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Touchy Subjects: a glimpse at photography's performance at the Sydney Biennale

'The presence before him was a presence.'[1]

The above quote, originally from a Henry James ghost story, appears in two essays by Douglas Crimp, first in 'Pictures' and then later in 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism.' In both texts, Crimp's interest lies primarily in an examination of appropriational strategies of the early 1980s in relation to performance art of the 1970s. In particular, Crimp is interested in quotational art that operates at a level of intertextuality, where the performative becomes photographic and the photographic becomes performative. Central to an understanding of this relational hybridity between performance art and photography is the role of the index—the essential referent that guarantees the work's meaning. While there have been many readings of the index's semiotic principles, Ernst van Alphen's definition is most useful here as it highlights the importance of understanding the affective import of the index. Van Alphen describes the index as:

> a sign motivated by contiguity or continuity; that is, there is a juxtaposition in time, space, or causality between the sign and the object it stands for. In the case of the footprint, there is an existential relation of contiguity with the human or animal that left it; footprint and creature are 'in touch'. The footprint thus *refers* to the presence of a person or animal.[2]

In performance art, the index is located in the affective relationship between the performers and the audience. It is the audience's witnessing of an event as it unfolds and is experienced in 'real time' that ultimately guarantees its meaning. For photography, it is this same contiguity between the event and its representation, except in this instance the role of witness is realised through the indexical properties of the photographic medium itself. In both cases the act of representation is based on a relationship of being 'in touch' with an original moment or thing, that gives the work its meaning.

For Crimp the intertextual relationship between performance art and photography occurs through a dislocation of the indexical authority that informs both mediums, thereby short-circuiting 'the causality between the sign and the object it stands for.' For the performative to become photographic it must operate as a series of fragmentary tableaus, time must flatten out and the experiential depth of duration must be lost. And for the photographic to become performative it must operate as a fragment of a larger whole. It must allude to a sense of narrative time which serves to connect and extend its existence beyond the limits of its frame.

When both mediums approach the condition of the other, there is a quotational face-off. The index of time that informs both the transient experience of performance art (the need to 'be there' in order to bear witness to the work's meaning) and the 'decisive moment' of photography (where the truth of reality is captured in one synchronous click with

fate) is displaced.[3] Like a kind of double act, the play of hybridity between performance art and photography is the acting out of the other's representational gestures—a dialectical staging of appearances. In effect, the road back to any original meaning is enacted as a continuous deferral. Absence of meaning is performed as a reiteration of Roland Barthes' famous photographic dictum 'that-has-been'.[4] It is not, however, the mourning of time passed as suggested by Barthes, but of the loss of signification, as the loss of the index is in effect the death of the 'real.' The hybrid act of quotation between performance and photography creates works that paradoxically become indexes to their own absence of meaning.

In his second rereading of James' quote, however, Crimp hinted at a way out of this self-referential end game that preoccupied much art of the 1980s. The 'false tautology' of James' quote was initially exploited by Crimp for its spectral punning of the word 'presence.' It signified a ghostly occurrence or presence while simultaneously marking a 'real' absence—a paradoxical embodiment of an absent body. In his later essay, however, Crimp found a way to critically negotiate and build on this loss of meaning by extending the notion of a present absence to encompass, 'the notion of presence as a kind of increment to being there, a ghostly aspect of presence that is its excess, its supplement.'[5] Crimp argues for an affective excess of meaning generated precisely by appropriational strategies which denies an essentialist reading of the subject as trans historical. The representational distance of the work is said to effectively generate closeness between itself and the viewer as it promotes a desire for an original that can never be located.[6] The viewer is put back 'in touch' with the work, through the construction of a critical distance between themselves and the original object of meaning that artwork simultaneously connotes and denies.

