (Program Director and Professor) from the school about the*** California Dreaming ***program, their own role as artists and the place of the school in the life of LA.***

Animated image of Mar Elepano from Yasuhiro Yamaguchi, *Reality Ends Here*, 1998

VS The works in *California Dreaming* largely reflect the great diversity of Los Angeles, a major metropolis which is highly international and multicultural. USC is physically located in the very heart of Los Angeles, next to downtown in South Central LA where some of the worst rioting took place in 1992. The films represent an alternative to what is typically portrayed by Hollywood. But this is changing. The demographic realities of Los Angeles have become a major political and cultural force winding its way into the mainstream. Therefore our program is both an alternative to Hollywood and an incubator for its evolving identity.

***The history of your own artwork, how is that playing itself out in your role at USC?***

VS I have in many ways found a home at USC. This is quite odd, as it is the school most closely associated with Hollywood and my work is far from the norm. This 'comfort level' has to do with the support I have had here for shaping our program into one which is international and multicultural. This is due to the fact that I have been a cross-cultural misfit myself…going back and forth between Scandinavia and the US…being a woman in what has traditionally been a male dominated field (computer animation), an artist working with scientists (before it was considered cool to do so), and developing new forms such as networked, improvised visual-music performances, physical-digital installation art and stereoscopic animation/virtual reality, all of which are considered highly untraditional forms of animation. USC is a research university, and many of the processes I have engaged in my work over the years are research areas of interest to colleagues in different departments…the research feeds directly into my teaching and so students have a chance to work in these areas as well.

ME It was only after graduation from USC in the 70s and after I started working as the manager of the school's film processing facility that I started to realise the importance and value of personal expression…in my case filmmaking…using what people call animation.

What happened was, as I was put in charge of processing student films, I realised how painful and difficult filmmaking is, especially personal filmmaking. As I learned my technical craft as a film processing technician I ruined a lot of students' films. I tried to make up for this atrocity by trying to learn faster and working a lot of extra hours to help students out. I was charged with the passion of a political activist who had no specific ideology. At the same time, I started making short films using the techniques of experimental animation. I would do 2 a year. I ended up with a body of work from the late 70s to the mid 80s. I realised 'I am a filmmaker' and this was paralleled with my contacts with the serious filmmakers in the school whose films I was ruining less and less.

The next breakthrough was my introduction and association with Visual Communications. This is the first and oldest Asian American Media Arts organisation in the US. I began to appreciate not just the ideologies but also their commitment to the community and their use of the moving image to revitalise it. I was invited to do animation workshops and this was the start of my politicisation. The memorable aspects of this ongoing journey are the pieces I helped kids create about the LA Upheaval (others call it a riot) in 92. I now feel very lucky to have met and worked with all these people. The moving image has gone beyond entertainment for me. I now fully understand its power to give a voice.

***Vibeke Sorensen and Mar Elepano are guests of the Sydney Film Festival. They will introduce 2 screenings of*** California Dreaming, ***June 12, 2.50pm & June 14, 3.15pm. Sorensen will also speak at the dLux media arts forum*** Being Digital, ***Dendy Martin Place, June 16, 2pm. An exhibition of*** California Dreaming ***digital prints and additional animations will be presented at Side On Gallery & Cinema, 83 Parramatta Road, Annandale, June 12 - July 1.***

***Kathy Smith is an Australian painter and animator who is artist in residence and lecturer at USC. She proposed and developed the*** California Dreaming ***program.***

# WriteSites: new manoeuvres

*Adrian Miles*

From Stuart Moulthrop's *Hegirascope*, Mark Amerika's seminal *Grammatron* and recent work that continues these traditions, web-based hypertext fiction has utilised simple time-based rules to produce interactive narratives. This has generally been achieved through the use of the refresh tag, where another URL is loaded after a nominated interval, producing narratives that literally move through time. On occasion this is performed in a quite linear manner, a work containing a 'passage' or 'corridor' of time-constrained nodes without links that then opens to a richly linked series of nodes (*Grammatron*), though it is also routinely used with links so that the reader is invited into a game of temporal cat and mouse, following a link before another screen displaces possible choices. Generally a work might use various combinations of these, and it is the structural patterns that these produce that in many ways determine the linearity, temporality, and interactivity of any hypertext work.

This animation of screens, whether image or text-based, allows a work to have rhythms that ebb and flow with a reading, liberating the work from the author's subjection to a reader's whimsy, while allowing the reader that allotment of choice that guarantees the illusion of freedom. However, Moulthrop's work in *Reagan Library* introduces quite a different temporal trope. Here is a work that does not utilise meta refresh tags to produce a machine-based reading time, instead it uses what is known as state information (always quite difficult to do in the stateless protocol utilised by the web) through javascript to react to an individual reading.

In *Reagan Library* narrative closure is produced through a duration within the work that is defined by the negotiation of entropy and redundancy performed by the reader and the work. Rather than the reader recognising cycling narrative episodes and so deciding that they know 'enough' to finish, or surrender—a common strategy in much hypertext fiction—this work performs this redundancy on itself. Each screen starts out as almost abstract sentence collages, with pockets of sense, and as you read they coalesce, over time, into more stable units. Here the apparent disorder that many naïve readers claim for hypertext, a disorder due to the opaqueness of the structuring rhythms within any work, is not contained within the architecture of links, but within the time of the reading transcribed into the very spaces themselves. While this time of reading is marked by this evolving text, a series of QTVR panoramas form a part of every screen, providing a topographically consistent navigational interface.

The QTVR lets *Reagan Library* explore the architectonics of multi-linearity through a writing with noise, entropy, and negentropy. The consistency of the landscape allows the variability of the text to become more visible, and this is why the use of a panorama with 'hotspots' is more than mere fancy. The panoramas provide a navigable 3 dimensional space where pages can be visited by clicking on their eponymous objects. In turn, following a text link loads a page with the panorama which is the view from that geographical location, so the reader has, in fact, 2 methods of reading. One is spatial and concrete, the other is textual and abstract. Through these panoramas Moulthrop is not only exploring spatial metaphors in narrative, but expanding the relation of image to word. There is a well formed irony between the stability of the fictional visual world and its contradistinction to the permeability of the textual universe. The images are plainly imaginary (the Bryce generated landscapes tilt their collective caps significantly towards *Myst* and *Riven*) yet retain much more stability than the text, which in its turn appears as a series of fragmentary asides, personal reminiscences, observations and self reflexive aphorisms. In other words, the text reads like a typically interstitial postmodern fiction and so manages an ironical sense of historical or diegetic truth, while the images are of an imaginary world, yet concrete in their discursive permanence.

The world defined and produced by *Reagan Library* is one where the reader is unable to return to a space, where hypertextual repetition becomes a play of difference, a continual question of subtle variation. Within this world *Reagan Library* combines history, criticism, and self reflexive irony to meld a narrative that takes well aimed bites at both the self appointed keepers of a literary heritage and those who misread the vicissitudes of hypertext as merely the opportunity to turn a trick.

This is a work that is almost Oulipean in intent, but rather than operate as a rule governed combinatorial engine, *Reagan Library* probes the relation of reading and game playing, and explores the boundary between image and text based diegetic worlds, demonstrating that writing's electronic future is less about textual pyrotechnics than a refiguring of words into other narrative spaces.

Reagan Library, *Stuart Moulthrop*, http://raven.ubalt.edu/staff/moulthrop/hypertexts/RL/

*Adrian Miles teaches hypertext theory and practice at RMIT, available at* http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/

# Exposing an emerging genre

*Kaz Madigan*

Archiving Imagination *is an accumulating exhibition of online projects. On the surface, the viewer is drawn in to read both the technical nuances and literary ideas inherent in the text and imagery but these also foreground the collaborative objectives of the artists. Aside from individual works on the site, writer/web-author Diane Caney and digital media artist Robin Petterd have creatively documented both their meetings and thought processes about the nature of collaboration itself. Poetry, hypertext, sound, video, imagery, diary entries and email correspondence are mixed in a way not easily possible before the internet and this is the artists' aim; to expose an emerging genre.*

*A synchronised collaboration is often sought by writers and other artists in an effort to create, extend and support new ideas. I asked Caney and Petterd if they viewed collaboration as a strength of working in digital media in comparison to conventional media forms.*

RP Maybe…new media and media arts generally require collaboration as part of the process.

DC Yes, as with filmmaking, I think new media often needs people with different skill bases, and yes I see it as a strength, but I do think that people have been desiring an artform with which to collaborate (especially across media) for a long time. Musicians, poets, technicians, software developers, writers, artists, filmmakers can all now work on projects which emphasise the projects themselves rather than foregrounding any particular 'genius' involved.

*The combination of technical and artistic/literary skills is plainly evident in* Archiving Imagination. *But I wondered why you choose to focus on the actual idea of collaboration as a subject in itself…*

DC Working collaboratively certainly moves us away from our individual creative practice, but it also developed out of my research into Patrick White and Sidney Nolan and the ways in which their artwork enmeshed. I really became fascinated by image and words intersecting and producing transient new meanings but…it really just began with Robin taking away some hypertext I'd written and making *Imaginative Reading V*. After that I was hooked by the actuality of collaborating as well as the idea of it!

*The site itself utilises an understated interface using white backgrounds to accentuate meanings in the text while gently inviting the viewer to interpret and make 'sense' of the work. I felt the artists had provided 'space' and had confidence in my hypertext choices. This is confirmed in the diary section which points out that the artists intended to place the viewer in a "fictive space" and "distance them." As much of the web can be bossy in interface design, what was behind the decision to give the viewer space.*

RP I looked at this the opposite way. I don't think we set out to make things that are not bossy. What we may have set out to do is introduce ambiguity into the interactions. Ambiguity is a common way of working in the visual arts, but not as common a method in interactive media. People seem so focused on the 'interface' and the ease of use, that they forget that art doesn't need to follow those rules, and perhaps the most interesting interactive art doesn't follow the rules of interface design.

DC There was a definite decision to sometimes use non-linear navigation, which tends to give readers a sense of freedom from manipulation…I hope. As a writer I certainly began writing in a less linear fashion, although I probably didn't develop this skill as quickly as Robin might have liked. I love fictive spaces and I always want to lure my readers away from too much analysis of the text…of what's going on. As to the 'distancing', much of my writing is about personal stuff and because that can feel overwhelming and suffocating, I wanted to distance readers, but that was more from a writer's point of view, not so much from the position of someone creating interactive media.

*Irina Dunn of the NSW Writers Centre has written that "web technology will remain insubstantial until writers specialised in the artform begin to make their contribution and create an audience for the medium." What type of audience are you seeking to create for your work?*

RP The artist/writer audience is a difficult question. I often feel that it's driven by concern to apply marketing to the process of producing the works. I think these sort of comments are also driven by people who are unsure of media and are maybe scared of technology. But as I'm working I do generally have a person in mind to whom the work talks and as an artist I know that my work online is visited by more people than it would be if it was in galleries.

DC I tend to agree with Irina. I haven't liked a great deal of what has been labelled 'hypertext' on the web. And I don't see the point of simply transcribing poems which might be published in hardcopy onto a web page and thinking that the transcription is, in itself, anything amazing. It's legitimate. I publish my poems in that form online. But, it will be as writers embrace the possibilities of the web that substantial things in writing will emerge. A piece called *SURFACE*, which is a collaboration of ours, is a good example. In it, Robin makes the words ripple and sparkle, stand still and disappear, and he accompanies them with one small moving illustration, an almost whimsical reference to the fact that words do conjure images and vice versa. You can see it at: *http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/frame/level2/petterd.html*

*Is* Archiving Imagination *an ongoing project…sort of open ended?*

DC Yes. All the works are in a sense unfinished. But that's because readers will always make of them what they will. Robin and I hope to do more on the works that are still there. We're giving a presentation at trAce's conference, *INCUBATION*, and the online piece we're making for that will add to *Archiving Imagination*. It will be a meta-narrative which traces the formations of our existing online stories/semi-autobiographies/fictocriticisms in innovative ways and also addressing questions about narrative, intertextuality and the blurring of text/image/sound boundaries as they occur on the web. We're looking forward to making that. And we'd also like to rework our first ever piece, *Imaginative Reading V*, to make it less linear.

Archiving Imagination, *Diane Caney & Robin Petterd*, www.archiving.com.au

*Kaz Madigan is a writer, web artist and bandweaver currently serving as a mentor for the trAce International Online Writing Community*

# Between definition & practice in Canadian art

*Lisa Colley*

In April 1999, Claude Schryer (electroacoustic composer and musician) was commissioned with the task of reviewing the Interdisciplinary Work and Performance Art Program at the Canada Council where he found himself faced with intriguing questions:

*What is performance art and interdisciplinary work? Are there other artistic practices that don't fit these categories? Who are the stake-holders of this community? What are its weaknesses, opportunities, threats? Who is the audience? How are technologies affecting the creation and dissemination of these practices? How do contemporary interdisciplinary and performance art practices position themselves in an increasingly transcultural world?*

Sound familiar? These questions were also resonating throughout the artistic community. Hence the call by Guy Laramee (interdisciplinary artist and panel member for the Canada Council) for artists to register interest in a Conference on Interdisciplinary Art Practices in Canada. The conference was sponsored by the Canada Council and over 100 artists travelled from all over Canada to attend.

The final report written by Claude Schryer was completed in November 1999 and the new programs announced at the same time. The conference became an opportunity to disseminate and discuss new directions and for the artistic community to further debate the issues raised in the review process. I was invited to lend an Australian perspective, the New Media Arts Fund having been through a lengthy process of review and debate leading to its formal establishment as a Fund in July 1998. I was then invited by the Canada Council to attend the first meeting of the new Inter-Arts Panel and to discuss lessons learnt over the last few years. This coincided with the conference in Montreal and it was a unique opportunity to get an overview of Canadian artists' concerns and work.

Guy Laramee posed a series of questions to the presenters and these became the focus of the event:

*Should we look at the interdisciplinary as a mixture of artforms, or rather as genre-traversing throughlines? Is interdisciplinary art a recent phenomenon or is it an undifferentiated primeval space, a necessary condition for any artistic expression? How does one become an interdisciplinary artist?*

There were no conclusions drawn. However I came away with a range of new perspectives on the same questions we are asking here in Australia, and some observations about the similarities and differences in the Canadian experience.

photo Francois Bergeron

As in Australia, the diversity of practice is extraordinary: the participants ranged from established artists to emerging, covering performance, installation, site specific and ecological work, sound, film... It is interesting that artists working in *media arts* (as they are termed in Canada) were under-represented at this gathering. In Australia there is more crossover with artists working in new technologies.

There was a very strong theme running through the conference of artists working from a political activist base, on interventions in communities, on environmental projects, and with first nation peoples. There was also an active contingent who claim the term performance artist and refuse the term interdisciplinary. This was a much stronger debate than I have heard in Australia, where the term performance art is not in such common usage.

