

# *Post Mortem*

# *Ante Facto*

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The Adelaide Festival has started to seem like an enfeebled elderly relative whose activities are now rather an embarrassment. Only those who can remember her glory days remain affectionately loyal. I don't know if it was the tottering uncertainty of the program in general that made the visual arts component look particularly good this year, but for whatever reason, I found the 2006 *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* to be the most enjoyable ever.

My expectations were not high. The *Biennial's* premise, that we need to re-examine the role of modernism in what many assume to be a postmodern age, didn't hold the promise of much joy. It seemed a little too close to the kind of taxonomic quibbling between Bernard and Terry Smith that recurs on the pages of *Art Monthly* and gives hermetic academicism a bad name. The exhibition's theme was reminiscent of those minutely revisionist thesis topics that PhD candidates often have to cook up because all the good ones have already been taken. The *Biennial's* curator Linda Michael proposed that modernism, like a patient on life-support, has not been revived but has managed to survive on its own. Well, maybe it has and maybe it hasn't, but in the greater scheme of things, maybe this dilemma is not of paramount importance. Instead of attempting great strides to explore new terrain, the show seemed set to advance the discourse by a couple of hard-won millimetres.

In fact Linda Michael's modest proposal took us straight to the heart of the most vital contemporary art practice, but I wonder if the appropriate response from a sensitive viewer would be to murmur, like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, "the horror, the horror". *21st Century Modern* provided a fascinating encounter with something that was supposed to have been dead for decades. If this really was a zombie, it was a remarkably attractive one.

We live in turbulent and disturbing times, acutely aware of various forms of irrational extremism, so in some ways this tranquil, intelligent exhibition came as rather a shock. There was no engagement with any of the fairly unpleasant social changes that are currently redefining our future lives. At first glance the exhibition appeared to have been conceived in an ideological vacuum, presenting the benignly vacant gaze of a bright sunny yellow minimalist/modernist smiley face. Why worry? Be happy.

The suavely elegant presentation (it was a very good looking show) somehow made worrying seem pointless. Arlo Mountford said it all in *Requiem to the Negativist Spectacle*. This was a playpen of wooden slats, containing a couple of video monitors screening a cartoon of twentieth-century celebrity subversives such as Hugo Ball, co-founder of dada at the Cabaret Voltaire, punk rocker Sid Vicious and monstrous kiddy-porn sculptors Jake and Dinos Chapman dancing in a circle to the Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the U.K.* until their heads fell off. As this was happening a steel ball bearing rolled slowly and loudly down the long grooved ramp of spiralling slats that made up the sides of the enclosure and finally dropped through a knothole at the bottom, joining those that had gone before. It was a mesmerising installation, encouraging viewers to fiddle (with themselves?) while civilisation burns. I could have watched it mindlessly for hours. Doing so would have prompted a rather disturbing question: why? Why look at any modernist work? Modernist art defines itself by not being about anything other than itself. It would be vain and presumptuous of us to imagine that it has anything to tell us about our own lives or the world around us. No one had a problem with that until postmodernism came along.

Sid Vicious is best known for stabbing his girlfriend to death, and Hugo Ball is largely remembered for his exhortation to torch all libraries so that knowledge would be confined to what people already knew. (Ball wanted to usher in a new age of innocence, but burning books turned out not to be the best way of doing it.) Most of the art in the *Adelaide Biennial* was remote from the radical subversion and ardent idealism said to have been associated with modernism in its firebrand phase. Instead, the artists offered a gentler, ruminative modernism. Over the years the altruistic notion that revolutionary art can change the world has been rather discredited. Today's much more sensible artists seem to realise that the best art can do is get you into a biennial.

The mythology of modernism suggests that it was a fiery wave that burned away the desiccated remains of history, so that a brave new world of pure clean forms could rise from the smoking ruins. In Europe a couple of world wars gave credibility to this dramatic version of the story, but it never really made sense in Australia. Nor does Carol Duncan's theory that modernism was a masculinist conspiracy<sup>1</sup> carry a lot of weight here (although I noted that Michael's exhibition was made up predominantly of men). The movement was established in Australia primarily by women artists and its latent male chauvinism didn't come to the fore until a generation or two later, when it was enshrined in our art schools by good old boys burbling on about colour temperature between mouthfuls of gutsy red, long after the party was over. Anyone reading the seminal texts of modernist theory today has every right to wonder what all the fuss was about. Modernism is nice.

When modernism was despatched from Europe to the rest of the world a lot of the contents seemed to have leaked out, and what we got was mainly packaging. Michael illustrated this poignantly in her catalogue by referring to the childhood memories shared by several artists in the exhibition, of growing up, in various countries, in Bauhaus influenced housing projects. The young Jacky Redgate wasn't able to see a Mondrian painting in Adelaide, but her mother made her a Mondrian dress from a Vogue pattern.