The theme of this year's Biennale, *On Reason And Emotion*, is informed by this spectral legacy of postmodernism's absent presence. Briefly, Isabel Carlos' curatorial premise is based on the desire to recoup or supplement the 'gap' in 'translation' that exists between reason and emotion; the politics of identity and its representation; and vision and understanding. To bridge this gap with an art that is 'experienced with feelings.'[7] Here it would seem that Carlos is arguing that 'feelings' generated from certain artworks have the ability to engage the viewer in a type of self-reflexive critique. They offer a critical dimension (reason) to the experience of affect as it is translated into emotion. Taking her cue from Antonio Damasio's book, *Descartes' Error*, Carlos' curatorial choices suggest an embodied response to art that undermines the dualistic principles proposed by Descartes' mind/body split. Carlos further describes her curatorial decisions as being motivated by an art that operates in terms of a 'politics and poetics of human relationships, where communication is a mutual exchange rather than a passing on of information.'[8] Her idea of 'mutual exchange' bears a close resemblance to Dominick LaCapra's description of empathy as 'an affective relation, rapport, or bond with the other recognised and respected as other.'[9] Both Carlos and LaCapra argue for an affective exchange that works as a dialectical process. The type of affective response to art that Carlos argues for is perhaps most easily understood as empathy. Although she does not use the term empathy directly, the kind of 'political' and 'ethical' understanding brought about the 'raising of awareness about emotion' she describes, most notably in terms of cultural difference, suggests a desire to affectively understand the 'other' through the act of self-reflection. And she suggests this can be done by critically thinking about the reasons that motivate one's emotive responses to certain works of art.[10] In a sense she wants to put the viewer back 'in touch' with the artwork in order to trigger a more reflexive response to the politics of representation.

Many of the works within the Biennale operate in terms a dialectical play between photography and performance such as Bruce Nauman's *Office Edit II (with colour shift, flip, flop, and flip/flop), mapping the Studio* (2001), and in almost direct contrast to Nauman, Helena Almeida's *Untitled* (2003). It is Derek Kreckler's series *White Goods* (2003-04) however, which more specifically addresses the political and ethical and dilemmas proposed in Carlos' thematic through their relationship to performance and photography. Kreckler's suite of large-scale photographs consists of scenes staged within a rural setting. The scenes themselves seem 'natural' enough. Girls climb up the banks of a river after a swim, or wander happily through a field of grass, and men and women mingle happily in bucolic surroundings. The banality of these actions are heightened by the juxtaposition of refrigerators which appear in some of the

images, hanging by ropes from trees and bridges, like dead bodies swinging from a hangman's noose. In some of the images groups of people socialise beneath the dangling corpses of consumerism, enjoying the spectacle of death (*White Goods #2).* While others gather seated on the grass to listen and learn the lessons of the lynched fridge (*White Goods #1).*

The refrigerators operate as symbolic stand-ins for the bodies of Australian Aboriginals slaughtered by colonialist white 'settlers' in their bid to take possession of the land. As Blair French notes in his catalogue essay on Kreckler's work, the 'allegorical' nature of the images performs the repression of the 'wilful cultural amnesia of *terra nullius*,' and in turn elides the history of suffering endured by Aborigines.[11] It is the restaging of the elision of trauma as a deliberate gap in translation between the past and the present, which Kreckler seeks to exploit as a means of generating an empathic response in the viewer. The metalanguage of history provoked by Kreckler's staged performances emphasises the normalised distance of our relationship to our country's history of trauma. Kreckler's appropriation of the normalisation (or 'white-washing') of colonial history, which is still performed by our current government, seeks the aesthetic distance of the tableau as means to generate an empathetic understanding of the pain of this unacknowledged and ongoing trauma that must be suffered in silence. Here Barthes' description of an exhibition of shock photographs could be applied to further understand the affective pull Kreckler attempts to generate through his work. Barthes describes the way in which the distance of representation creates a supplementary presence, a critical affect, whereby images such as Kreckler's have the ability to 'astonish because at first glance they seem alien, almost calm, inferior to their legend [...] the naturalness of these images compels the spectator to a violent interrogation, commits him to a judgement which he must elaborate himself [*sic*].'[12]

At their best the images struggle to maintain the dialectical play between photography and performance that is necessary for the 'violent interrogation' of an empathetic response to the experiences of the 'other.' The reiteration of this staged banality across a number of images also proves counter-productive to Kreckler's overall intent. At times the overly self-conscious reworking and repetition of the images' scenes dissipates the dialectical tension by completing the performative gesture of empathy, and destroying the allusive space of the work's narrative potential. Kreckler's work is problematic because it does not allow the viewer a space for critical thinking. Instead, the moral of the story has already been established and completed, so the images become aesthetic tropes of trauma.