The keynote was given by Dr Ron Burnett, President of Emily Carr Institute. His presentation was both challenging and accessible. He proposed and introduced the term *transdisciplinary* as appropriate to the work being discussed. Transdisciplinary is not to be confused with interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary, both of which remain linked to "the framework of disciplinary research"..."for people involved in transdisciplinary research, nothing is sacred." (The full text of this paper can be found at *www.eciad.bc.ca/~rburnett essays.html*.) From then on, the terminology debate raged and it was only when we turned to the work of artists on the panel that connections were made about the nature of practice across disciplines.

It was clear from the discussions that artists in Canada and Australia share many of the same concerns, in particular that funding bodies define the nature of the work artists are undertaking and put the work in boxes. There was a passionate plea to keep performance art as a separate category while others argued that labels were meaningless and the focus should be on making the old disciplines more rigorous.

I can only briefly touch on the artists who spoke as there were over 35 presentations: New York artist Devora Neumark peeling beetroot outside her burnt apartment, talking with the neighborhood as part of her grieving process made into art; Dulcinea Langfelder on her greatest flop, a performance work based on ice hockey that the ice hockey fans loved and the art world hated; Pam Hall from St. Johns Newfoundland, artist in residence in the Faculty of Medicine at Memorial University for 2 years, now working on a national project exploring issues of justice in Canadian Fisheries (*www.med.mun.ca/ artistinresidence*); Nancy Blecks' photo documentation from the *Witness project*, beautiful tracts of rainforest one day, woodchips the next. (All the presentations and contact details for the participants will be published. For more information, email Guy Laramee at *INTER2000mtl@aol.com*.)

The new programs of the Canada Council had been released by the time the conference took place and there was generally a very good response from participants. The programs are now structured under a new section called Inter-Arts with categories for Performance Art/Interdisciplinary work and New Artistic Practices.

Schryer concludes in his report:

*Contemporary artists in general and visual and media artists in particular are constantly shifting, mixing and questioning conventions, concepts, procedures and structures. As Danielle Boutet points out in her article [which is part of the report],"Reflections on Interdisciplinary Practices in Canada", artists rarely agree on any single definition: they tend rather to think in terms of materials, media and contexts, continually seeking the best material and formal strategies for carrying out their intentions. In a sense the Inter-Arts office is both a transition zone towards expansion of disciplinary boundaries and a barbour for emerging and experimental interdisciplinary artistic practices.*

(The full text of the report is available through the Canada Council website at *www.canadacouncil.ca*. Claude Schryer is the Inter-Arts Officer.)

The Inter-Arts panel met for the first time in late February and the quality of projects was inspiring, as it is here in Australia. The next few years will see how this program evolves...hopefully we will now have an increased dialogue between our 2 countries. I gave a short presentation and pointed them to the *RealTime* and ANAT websites as excellent windows to the work being undertaken in Australia, so expect an increased level of contact from your Canadian colleagues.

The conference ended with an outdoor performance event by Toronto artists Randy & Berenicci which involved the release of large helium balloons with radios attached broadcasting in different languages. A lasting image of my time in Canada will be the gradual disappearance into snow laden clouds of these balloons speaking *alternately* in French and English.

*L'espace Traverse: Conference on Interdisciplinary Practices in Art, a national event held in Montreal, Canada, February 24-27*

*Lisa Colley is Manager of the New Media Arts Fund of the Australia Council for the Arts.*

# Das Arts: training for the theatre of the future

*Rachael Swain*

During 1999 I spent 2 seasons as a 'participant' at Das Arts, a small international school for experienced artists in advanced research in interdisciplinary arts practice. Das Arts is situated in Amsterdam west in the wonderful environment of De Wester Gas Fabriek, a huge ex-industrial site which now houses a number of arts facilities, companies and festivals. The school is a cluster of studios, editing and research facilities, and works of art, huddled around 'Cloisters', the school's social, administrative and culinary heart.

Das Arts is an extraordinary, well-funded venture of the Dutch government where a vision to "train the artists of today and tomorrow by the artists of yesterday and today" was handed to a committee of practicing artists and producers. The result was a tiny school for up to 10 participants at a time, a school with no curriculum and very open structure based on the concept of mentorship and belief in the moral power of art. This "circus" (as he lovingly names it) has been led through its first 7 years by the wonderful vision of Ritsaert ten Cate, who previously founded and directed the Mickery Theater in Amsterdam. This year, the reins are being taken by Alida Leslo; coming from her role as director of De Nieuwe Amsterdam, a multicultural undergraduate school with a strong focus on dance.

The school's structure, like many of the great things in life, is both complicated and simple. With a stated aim of training artists who will create 'the theater of the future' it completely reinvents itself twice a year. The choice of no curriculum allows the school to create itself in response to the developing sociopolitical and artistic climate and through the vision of 2 mentors, a number of guest artists and the participants themselves. Each block is 'curated' by guest mentors who are selected by the director of the school from a talented pool of international avant-garde artists and others who have been influential in the development of current international performance practice.

The mentors are asked to curate a block based on a field they are investigating at the time. They invite guest artists and experts, plan field trips both national and international, and devise provocations for the participants to fuel the constant process of "performative response" developed by Das Arts. This structure places responsibility on each participant to constantly process the vast amount of stimulating input into their chosen medium and via their personal experience. The school provides its own studios, audio, video, film and production management resources. Due to the number of disciplines being practiced, each participant is also given a budget for hiring equipment or conducting whatever research is necessary to the particular development of their own work or group projects, in response to the content of the block.

Das Arts strides boldly into the inherent paradox of teaching a person how to be an artist or create a work of art; both structure and anti-structure are apparent at every turn within the school's make up. A double edged inward/outward gaze is fostered, encouraging the participant to navigate both very personal territory and the complexity of the world in which we live.

The first block I attended in the winter/spring of 99 was "Reconciliation and Storytelling", drawing deeply on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and on the storytelling traditions of South Africa. This block was a harrowing walk through a nation's process of reconciliation, a look in the face of gross violations of human rights, of the vagaries of truth (forensic and emotional), the human cost of lies and the simple power of storytelling, whatever form it might take. Guest teachers from South Africa, including ANC leaders, exiled writers, an elderly Zulu poet, singers and dancers, led the 10 participants from Eastern and Western Europe, South Africa and Australia.

The second block titled 'Performance, Food and Cookery' was mentored by director and Performance Studies wiz Richard Gough and Art Historian Rob Berands employing what we eat—the ceremonies surrounding it, how food marks our sameness and our difference, its mythic and symbolic importance, the joy of plenty, the fear of famine and deprivation—as occasions for reflection. A fabulous 'performance kitchen' was created in one of the studios complete with mini-restaurant and video screen. Here the participants (from Croatia, Serbia, Italy, Germany, South Africa, Romania and the Netherlands) brought a wealth of artistic and culinary traditions to the collaborative table.

Finding your way amidst the constant stream of stimulating material, dialogue and other artists' processes, and at the same time exploring the edge of your own practice, is not an easy matter. The most profound thing about being there was to be watched in practice, in a probing, informed and personal way; to talk and be given feedback one artist to another, one participant to another, something I fear we shy away from here in Australia. As an established practitioner used to creating large and complex projects, it was both confronting and liberating to be in a carefully facilitated environment where I could get lost. Letting go of tools I rely on to get me through projects, taking other kinds of risks (more personal than I usually allow myself) or experimenting in other media.

Such a dynamic and educational model providing a quality of mentorship to a few students is a rare and precious thing in today's world. There are days when I wonder how long it can exist even in the comparative generosity of northern European arts funding. I only hope that from Das Arts' focus on quality, risk, sociopolitical and artistic climates and personal exploration, ripples will spread along with those artists who will define the theatre of the future.

*For more information on Das Arts, visit their website* www.dasarts.nl *or email* dasarts@dasarts.nl

*Rachael Swain is director of Stalker and a long term intercultural project, The Marrugeku Company. Marrugeku is currently in rehearsal for its second production* Crying baby *which is being created in Sydney and Arnhem Land this year. Rachael was funded by the Gloria Payten and Gloria Dawn fellowship to attend Das Arts in 1999.*

# The city dead and undead

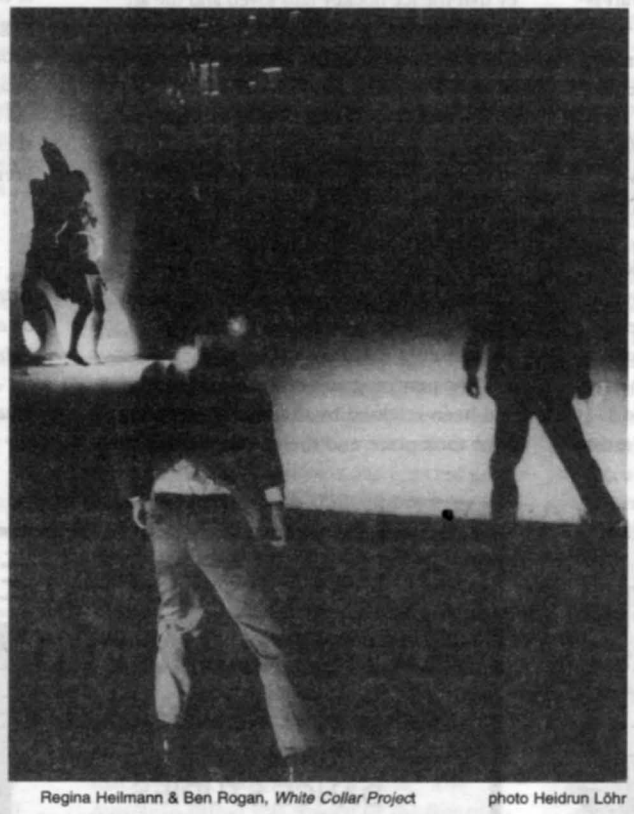
*Stephen Armstrong*

We're at the Coronation Hotel and 20 minutes after stepping into the lift we're still in transit. At first we think the performance has begun—but it's not intended: we're stuck between floors. After comedy comes relief: the company is good; no-one has acute claustrophobia; no-one's busting for a pee; and the smoker isn't pushing the point. A funny face peers through a grill at our feet (drop to your knees to see and it's like *Being John Malkovich*) repeating in a funny voice: *everything will be alright*. This is not a lift mechanic, it is an artist—and yet there is comfort in that…*culunk* and we're travelling again, on the up and up.

Add 39 steps and we've reached the roof-top, perched like Christopher Robin on his landing, neither half way up nor down the steep face of the city. Much taller buildings hem us on 2 sides, at the open ends the landing is secured by a chest-high ledge. There is a kind of mezzanine for the operatives and speakers and lights and projectors and all the ectopics of performance humming along with the building's external organs.

Sound swims about in shifting currents: *red city/dead city, new city/blue city*. A woman contorts on the ledge—she meets a very green apple with deep red lips. Above her, the city's posture is projected onto a dull, vast, light-soaking wall: red and blue projections of revolving doors giving way to sharp, structural plains which tilt—and your head with them as you try to get a fix on things. A pair of red shoes, stepped out of and abandoned at the ledge's edge.

The 3 performers traverse the space—like salmon returning to spawn, clownishly desperate but no less bent for that—and we divide before them like water. Twisted dances of routine and personality plundered. One man searches for a shape to enter the city gates; like the Greeks he must disguise his desire to enter Troy. Another escapes his desk to become Kong, conqueror of the tower block and starlet's heart. A woman is boxed by her own image. Lovers are separated before they've met. Anxious bodies tell anxious stories, conjure giant shadows, make an epic of their fiction of entrapment.



Regina Heilmann & Ben Rogan, *White Collar Project* photo Heidrun Löhr

The performance is now down there as well as here. The collared queue waiting for a bus couldn't give a toss about the affecting performance happening on their pavement directed up at us. The smooth images on the wall seem small and puny (restricted by laws, no doubt). These images and sounds bring back Brack, Gilliam, de Mille, Kafka, Lang, Sennett, Anderson, Scott, classical de-humanity and CBD doom.

Once upon a time there was a city whose haunted inhabitants, the dead and the undead, could not tell themselves apart.

Leaning over the edge to watch, you notice how the tarmac washes between the trunks of buildings like a dark, hunted river. Spin your head upwards. The metal and concrete towers are wrapped about with life and light, rushing head first into an empty sky, filling it with evening office workers, security guards, cleaners, tenants and prowlers.

Lying on our backs, we are treated to a story and a beautifully sung lament: "I just escaped the cathedral of labour/and straightened my no-iron shirt."

Looking up, we can see them. Someone is standing by the window of a room on the 16th floor of an adjacent building and she is staring down at our strange assembly. She has no thought of jumping and knows herself too well from the dead.

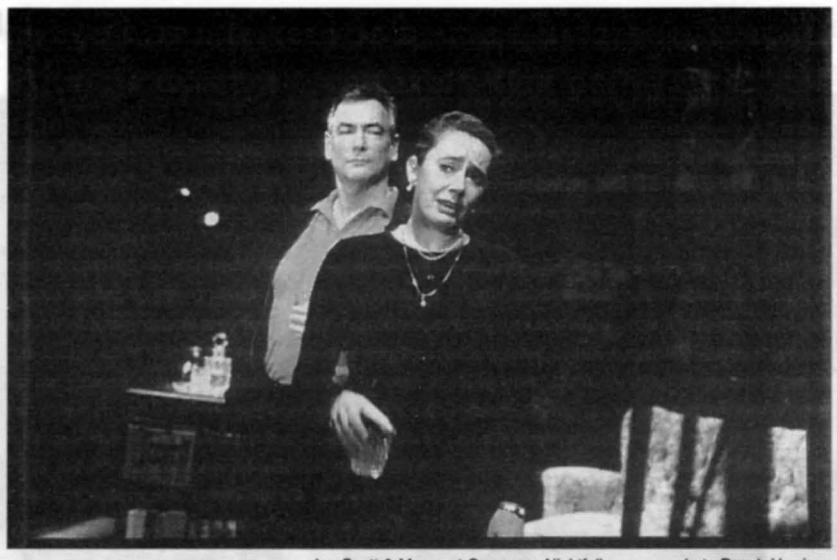
White Collar Project, *creators Caitlin Newton-Broad & Gail Priest, video artist & design Samuel James, technological concepts Shane Wynter, performers Regina Heilmann, Ben Rogan & Drew Fairley, rooftop Coronation Hotel, Sydney, April 26-30*

*Stephen Armstrong is Artistic Associate of the Sydney Theatre Company.*

# The other side of *Nightfall*

***Virginia Baxter***

*The production of Joanna Murray-Smith's play* Nightfall *directed by Jenny Kemp premiered at Playbox in November last year and was six weeks into its season at the Sydney Theatre Company when I spoke to Ian Scott and Margaret Cameron who play the central roles of Edward and Emily Kingsley.* Nightfall *concerns an upper middle-class couple whose daughter Cora has mysteriously left home with no explanation. She has been gone for a number of years when the Kingsleys are visited by Kate Saskell (Victoria Longley) a go-between who has come to prepare the way for Cora's possible return. I asked Ian and Margaret to elaborate on the construction of their remarkable performances.*



Ian Scott & Margaret Cameron, *Nightfall* photo Ponch Hawkes

MC The approach to the play for me was a matter of the whole body physically listening. The listening body is like an animal…you can get caught, suspended, you're hunting the sense and the emotional sense. Jenny Kemp is a very good director for me in that she loves to see that. If you get stranded halfway, held in space, Jenny's in a state of delight because it's dangerous. She credits the invisible world. She understands it as present. Joanna's text, it's like a score. There's beat, pause and silence. And there's dot dot dot and dash and they are absolutely accurate—except she's prepared to shift them around if, after trying everything, they can't be spoken.

