



CONSCIENCE AND PRIVACY, MEMORY AND FICTION

SOPHIE O'BRIEN

Every object is an event... and every event has an object-like quality.
George Brecht ¹

The Museum of Contemporary Art's end of 2005 season of sculpture presented three very different practices in three very different exhibitions—Kienholz, Jacky Redgate: *Life of the System 1980–2005* and Erwin Wurm: *Glue Your Brain*.

There are no planned connections *per se* between the exhibitions, and in fact so different are they that finding overt correlations between them would be forcing the issue. However, what each show offers is a reflection upon their shared territory and their respective positions within it, representing different artworlds and periods—Kienholz, as an initiator of the American school of large-scale sculpture and installation; Redgate, with both the survey of her own work and the curation from the MCA's collection, combines the specific history of the Power Bequest within an international context and provides a view of the 1980–90s in Australia; and Wurm, whose work, among other things, represents one of the current dominant forms of contemporary practice in Western Europe (flourishing in the more well-known and documented biennales). The combination of these exhibitions therefore allows the visitor to reflect upon all three of these phenomena quite clearly, each one more illuminated by the light of the other two.

The three exhibitions propose investigations into human life at the daily or basic level, utilising to different degrees the tools of cliché and iconography, poetry and implication. What is most revealing is the respective artists' relationship to the world outside the studio door and their concern with human reaction to change or the unknown. Their responses range from the grandiose to the microscopically small, portraying all manner of systems and the consequent emotional impact of them upon the individual.

Edward and Nancy Kienholz' sculptures present life as short, brutish and cruel, with no person or object resting outside of the tangled world of politics and shared history of violence. Their works are carnivale, ghost circus and American gothic rolled into one, where iconographic symbols are the currency (bullets equated to phalluses; prostitutes, with faces literally framed, trade in their appearance; an only slightly worried Statue of Liberty represents the voice of America in neon letters). The works on war clearly put forward the artists' opinion of the current United States of America's defence and foreign policies, as well as those policies' historical precedents. These criticisms of the State and society are laid out with a broad brush and on a grand scale—the artists making their sculptures as brash, dirty-looking and as overt in meaning as is possible (notably in *The Bear Chair*, which focuses on child abuse). Unfortunately however, although there is a great deal of sympathy and support to be invoked for the overall validity of these baldly stated ideas, as well as concurrent criticisms of our own government and society, the messages often appear to be overly simplistic and didactic—and possibly even seem rather patronising to an Australian or foreign audience. Yet this approach is duly reinforced by the essayist Richard Cork in his description of *The Ozymandias Parade* in the exhibition guide:

The entire world is involved in this charade: different flags have been planted... while a host of diminutive Third World figures accompany the parade. They seem eager to participate, even though the behaviour of the President and his cronies reveals just how hollow the belligerent western power-game really is.

In the context of this visual and verbal din (with everyone on their respective soapboxes), the smaller sculptures in the adjoining rooms and corridors quietly communicate the same ideas in a more assured and understated manner, offering far more impact and cohesion. More poetic and with more far-reaching implications, are the works where outcomes are to be imagined by the viewer. Each work in the *Concept Tableaux* series consisted of a plaque accompanied by a detailed description of a proposed work. The buyer would be able to take the project further by paying for a preparatory drawing and, at the final stage, the tableau's realisation. And in *The Barter*, a series of rubber-stamped

watercolours state what the artworks were acquired in exchange for (*For Nine Screwdrivers, A Fur Coat and A Bolt Cutter*). Both series indirectly criticise the artworld and/or the other worlds we inhabit, but are not as over-determined or as clumsy as the larger scale installations.

Certainly though, it must be acknowledged that Kienholz successfully portray modern Western societies to be self-interested and violent, albeit through the recreation on a life-size scale of the blunt and ugly consumerist behaviours they criticise. At the very least, this energy and overt commitment against the mainstream reveals to an extent our own political situation and the general malaise of apathy into which we seem to have sunk.

