

CALLUM MORTON

Babylonia

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,
Melbourne

Melbourne International Arts Festival

accaonline.org.au

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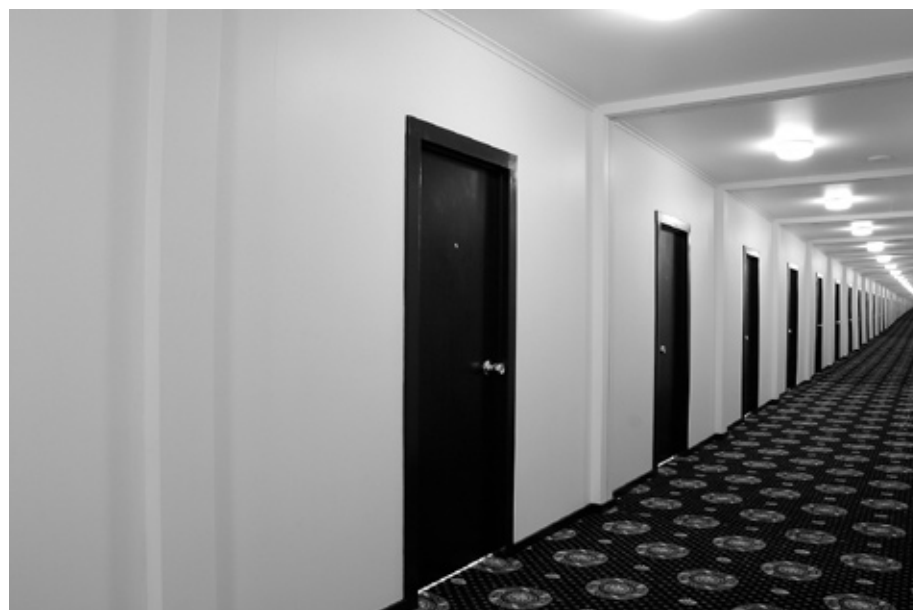
ANTHONY GARDNER

As the American art historian Thomas Crow noted in a lecture for London's 2005 *Frieze Art Fair*, institutional critique has become passé. Emerging in its wake is institutional competition—large-scale artworks vying visually, physically or aurally with glamorous gallery architecture for the viewer's attention. Crow's 'competitors' include the marquee names of today's art fair extravaganzas, from Richard Serra to Olafur Eliasson and Maurizio Cattelan, whose sculptures are dwarfed only by the budgets required to make and buy the works.¹

Callum Morton's *Babylonia* suggested that his name could be added to that all-star cast. He similarly benefited from sponsors' largesse: a \$100,000 grant through the Helen McPherson Smith Commission at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and presentation through the *Melbourne International Arts Festival*. Yet the result of such rare beneficence was more complex than Crow's thesis allows: *Babylonia* was both a spectacular installation competing with the chic of ACCA's main room and a tidy summation of Morton's practice to date.

Morton's references were again multifarious, directed inwardly through self-reference and out to other cultural histories. The gallery's black slab floor served as a sea surrounding Morton's island installation, a miniature approximation of Lisca Bianca, the Italian outcrop on which Anna disappears in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *L'Avventura* [1960]. Its polystyrene shell was the oversized offspring of Morton's *Oh Brigitte* [2002], itself a Lilliputian replica of the Capo Massullo, the peninsula on which Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* [1963] reaches its climax beside the Casa Malaparte.

And as has become Morton's signature style, sound emanated from this installation's interior: a garish mix of telephone rings, dog barks, babble and Henry Mancini muzak that made Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* [1961] seem quaint. Viewers familiar with Morton's models of architectural icons [from Mies' Farnsworth House to Safdie's Habitat '67] will know that he regularly frustrates our desire to peer inside the models, to see the mechanics and machinations generating these sounds. Translucent and curtained windows, locked doors and one-way mirrors keep the art world [or at least certain



members of it) awake at night asking: what is inside Morton's boxes? And *Babylonia* provided an answer—more of the same smoke and mirrors. Inside the island's bowels was a plush and slightly cramped hotel corridor begging for a kid on a tricycle and Kubrick's dolly camera from *The Shining* [1980]. The ceiling was slightly but perceptibly lower than one would expect, a scalar play familiar from Morton's early wall-bound balconies like *3/4 Time* [1997]. Nor was the Western art canon immune from tweaking: Morton rearticulated Dan Graham's own spatial games, with works like *Public Space/Two Audiences* [1976] reanimated as two mirrors facing each other, so that the corridor appeared to extend infinitely in both directions. Light seeped from beneath locked doors that vibrated from the bass behind them—another self-reference, this time to the rattling doors holding a rabid beast at bay in *Cellar* [1998]. In short, think a Holiday Inn in

the guts of Hanging Rock, with the eternally elusive Miranda replaced by the ever-allusive Morton.

Babylonia could have boiled down to a case of the artist preening before his own mirrors were it not for the installation's pairing with Martin Creed's *The Lights Off*, a decision that, in retrospect, was inspired. The sounds from *Babylonia* wafted throughout ACCA because of its notoriously bad acoustics, competing with and dominating the gallery space, permeating the suite of rooms in ACCA's second wing. Standing within Creed's pitch-black [and thus seemingly endless] corridor heightened one's sense of hearing, accentuating *Babylonia*'s soundtrack within *The Lights Off*. The effect was a curious dialogue between the works and a mutual conceptual reinforcement. Creed's intervention became a darkened mirror of Morton's interior, with Creed's

apparent act of refusal developing into something else: an act of deference toward *Babylonia*'s attempts to compete with everything around it.

The works' shared genesis in Western art's recent past also began to emerge. Creed rearticulated conceptual interventions in the institution, though in a blackly comic way. If Mel Bochner mapped the dimensions of a gallery room from cornice to cornice in black tape and foot lengths, mutely enlightening us to the presence of space, then Creed provided a similar awareness though in an inverse way—by spectacularly [and now infamously] shutting the space down. *Babylonia* similarly rearticulated Graham's minimalist space by reframing the latter's phenomenological enlightenment within tropes of overwhelming entertainment. But to see this turn to 'spectacle' as something new would be mistaken. Morton's references to period cinema and Mancini songs suggested a need to re-read minimal and post-minimal art within modes of entertainment that existed before contemporary criticism's fear of 'institutional competition'. Posing before Morton's mirrors is no different, no more or less spectacular, than posing before a Graham thirty years before; Morton's exaggerated references merely highlighted that ongoing relation between behaviour, environment and entertainment.

In other words, *Babylonia* suggested that 'institutional competition' is not a recent phenomenon; it was already present within phenomenological interventions of the 1960s and '70s. The American neo-avant-garde may actually be the Old Testament to contemporary art's approximate palimpsest [*Babylonia* indeed]. And though Morton's perpetual self-references risked reducing the work to narcissism, his complex investigations of Western art history and contemporary art practice, spectacle and the conceptual, provide a strong point from which to push his now-familiar approaches in new directions.

Note

¹ Thomas Crow, 'Contemporary Art Versus Its Envelope: Competition and Co-Evolution', lecture presented at the *Frieze Art Fair*, 22 October 2005, webcast through www.resonancefm.com