IS The words dry up but something else keeps going and I've realised that there's a whole world there in those dots where you can be observing someone or your face carries the thought. More than any other plays I've done, I think this sort of writing can produce some wonderful performances where there are no words.

MC That's going on all the time in these characters. Emily goes into a place where she can't talk. It's as if the play's a grid and there are references going all the time to things that can't be said.

IS If you took a negative of all those pauses and put them out on paper you would have another map, another text through the play. There's a lot of things that Ed says like "what is it you're... Just say what it is you're insinuating…where did this all..." And I can't…Ed can't actually use words because they fix it and he can't have that happen.

*That inability to speak is expressed physically—for instance, I became aware of all the little muscles along the side of your jaw. Dale Ferguson's design pretty much locks you into a small square surrounded by the outside dark. How do you respond to the physical confines of the space.*

IS You think of it as a technical thing that you can't occupy a place and stay there because the emotions or the unfolding will project you into different places—Jenny was very conscious that it has to arrive naturally. So then you realise other things are important, that you can use your back to the audience, that you *can* be in a position where you're uncomfortable...

MC You know that your whole body is being read, wherever it is. You are completely visible. There's also the wonderful exaggeration of the in and the out. Because Cora may be out there in the garden, it feels like an amphitheatre and you're able to have double faces. You present one face inside the living room and then you turn to the audience and go, "What is she talking about?" So the audience is in the place of reading the inner feelings of the characters when they're looking out.

*Is that written into the script?*

MC It's written into the design, I think, and the direction.

IS I think of moments of stillness and the moment in the play when Kate starts telling us that Cora has been depressed and she's revealing bits and pieces of information. The room goes almost deathly still.

MC Every single night, the whole theatre goes…

IS And we're still too because…

MC …silent.

IS Receiving that information and being victims of Kate's knowledge produces a kind of paralysis. When that breaks, we say things like, let's get this thing back on the road... and we all have trigger points. One of Ed's is to get up and tell a story and rebel against the visitor. The stories become physical escapes. Sometimes those things follow in a predictable fashion but there are unusual moments like when Emily hits Ed. It is written in a very detailed fashion but there is something else there that takes over despite the way it's written. It's a particular form of physical moment.

MC The play starts right on an edge but then it's actually something that needs to be held and contained and contained and contained. You can't break out of its parameters or it loses resonance. It doesn't hold. And formally speaking, you have to hold and hold and hold. You never really go for the dramatic moment. You just hold form. Then it... just right at the very end, it breaks. Emily is trapped behind the couch and she does this elision. Her lines are "I I felt less than nothing. I can tell you I wanted to vanish." The audience might think that she's answering the question "What was it that Cora remembered?" but she's not, she's eliding under emotional pressure into just talking. Structurally, if it dips emotionally too strongly anywhere else, you lose that break. And it's a very subtle breaking point. So the drama leaks, it leaks out of the structure if you don't play it muscularly.

*Is the performance fixed, does it vary much?*

IS It's one of the tightest shows I've ever done.

MC But the personal physicality I find shifts around depending on how the emotional graph of that particular evening goes.

*Can you describe the emotional graph?*

MC It begins and that's all I know really. And I know I must have a particular cocktail ready—Emily's cocktail; her emotional physical world is adrenalin, huge expectation and capping and locking a terrible fear that things might not be all right. It's a paradox she starts with, an expectation equalled by a massive fear. And they're balancing each other. That's her place. And she keeps and keeps working towards the belief that Cora will come in that door any moment. She's sincerely trying to help Kate, she's doing all that sort of thing and the pressure will shift me around emotionally. So that if on any particular evening there might be a point reached in the graph, which is a little bit unexpected or the intensity is less than last night, what happens is that it goes somewhere underneath—it'll curve around and sort of push you in another sequence. So you're playing the essentials every night but where they occur is very volatile and moveable.

It's quite frightening to perform. At certain pitches in the thing when you're going along, like when you say to me what this woman is actually thinking, Emily's response is silence, then "But that is…but…look Miss Saskell, look, I understand that you are,"—she goes somewhere else—"you are concerned for Cora,"—she goes walking into the unknown all the time—"but if this is, if Cora said, if that is true…"—and I find it hard to… you've got all this uh-uh-uh stuff going on all the time. You're swallowing like that all the time. You're swallowing the language and at a certain point, you'll have a spot where it just goes pchwew! And you get a chance to respond.

IS In the end it all comes out.

MC There's a lot of burping going on. I swallow all this air.

IS The moment when you hit Ed, and from your point of view, there's a release; but also for the audience a sense of relief that…

*…that a sentence has been completed.*

MC There's been a break.

*It's a very powerful moment.*

MC It's also very impotent. She only enacts it. It's not the actual break. The pain gets visible but it's not resolved. Then begins the lie. Is she telling the truth—or is she just trying to get Cora back? In the first scene, Emily says "Imagine ripping down the walls." I'm going pitter patter on Ed's chest and then I turn and the whole house tilts and I see the walls of the suburban house gone and I'm just floating in orbit. From then on, for me the play becomes very, very abstract. I'm actually working in an amphitheatre then, not in a living room set. Right out. Right out. At the very end of the play I try to use this. I empty my mind as if to say to the audience: my mind is the theatre, it is a space for your imagination. Whatever you can imagine is here. I am empty now so what do you see? Whatever you see is possible. This transaction really to me is what the play is about.

*What's your relationship with Elizabeth Drake's score?*

IS I say "You know I had a dream last night, that I had been living in a world without sound." I use it to quieten her but when I think of the way the sound is used in the production, I think of that story, "I wondered for a moment if this was death—to be somehow conscious but without feeling"… "Then the noise started, earth music." The pulsing of the sound through the play is a bit like the mind see-sawing, the inner things that need to come out and the outer world sort of changing places until finally one wins.

MC It creates a fantastic listening. It actually enables the play to go a bit abstract towards the end I think. It pulls the walls of the living room down to way outside the theatre. Because it amplifies the listening, and the silence, it is possible then to become very intimate vocally at certain points. The voice can become really, you can really do things in a kinaesthetic way.

IS I think it tunes the audience.

MC You can touch people almost because the voice does. It goes into the body. Because it shifts around the listening air, you're able to touch that. And it is also possible to locate the audience towards the end of the play. Sometimes I have this feeling, as Emily, coming up front saying all that stuff, I see people, after that breaking point with the hitting, I see someone sitting forward like this and I think, do you need me to say this? I will say this for you. There's a transference that goes on. It's possible to be very plain with this text. Just to say it. Just-to-say-it. And I found that from the beginning just-to-read-it. Just to say it.

*Is this because it is a very good piece of writing for performance?*

MC I do think it is well written and there's a certain thing in Jenny Kemp's angle on it, her a priori position that the unconscious is territory. It is. And it is a landscape and it involves travel and it has treachery and it dips and there is an underworld, an under-world. It's almost like this play meeting that idea and not much more has to be done. When you're with a person, a certain transmission goes on. So there has been a transmission of Jenny Kemp's consciousness, mine and Ian's and Victoria's. We participate. I love the fact that the characters are intelligent, that they see themselves but that they're also poised on this little pivot where the drama has to take place and the stakes are high. To fall off is to drown in a whole lot of feeling. And I'm fascinated by the capacity to play that little pivot and observe and just keep observing it.

IS Kate has a line—"This is normal, don't you realise" It reminds you that in the everyday, people say "this is normal." Wonderful films like *American Beauty* and *Happiness* uncovering things which were always regarded as the things that you didn't talk about; they deal with ideas with such openness and they're having the success they deserve. This is a play which takes those ideas and deals with them in a similar way. We have to find new ways to look at manners or morality or social behaviour and conventions. There's something really strong there. At the end of the millennium, these works point us towards a new way or thinking or working, a new kind of art which actually is bypassing the blockbuster.

*What does it feel like to walk around with this play inside you?*

IS It's a kind of a burden that's carried. There are some plays that leave you completely exhausted but refreshed.

MC You can't really rest because you have to begin again that night. There's a certain amount of emotional courage we all bring to it. It's not as though in your resting you can retreat into a kind of inertia. You actually…I can feel in me just a little bit of a gulp going on all day. A little bit of a gulp—it has to be considered again this evening. And it really is *considered again* because there are unknowns.

IS It's a constant kind of grappling with this thing and trying to find the way to be true to yourself, to know when to get angry, when to give in, to sleep, to know when to get up and do something else…

MC It's a physical task, athletic. You look at someone who's training and they do this gigantic run, their stomach is gone when they get to that line. Sometimes I've come downstage and looked at my body and it's hollowed out from holding it, for this tiny voice to come out.

IS You try to use all the actor's training but you can't be stress free when you're going into these sorts of territories. I suppose what you do is try to minimise the damage and to be as aware as you can. Particular parts of the body are affected. When I come off, my back…I think it's standing behind the sofa when Emily's confessing—I come off and my back…

MC I come off panting.

IS So we're both on wheat grass and guarana... No. 17 from the Kings Cross Juice Stop.

MC I feel sick at the thought of doing it again tonight.

LAUGHTER

Nightfall, *Playbox & the Sydney Theatre Company, Wharf Theatre, opened April 12*

# Saved from the eternal purgatory of development

*Suzanne Spunner*

Each year hundreds of scripts come to Playbox for assessment. Currently they have 13 playwrights under commission and 18 more whose work is receiving development support. It must be a daunting task to sift through these scripts, so the decision to create a season within a season and produce 5 new works for ostensibly the cost of one was a sensible, commendable and possibly heroic one. *Inside 2000* was billed as "five plays, five directors, six actors and forty five roles, one space—brace yourself." They were rehearsed in a carefully calculated timetable over 7 weeks and presented in a repertory format with a new play opening each week.

In the midst of the season I spoke with coordinating director Tom Healey, designer Greg Clarke and some of the writers and directors, and it was very clear that the initiative has been gratefully embraced by the writers and their directors, who were usually well-established collaborators. Playbox audiences had responded enthusiastically and the works had been well received; nobody expressed frustration with the breakneck speed and all were positive about the ensemble feel that had developed within the creative team, and the spin off stimulation of being exposed to each other's work. The writers in particular were happy to be included fully in the rehearsal process and to have their advocate, the passionate and benevolent Healey, at the helm. Healey spoke of the problem for so-called "emerging writers" in Victoria since the demise of the middleground companies and spaces, where the choice has contracted to La Mama or Playbox, with the Playbox spots taken up by established and bankable writers and La Mama offering opportunities for the genuinely emergent. The rest languish in the eternal purgatory of "development."

The 5 works were diverse with different development histories. Jodi Gallagher's *Elegy*, Samantha Bews' *So Wet* and Gabrielle McDonald's *Like a Metaphor* had already been through development with Playbox's *Theatre in the Raw*, which offers dramaturgical support and a rehearsed reading. Pam Leversha's *Violet Inc* has been developed outside Playbox, the first part produced 5 years ago by $5 Theatre Co and the second part commissioned by Branch Theatre Co who were co-producers.

Margaret Mills, *Like a Metaphor*, photo Jeff Busby

Campion Decent's *Baby X* premiered at Belvoir Street Theatre during Mardi Gras (see RealTime 36, "Sampling the Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras, p10) and for the Playbox production had a new production with different director and cast. With the exception of *Baby X*, directorial and dramaturgical relationships with the writers were well established before *Inside 2000*. It is imperative in a season of new work with such tight rehearsal periods that development be completed beforehand and the creative team have a strong investment in the piece to withstand the rigours of the schedule. *Baby X* really was a ring-in and I question its inclusion in this season other than providing some subscriber titillation in view of its subject matter: lesbian parenthood and sperm donors.

Only McDonald's *Like a Metaphor*, a series of 5 monologues animating the female body, had the mark of an exciting new theatrical voice. Jointly directed by McDonald and actor Margaret Mills, the potently poetic sculptural installation by Fleur Summers (of oddly-angled, bandaged kitchen chairs) captured the vulnerability and fragility of the various voices. Mills' virtuoso performance was crystalline and the words sharp as knives; it was theatre at its simplest and most powerful. Each monologue was left whole and the temptation to dramatise by intercutting them was resisted so each voice spoke clearly and the sum was an accretion of layers for the audience to put together. McDonald and Summers are involved in an ongoing collaboration and want to rework it in a gallery to explore more fully the installation aspects.

If McDonald's was a work that revealed an emergent playwright, Leversha's *Violet Inc* was the work of one already out. Full of interesting ideas about art and culture, varied voices and dramatic modes, it was enlivened by its disparate tones at times viciously satirical, at other moments elegiac. However the conceit of Violet's ghost being the motivating force let the virtual protagonist, the ambitious art historian, off the moral hook at the end, just when things were getting really interesting.

*So Wet*, in the hands of a very experienced director Nancy Black and a strong cast, exhausted its potential and thereafter revealed its limitations while *Elegy*, in the directorial hands of Healey, its dramaturg, set up an irritating and predictable rhythm of cross cuts which did not layer the meanings in the text, but merely broke up the time sequences in a way that did not advance our understanding or involvement with the characters.

While the aim was to promote new writing, audiences could be forgiven for thinking it was to showcase the diverse talents and phenomenal energy of the actors (Sue Jones, Mandy Micelhinney, Margaret Mills, Ken Radley, Fiona Todd and James Wardlaw), the cleverness of Greg Clarke's infinitely adaptable set, and Phil Lethlean's surprising and stylish repertoire of lighting effects. The good news is that Playbox are already thinking about *Inside 2001*.

Inside 2000, *Playbox Theatre, CUB Malthouse, Melbourne, April 4-8, 11-15, 18-22, 25-29, May 3-13*

# Brink tackles Tyrannosaurus text

*Dickon Oxenburgh*

The work of the late German playwright Heiner Müller (1929-1995) is rarely produced in this country. Among the more notable occasions are Mudrooroo Colin Johnson and Gerhard Fischer's workshop of *The Aboriginal Demonstrators confront the Declaration of the Republic with the production of The Commission*, its subsequent production (directed by Noel Tovey) at The Performance Space and tour to Germany, and the original production of *Quartet*, at the Seymour Centre, Sydney in 1982. Despite his relative obscurity in this country, Müller is generally recognised as the most important German playwright since Brecht.

The dramaturgy of Müller's theatre in part reflects the decay of ideology. Early works included socio-realist/naturalistic adaptations of workers theatre texts for Volksbuhne theatre but with the onset of political stagnation the themes of his work became darker, more misanthropic, centering on mythic allegories of power and violence. Nowhere is that vision more refined or savage than *Quartet*.