Jari Silomāki's *My Weather Diary* (ongoing series since 2001), situated on a wall adjacent to Kreckler's work makes use of a similar strategy of shocking banality but in a much more subtle and effective way. Unlike Kreckler's overtly choreographed style, Silomāki's grid of photographs is made up of small images that look like ordinary snap-shots. The amateur aesthetic of the work, its often blurry images and rough compositional framing, is emphasised by hand written texts that read like confessions. A hazy shot of pot plant against a window-sill with the caption 'Today it rained,' sits next to an image of an the side of a mountain with trees with the caption 'Turku, the day that US began bombing Afghanistan.'

An image of Turku, a seaport in south-western Finland stands as dislocated witness to the devastation of war in Afghanistan. The absence of violence, the deliberate gap staged by the text between the event described and its depiction reinvests the image with a temporal space of uncertainty. The disjunction between the evidentiary quality of the images' diaristic notations and their amateur aesthetic engages the viewer in a space between the literal and literary. The displaced chain of causality between what the photograph shows and what it is said to represent allows the audience to get in touch with the production of meaning as they read their own imagined memories back through the traumatic frame of reference suggested by the caption.

The collaborative work of Thomas Mulcaire and Amanda Rodrigues Alves, *Project for Sydney* (2004), while not photographs per se, operate on the same principals of mechanical reproduction as photography—their posters demonstrate the possibility of endlessly reproducing a single image, thereby making the very idea of an original redundant[13] Mulcaire and Rodrigues Alves put the quotational characteristics of photography to work in a strategy similar to Kreckler's. They use words, however, and not images to re-enact the elision of trauma represented the belligerent racism of our government, with the focus clearly on John

Howard's refusal to say 'sorry' to the children of the Stolen Generation.[14]

Appropriated from the cultural currency of the Australian vernacular, the words 'sorry' and 'no worries,' appeared in black text on two separate white posters on the walls of the Art Gallery of NSW. The two stacks of the posters were also positioned side-by-side and available as souvenirs for the audience to take free of charge. The spatial proximity of closeness between the two stacks of printed words exploited their dialogical tension by staging an imaginary apology and its acceptance—'Sorry.' 'No worries.' The imaginary act of contrition performed by the words further served to highlight their problematic usage in our current political climate. At present, their racist uptake operates diametrically rather then dialogically. The reductive opposition of the words too easily translate into Howard's colonialist rhetoric, where saying 'sorry' equates to being 'UnAustralian,' and 'no worries' stands for what it means to be 'Australian'—easy-going and acquiescent—the uncritical position of towing the party line.

The dialectic temporality constructed between the word's narrative potential (performative duration) and their fragmentary (photographic) definitions sets into play a questioning of the political economy of language. The destabilising of this economy is extended further with the artists' gifting of the work to the public via a 're-appropriation' of language.[15] Upon first glance, the infinite potential to reproduce the posters appears as an allusion to a surplus of meaning, where words have become apathetic signifiers. This representational redundancy, however, is subverted by the audiences' consumption of the work, as the presence of loss is registered by decreasing size of the stack. It is this performance of presence and absence, which is triggered by the viewers' active participation within the work, that allows Mulcaire and Rodrigues Alves to draw attention to the possibility creating of intimate and affective moments within the disciplinary space of the public domain, literally mobilising language by giving it back to the viewer.

The appropriated style of hi-tech video gaming graphic meets Calvin Klein advertising in AES+F's episodic adventure series deals with the politics of cultural identity and its representation from a populist rather vernacular angle. These are the big punchy images that everyone loves because they look like fun. The hyper-slick surface of digital realism that gives the image its ethereal perfection pushed to the extreme, with the depiction of male and female adolescents angelically poised with sci-fi weapons. The war they are shown fighting is a 'clean' war, sanitised from the possibility of pain, death and the world itself, much like visual rhetoric and political spin that was used to describe America's role in the Gulf war. AES+F's works could almost function as visual 'Cliff Notes' to Baudrillard's text, *The Gulf War did not take place*. The evacuation of meaning brought about by sterilisation of reality in AES+F's *Action Half Life Episodes* presents the viewer with a simulated space of conflict. The digitally painted fiction of this world, where virginal bodies clothed in white play with guns that sublimate the pornography of war, leaves little room for discursive play or any affective engagement between reason and emotion. Even the characters' frozen movements, paused as if by remote control, create little dramatic tension. The potential of their reanimation seems to offer merely another sequence of pre-programmed moves rather than the possibility of any type of metaphorical slippage. *Action Half Life Episodes* fails to engage the viewer on a critically perceptual level because they are all presence and no absence. The seductive impact of the image lies in its performance as pure spectacle, but after the initial thrill there is literally and critically nowhere to go