The survey exhibition of Jacky Redgate's work, *Jacky Redgate: Life of the System 1980–2005*, is a more measured approach to sculpture and image making. As MCA curator Russell Storer writes in the accompanying guide, Redgate has focused on questioning conventional uses of photography, investigating the systems that govern modern life and assessing our perceptual frameworks. Additional to this, Redgate's commitment to understanding objecthood is primary and this is certainly where her exhibition achieves the most. It is this fascination that creates the most interesting links to the accompanying historical exhibition entitled *1967: Selected Works from the MCA Collection*, which was curated by Redgate as parallel to her own practice and her emigration to Australia (in 1967). Connections between her own works, history and the works within the Collection are fluently drawn out, although the artist modestly steers clear of stating too many connections. For example, there are parallels in the investigation of light, vision and perception between *Anonymous (probably Daguerre or Niepce de Saint-Victor)* table prepared for a meal and Gregorio Vardanega's *Chromatic Circles*. More overtly, explorations into the re-use of artworks to investigate authorship and photographic documentation is apparent in both *A Picture is no Substitute for Anything!* and in Ian Burn's *Photographic Mirror (Referential line: Robert Morris)*.

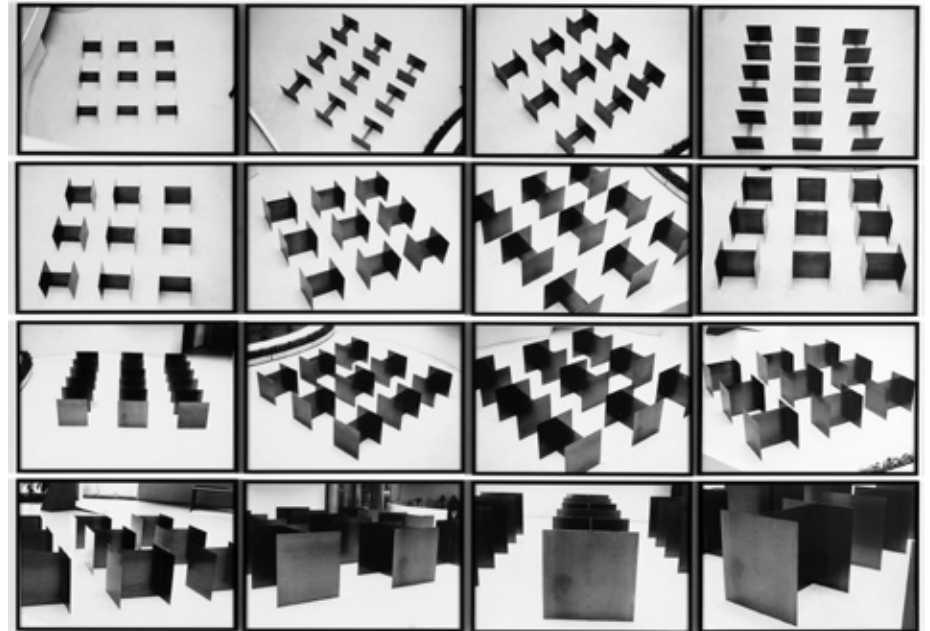
Where optical illusion and perception are fully explored in Redgate's work, the viewer is entranced (for example, in the *STRAIGHTCUT* series of photographs), as these reflect on multiple perceptions, including the viewer's physical cognisant process, the history of abstract painting and the aura of the art object (where a plastic picnic box can become an abstract sculpture). However, when visual phenomena are presented as ends in themselves, the works are less conceptually satisfying—especially when they reference the 'universal' symbols of those old chestnuts, the European 'masters' (as in *Untitled—Vase Shapes #1–5*). These serve to underline the strength of the more personal (as in the family photographs used for the *photographer unknown* series), which connect Redgate's practice more securely and more meaningfully to the artworks and documentation material presented in the collection exhibition. It is when Redgate, rather than engaging with symbols, references her own information and context rather than engaging with symbols (as in *A Picture is No Substitute for Anything!*, where she uses the negatives from Narelle Jubelin's installation *Dead Slow* and in her own curatorial text on the collection) that her connections to the place she emigrated to become fully resonant—and indeed, makes the collection of international work more meaningful as well.

Erwin Wurm could, superficially speaking, be accused of whimsy. An Australian critic recently stated that Wurm must have amnesia or be an exceedingly astute careerist, as his works have all been done before by previous conceptual artists. However, it is precisely this knowledge of the history of conceptual art that is referenced by Wurm, although (luckily for the critic in question) not necessarily required of his audience. Indeed, to imply that conceptual art should be contained within a specific timeframe (the 1960s), or that the artist should have exactly the same relationship to cultural production as Marcel Duchamp did in his day, is, if nothing else, somewhat limiting for both artist and visitor.