Written in 1982 *Quartet* is loosely adapted from Laclo's late 18th century epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. The narrative concerns itself with a pair of jaded French aristocrats, the Viscomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil who, through a chain of letters, make a pact that Valmont seduce and corrupt 2 innocents: Madame de Tourvel and Volange, Merteuil's niece. The seductions are acts of revenge on the husband of Tourvel, who spurned Merteuil, and the fiancée of Volange who previously lured a lady away from Valmont. Merteuil and Valmont are former lovers and through the course of their correspondence play out their ambivalent relationship as a private hell.

In Müller's adaptation, Valmont and Merteuil role-play the seductions in a transvestite orgiastic fantasy, highly reminiscent of Genet's *The Maids*. The mind-game climaxes with Merteuil murdering Valmont, leaving herself alone to consummate her self-destruction with "cancer my lover". The decadent exchange of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* becomes an exercise in hallucinatory solipsism.

Visiting English director/designer Gerrard McArthur and fellow designer Richard Kelly have delved beneath the neo-classical artifice of the historic Queens Theatre to create a claustrophobic post-apocalyptic wasteland for this "game for two players." Surrounded by scores of high heels from a thousand cocktail parties (or a thousand holocausts?), the characters play out their claustrophobic two-hand game of mutual hatred. Actors Colleen Cross and Syd Brisbane bring considerable stamina and control to their roles of the Marquise and Valmont. In a high voltage verbal barrage Cross alternately lacerates or bludgeons all in her path, while Brisbane plays Valmont with post-Godard cool as a strutting gender bender wide boy. Together they assail the audience with Muller's impossibly dense and dark text. The internal rhythms of this are reinforced with evocative lighting by Geoff Cobham and an impressive industrial soundscape by composer Jeremy Rowney.

To synchronise *Quartet*'s "clockwork" structure, McArthur has elected for an absurdist framework reminiscent of Beckett and Sartre. While newcomers to absurdist theatre may find its conventions intriguing, those familiar with the form could find the experience predictable, in turn lessening its theatrical immediacy.

Brink Theatre is in every sense a young energetic ensemble, expressing itself in very physical theatre. Youth is a seductive attribute, but it does present challenges when casting for older roles: in the case of *Quartet* the choice seemed to be to "cast up" and sacrifice dynamism or "cast down" and lose the richness of realism. In the end, Cross and Brisbane's energetic characterisations were at odds with the decadent decrepitude of Valmont and the Marquise, distancing the audience from the core of Müller's world.

Quartet, *director Gerrard McArthur, performers Colleen Cross & Syd Brisbane, designers Gerrard MacArthur & Richard Kelly, lighting designer Geoff Cobham, Brink Productions, The Queens Theatre, Adelaide, May 4-14*

*Dickon Oxenburgh is a West Australian writer and dramaturg now living in Adelaide. His last major work was a stage adaptation of the novel* The Year Of Living Dangerously *by CJ Koch for the 1999 Festival of Perth. In 1998 he was joint winner of the WA Premier's Literary Award for his adaptation of the novel* The Merry-Go-Round In The Sea *by Randolph Stow.*

# Australia/Japan: gesture and place

*Edward Scheer*

A theatre director quoting Foucault. Bizarre. A theatre director using Foucault...More bizarre. Intellect is rarely spectacular but its staging can be provocative, productive, memorable. Ask anyone who saw the ongoing NYID/Gekidan Kaitaisha (Theatre of Deconstruction) collaboration in Melbourne last December. In the transient fever of recurrent festival seasons it's good to be reminded of an international collaborative theatre project with longevity. In 3 performances at Melbourne University's Open Stage, La Mama and Dancehouse, Gekidan Kaitaisha—one of the edgier outfits of the current crop of experimental Japanese performance companies—showed an impressively intense brand of gesture based physical theatre: part Brechtian Gestus, displaying a socialised positioning and critique; part Artaudian 'inspired tremor.' Limited use of verbal language also opened up the Artaudian terrain of the work and made it accessible to English speaking audiences.

The object of their visit was a collaborative workshop with Melbourne based NYID (Not Yet It's Difficult) whose work we haven't yet seen in Sydney but who also use a vocabulary of dynamic gesture described by dramaturg Peter Eckersall as "a kinetic layering of signs on the body of the actor." NYID's opus includes the controversial *The Austral/Asian Post cartoon Sports edition* (1997) with its sequence of a staged bashing of the only Asian member of the company (promising at least a colourful interaction with GK) and *William Shakespeare Hung Drawn and Quartered* (*WSHDQ* 1994) which features actor Greg Ulfan reciting the "to be or not to be" text while being smashed to the ground with a copy of Shakespeare's Complete Works. This conflict between text dominated theatre and the performance of the body is a theme which animates NYID's approach to performance. *WSHDQ* also has an impressively choreographed kendo fight sequence in which the combatants periodically stop after a flurry of blows to address the audience with a pithy swipe at old WS: whack whack pause, "Shakespeare invented violence" and so on. The object of critique is the WS addiction displayed by most of our mainstream theatre, an issue that ironically resurfaced in the lead up to the Gekidan Kaitaisha/NYID collaboration. NYID director David Pledger (a deserving winner of the 1999 Myer award for services to theatre) suggested to the director of GK, Shinjin Shimizu, that they work on the "to be or not to be" text but this notion was met with some resistance. Shinjin argued that there is a danger in globalising and insisted on the "need to resist" and the need to "deconstruct." Pledger's intention was to place the WS in an ironic contrast with his gestural performance mode and see how the 2 companies could deconstruct the East/West opposition, which WS seems to embody. Only a fragment of the text was used in the eventual joint workshop.

NYID/Gekidan Kaitaisha, photo Miyauchi Katsu

If anything this conflict illustrates that Shinjin's approach to text is minimal in the extreme. In any case Pledger's style is inherently deconstructive in precisely this way. His inflected Suzuki method (the most original use of this system since The Sydney Front in the early 90s) provides an intriguing way of disrupting the integrity of this system while enhancing the effects of its discipline, staging it with humour and intelligence, quite contrary to the critics of the company who emphasise the 'totalitarian' nature of the 'hard-body sameness of NYID actors.' The discussions in the public forums focused, not surprisingly, on the different approach to gesture. GK's director Shinjin referred to Foucault—more the Foucault of 'docile bodies' than the later 'technologies of the self', in that he is interested in exploring bodily passivity and indifference to the techniques imposed upon it by the imperatives of industry—and to the nervous system as the key starting points for understanding his approach. The GK performers stage exhaustingly repetitious gestural sequences in a way which is similar to the NYID method. As Eckersall explains: "each NYID performance typically dissolves into a repetitious semiotic landscape" while Kaitaisha on the other hand stage a "radical anti-theatricality" suffused with "the semiotics of violence, aggression...colonisation and regulation" which "is not so much performed as it seeps through the moment and clings to the air." The beauty of the workshop was the intriguing hybrid produced by the Suzuki based training on Australian performers feeding back into the Japanese avant-garde through David Pledger's appropriation of Suzuki's style.

The legacy of this type of collaboration is probably still unclear and particularly as the next phase of the relationship is yet to occur, but some lessons from the rigour of the GK attitude are already worth noting. Shinjin Shimizu argues that their work is not theatre, not performance, and is perhaps another representation of power and self-identity or expression. But what might this be? What new form might this call into being? There is no readymade answer to this, it is in the making, but if you want to figure out what he means perhaps you could have a look on the net at *www.kaitaisha.com*. So while GK emphasised the disappearing boundary separating performance and public life in Japan, NYID's position, ironically, looked like 'a defence of the theatrical.' The question that emerges becomes more than a question about the place of gesture in our theatre but about the very place of theatre in our culture. Eckersall, who, as organiser of the event, deserves the last word here, asks: "What is different in Australia and Japan that might undermine theatre/performance as a possibility in one place and validate it in another? What should we be doing here in terms of provocative, gusty, political work?" To be continued...

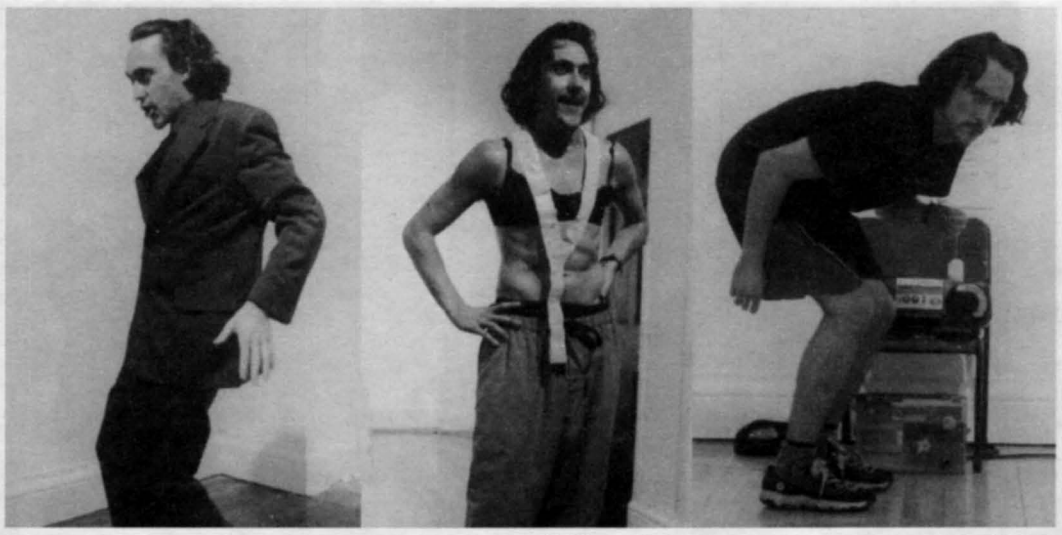
*Peter Eckersall writes: "The second stage of the project will be in Tokyo, July 1-10. NYID members David Pledger, Katia Molino, Greg Ulfan, Louise Taube, Simon Hall and myself will go for the duration. There will be a symposium on the 9th."*

# Reversions to form

*Keith Gallasch*

**In the last 2 months the Sydney theatre and performance scene has generated some curious crossovers.**

True to the postmodern condition where, as with cable TV, *everything* ever made appears to be *forever* available, theatre-going has been like unwanted time-travelling, at least in terms of form. What is Don Mamouney, a stalwart of contemporary performance, doing at Sidetrack directing a piece of naturalism from the early 60s? Why are Jenny Kemp and 2 of Melbourne's finest non-mainstream actors, Margaret Cameron and Ian Scott (see interview, page 29), engaging with Joanna Murray-Smith's naturalism at the Sydney Theatre Company? Why are young, adventurous directors elsewhere reverting to formulae that repeat early theatre as education? However, as per the hybridity yielded by the postmodern, there's nothing simple about these apparent reversions.



Hot Banana Morgan photo D. Rogers

Jenny Kemp's production of *Nightfall* is a vertiginous experience. Joanna Murray-Smith's other plays have irritated me with their short-storyish plot contrivances and the insistent feeling that they don't really belong to an Australian culture. That suspicion persists in this big-dark-secret play of the buried-child tradition so beloved of American playwrights where getting the secret out into the open is more important than dealing with the consequences of its unleashing—a more compulsive rather than revelatory formula. There was a point early on in *Nightfall* where suddenly I knew where it as all going. My heart sank. How long would this unfolding take? That irritation never went away, but was lessened considerably by several factors. One was that Murray-Smith's dialogue has taken a leap forward, certainly for two of her characters, the husband and wife (Scott and Cameron), who yearn for the teenage daughter who walked out of their lives. It's a language of incomplete sentences, words that cannot match feelings, obsessive cycles of unanswerable questions and dubious assertions. A second plus is that Murray-Smith tests the truth of the secret. It's not that she undoes the formula, it's too straight a play for that, but she does query the morality of giving an interrogator what she wants to hear in order to achieve your own ends.

*Nightfall* looks at first glance like cosy naturalism, but in Kemp's direction there is a rich, claustrophobic choreography in a set without walls in which Cameron's restless energy maps out caged anxiety against Scott's apparent solidity, and in which every move—the pouring of whisky, the handling of glasses, the slightest touch—bespeaks barest control. Cameron and Scott's virtuosic delivery of Murray-Smith's language of desperation is framed by the sound of birds from the surrounding garden (offering no solace to its owners). Expertly composed by Elizabeth Drake, the bird song comes and goes, indifferent to the drama of the caged couple, but often quietly underscoring a moment of tension, a development, a calm. The relentlessness of *Nightfall* also benefits from the absence of an interval.

The play falters in the writing for the third character, a tough role admirably played by Victoria Longley with a sinister edge as an unexpected visitor who offers, as go-between, to negotiate the return of the daughter if certain truths are spoken. This character seems part interrogator, part counsellor, her motives insufficiently elaborated by the writer. However, problems aside, the blessing of *Nightfall* is that it allows us a rare opportunity to see the great director Jenny Kemp at work some of her favourite performers in a play strong enough to offer them the foundation for truly great performances and something more than conventional naturalism.

Sidetrack Studio Theatre is not where you expect to enter and find yourself face to face with the walls, doors, stairs and loungeroom that constitute Nick's International Boarding House in Newtown, 1963. The accuracy of its realisation is a reminder of Sidetracks' impressive *Five Rooms in Marrickville Eyes* (see RealTime 27, p 37), a meticulous recreation of rooms from Marrickville homes that evoked the drama of migration without performance. In this boarding house set, migrants wait to become a part of Australian society, or despair of ever doing so. Journalist, playwright and poet Theo Patrikareas migrated to Australia in 1958 and wrote *The Promised Woman* in the 60s.

The casual realism of the play is bracing, its humour is sharp and the admirable restraint in writing and direction avoids melodrama, giving the play a peculiarly contemporary feel while maintaining a palpable sense of the early 60s of the Credit Squeeze. Until it gradually takes over, the main plot is peripheral to the everyday conversations that define the boarding house's cultural mix, its friendships, the wariness, the frustrations ("living in a paradise and having no way of enjoying it") and a growing fatalism about not succeeding in Australia. But for a play from the 60s, *The Promised Woman* is striking in its treatment of a woman who arrives for a pre-arranged marriage to a stylish young man. She is older than he expected. He rejects her, insists he is responsible for her and is determined to send her back to Greece. One of the other boarders develops an affection for this intelligent woman, whose English is excellent and who is determined to make good her escape.

Although conventional in form and respectfully realised (with some striking moments where Mamouney sustains an image beyond expectation), this production of *The Promised Woman* offers a special experience, filling out Australian theatre history and offering performances from actors who should be seen more often. Once word got around the short season was extended by several weeks. *The Promised Woman* deserves to be seen nationally. Currency are publishing it soon in *Plays of the 60s, Volume 1*. Happy 21st Birthday, Sidetrack, and thanks for the surprise.