The door to the primal scene in Pat Brassington's installation *My Father's House II* (2004) is where the slippage from the virtual to the affective takes place through the disclosure of a pornographic trauma. The three wooden doors hinged to frames are built into the gallery walls. Closet behind each door are a set of black and white children's book images, which are overlayed in places with smaller framed images. These smaller images are framed as violent visual ruptures within the domestic nostalgia of the black and white backdrops. Behind one of the doors the long stem of a crimson phallic tongue confirms the anticipation of shock that weighs on the viewer's imagination as they slowly pull the door open to explore Brassington's world. All the doors hide images of raw body fragments that hang within the tightly framed space as if abjected from their owner's bodies as well as from the memories of the children who witnessed their display. The home in this series is the site of trauma. Brassington purposefully creates a theatrics of shock that overwhelms the viewer's performance within the scene of possible abuse and trauma. The game of hide and seek with the images that the doors allow

the viewer to play literally performs the dialectics of absence and presence of memory in relation to trauma.

The photomedia based works I have briefly discussed are emblematic of a wider set of concerns that inform the Biennale. Within the broader context of the exhibition the inclusion of these works represent Carlos' attempt to curatorially negotiate and define what is at stake politically and ethically in terms of a representation of the self and the 'other' through art. In this respect the exhibition can be understood, in part, as Carlos' desire to stage a dialectical relationship between reason and emotion as way for the audience to experience an affective response, which in turn creates a sense of self-reflexive empathy, or an 'ethics of emotion.'[16] One of the problems, as demonstrated by my discussion of some of the works, is that they are either unable to maintain, or in some cases even initiate, a performative dialectic between the self and the 'other' that is necessary for the experience of empathy. In these cases empathy becomes nothing more than an appropriated effect, rather than an affect generated by an appropriational 'rereading' of cultural identity. Here the politics of representation is reduced to an aesthetic universalism that negates the cultural specificity of viewer's identity and, at times, the cultural difference of the 'other' represented to the viewer. Instead of connecting the viewer to a critical sense of their own history within the show, which would have allowed for a sustained reflective inquiry of cultural identity and difference, the 'universal, even pantheistic' inclusiveness aimed for by Carlos served to generalise and conflate most experience to a neutral sameness.[17] While there are many engaging works within the Biennale, their political reflexivity and the ethical dilemmas they pose for the viewer are short lived because of exhibition's uncritical mixture of works. Understanding cultural difference through an aesthetic lens is a tricky proposition at the best of times. It is to Carlos' credit that she does, however, see the possibility of a link between aesthetics and affect as a means to generate an ethics of emotion yet. What is disappointing is that lumping artworks that subtly make arguments for cultural difference within a universalising framework of emotion makes for lazy politics. In a sense, it allows the viewer to walk through the exhibition much like John Malkovich's character in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Beyond the Clouds* (1985). Malkovich, playing Antonioni, is seated on a train watching the world rush by, framed through the window when he says, 'I feel lazy, and rather than thinking things over, I prefer to feel them'. And this is unfortunately what the polemic of cultural identity and difference is predominantly reduced to in this year's Biennale—feelings, and often nothing more.

NOTES

[1] Douglas Crimp 'essay' in *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism* in *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993, p.109. (essay first published in *October*, no 15. Winter, 1980-81, pp.32-37). Douglas Crimp. 'Pictures' in (ed.). Brian Wallis. *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York/Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art & David R. Godine, 1984, p.177. (essay first published in *October*, no 8. Spring, 1979, p.75-88).

[2] Ernst van Alphen. *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory*, California: Stanford University Press, 1997, 126.

[3] Crimp, *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism*, p.109. Crimp says 'the aesthetic mode that was exemplary during the 1970s was performance art – all those works that were constituted in a specific situation and for a specific duration; works for which is could be said you literally had to be there; works that is, that assumed the presence of a spectator in front of the work as the work took place, thereby privileging the spectator instead of the artist.'

[4] Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*. (trans. Richard Howard). London: Vintage, 1993 (1980), 76-77.

[5] Douglas Crimp. *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism*, 109-111.

[6] Here Crimp is drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' in relation to mechanical reproduction. Crimp paraphrases Benjamin's concept of the aura as that which 'has to do with the presence of the original, with authenticity, with the unique existence of the work of art in the place in which it happens to be.' Douglas Crimp. *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism*, 111.