

THE TRIUMPH OF SCULPTURE

ASTRID MANIA

There was an odd feeling of déjà vu associated with this year's Australian Pavilion in Venice. Despite the fact that a retro vibe is consistent with Ricky Swallow's recent oeuvre, regrettably, many aspects of this effect seemed to be beyond the artist's control. As the Australia Council geared up for another major public relations exercise for the nation's cultural sector, the considerable media attention generated around Australia's appearance at the *Venice Biennale* two years ago was outshone as the Fellowship of Bling sought the aid of Elf Queen Cate Blanchett. Her intercession at the opening made me suspicious as to who and what was being promoted there. One couldn't help but feel for Ricky Swallow, as tried and true Hollywood appeal stole the show on the day, spinning the event far from the kind of critical appraisal a serious contemporary artist can expect in Venice.

Beyond its promotional machinery, the pavilion itself in many respects also bore an uncanny resemblance to the way things were two years ago, with an arrangement of representational sculptural works similarly positioned throughout the interior. This extended to remarkable coincidences such as Piccinini introducing her installation with a series of distorted helmets [reminiscent of Swallow's *iMan Prototypes*], while Ricky Swallow's final piece in the pavilion was a bike helmet occupied by snakes coiled within it. Obviously the approach that Australia adopted for the last *Venice Biennale* was identified as a magic formula. Again, the country has chosen to be represented by an artist of European descent with a solid international career and a practice that can hardly be called offensive or politically challenging. On the contrary, both practices affirm a hegemonic, conservative status quo in Western aesthetics.

To some extent, the notion of an eternal recurrence is interesting when dealing with an artist who has until now so smartly distorted aspects of time. Swallow previously merged past, present and future; he interwove and ironically displaced historical fact into science-fiction fantasy, contaminating the linear flux of time with his sardonic monuments. In treating the emblems and paraphernalia of contemporary pop and youth culture as if they were residue from a lost civilisation, he transformed them through tours de force of technique into artefacts that seemed to belong to the past.

Swallow has always been fascinated by the morbid and the macabre, but the skull, for example, often seemed more of a reference to the defiant icons of contemporary youth culture, to bodies of evidence from scientific constructs, than to classical *memento mori*. Now this relationship has shifted, and the more recent work inscribes itself into this aesthetic tradition without either genuinely reviving or questioning it. The sculptures displayed in Venice strike me instead as mementos of the *memento mori*, rather than actual reminders of human mortality, as they seem to be perceived by many critics. These works do not evoke death and decay because they do not generate commanding images that would encapsulate contemporary fears or nightmares. It is doubtful whether Swallow ever intended them to be read this way. They do, however, romance art historical representations of death and decay.

To me these works lack much of the tension Swallow has the capacity to produce—a tension between the subject matter and its formal treatment, between object and material, to be found, for example, in *iMan Prototypes* [2001]. Humorous and unsettling, this work embodies a kind of technology-generated angst, a human anxiety about being controlled by a higher intelligence of digital genesis. On a much lighter level it exaggerates the renowned organically-shaped design of the Apple computer and highlights a formal analogy to the human skull. Plus it is, intentionally or not, an hilarious reference to Alan Turing's enigmatic death.

It is today perilous to sincerely deploy formerly powerful *vanitas* symbols, which along with the overarching metaphysical belief systems that accompanied them, now seem untenable. Swallow seemed to understand this condition as he overtly drew his symbols from the imagery and ornamentation of skateboards and pop culture. The ghoulish skeleton riding a motorbike in Liz Craft's *Death Rider [Libra]* [2002] provides another take on the transformation of a once commanding icon into a kitschy emblem of contemporary rock or gothic culture. Even though she too moulds her subject into an elaborately manufactured commodity, her bony rider knows it looks ridiculous.

The skeleton in Swallow's *The Exact Dimensions of Staying Behind* [2004–05] however, does not emerge from the depths

of popular culture. It knows that its origins are art historical—isn't the tool that it holds in its hand the knife with which it has chiselled itself out of its own tradition? The form of the skeleton is carved with such austere craftsmanship and executed in such a classical material, that it almost passes as a credible historical artefact. The same effect is created by the cornucopia of fish spread on the table of *Killing Time* [2003–04]. Although ostensibly rooted in the artist's biography, these motifs are haunted by too many religious and art historical connotations for the work to display the temporal and aesthetic ambiguity of Swallow's previous sculptures. Apart from demonstrating his virtuosity as a sculptor, what does he hope to gain from such a traditional treatment of such traditional subject matter?