*Marinheiro* from PlatForM 27 and Urban Theatre Projects was another work that attracted audiences and good reviews. The committed cast, some fine multimedia effects well integrated with design and action, a powerful musical score played live and the epic ambition of the scenario (devised by director and cast) could not overcome the dogged literalness of the story (the Portuguese journey to and 'discovery' of Australia), empty spectacle and, towards the end, some cheap rhetoric about who really came first and the meaning of 'sorry', topically tacked on. After the long-winded account of the miserable journey of the Portuguese and the horrors they inflicted on native peoples on their way, who could give a stuff about whether they found Australia first. *Marinheiro* is educational in spirit but also in love with spectacle—the massive storm-at-sea scene strobes, wracks loudspeakers and rolls performers unconvincingly about the floor. The mix of banal historicising and pedestrian spectacle (with a bit of Sydney Front-ish sexual assault with a watermelon thrown in) suggests that the director Legarto is in the early stages of finding a performance language. However, more controlled moments in the production and the power of performances from Valerie Berry, Rolando Ramos and Paul Cordeiro suggest potential that perhaps a writer might help shape.

It was hard to believe that Wesley Enoch, the same director who gave us *7 Stages of Grieving* (which he co-wrote with performer Deborah Mailman) has directed *Stolen*. The production has received excellent reviews and standing ovations at many performances. The performers are good, the spare set is eerily lit and the sound design is haunting. But the writing is not great and the theatricality is dogged by literalness. In *7 Stages...* Enoch combined direct story-telling with spare but powerful images—tears, ice, fire, earth—and a telling stillness. The sheer busy-ness, role-switching and manipulation of the space reduces the telling in *Stolen* to mere fragments seguing into often heavy-handed re-enactments. We are never left long enough with any one performer to connect...until the very end when, albeit briefly, the actors speak as themselves...then something happens, a new resonance in the voices, a change of presence that even the most resistant member of the audience cannot refuse. The actors had stopped acting and we were returned to the fascinating, half-real, half-fiction world of *7 Stages...* where Mailman was both herself and many others and powerful forces were released.

Morgan Lewis aka Hot Banana Morgan is a mean talent whether as hip hop artist, rapper with the well-travelled Meta Bass'n'Breath, or performer (recently in Alicia Talbot's soon-to-be-revived *Cement Garage*). His one-man show is a riot of hit and miss invention, accessibility and sheer opacity. His audience love it. I love it even though it needs a good prune and the framing device of finding ourselves in a hiphop class in Alice Springs (he teaches his willing pupils some showy fundamentals) could be put to better use across the show. A performer in his late 20s, it's downright funny to hear the self-referential bits about his career and followers scattered through the script with just enough self-mockery (he was in the same Australian Theatre for Young People group with Toni Collette in 1989: "She's gone on, I'm still here"). Lewis plays with many performance languages but hangs them together on his lean frame and leery visage. His charisma and energy are complemented in this new work with a seriousness previously unseen.

Nightfall, *Sydney Theatre Company, Wharf Theatre, opened April 12;* The Promised Woman, *Sidetrack Studio Theatre, March 21 - April 22;* Marinheiro, *Performance Space, May 2 - 14; Hot Banana Morgan, Performance Space, March 22 - April 2.*

Roberta Bosetti in *The Secret Room*

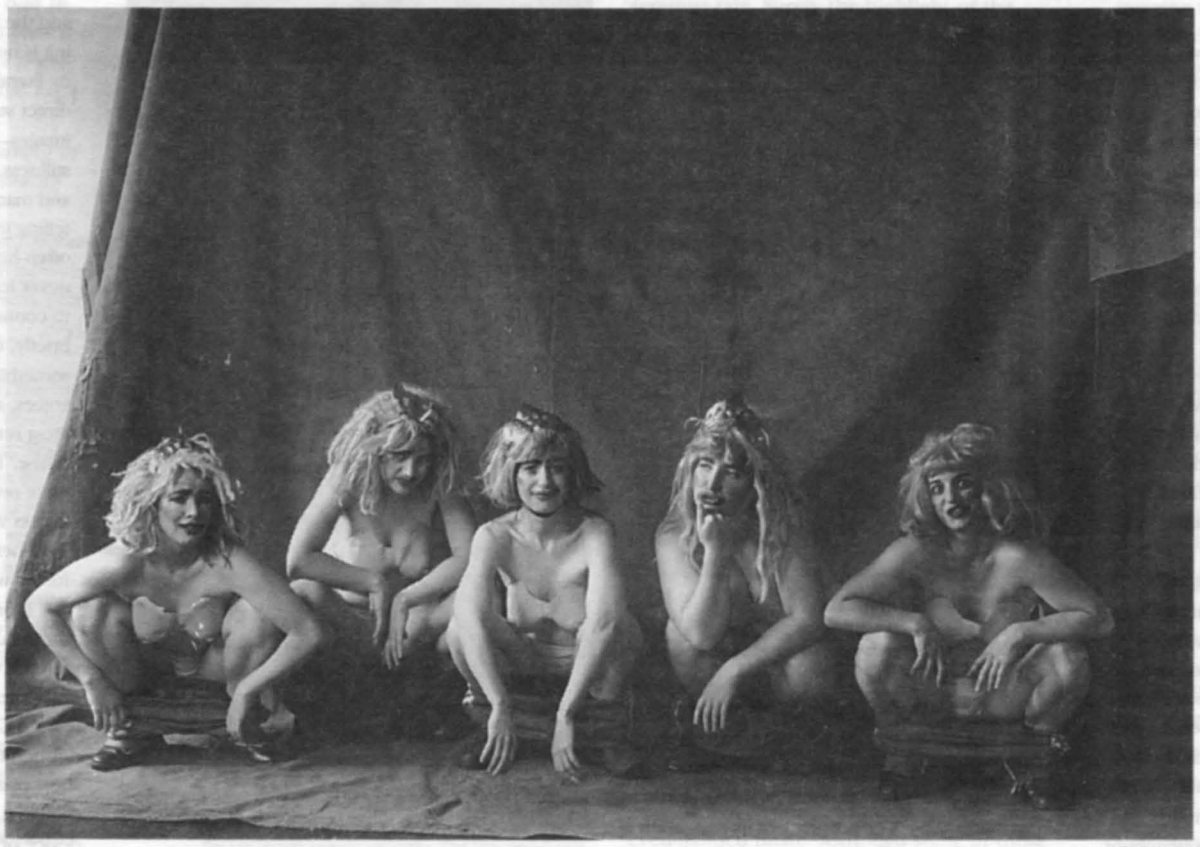
"The house is in Carlton. The address is secret (details upon booking)," declares the publicity for *The Secret Room*. You're in for an intimate adventure. Melbourne's stylishly innovative IRAA Theatre is back with a mystery location, a real home for its female protagonist and audience: "The house is not a backdrop for the stage but a trap for reality. Real life space and theatre space overlap." The performer is Roberta Bosetti, the director Renato Cuocolo, and media artist Warwick Page is collaborating—the performance will be broadcast live on the net.

*IRAA Theatre,* The Secret Room, *from June 8. Tel 03 9349 5880, info@iraatheatre.com.au, www.iraatheatre.com.au*

# Achieving runthood: Frumpus

*Eleanor Brickhill*

**Runt: a term of opprobrium; disgrace incurred for shameful conduct; a weakling, undersized and stunted.**



Frumpus photo Phillipa C.

Runts are helpless in the face of sudden savage attacks of anxiety and self-loathing. Their nerves are frazzled. Runts are restless in sleep, squirming and wriggling against the rest of the litter for warmth, frightened of being left out in the cold. Runts want to be strong and fearless and beautiful but something seems to get in the way; basically they're a bit of a mess, always—so it seems—caught with their pants down. These runts are beset with a shared nightmare, forever up against strange elements, the frightful dark, the monstrous terrain and awful howling sounds, but above all, The Suited, 3 spooky but suavely dressed fantasy oppressors, who hang around often on the side-lines, and sometimes centre stage, but seem to hold the fates of our 5 intrepid red-tracksuited heroines in their oily palms.

The audience enters at bedtime for runts, witnessing a burlesque of fraught and agonised sleep, postures contorting in tandem; fingers, faces twitching, mumbling, slack and stupid. But somehow we like these runts. They're a bit like we are, the heroes of their own fantasies.

In their dream the story begins, a sequence of scenes not always connected, but all somehow part of the same horrible nightmare. Or maybe it's just a bit of fun, a jumble of bits and pieces, a collage of strange and funny ideas looking for a theme. Take your pick.

The performers are clowns, comedians—actions, body language, expressions, are all exaggerated and overblown, like their fake plastic bums and tits and horrible lipsticked mouths. The style is beautifully rough, naive and burlesque, some of the action cartoon-like, or reminiscent of silent movie melodrama.

Sometimes they are 'girls against the odds', pitting their weaknesses against imagined horrors: nightmarishly trying to out-run some evil, cartoon-fashion, but never getting anywhere, getting separated and lost, making you want to yell out an agonised "Look out behind you!"; or perhaps climbing tall buildings on a rescue mission, with sparklers on their heads to light the way.

And sometimes, as in dreams, scenes shift impossibly from one theatrical fantasy to another with no smooth segue, but the heroines use the opportunity to dress up and parody their favourite women of the stage. We are told to "Make a date with the woman you'll never forget", and to note "the woman whose face and figure fascinates every man." The heroines get to be German Expressionist dancers, sitting astride chairs in black boots and chemises, showing their inner thighs; they get to put on dark glasses and scarves and mime "Look at me, I am beautiful"; they don short baby-doll pyjamas and lie about seductively on big cushions kicking their legs in the air in 19th century soft-porn mode. My personal favourite is the bit from *Alien*, with extra-terrestrials exploding from their chests, miming "Get away from her, you bitch."

In one small, muted scene was a tiny lighted cardboard cut-out cityscape, with windows in the buildings and flickering lights in the windows. We watched the 5 cut-out figures in red—tiny cardboard puppets—still battling the elements, under manipulated lightning bolts and crashes of thunder and rain. Naive, funny and memorable.

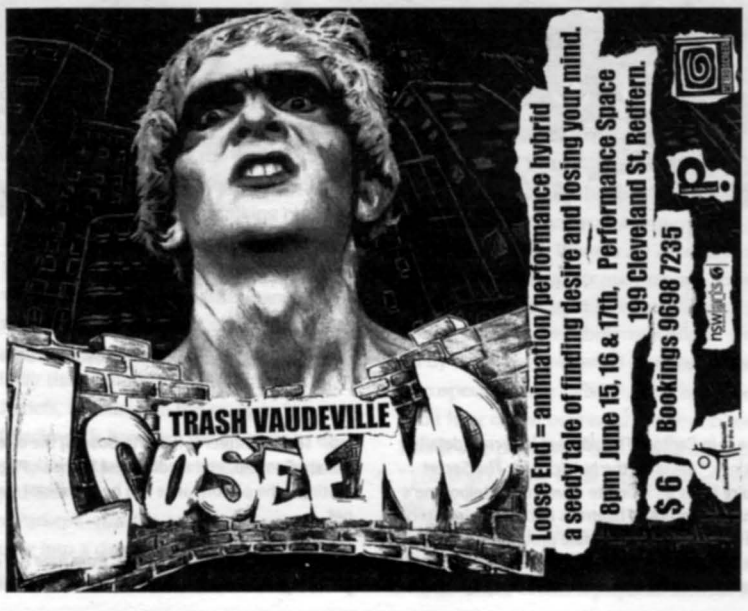
Runt, *Frumpus is Cheryle Moore, Lenny Ann Low, Stephanie Haris, Alycia Fergusen, Rosanna Scarcella, director Celia White, Performance Space, April 12-16*

# Kooemba Jdarra: connecting black and white

*Mary Ann Hunter*

"What is the first thing I see when I look at you?" was the question initially asked at devising workshops for Kooemba Jdarra's latest production, *Skin Deep*. While the first answer was 'skin colour', a close second must have been 'gender', as this two-hander is as much about implicit notions of 'woman' as explicit constructions of 'black' and 'white.'

Dallas Winmar's script explores both the subtle and gross forms of racism experienced by Indigenous women in the everyday. Strong, direct monologues are based on real life experiences and communicate the pain, anger and ignorance of women on both sides of the black and white divide, and those caught in between. Other vignettes—sharing a train platform, going to a beautician, making canteen conversation—provide well-chosen contrasts with their playful exaggeration and inversion. Performers Roxanne McDonald and Zara Grose in the characters of Black Girl and White Girl enjoyably play up to the task, interchanging shoes like experience ("those black shoes, they pinch…but the white, why take them off, they're so easy and comfortable to wear?") and wage war in miniature Stetsons, shooting stereotyped perceptions back and forth. The lessons here are clear: that personal experience of racism is raw and diverse, yet institutional racism continues unabated, charged with hollow stereotypes that foster ignorance and pain.




It often feels as though the performance is on the verge of doing something more. A deeper engagement with any one of the monologues or vignettes is eagerly awaited, promising further dramatic and political possibilities. But *Skin Deep* does not really go below the surface to explore the complexities and challenges of the situations it presents. Instead, having raised awareness of difference in a society in white over-drive, *Skin Deep* attempts to reconnect black and white through the singular body of 'woman.' This is represented by the symbolic assembly of a large female form, framing the individual vignettes. This notion of an essential woman-spirit imbues many aspects of the performance: from the circular representation of women holding hands on the floor to the closing image of the large opaque belly of the woman-body pulsing with a foetus, reinforcing a biological and, for some, a spiritual determinacy of women's connections with each other.

*Skin Deep* is centred around honest stories of women living with racism in Australia. To have shared those stories in workshops would have been a rich and risky experience for those involved. While that richness is available to the audience in many instances during the performance (in particular, Black Girl's talk with her deceased Grandmother), dramatically this work requires further risk-taking, to stretch the text, performers and audience. Assembling the one woman-body never feels symbolically strong enough to ground the short narratives (women still working with differences in economic status, sexual orientation, political persuasion and spiritual values). As a work confronting the difficulties of respecting and communicating difference, *Skin Deep* is pregnant with possibilities.

Skin Deep, *Kooemba Jdarra, writer Dallas Winmar, director Nadine McDonald, dramaturg Maryanne Lynch, designer Delores McDonald, performers Roxanne McDonald & Zara Grose, La Boite Theatre, Brisbane, May 18-June 3*

*Mary Ann is a performance educator and researcher with a background in community-based and youth-specific performing arts. She currently teaches at Queensland University of Technology.*

# Justifiable paranoia in Port Arthur

*Sean Kelly*

*Panopticon* is an ambitious project in virtually every sense that a theatrical production can be. It is ambitious in both the conceptual base it proceeds from, the staging and presentation mechanism, and the sustained non-verbal performances required.