Moving on from this rather exhausted area of debate, Wurm is patently not interested in investing objects with 'aura', but rather in a given object's reproducibility—objects are not readymades, but multiple ever-ready-to-be-made materials, to be deployed in a gallery or any other context. Wurm extends the dialogues of previous performance and conceptual art into more formal works of sculpture, siting them between static and performance art. His drawings are both instructions and documents of what was undertaken, the photographs of performances themselves becoming sculptures of the spontaneous.² In reference to his jumper (or sweater) sculptures, he has noted that "an essential plastic process takes place" when they are inhabited; "I want to have the appeal of the recognition effect on one hand and that of alienation on the other, which the object emanates".³ His works depend on several basic structures in order to place the theoretical alongside the lighthearted so effortlessly—the sight gag, the implication of small-scale disasters that have already taken place, the non-event and an underlying preoccupation with failure. With these in hand, Wurm can combine a sculptural process with existential predicaments, creating absurd and brief choreographies that reveal the vulnerability of human life and propose an 'otherness' of meaning. It could even be said that the works are an act of reconciliation between the worlds of objects and people.

These anthropological works rely heavily on a naturalness of appearance in the objects and humans they utilise, valuing the energy expended in any sculptural attempt (even if only a theoretical one). This theatre of the natural and the seeming imperviousness of his subjects, allows Wurm to analyse improprieties and improbabilities within human interactions and create "a field of situations in which our most varying fears, imaginings, conditionings and neuroses which accompany us can be applied".⁴

Opposite page: Erwin Wurm, *Instructions on How to be Politically Incorrect Looking for a Bomb 1*, 2003
Photo courtesy the artist
Below: Ian Burn, *Mirror (Referential Line: Robert Morris)*, 1967
Photo courtesy Estate of Ian Burn



In this way, encroachment upon humans by other humans is made abstract, allowing for serious criticisms of the State and the presumptions of our society. Notably, the terrorist photographs, which can be so easily overlooked or dismissed as easy humour, are all the more telling in their lightness of touch. Additionally, several of the works are specific to the neo-conservative political realities of Austria, although to an Australian eye they may seem overly theoretical and distant—in reference to another work, *Kneel down and think about Freud/Wittgenstein*, Wurm comments that "It is a situation that is very familiar to me, and one which still exists today in the cultural background of scholars in Vienna, the city where the philosophical discussion took place, and where I live".⁵

The exhibition is separated into several designated themes (ACT/THINK, GROW, INCORRECT are a few) and additionally, in the foyer, are a video work made of a performance at the opening and a photograph documenting the 'growth' of several curators (both new works made specifically for the MCA and both employing MCA staff). There are, as always with a Wurm exhibition, several works that require visitor participation to function. (*I undertook a heart-to-heart in the Confessional*, as well as the *One Minute Sculpture requiring me to put my arm through a hole in a plywood wall and think of Sigmund Freud*.) In this way, Wurm embraces both high and low culture, as well as all the clichés of the museum and the artworld, yet stating firmly that "I don't mistrust reality, but I do mistrust the picture we have of reality".⁶

This is a viewpoint that each of the artists could be said to share. Each of them—Kienholz, Redgate and Wurm—creates a contract between themselves and their (specifically Australian) audience, each one of a very different nature, allowing us to analyse what we expect from artworks and exhibitions, and what they require of us as viewers and participants. But is it art? To answer this question, rate the likelihood that anyone ever uttered the words, "Hey, Michelangelo! I like the ceiling and all, but when are you going to balance some pens on your shoes?"⁷

Notes

¹ George Brecht, 'George Brecht interview with Michael Nyman', *Studio International* Vol 192 No 984, November-December 1976: 257

² ZKM Media Museum, press release, January 2003

³ Erwin Wurm interviewed by D Schellerer, Design Vienna, Australian Museum of Applied Arts, February 1989: 29

⁴ Op. cit., ZKM, 2003: 29

⁵ 'Interview' (with curator Antonella Soldaini), Exhibition guide, Museum of Contemporary Art, November 2005: 3

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quote from a Brisbane-based website's review of a previous Erwin Wurm exhibition: www.fullyramblomatic.com/essays/erwin/