In many of his earlier sculptures the elaborate craftsmanship was necessary to change the status of the object, to transform it from an item of everyday pop culture into an item of petrified museum culture. For the Venice works this craftsmanship is almost tautological, as the objects represented here are already sourced in the world of the museum, the cemetery of art history. Monochrome surfaces add to the impression of looking at 'authentic' historical specimens. In the past, Swallow often removed all traces of colour from his sculptures to render them less familiar, to pour a colourless layer of historicity over them, to remove them from the contemporary world of consumerism and induct them into the world of aesthetics. Applied to subjects from art history, however, this formal device does nothing to surmount its inert subject-matter.

When re-animating an aesthetic tradition such as the still life, its sociological implications and values should not be overlooked. The heyday of the still life painting was also the heyday of a rising bourgeoisie that helped, with its burgeoning economic power, to wrest control of the arts from the church's sphere of influence. One of the most interesting repercussions of this period of art history for today's art world was the rise of the art market. Swallow continues the tradition of the still life in the sense that his works are spectacularly crafted displays of fascinating objects, while at the same time remaining highly collectible items. Swallow's earlier works were also desirable objects for collection, but they understood the

structure of desire and laid it open: he selected consumer objects from his generation and transformed them into sought-after art objects through the application of his signature style.

At this point it is worthwhile juxtaposing another practice entirely wrapped up in the condition of the object to Swallow's meticulous celebration of it. Tino Sehgal, one of the two artists representing Germany in this year's *Biennale*, has built his practice on the creation and production of immaterial works. His sculptures—as he insists on calling them—manifest themselves only through a fixed set of theatrical chants, movements and interactions interpreted by performers who are hired for the duration of an exhibition and instructed by the artist. Contrary to performance, however, which supposedly topples notions of unrestricted access to and availability of works of art, Sehgal's sculptures are 'displayed' continuously in accordance to the exhibition site's schedule. Moreover, their duration is—as with that of many objects in museum collections—theoretically unlimited, as they can be 'revived' at any time for further exhibition.

Despite the fact that Sehgal renounces permanent physical materialisation of his work—which includes a prohibition on any pictorial documentation or representation of it—he steadfastly obeys the conventions of the museum and art market. It is not the current system governing the arts that he disdains, but rather the objects circulating within it. Sehgal's art practice is an economic experiment, as he sees the art market as a case study of current capitalist society. Identifying overproduction of goods in times of shrinking resources as a key socio-economic problem for today's affluent societies, the artist proposes a different model of production—that of the immaterial good. With his deliberate and conscious embracing of the market, Sehgal solves one of the persistent problems associated with previous attempts to dematerialise and evade the commodification of the art object. Through their documentation in the media of film and photography, much of his predecessors' works ended up being re-introduced into the art market. Sehgal closes this loophole, but if he is truly driven by ecological and economic concerns, why not go one step further and test the white cube, not only as a site for different modes of production, but also different modes of distribution?



Perhaps the most radical and successful meditation on the art object and its implications was achieved in the Romanian Pavilion. There, artist Daniel Knorr and curator Marius Babias also rejected any kind of material representation by exhibiting an empty pavilion. They did this, however, not to suggest a different approach to art production, but to step back further in order to question *a priori* conditions underwriting the production and display of art. A reader containing a number of essays shedding light on the history and symptoms of the European Union as pandemic was handed out to the audience. Within its modest pages, artists, philosophers and art historians offer commentary on identity politics in the countries of the former Eastern bloc and the role the arts play in them. With their refusal to engage in any kind of visual representation, Knorr and Babias managed to escape the productive and affirmative function performed by the arts in the service of a new national image.

The Romanian Pavilion understood and demonstrated best that the decision for a particular mode of artistic production brings with it a particular set of values. Moreover, Knorr and Babias highlighted the fact that in Venice, as elsewhere, the arts are hijacked by national interests that eclipse the aesthetic realm. In this respect, Ricky Swallow may have been caught up in a project that instrumentalised his art for the benefit of conservative national interests on the part of the Australian state.