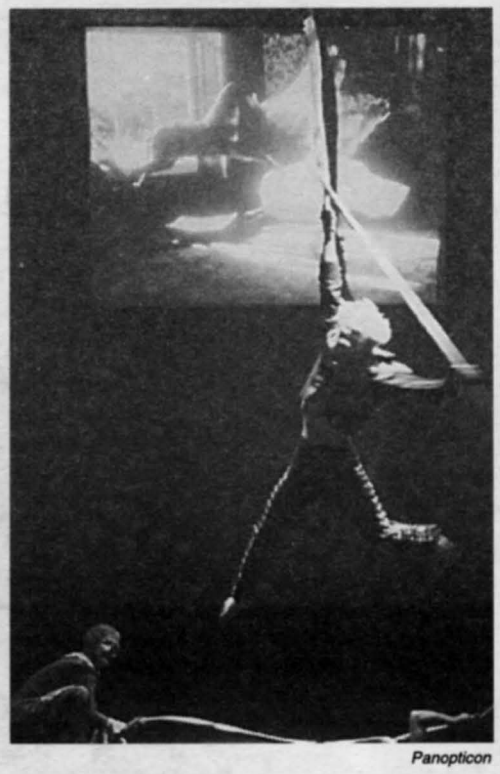
*Panopticon* was developed by Salamanc Theatre Company's director Deborah Pollard in collaboration with Ben Grieve. Its basic premise is surveillance. The concept grows out of the Panopticon devised by Jeremy Bentham. Panoptic simply translates as "all seeing." It was Bentham's belief that in the 19th century there was a more effective way to treat prisoners than locking them up in hulks to rot away unproductively with little or no chance of redemption and rehabilitation. As a utilitarian philosopher, Bentham's vision was impelled by a real appreciation that it was possible to improve oneself given the right conditions, and that the process of personal growth to redemption and usefulness could be achieved through reflection and introspection. He devised a prison plan of elegant simplicity and efficiency (he was an economist as well). In Bentham's prison a cylindrical structure contained inward facing cells at the centre of which was an observation tower. The benefits were obvious. The cells were easily monitored by as few as one guard and the prisoners were never sure who was being specifically monitored at any given time. Within their cells the prisoners were isolated from each other and effectively monitored constantly. There they could reflect on their situation and ponder how they may improve, safe from the insidious influence of their peers.

One wonders how Bentham, an arch pragmatist, could not have foreseen the sinister psychological implications since he also considered this a viable concept for schools as well. The first prison built according to these principles, Pentonville, lasted only a few years before the rate of insanity developing among prisoners forced its closure. In Van Diemen's land about the same time (1853) another, more sinister, development was occurring. A 'Model Prison' was constructed based on Bentham's theory but this one was intended specifically to be punitive. Prisoners were totally isolated from each other and silence was maintained at all times. The psychological terror engendered by this system had distinct and destructive effects on the individual psyche.

Anyone visiting Port Arthur will pass through the model prison and its chapel. The chapel was constructed so that prisoners were led in one by one and seated in isolation within tight cubicles which allowed them to see the parson but not each other—Bentham's bastard child at work and a chilling space to experience.

*Panopticon* takes this as the starting point, both for the development of its central concept and in the presentation of the work. The basic premise of the show is that the Panopticon of Bentham has been replaced by new and potentially more sinister forms of surveillance—technology has advanced to the point where we are all potential subjects and, in most cases, may not even be aware of when and how it is happening. The outcome is paranoia. It could be argued that paranoia is a characteristic of the contemporary psyche and with some good justification. (Just because you are paranoid does not mean that they are not out to get you.) What is most insidious about this form of surveillance and control is that in most cases we are powerless to act against it as we are unaware of the depth and nature of its penetration into our lives. The internet, global pseudo-military installations also used for industrial espionage, digital data recording and the widening of the technological net across all activity and into all spaces are reasons to be concerned. How do we feel? How do we act?

We are controlled as we enter the space. First, silence is imposed (gently, by example) and then we are separated into groups and led off one by one to our appointed places (one of 72 in a specially constructed set not unlike the prison chapel). Designer Greg Methé has excelled himself with this staging. A small (seemingly innocuous, even friendly) camera lens is noted in each space, trained on the viewer—it looks like a toy. The space in front is a circus ring into which 3 wonky clowns enter and soundlessly go about their business. Behind the action a massive screen accommodates images both pre-recorded and live. Some of these become images of the audience, interspersed with those generated by the clowns and those already created. Live action, live narration mixes seamlessly with pre-recorded elements so cleanly that you feel confident that these guys are on top of the technical and other complexities. You can suspend your disbelief and



*Panopticon*

enter more deeply into the experience.

Deborah Pollard has set a new and fresh course for the Salamanca Theatre Company in the time she has been its director. The projects she has developed have been characterised by an eager embracing of new technologies as well as active collaboration with a number of arts practitioners from diverse backgrounds and practices. Filmmakers (Roar Film), sound artists (PK Khut), live video all feature in this production. None is used gratuitously, all are balanced and all are necessary. Salamanca is a youth company and now it utilises a language familiar to the new culture.

In *Panopticon* it uses this form to examine itself. Conceptually it is equally ambitious. What is it about the clown? Like the jester the clown has an imprimatur to stretch the boundaries, to poke fun, to take risks in a social discourse. Clowns can be scary (how can I avoid the apogee of the sinister clown—John Wayne Gacy). The clown is us, muddling about with the technology, partly defusing its threat. It never resolves, they never quite control it, even as they fool about. This was a long bow to draw, colliding the culture of control of 19th century prisons with the performance of 3 clowns. No narrative, just a series of short often very funny pieces exploring our interaction with something we can never quite hope to understand. This is just one of the ambitious leaps this production takes and it works.

The show also deals very effectively with the more general issue of the viewer's experience. There are flashes of the absurd and 'assaults' on the audience but not the visceral attacks of Peter Handke or Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. This is tricky ground. The show unsettles its audience and keeps them in a state of anticipation and even apprehension but it never alienates and does not seek that ground. It holds us, yet it is an itchy sort of embrace as we are never sure when we will become part of the process. There is more of a Dada edge to this theatre but still it holds its conceptual base together through a kind of focused 'nuttiness', a bit like the Dada figure of Benjamin Peret who liked to seek out priests in the street and insult them (on behalf of everyone else).

This is the most complete, focused and polished work Salamanca has produced. It is absolutely timely. It uses everything but the kitchen sink, has a risky premise and asks a lot from its 3 performers (Deborah Pollard, Adam Broinowski and Katia Molino). It is presented in a fascinating but difficult space. I hope this one goes on the road, as it deserves a big audience and a long life. It is fitting that this work should be Deborah Pollard's last. It's where she and the company have been heading. It's also clear that the many artists who have worked with the company have now been fully integrated into that vision. This will outlast Pollard, there's no going back from this point

Panopticon, *Salamanca Theatre Company, HMAS Huon Quays Drill Hall, Port Arthur, Tasmania, May 9-20*

*Seán Kelly is Director of Contemporary Art Services Tasmania*

# Brisbane's Powerhouse open for business

*Shaaron Boughen*

In mid May when the Queensland Government announced funding for a new contemporary arts gallery and the development of regional arts infrastructure, Queensland could be forgiven for thinking that it is sprouting new arts venues. The first growth of this arts Spring is the Brisbane Powerhouse which stands unique on a significant curve of the river at New Farm. This is no South Bank, no elitist performing arts centre. This is a building with raw edges, graffiti'd walls—a contemporary space that offers the potential for diversity in live arts practice and performance. The old powerhouse that once generated the energy to run Brisbane's trams is now ready to energise an arts scene that some see as conservative and others as parochial—perceptions which deny the existence of a rich community of contemporary artists already controversial in their practice.

The Powerhouse is the result of an exhaustive consultative process initiated by the Brisbane City Council and genuinely based in community advice and opinion. It houses 2 multi-configurational theatres of 200 and 400 seats, a restaurant, cafe, gallery, function rooms, offices and rehearsal and storage space, which all sounds like any other venue but Peter Roy and his team of architects have so cleverly maintained the integrity of the original building that these facilities fit like a glove.

The venue opened to the public with a free performance event attracting thousands. The external walls provided the backdrop for some clever visual projections, circus tricks, a suspended singer, Aboriginal didgeridoo player and singer, and powerful electronic music. The audience was then invited into the Powerhouse and the building buzzed with the dynamism of hundreds as they wandered about the impressively transformed space.

Marian Drew's current photographic exhibition captures succinct images of the derelict space prior to its transformation and is impressive in its display. However it was the opening with La Bôite's *Popular Mechanicals*, a dated, laboured and hugely unfunny play, that created the first murmur of concern. Featuring a tired piece of theatre exposed a potential difficulty with programming the Powerhouse. Where was the bold and fresh work to match this bold and fresh venue?

It is an extraordinary vision of Brisbane's City Council to provide a space for the contemporary arts community that will serve its needs way beyond the year 2000. In an age of hyper accountability and shrinking bottom lines, artists invariably get less than they deserve. But now Brisbane has a live contemporary arts venue that offers more, lifts our expectations and ultimately needs growing into. Artistic Director of the venue, Zane Trow, has in place a series of programs to stimulate, support and develop audiences, artists and new works. He will need these programs as the Powerhouse will devour product and only the best of local and interstate work will satisfy ever-discriminating audiences.

*Brisbane Powerhouse, opening weekend, May 6 & 7*

# Seeing & hearing The Necks from all directions

*Linda Marie Walker*

*...music can only be played, including by those who only listen. The entire body is involved in this play—tensions, distances, heights, movements, rhythmical schemes, grains, and timbres—without which there is no music.*

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World* (trans. Jeffrey S Librett, University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

The Necks make a music which seems, at the outset, background, ambient. This is not so, the music is disturbing. There are no comparisons, while being, however, relational. And because it is, one wants to 'see' it, as if the eyes are longing for what the ears are receiving. Watching The Necks is a significant pleasure of their music, and is a pleasure unlike watching 'a band.' Hard to say why, but it's concerned with the separation, the independence, of the 3 layers—piano, bass, drums—and the way in which these layers shift or turn almost imperceptibly (I think it's this that the eyes imagine as literal movement, as if the music is film or dance). Seeing Tony Buck select his 'sticks' is not only fascinating, it's motif: it signals an overall improvisational process. Seeing, or just missing, Lloyd Swanton change patterns on the double bass is like being suddenly released. Seeing Chris Abrahams repeat a group of notes on the piano until they're beyond exhaustion, yet still overflowing, is bodily wearing.

The motif, the process, is 'relentless'. It clasps you. This happens either slowly (*Sex*) or quickly (*Hanging Gardens*). It doesn't matter, sooner or later you are surrounded.

I've seen them play twice—each time has been riveting (like watching/reading a thriller) in the best sense of theatre. 'Compelling' is a strong word: the music is compelling; it's also crystal-taut, and as beauty comes about over time, being-urged is a knowing state of suspension. This music is space (as is all music), but 'this' music spaces-out space—makes you think space, reminds you of spacings (gaps, voids, piercings, screams, calls, night), of walking (measuring) the world, of sitting alone, of smelling the beloved: "Sound has no hidden surfaces. It is like a totality of space, on the confines from the very start..." (Nancy): such a delicate impossible proposition. It seems to roll out before you like a landscape—a plain or a desert. Not a mountain range or a rainforest (although, on the other hand, *Hanging Gardens* is dense, thick, humid).

The music of The Necks, often recorded live, has an intimacy, as well as a threatening undercurrent. (*The Boys*, for instance, and particular moments in *Aquatic* and *Sex* and the way *Hanging Gardens* begins, together with the low piano notes and a scraping noise that happens occasionally.) The simultaneity of sensuality (a touching) and dark ominous tension (a repelling) is almost tangible, like skin on skin. What appears, as space, as opening (of language) is a sonorous philosophy of 'love', not Love, but that wonder when the density of a moment 'is' fully itself and something extra/excessive—beautiful, delicious, pungent, molten, etc. It comes to be inside, and is then of oneself.

There are several aspects of The Necks' music which makes it distinct. One is that the 3 musicians play all of the time, even when joined by another musician on *Aquatic*—Stevie Wishart [hurdy-gurdy: this instrument suits so well the swirling rush which happens regularly]. The music does not conform to jazz or classical forms. No solos; the differences—density, intensity, tonality, momentum—happen within the perpetual playing 'together.'

Lloyd Swanton, Tony Buck, Chris Abrahams—The Necks

This means something. You read about it elsewhere, say in Deleuze, Blanchot, Cage, and you hear it in electronica music (Fila Brazillia, for instance—who are fans of The Necks). Another is that these long works (one track per CD: *Sex*, *Piano Bass Drums*, *Hanging Gardens*) are improvised, so listening is 'the composer.'

Although one recognises the sound of The Necks one can't know beforehand what will be played. This contributes to theatre, it might be 'the' theatre. One watches music being composed and played at the same time; something unpredictable occurs when an 'ensemble' performs at-once, and over time (in-duration); it is arduous, equally—an investment of work; and perhaps more than that, a democracy of making (the result is art); a sustained connection between the musicians gives a similar quality (to the ears) to that of a dance-work with all the dancers on stage for the entire performance (to the eyes)—like Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's *drumming* or *i said i* (2000 Adelaide Festival). That The Necks make one think of other practices (of other places) is also an aspect which sets them apart. I think, for example, of Beckett and Duras: inevitability, horror, exhaustion. Yet, also, a keeping on, and insistence—for what...whatever, everything? Their music is too-much, excessive in the exact right way: resonant: opening the world. It is difficult to know why a specific music shocks. Near the end of the concert at The Governor Hindmarsh Hotel in Adelaide the guys at the bar couldn't resist shouting "horny, horny", or the like. The Necks' curious tender touch is so on-the-surface (is this a reason for the name: vulnerability); a fragility of lostness—sounds leaving, dissolving. At the very moment of receiving: nothing. In a sense this music is voice, it invites from the listener a wish to respond (but how). It's a music which one writes toward, in answer to, in despair with, and as partner of, or (illusory) participant in; and this one (listener), while pretending relations here, is unsure how to be clear (try listening to *Hanging Gardens* late at night, alone); it's a night work (air still, perfumed, full moon), almost ceremonial, funereal in a deceptive way—as if kettle drums will redeem; it starts in-the-midst, knowing this is music's condition. Perhaps they don't know the relationship between writing and music, perhaps they don't care 'to-write'; but writing often cares 'to-music'. Clarice Lispector, for instance, invokes the composers, pays homage to them in her works. At the start of *The Hour of the Star* she writes: "I dedicate [this narrative] to the tempest of Beethoven. To the vibrations of Bach's neutral colours. To Chopin who leaves me weak. To Stravinsky who terrifies me and makes me soar in flames..." Lispector might be answering Jean-Luc Nancy's question, which is no-question: what if sound/speech was "the condition of sense"?

The bleak (world), *Fife and Drum* from *The Boys* (the soundtrack to the film), can only mean bad acts (actions). A marching into a place—swamps, tangled trees, coarse undergrowth—of no-return. All the sounds of distant (safe) life following the overwhelming beats of a fearing heart. The awful ringing in the ears of blood—long drawn out notes hanging over this thumping. "The most interior: the body in a state of sensory deprivation continues or comes to hear itself, to hear its blood, its noise, its heart" (Nancy). Breathing, scraping, whirring, and the march continues, and then something happens: the hard ringing beat stops, a few last breaths, water, nothing: like music 'is' (its invisible gripping presence), its very ordinary nature, its fact: silence: "Something is lost essentially in the sonorous gift: resonance 'itself' "(Nancy). This 'piece' of music effects long after hearing. The dread which lives in it is dread I dread hearing. From the first moment there is no hope, death is the land: "...these are the worlds we made..." (inner CD sleeve, *The Boys*).

