

GRIDLOCK



James Angus [Aus], Jose Dávila [Mexico], Ceal Floyer [UK], Shaun Gladwell [Aus], Rikard Lundstedt [Sweden], Andrew McLeod [NZ], John Marriott [Canada], TV Moore [Aus/US], Jaakko Niemelä [Finland], OLO [Finland], Anu Pennanen [Finland], Jim Speers [NZ], Johan Thurfjell [Sweden], Raffael Waldner [Czech], Brendon Wilkinson [NZ], Ri Williamson [NZ]

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Gridlock: Cities, Structures, Spaces was an aptly titled exhibition. With its subtitle, curator Simon Rees invoked the nightmare of cities, structures, spaces through artist's thoughts, ruminations and fabulations, rather than through signs of cataclysm. If we think of the city as a body, disruptions come in the form of antibodies or viruses. There is civil disobedience and breakdown of law and order, general strikes and rioting; the disruption of services [bodily functions] – garbage pickup, power outages, water shortages; acts of god – towering infernos, earthquakes, storms; and inexplicable otherworldly interventions as in the 'Godzilla

metaphor.' The future-gone-wrong vision presents us with uncontrolled tumours spreading through the city-body in films such as *Blade Runner*, *The Fifth Element*, *Demolition Man* and *Escape From New York*. Gridlocks are different and more than traffic jams, as they represent a congestion initiated by human error and/or intent, such as sabotage of the traffic computer in the film *The Italian Job* to facilitate the thieves' quick getaway, a comical contradiction in terms [in order to reach the mountain escape route, the getaway cars exit through the sewers, the bowels of the city]. Gridlock is a paralysis, a systemic failure of the very system that is meant to keep traffic flowing – time and space 'management' is suspended.

Rees' exhibition however, is no mere cautionary tale with a hero or anti-hero to deliver divine intervention. He assembled sixteen artists from Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden and Switzerland. Twelve of the artists produced new work. Yet these are not countries we think of as invoking über-urban mythologies [with the exception of Mexico City and London]. Rees' inspired selection interwove a modernist credo in art – the ordering system of the grid – with that of urban culture and memory. The grid has been the subject of countless exhibitions as has the city, but to take a cue from the mother lode of urban-grid paintings,

Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, we can learn nothing about the city, or boogie-woogie. Rather, we enter into the lure of modernity as a benign and pleasing pattern. Everything looks good from a bird's eye view.

Works by James Angus and Shaun Gladwell provided visual extremes of the gridlock proposition and how artists continue to find ways to communicate. Angus' *Morellet Wall* – a reference to the French systemic artist François Morellet [b.1926] – occupied the museum's feature wall at the top of the Billy Apple 1970s altered staircase [the invisible seventeenth artist?]. In contrast to Mondrian's aestheticised grid, Angus followed the Morellet rule of a composition executed without arbitrary aesthetic decisions. He used black masking tape to construct a grid of truncated cruciforms that formed a matrix of circles. This may be the Holy Grail for utopian architects and urban planners, a road grid without the interference of buildings. Angus' 'map of roads' [or a 'neural mapping'], go nowhere and everywhere, emphatically locked into its own, anti-circulation grid system. At the side, was an earlier, small multi-coloured perspex architectural model of an idealised modernist building titled *Dom-Ino Colour Separation*. They were not related works, but the relationship is there for the taking.

Shaun Gladwell's *Multiple Descent [Taranaki]* was made on site in New Plymouth. The video followed two local teens who agreed to skateboard down a multi-levelled parking garage, situated on the city centre's ocean front. The video is as simple a proposition as Angus' work, the subject not being the skateboarders *per se* [youth culture subverting urban function]. During the descent via the monocular camera eye, the ocean comes into view, then Mount Taranaki. They are views that one expects of prime location condos or landscape painting of the sublime, but were of little use or interest to [the utilitarian needs of] drivers or shoppers. The looped repetition of descents and slowed-down time allowed this paradox to be revealed.

Like Angus' endless grid, there is no beginning or end to Gladwell's video: he cuts it before the skateboarders reach the exit sign. A comparable vision/proposition dual projection video by TV Moore shows a man running backwards – in slow motion and slipping periodically – through the early morning and near deserted streets of Sydney... but it could be any city. Rees stated that the viewer is unsure whether the runner is in a real or dream space. That is, we know this space and may have similar nightmares. Likewise, there is no specific beginning or end.

Not all the works invoked the cityscape real or imagined, but that too was the strength of the exhibition. The Finnish duo OLO constructed a one day sauna in the courtyard space of the Govett-Brewster Gallery. The sauna was not architecture but rather an expedient utilitarian space utilising timber off-cuts and plastic sheeting within a formal architectural setting. OLO invited the gallery visitors to 'strip down and get hot' as a temporary cultural-mystical overlay of an integral element of Nordic life in the southern hemisphere. There was by the way, a gridlock of sorts as the visitors quickly jammed the small courtyard, which was accessed through the gallery restaurant. Another space intervention work was that of Canadian John Marriott. His *Incidental Park Zones* video instructed us how to create 'park zones' in the city by following simple rules of interpersonal engagement.

Singling out these works does not however, do justice to the diversity and range of the exhibition. Finnish artist Jaakko Niemel's CGI projection work titled *Fear of Loss*, takes us through a domestic space constructed from his childhood memories and realised as a quasi-dimensional graph-grid. As with other works described, the viewer was locked into the continuous circulation of the grid.