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A sense of torpor permeates the latest *Biennale of Sydney*. In an exhibition curated on the premise of emphasising the emotional register of contemporary art, strangely enough the overweening sense is one of lassitude, at times *ennui*. Is this due to lack of ambition or intellectual sluggishness on the part of the curator, or perhaps some of the artists? Or could it evidence a strategy that aims to slow down the pace and lower the temperature of cultural activity and interaction; a reaction to the ever-present live streaming of ‘shocking’ images and sounds that does not allow for careful, considered scrutiny; a visual arts equivalent to the ‘slow food’ phenomenon? Certainly, if art is capable of crafting alternative forms of spectatorship to the mass media norm, we are currently in dire need of them.

Perhaps in her very intellectual sluggishness and lack of ambition, Isabel Carlos may well have tripped over an emerging tendency in contemporary practice – slow art – that does not ironically demand our boredom nor scream its banality, but seeks to develop a more temperate but extended mode of engagement. As Carl Honore argues in *In Praise of Slowness: How a worldwide movement is challenging the cult of speed*¹, slowness is an important cultural phenomenon, so that perhaps ‘slow is the new fast’!

What do I mean by intellectual sluggishness and lack of ambition? To begin with, the theme – the proposition that feelings are integral to the process of thinking – is poorly thought through, does little to elucidate much of the work, and appears to betray an alarmingly simplistic take on aesthetic and philosophical developments of the last few decades. Many would argue that this proposition is nothing new: it hardly captures the *zeitgeist* and could be read as little more than a basic description of the very domain of art. Another view might suggest that there is a rich vein to be tapped here, particularly if the theme aimed to explore how some recent practices have questioned the dominant conceptual legacy of contemporary art in order to re-embrace the full gamut of art’s aesthetic effects. However, the curator made no allusion to such a perspective, and passed up the opportunity to provide a convincing historical context or rationale for her chosen theme.

Carlos’ catalogue essay is thin on argument, over relies on quotations that cry out for proper contextualisation and makes many simplistic and unhelpful assertions – including that as the work in the exhibition should be ‘experienced with feelings that go beyond what can be written about’, the introductory essay is ‘a necessary evil’. This assertion, ironically, affirms the very duality of reason and emotion Carlos seeks to problematise. In the same spurious spirit that ‘words get in the way of emotion’, the catalogue texts fail to expand and riff on the theme: there is no other broad contextualising essay and, with a few exceptions, the artists’ entries rarely go beyond description of individual works.

Some of the works also exuded a similar laziness and lack of ambition. In particular, this pertained to certain site-specific works, works that Carlos – in her efforts to distinguish this *Biennale* from those that result from the default decisions of international curators – foregrounded as evidence of this exhibition’s engagement with local conditions. It is hard to imagine a more reductive and patronising response to the ‘specificity’ of Sydney than Thomas Mulcaire and Amanda Rodrigues Alves’ *Project for Sydney* [2004], which comprised a wall text and posters with the words ‘No Worries’ and ‘Sorry’. De Rijke/de Rooij’s *Bouquet* [2004], a bunch of Australian native flowers in a typical florist’s arrangement, however, would probably come close – although this duo’s major work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, *The point of departure* [2002], was an excellent example of what might be a broader move towards slowed-down attentiveness in contemporary practice. Luísa Cunha’s “*Hello!*” [2004], a sound installation whereby a small voice asked ‘Are you there, can you hear me, hello?’ while you sat in an MCA toilet cubicle, also suffered from a lack of ambition. The site had great potential for intimate, unguarded exchanges, yet the actual monologue was so underdeveloped and banal that the overriding feeling was one of wasted opportunity. Frédéric Post’s *La Temple de l’Extase* [2003–4], another purportedly ‘site-specific’ work, sought to recreate a chill-out room, but was so unsympathetic and unresponsive to site that it repelled rather than attracted visitors to tarry a while.

The problem is not simplicity of gesture; simple gestures can result in complex responses. For example, Rubens Mano’s *Visor* [2004] invited the viewer to don a visor like that worn by an elderly woman whose gaze we could plainly see in the photograph before us. Upon looking through the visor, however, our vision became alarmingly cloudy: all we can discern are variations in light. As such, a simple gesture confronted us with our assumptions about perception in an immediate and demanding way. Jari Silomäki’s *My Weather Diary* [2001 and ongoing] was also a simple gesture, a series of seemingly unremarkable snapshots that have been annotated in the artist’s hand with prosaic statements about events, whether in the artist’s personal life or in the news. Once we understand these image-text combinations as daily journal entries [the photographer has unfailingly taken one photograph a day since 2001], once the artist’s selection of personal experience and world events begin to anchor our own memories, Silomäki’s work makes for a poignant and absorbing meditation on how we structure history.

Hence it is not simplicity, but simple-mindedness and oversimplification – where the concept, and its material realisation, remains underdeveloped and unresolved – that lead to intellectually sluggish, unambitious work. The results appear as an ironic token to the curator’s desire to have this *Biennale* operate like a big workshop, along

the lines of the much admired *The Readymade Boomerang*, 1990 *Biennale of Sydney*.