It's the way (the approach) of this music, its delirium, the passage of its taking-time, its capacity to wait with its own company—does this make sense—its suspension, acknowledged, finally in the latest title *Hanging Gardens*. The Necks' music is a making in-the-making, a making which (here comes the night) unfolds before your eyes/ears when you watch them, and before your ears/eyes when you listen to them. They give, offer, one the chance to think of/inside music; not just theirs, but music as the sense which reaches/touches us through-the-air (from all the other directions), and is in a 'sense' the art which passes through us, as breath. They give music as space and time, generously, and in the mode of risk: "...a playful execution of sense, a being-as-act through cadence, attack, inflection, echo, syncopation..." (Nancy).

*The Necks are Chris Abrahams, Tony Buck, Lloyd Swanton.* http://thenecks.com/

# Performing the inland

***Keith Gallasch***

*Originally produced for and broadcast on ABC Classic FM's* The Listening Room, *Gretchen Miller's* Inland *has been realised as a live performance in The Studio at the Sydney Opera House. The full version of this edited interview can be found on the* RealTime *website.*

Inland *is a very layered work. In each of the 4 sections there's a sense of an identity, someone who's prominent in the piece, a voice which often sounds like an authentic voice, a real voice. Then there's another more performative voice, then there's your musical compositions and various sonic elements. To what degree is it a composed work?*

It was highly composed. The score has come after the radio work but during the writing of it I would go down every morning into a piano room for 4 hours with my logs of sound from my travels out west. They're on tape but I log them on paper so I know what sounds I have—just lists really. I'd go down to the piano room with those logs and the sounds in my head and and I would compose the music on the piano with a manuscript and write texts simultaneously. I gave each section a week to begin with. So in a month I decided I was going to have 4 sections to this work and each week I would furiously write text and music together. Not that it's like a song because I would be writing fragments—lots of fragments coming out of the sounds. This was during the artist's residency I had at the ABC [jointly operated with the New Media Arts Fund of the Australia Council]. The work was originally for *The Listening Room*.

*Your sonic log includes interviews as well. The story of the opal dealer has a verité quality. What about the others like the aviator?*

To begin with I wrote these vignettes, little fragments of reality—a story about a woman pilot, a tale of an opal's history. Some opals have names. There are famous ones like the Pandora or the Black Prince. And I wrote those from so-called reality or fact, from history books or whatever. Then I thought it might be interesting to get in some people who were involved, so one story is about an alcoholic cripple, an opal miner living at Lightning Ridge, and I trawled around, rang around the opal shops to find someone who had a knowledge of the history of opals. I found a wonderful man, Greg Sherman. So I asked him in. I wanted some kind of weight of history. His voice held some of that history so I got him in to read some of those vignettes.

*So that's not his personal history we hear?*

I got him in to read but then we talked about his life and fragments of Greg's life came in as just another layer.

*Tell us about Nancy Bird.*

She was a pioneer aviatrix of the 20s and 30s, one of the first to work as a pilot which had been regarded as a sport for rich people. She worked with the flying doctors when they started up and was trained by Kingsford Smith. I asked her in to read me some vignettes, little stories of her comrades I guess—women pilots from the early part of this century. She told me another story and that became part of the piece as well.

I also spoke to Yami Lester, the Aboriginal elder from the Emu Maralinga region (in the fourth section, *Heat*). He went blind from an A-bomb blast there in the 50s. He's become quite a significant political figure but instead of making an overt political statement in that section, I asked him to describe the landscape that he knows but also knew visually before he went blind at 14 years of age.

*We're not told that he's blind. It's like a mapping—various voices including his own listing the parameters of his territory*

The tracks. I asked him about the routes that people would take over that landscape before it became untouchable but he also named the landforms, the animals, the flora and the fauna. And he also talked about the use of fire and that had a resonance with the fire of the bomb blast, the fire of the sun...

*You save up the bomb until well into that section and it emerges in an almost poetical way about helium and the light. Suddenly the listener thinks, oh the bomb.*

The elements. And I don't use the word Maralinga either. It's not there.

* * *

*The first section is* Immersion *but water returns in the last one,* Heat, *where there's a sense of walking, rocks, sounds of gravel. Then it goes liquid.*

Because a really important part of this whole piece is to do with transformation, elemental transformation and breakdown and decay. When you go out into the so-called dry inland, you become acutely aware of the way things transform very slowly over time—the way water will sink into sand and disappear.

*You have even more extreme examples like liquid opal forming in the cavities of bone through a process of fossilisation.*

And before that in the section called *Stone* bone turns to opal. In *Flight* there's a sort of pre-echo of that with the woman and the bird flying and the bird falls to the ground and becomes bone, covered by sand. Thousands of years later that bird has become an ancient sea creature which fossilises and turns to opal. Light in opal becomes the light of a hydrogen bomb.

*How does the first section,* Immersion, *relate to the idea of the inland?*

The impetus was the story of my great-great-great-grandfather. My mother's recently been doing the digging, as you do, and she's found a convict who came here. Our approach to Australia was by sea. Our approach inland was by water quite often, up through the rivers and that's exactly what this figure does in my imagination. Robert Ward had a lot to do with water. He was a convict so he was shipped over here. He was imprisoned on a hulk, *The Phoenix*, in the middle of the Harbour. He was destined for Norfolk Island. He was also an expert plumber and the government architect of the day apparently prevented him from going off to Norfolk Island and employed him instead. And, of course, white history in Australia is desperate to take water inland. So he travels inland on a boat. I just imagined him stowing away or rowing this boat inland and dreaming of piping water through stone. There's just a hint of the Snowy Mountains scheme there. He fantasises something that happens a hundred or so years later.

Gretchen Miller photo Bridgette Elliot

And he dreams of taking water inland.

When you go inland the grasses are tall, it is very fluid, the wind blowing across the grasses. In these plains of grasses are the places that people desperately wanted to find an inland sea. I went to the Sturt Stony Desert and recorded there and it's extraordinary. There are stones there that are red. They're smoothed by wind. They look fluid. They look like they've been underwater. There are beautiful things and yet it's so desperate...

* * *

*Your compositions for bass clarinet, double bass and percussion are very spare.*

The music has tonal centres but I've always loved to reference the 12-tone every now and again. The double bass and bass clarinet are very vocal to me. I also love certain brass instruments like the trombone because they're so human and humorous. But I also chose these instruments because you can fragment the pitch, and there are a lot of multiphonics in the clarinet and harmonics in the double bass. That parallels the breakdown of elemental structures. To me those two bass instruments refer to a vibrating environment, whereas the percussion refers more to the delicacy of the objects, their fragility but also their hardness, their permanence. It's also a decaying instrument—you can't sustain in the percussion. So again, there's decay.

*Why have you decided on a concert version—is that what you'd call it?*

I see it more as a piece of theatre but there is no movement on the stage. You've got 3 instrumentalists and 4 speakers. I think what I intend the work to do is to transport the listener to another place, to an internal place or to the desert itself in some form. I decided that it would work as a live performance. The experience of having a story told to you is usually one which is face to face— you associate the voice with a physical presence. And you'll have a sense of spatiality, a three dimensional space, a living space. A really enriching part of the live performance will also be the images which are projected throughout the work. The photographer Anthony King and I travelled together. So while I was making recordings, he was taking photographs—not with the intention of putting a piece on at that time. There's another layer, another narrative which he has created, but there's no attempt at a literal representation.

*What about the performers you've chosen?*

Virginia Baxter is probably the most overt of the storytellers. She has the narrative line very strongly in 2 of the sections. Then there's me—I suppose I take the more poetic voice and the sung voice. There's Kerry Casey, the only male voice—he has a very rich tone and he also has a wonderful history with the outback. There's Karen Pearlman who's best known for her dance work with spoken word. She has an American accent which is very soft. I wanted that voice to be a sensual voice. To me this work is very sensual. Daryl Pratt is on percussion. He's one of the country's best. Likewise Dave Ellis on double bass—jazz is his background but he's done a lot of contemporary work. Marjorie Smith on clarinet is extraordinary as well. Russell Stapleton who was the engineer on the original radio version is also an accomplished musician and has an instinctive sense of rhythm for working with sound. He re-mixed the sounds for this performance. We had to break the work, take the text and the music out. He'll be playing them. Anthony King will be projecting the images onto 3 huge floating sheets of fabric and Neil Simpson has done the staging and lighting.

* * *

I don't think I'll ever leave the inland behind. It's a corny thing to say but it does get inside you, under your skin. After the first trip in 1996 I went back in 1998, 1999 and this year again. I can't stay away from it. I need it as a place to just go and be. It is a love affair. There are certain places that I return to again and again and rediscover things and always take a microphone.

*So the end product is an act of both re-creation and an act of fiction? You evoke the place and then you're in your piano room, you're writing whatever comes out.*

Absolute fiction. There's very little fact in this. The real is in the sound and the allusions and within the voices.

Inland, *written and produced by Gretchen Miller, The Studio, Sydney Opera House, June 9-10*

## interFACES - Australasian Computer Music Conference 2000

Reading a recent interview with dance music wunderkind BT reminded me of how so many esoteric computer music synthesis and compositional techniques have migrated from the rarefied air of research labs in universities to the loungeroom PCs of the inner-urban DJ. Phase vocoding and granular synthesis which BT uses extensively on his latest album were developed by practitioners of the computer music avant garde in the last decade or so. The expanding role of computer-based technologies in the composition, recording and dissemination of music has meant that tools and techniques that only a few years ago were considered the sole domain of electronic music postgrads have spread out into the wider social sphere—the arcane becomes the quotidian.

In light of this, the annual conference of the Australasian Computer Music Association plans to shift across genre boundaries by inviting participation from innovative musicians and sound artists working in a variety of fields from universities to dance clubs in Australia, New Zealand and internationally. The conference will be hosted in Brisbane by the Queensland University of Technology from 5-8 of July.

This year, ACMC2000 will focus on the interfaces between artists and audiences as well as between musicians and technology. It is an opportunity for composers, programmers and other practitioners of computer music to share works, techniques and perspectives with their peers and encourage cross-pollination between disciplines and genres.

The keynote speaker will be Zane Trow who will inject his perspective on audiences and spaces for new music as Artistic Director of the newly opened Brisbane Powerhouse. A public performance of diffused electro-acoustic works is also planned to be held at the Powerhouse. Other performances will engage with audiences in a variety of environments from the concert hall to the music bar culminating in a live radio broadcast via independent FM station, 4ZZZ.

More information regarding the conference can be found online at *http://asn.net.au* or by mail at ACMC 2000, QUT Music, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove Q 4059.

*Richard Wilding*

# Oliver & Olivier: Radio France celebrates 20th century music

*Chris Reid*

Outside it's cold, a Parisian winter. Inside, the buildings are overheated, the metro overheated. The Parisians are pretty cold, uniformly in black overcoats, sombre scarves, often smoking, hurrying, eyes averted. I catch the Metro to Passy, then walk by the river to Radio France. The Metro crosses Pont de Bir Hakeim, near the Trocadero, and from the train window—there's the Eiffel Tower. Lit in sparkling millennium lights, thousands of globes igniting randomly, momentarily, all over it, the tower glitters in the dusk like a giant chandelier.

New music receives modest attention here—in the previous fortnight, only a recital of 20th century chamber music for saxophone at l'Eglise Americaine. Now Radio France is mounting this 2-week festival of 20th century music broadcasts. There are concerts every night and on weekend afternoons. Star performers present work by well-known names—Ligeti, Crumb, Dufourt, Grisey, Turnage, Messiaen—and newer names. Much is specially commissioned.

*4 février*

Opening night. We must enter the Radio France building, a cake-shaped concrete block, through an airport metal detector. Everyone triggers the beeper but the staff ignore this music, marshalling the hordes into queues firstly for the limited *free tickets* and then for the charge to the doors of the 800 seat Salle Olivier Messiaen.

Leif Segerstam, a giant in tuxedo and tails, smothered in grey hair and beard, conducts l'Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France in works of Yan Maresz, Yoshihisa Taïra, Marco Stroppa and himself. The works are complex, energetic, demanding, with many themes and sub-themes running at once, requiring large orchestral forces, especially percussion. They are monumental, though in Taïra's case, more lyrical and refined. Called to the stage after the performance of her work, the 62 year old Taïra seems so diminutive—how could she produce such forceful writing? Segerstam's Symphony No 27, *Symphonic thoughts after the change of the millennium No 1*, involves a massive ensemble, a piano at either edge of the crowded stage, Segerstam driving one of them. His 27th attempt is prodigious rather than apocalyptic or far-seeing.

During interval, boisterous, multilingual chatter fills the foyer—meetings of hearts and minds from across Europe, the cheapest coffee in Paris at 5.50FF. This brotherhood in contemporary musical appreciation is delighted with everything.

*4 février*

Music for solo piano and for piano and percussion. Pianist Florian Hoescher dazzles with, amongst other pieces, Stroppa's *Miniature estrose* [little inspirations?], *premiere livre*.

*7 février*

The concert is built around the adventurous, dynamic and brilliantly red-headed harpsichordist, Elisabeth Chojnacka, with various colleagues on percussion, sho, chang and flamenco guitar. Only an extrovert could bring this off—she does!

*8 février*

The venerable London Sinfonietta—best known for its rendition, under Zinman with soprano Dawn Upshaw, of Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*. On this crossing of the channel they're directed by composer Oliver Knussen in work by Julian Anderson, Geoffrey King-Gomez and (naturally) Knussen. Self-effacing Ollie is cheered into accepting the acclamation so deserved by ensemble and composers. Great concert—lyrical, fluent writing, clear direction, every instrument outstanding. More composers take bows—they're sometimes the worst-dressed, their partners the best-dressed, in the season's audiences.

*12 février*

6.00pm: performances of *Butsumyôe (La cérémonie du repentir)* and *Sappho Hikètis (Sapho implorante)*, by Jean Claude éloy, for voice and percussion. Highly theatrical, didactic work, Fatima Miranda's and Yumi Nara's formidable delivery ensures success.

8.00pm: two long electro-acoustic works, *Erkos (Chant, louange)* and *Galaxies, version Sigma* by éloy. The stage, aisles and balconies are filled with (at least) 24 pairs of large loudspeakers, playing taped music recorded from vocal, eastern instrumental and other sources. éloy's ideas seem limitless, the delivery awesome, but the material not quite as convincing.

*13 février*

The fabulous Ensemble Ader, led by pianist Alice Ader, gives concerts at 3.00, 4.30 and 6.00pm. Including clarinet, violin, flute and cello, the ensemble's jewel is shaven-headed, barrel-chested, Gucci-shirted Stephen Salters, whose effortless, rich, articulate baritone fills the hall. The 11 composers' works are consistently high class, but Iglésia's *Premier discours du Job* (Salters: wow!), Hersant's *éphémères* for solo piano (Ader!), and Penderecki's Quatuor *avec clarinette* stand out.

*17 février*

The program of orchestral music is performed once and, after the interval, is performed again with six dancers added. One hearing is enough, the dancers beg more inventive choreography. Serenaded on the Metro by its ubiquitous buskers, I retire to a bar in the Marais.

*18 février*

The zenith—Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus*, of 1944, performed by Roger Murraro. This incredible two-hour work for piano, like all Messiaen's work, is profoundly spiritual and consummately written, revealing many musical forms and influences. It evokes the Miracle and the swirling mass of cosmic energies that created it, physicality and metaphysicality, lessons for mind and soul. The sophistication of the music's structure and its technical demands deserve a virtuoso fully rehearsed in the composer's idioms. Tall, grey-suited Murraro is such a virtuoso—his performance is overwhelming. (Radio France's piano tuner, at work up to the concert's commencement, must retune the upper registers again during the interval.) The whole festival's musical investigation and millennial pondering telescope into this moment. At the conclusion, our standing ovation draws the humble Murraro back for bow after bow before, elated and replete, we depart.

Messiaen's God has smiled, the glittering arrow points to Heaven.

*Presences, Festival de Creation Musicale, Maison de Radio France, February 4-20*

# Not taken as read: speech occludes the visual

*Chris Reid*

A space is a resonant body, a site that catalyses interaction and creation. German performance artist and composer Johannes Sistermanns demonstrated this in 4 performances at the CACSA involving local artists and himself.

On opening night, Johannes and 3 colleagues sang a single note while applying cheese graters to dried out bread rolls nailed to the wall. Sistermanns painted sheets of paper with glue to catch the breadcrumbs and hung them from a rail. The rail also supported a length of aluminium foil connected to a minidisk and a transducer, the foil operating as a loudspeaker to replay ambient sounds recorded from the performance.

A week later, writer-artists Christopher Chapman, Teri Hoskin, Jim Moss and Linda Marie Walker scratched text on pieces of car bodies wired for sound, their scratchings amplified through sheets of blank paper also used as loudspeakers, hanging on the wall like pictures.

The third evening included 4 works in which composers were invited to read. In the front room, Stephen Whittington's iMac was the reader, feeding a phase vocoder through a mixer to loudspeakers that fed back to the microphone, along with ambient sounds. The Imac selected random sentences from works by Bacon, Schopenhauer, Pythagoras, Kepler, Tartini, its female voice (HAL?) blended by Whittington and the vocoder with a synthesiser to produce philosophically profound musical speech, the (non)sense of aleatoric literary appropriation.

Then David Harris, Lily Leaver and Cat McGuffie of ACME New Music Company, seated at desks around the car parts in the rear room, read Harris' word lists, their speech structured by time-clocks. The lists of words, temporally and syntactically fragmented, rendered the word as sound, leaving meaning open.

Sistermanns' own performance followed in the front gallery. Sticking one end of a roll of packing tape to the wall, he slowly unrolled it, moving across the room and sticking it to the floor, vocalising unintelligibly. The tape's unravelling made a staccato screech as he wound it around his head, enclosing his mouth, his voice thus muffled, packaged.

Concluding the evening, Lily Leaver's ensemble of nine voices sang, beautifully but wordlessly, Leaver and tenor Gordon Combes at the entrance to the darkened centre room where a chorus of singers lay supine, Leaver's electric torch probing the space. Again, language = music.

Johannes Sistermanns, photo Stephen Gray

On the final night the audience performed, amongst the month-old bread-crumbs, placing tuning forks against the wall, floor and car parts to 'tune the space.' The mood was slow, meditative.

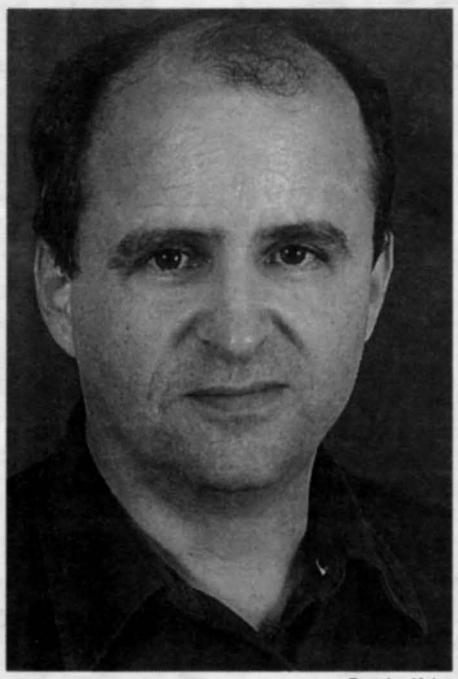
There was an accretion of sound, language and thought over the 4 weeks. Sounds are inherent in any space or object and Sistermanns finds them and weaves them into a subtle fabric. He uses space as a sound box and the audience and objects as sound sources. The audience acts directly, as with tuning forks, or indirectly, their movements and whisperings recorded and reproduced through an amplifier and transducers attached to objects. Thus integrated with the space, with the sonic, visual and temporal forms and textures, one's awareness is heightened. One notices the subtle background sounds, considers the meaningfulness of sounds that are usually unheard. By working at the edge of apprehension, Sistermanns identifies the triggers of perception and thus of meaning.

Day of Resonance, Night of Beginnings, *Johannes S Sistermanns, Contemporary Art Centre of SA, Adelaide, March 31, April 7, 14 and 20*

# Douglas Kahn: worldly sound

*Nicholas Gebhardt*

*One of the major tasks of Douglas Kahn's new book,* Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts, *is to redress an imbalance in the history of contemporary artistic practices in which "visuality overwhelms aurality in the cultural balance sheet of the senses." Aware of the dangers of such abstractions, however, Kahn directs our attention to precisely* how *the problem of making or symbolising sounds has been grappled with. Passing from late 19th century literary evocations of an 'auditory sense', through the ambitious projects of the Italian Futurists, early cinematography and avant garde music, to the major innovations of John Cage, William Burroughs, Antonin Artaud and Michael McClure, Kahn plots an ambitious historical and theoretical path through the labyrinth of modernist and post-modernist practice. His aim is to accentuate the various intrusions of what he terms 'worldly sound' into a range of artistic productions (not just music, as some critics would have it) and to define the allusive qualities that make these sounds seductive. I asked Kahn how he established the relationships between such disparate phenomena.*



Douglas Kahn

I wanted to introduce history, culture and human agency into notions of sound, voice and aurality, because within a lot of writing it's taken as though those things have been the same for ever. In this work, sounds are supposed to have some kind of transparent significance, or they supposedly elude significance altogether, like the scream. One of the main things I was trying to do was introduce historicity into ideas of sound. The way that I did that was to get into not just the practices of sound, but the discourses of sound. When I say sound, I mean sound, voices, and aurality. I wanted to look at the different techniques, technologies and tropes, the rhetoric of sound, in every instance and in detail, and see how they were embedded and embodied in actual social, cultural, and political situations. At the same time, I was trying to get behind the common rhetoric, to work out how each practice or discourse was different.

*In trying to demonstrate the materiality of sound in various artistic practices, how do you prevent a conceptual slippage between the different manifestations of sound, voice and aurality.*

Firstly, the notion of materiality when it comes to sound is problematic in itself. For example, there's a section in the book about the 1920s. Under the influence of recording technologies and a number of other factors, there emerged a field of radio art or audio art that, in effect, had nowhere to go. It was heavily influenced by radio, but of course also cinema sound, and yet it was not music. The insights produced here outlined the musical practices and sound practices that would later be called *musique concrete*. Likewise, the sound experimentations within some early sound cinema are very much *musique concrete* techniques: reversing, cutting, speeding up, slowing down; the very things Pierre Schaeffer started using in 1948. There were others in all kinds of areas starting to use it in the 1920s and then especially the 1930s. I'm really interested in those kinds of relationships; how sound floats over the fence of different disciplines and challenges the discrete territory of the disciplines of different artistic practices.

*How does an analysis of an artistic practice in terms of phonography, or noise, or aurality undermine the formal frameworks in which people might talk about theatre or painting or cinema?*

For most of the people I deal with in the book, those formal and organisational questions are already under attack from a number of angles and forces. What I emphasise, however, is that there are these other discourses around noise, or the voice, that have been completely ignored in representations of 20th century culture, and that even when they are dealt with, it is always in a simplistic fashion. For instance, I try to argue that there are different noises, ranging from the usual noises we associate with the avant garde which are transgressive—crossing boundaries, interruption, and things like that—clear over to a cosmological noise, the chaos from which all is generated. Between those 2 bounds or parameters of noise there are quite a few others, and often they operate at the same time. So I purposely ignored the key musical category of dissonance. Firstly, because it has been given a lot of attention already and doesn't need to be rehearsed once more. But secondly, to try and shift the terms of the debate on the issues of sonic materiality.

*Do the terms noise, water and meat in the title suggest a tension within the very field of artistic practice itself, that is, a tension between the symptoms of sound production and the theory of sound as a critical practice?*

In the back of my mind I wanted to counter Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone Film Typewriter* which pins a lot of cultural practices down to technological determinism. I wanted to tie the text to the ideas of the artists I deal with, so that the terms arise directly from the problems generated within the various practices. For example, the notion of meat emerged from a consideration of [the American performance poet] Michael McClure's work, and attempts to recuperate the negative sense of the body that had developed within the discourse of artistic practice.

*In what sense does each character or actor in the book correspond to a particular auditory moment?*

The discourses are always larger than the people who make them. So I don't use any of the individuals in the book as embodiments of a certain auditory idea or technique. What I do is demonstrate how phenomena such as the modernist concentration on the *glissandi* [a continuous slide of notes either up or down] was both a sign of 'worldly sound' and a means of remaining within a musical rhetoric. I don't go to any of these individuals, say Percy Grainger who was glissandi-mad, and try to attach the idea to him specifically; I go to him to show that this was one way to make a certain representation about the world—a sound that was always falling short of becoming a melody.

*How do you begin to unravel the complex interrelations between artistic practices and recording technologies, and what are some of the key contradictions that arise in this process?*

The big issue, of course, is sound manipulation of varying degrees and kinds. A lot of the artistic questions around authorship that emerged with recorded material were rehearsed most significantly within photo-montage and other systems of recording in the late 19th century, and not necessarily audio montage. You have to remember that the ability to start manipulating sound didn't come until sound cinema. It wasn't until malleable film stock that the first practical sound experimentations came in. This occurred in works like Walter Rattan's *Wochenende* (Weekend) of 1928 and the experiments within film sounds and music in the late 1920s and the 1930s. In terms of the development of the avant garde and artistic practices associated with technological invention and innovation, the institutional conditions under rising Fascist and other regimes meant that experiments were scattered. To call something a 'practice' there has to be a critical mass and, as I try to show, this emerged after the Second World War.

*So in what sense is the book equally a history of brutalising techniques and the automaton in 20th century experience? After all, the industrial arts are driven by a powerful 'efficiency principle.'*

I always try, in this work and in other writings, to argue from the perspective of the artist, and not the sociologist. I've been a practicing artist myself. In that respect, I'm animated by a sense of artistic possibility, which is not something I saw offered in Jacques Attali's *Noise*, which would probably be one of the biggest illustrations of the brutality of audiophonic technology. In his book he demonises phonography, and associates it with the political and economic period of what he calls repetition, and the overwhelming power of commodity culture. That argument has a sort of normative impulse when you start talking about technology in such ways. I'm more interested in investigating specific instances of artistic possibility, rather than making monolithic claims for technology.

*In this sense, are you continually working against the abstractions that creep into discussion about sound?*

I didn't go into this analysis to oppose this or that abstraction. It's just that the state of play on talking about sound is not very advanced. There are people in Australia like Paul Carter, John Potts, Fran Dyson, who have a background in this area that is pretty uncommon. Aside from their work, however, there's not much material out there that is very useful. So the book emerged from my own development within an artistic community dedicated to working with sounds, and my writings emerged as a kind of service to these artists.

*Douglas Kahn,* Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts, *MIT Press 1999, $AUD69. Douglas Kahn is Associate Professor of Media Arts at the University of Technology, Sydney. He is the co-editor with Gregory Whitehead of* Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-garde, *Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992.*

*Nicholas Gebhardt is the Music Director at 2SER FM in Sydney.*

## New Music Notes

The **New Music Network** is about telling audiences and performers where, when and how to hear the best in new music performance around Australia.

Get yourself to the Side-On Café in Annandale soon, and a perfect moment would be when legendary saxophonist **Bernie McGann** is on stage with **John Pochée** (drums), **Lloyd Swanton** (bass), and on 16th & 17th June, **Sandy Evans** (sax) and **James Greening** (trumpet) join the magnificent three. Call Side-On to book a table: 02 9516 3077

Wednesday night **jam sessions** at Side-On, are co-presented by SIMA and Jazzgroove, for 4 to 5 dollars at the door.

Sunday 18th June, listen to members of the excellent **Alpha Ensemble**—Peter Jenkin, Georges Lentz, Stephanie McCallum and Robert Johnson —play **Alban Berg**, **Peter Sculthorpe** and **György Ligeti** in the Eugene Goossens Hall, the recording hall at the ABC Centre. 3pm. (Special ticket prices for NMN members of course) call 02 9660 0840 to book.

Melbourneites have excellent guides for a journey through the music of the 20th century: **Libra Ensemble** have launched an outstanding program for 2000, which continues on 6th July with works by **Milhaud**, **Berg**, **Dench**, **Maxwell Davies**, **Boulez**, **Kagel**, **Barrett** and **Finnissy,** then on 8th July with **Stockhausen**, **Gerhard** and **Werner Henze**. Both concerts take place at the North Melbourne Town Hall at 7.30pm. Call 0417 124 348 for bookings & enquiries.

Back in Sydney, Beat it! 2000, **Synergy Percussion**'s big night out at the Sydney Town Hall is on July 8th at 7pm. The whole place will be grooving to the incredible sounds of **Glen Velez** and **Aly N'Diaye Rose**. Call the box office on (02) 9250 7777 and bring a cushion.

The **11th Sydney Spring Festival of New Music**'s program launch will take place on June 7th. This year the festival will play host to our **Peggy Glanville-Hicks Address** and **New Music Forum** including an exhibition of artist portraits by **Bridget Elliot**. This year at the forum we force entry into the 21st century and look at the ways composers work with the tools and techno-centricities of contemporary culture: Is it new music if we can dance to it? Does anyone care? Our **Peggy Glanville-Hicks** speaker will deliver us from evil and into the hands of idealism once again.

The **Sydney Spring Festival** runs from 4th until 13th August 2000, in The Studio at the Sydney Opera House. Whether you seek out the soloists or the ensembles, the music theatre or the new-media performances, you are sure to find much in the ten day program to entice you. All bookings are through the Sydney Opera House and after June 7th you will be able to visit the program online at the NMN website (see below).

A couple of fund-raising events are coming up for our worthy ensembles: on 8th June at 7pm, join Judy Glen for a dinner/cabaret for **Music Theatre Sydney** (Leichhardt Town Hall) at $65 per head, phone: 9906 7794.

Then on 24th June there's a gala dinner and auction celebrating the 10th year for Artistic Director of the **Song Company**, the wonderful Roland Peelman, at the Renoir Ballroom, Le Meridien Hotel in Sydney (Ph: 0419768800).

If you'd like to receive the NMN's email bulletins, & for more info on times, prices and venues visit our website:
**http://www.nmn.org.au**