Yet, amid works that disappoint in their conceptual sluggishness, there were others where the torpor had a far more positive effect, where slowness is a virtue not a sin. The tendency to slow down was perhaps most obvious in the video works, many of which aspired towards an expanded duration. In contrast to the predominance of narrative in the previous *Biennale*, [*The World may be Fantastic* – which responded to the perceived proliferation of alternative and fictitious stories in contemporary culture – in these video works the action was not figured on the screen, but occurred in the very process of watching. The video installations of both James Coleman, *La Tache Aveugle* [1978–90] and Bruce Nauman, *Office Edit II* [2001], tested our attention-deficient mode of perception. That the frames barely moved forced us to focus not only to the film/video-making apparatus and process, but also to our very impatience, on our itch for immediate narrative titillation. De Rijke/de Rooij’s *The Point of Departure*, a film that slowly and gracefully tracked over the detailed abstract patterns on a Persian rug, also challenged our impoverished modes of spectatorship. The pace and tenor of the film, in contradistinction to energetic abstract animations such as those of Len Lye, extracted meditative time from the viewer. In a different way, so did the real time dinner conversations of African migrants to Sweden, as recorded in Loulou Cherinet’s *White Women* [2002]: this video was feature length, with a continuous tracking shot of the dinner guests and made no concessions to the viewer’s desire to grasp the work instantly before moving on.

Susan Norrie’s video *Enola* [2004] also extended time through a combination of slow motion, apparent distortions of scale, and the spatial disorientation of the viewer that results from the impossible [yet real] juxtaposition of iconic monuments from around the world. [Norrie derived her footage from a visit to a Japanese theme park where such landmarks as the Eiffel Tower, the World Trade Centre and St. Peter’s Piazza have been meticulously reproduced]. Norrie’s film felt sticky: we were caught in the images’ drag as though in viscous ointment, a sense that was underlined by the contrasting pull of the tinny, jaunty muzak on the soundtrack. Slow, subtle movements also characterised Daniel Von Sturmer’s video installation *The Truth Effect* [2003]; it comprised five separate films projected on small canvas-like screens that we might describe as a series of kinetic still lives. Everyday objects were set in slow, gentle motion by an off-screen impulse, creating simple but poetic patterns that focused the viewer’s attention on the act of looking, while reminding him/her of the beauty and integrity of ordinary things.

The urge to decelerate was also inherent in a number of the paintings, whose intricate, complex compositions demanded that the

viewer gaze closely and at length. Carolyn Eskdale’s small, delicate ink washes slowly unfolded as the viewer approached. A field of colour differentiated into innumerable fine lines that oscillated between fingerprints, the texture of paperbark and a map’s contour lines. [Eskdale’s *trompe l’oeil* sculptures that disguised translucent cloth as marble and flocking as plaster stucco also cause the viewer to stop, take stock, recover his/her bearings]. Both Elizabeth Nyum Nungurrayi’s thick, creamy, layered pattern *Parwalla* [1999–2002] and the overblown decoration of Michael Raedecker’s embroidered paintings, such as *brilliant gloom* [2004], hold within them a strong sense of the artist’s time. They are slow works: slow to make, slow to observe, slow to yield their meaning. Similarly, a sense of time suspended permeated Diti Almog’s suite of small-scale ‘paintings within paintings’, including *Main room, March 15* [2004]. These works’ immaculately smooth surfaces and finely executed tonal variations, together with the spatial conundrums they provoked, make for a slow experience of viewing. Almog appears to have frozen a vista in time, and trapped the moment of looking in paint with a viscosity that recalls Norrie’s film. The painterly photographs of Pat Brassington and Frank Thiel, despite their disparate subject matter and technical finish, shared a profusion of intricate aesthetic effects: the texture, colour and minute detail of these images demanded the viewer’s close and extended scrutiny.

Even Jimmie Durham’s rock was slowly, gently lowered, to the surprise of most of the onlookers who expected a fast, spectacular drop, in *Still life with stone and car* [2004], which entailed the crushing of a car with a large boulder on the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House.

While too often the inertia that this exhibition exuded amounted to a kind of intellectual sluggishness and lack of ambition – on the part of the curator as well as certain artists – at other times that very lassitude that urges us to slow down can prove not only engaging but challenging to our prevailing modes of spectatorship. Carlos aimed to curate this *Biennale* so that it would operate as a walking trail, reviving some of the strategies that were employed by earlier *Biennales*, such as those in 1990 and 1998, where the act of walking around the city informed the works. This might have remained more lip service than reality, given that the vast majority of the exhibition was white-cube bound. However, certain works did encourage a slow, ambulatory pace, whereby we could stop, take our time, and imagine an escape from the cult of speed.

Note

¹ Carl Honore, *In Praise of Slowness: How a worldwide movement is challenging the cult of speed*, San Francisco: Harper, 2004