Any leftover hard-core radicals would probably be outraged that Andrew Petrushevics' funny and quaint *Laminex Maleviches* and *ethink* revived Russian revolutionary art and Orwellian totalitarian nightmares as camp nostalgia. Petrushevics, however, is motivated by an understanding that it is the humourlessness of extremist ideology that makes it potentially so dangerous. Modernism was not able to bring world peace, but at least it matched the curtains, a fact that many artists during the past twenty years have highlighted in their smug appropriation of what was once considered to be avant-garde style. Michael made a point of selecting work that was refreshingly free of this kind of smart-arsed irony.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this exhibition is that it should have taken place in Adelaide, home of ideologically committed art in Australia. The original modernist movement was undertaken with immense vigour and conviction, and in Adelaide, perhaps more than in any other Australian city, it was a very serious business. In the 1940s artists and writers (for example Max Harris) put their reputations on the line and almost wrecked their lives in the process. Radicalism reappeared in Adelaide during the 1970s, when bitter opposition to Australia's involvement in an immoral and unwinnable war abroad and concern about an unravelling social contract at home cranked the ponderously earnest PAM (Political Art Movement) into action. Now Australia is involved in another war that is

arousing the spectre of Vietnam, and all manner of civil rights appear to be under threat, but there was no evidence of that in the *Biennial*. Clearly the artists included in the exhibition saw no reason why there should have been.

This is not because they were a bunch of young careerists blind to anything except current fashion and their own CVs. Michael did an exemplary job of combining artists of all ages and reasonably diverse backgrounds, which always enriches the value of this kind of survey show, no matter how tightly focused the theme may be. She included artists born in every decade from the 1930s to the 1980s. Her exhibition distilled and clarified what is apparent from a broad study of Australian artists—that fervent and critically engaged art is not the main game at the moment.

Instead she was able to find traces of an essentially utopian optimism, which did most to bring the exhibition close to the original modernist agenda. This could be seen in Scott Redford's celebration of the Gold Coast as Surfer's Paradise on earth, and in the two mini-exhibitions within the exhibition. The SLAVE collective grouped works by several artists into peaceful if slightly chaotic co-existence. There were, for example, colourful lumpy play dough sculptures by Christopher L.G. Gill and a razor-sharp text video by Grant Stevens. The world would indeed be a better place if ideologies as diverse as the artists combined by SLAVE could be taught to sing in perfect harmony. Gareth Donnelly produced a tiny exhibition reminiscent of the Boite-en-valise collections that Marcel Duchamp made with miniatures of his work. Donnelly's miniatures, however, are of other artists' work. His *Art of the Twentieth Century* is a line-up of doll's house sized versions of iconic works from the last century, lovingly reconstructed the way boys construct model vintage aeroplanes in kit form. It pays sincere homage to the marvel of modernism.

The inclusion of Domenico de Clario's *Seven Times Thank You* was a particularly thoughtful choice for this show. Not everyone feels comfortable with art that invokes new-age psycho-spiritualism, and the people who don't are probably the same people who overlook the fact that modern art wasn't just the product of rational materialism, but owed a lot to the frankly odd beliefs of Madame Blavatsky and a number of other table-rapping mystics. De Clario was in effect channelling dead artists, and even if the idea seems dodgy, the paintings are terrific. His ritualistic way of communicating with the other side was the exhibition's most colourful and intriguing evidence that reports of the death of modernism are greatly exaggerated.

There were some far more surprising names in the list of artists. An exhibition that seems tailor-made to fit John Nixon is an unlikely place to find Anne Wallace, but in fact the two are unexpectedly linked by a common interest in modernist interior design. Décor, for the home and for the stage, also linked the works exhibited by Anne-Marie May, Robert Rooney and David Rosetzky. The placement of works made Rosetzky and Wallace neighbours, creating a fairly bleak neighbourhood. Both artists present the sleek lines of the modernist home as some sort of cover-up. In Wallace's paintings the undercurrent tends to be sinister, but in Rosetzky's video *Maniac de Luxe*, modern design seems to be a way of putting a brave face on feelings of emotionally exhausted emptiness.

There was plenty of modern design in this exhibition. Frank Bauer was represented by lighting fixtures, Andrew Donaldson by rugs, John Meade by room-dividing screens, Janet Burchill & Jennifer McCamley by a table and Shane Haseman by costumes.

Or they all showed sculptures, depending on how you look at it. The exhibition recalled the democratic belief, embodied by Russian constructivism and Bauhaus functionalism, that there should be no discrimination between art and industry.

In the past Debra Dawes has occasionally blurred the distinction between painting and textile design, but the striped canvas of her clock-wise paintings in the *Biennial* could never be confused with deck chairs. While they depend on intensely subtle colour relationships, the meaning of the works is based on divisions of time, and the vertical lines calibrate the period during which the paintings were executed. The deeply satisfying visual experience that protracted time allows viewers to take from the paintings completes an equation set up by the carefully measured time that the artist put into them. Like many of the artists in the exhibition (James Angus, John Nixon, Raafat Ishak, Narelle Jubelin), Dawes investigates the relationship between labour and aesthetics.

Aside from its meticulously considered dialectical complexities, this exhibition also succeeded because it brought together a large number of highly engaging, sometimes funny, sometimes very beautiful works of art. And it was splendidly displayed. This year the *Biennial* was not obliged to share the Art Gallery of South Australia's temporary exhibition space with any money-spinning ticketed shows of popular classics from the past. Modernism was given a whole floor. Spatial divisions were minimal. Of the three moving image works, only David Rosetzky's was put in a darkened booth, and this was essential for the self-referential intimacy of the work to be properly appreciated. The theatrical trick of spotlighting individual works in the cavernous gloom (which can make quite ordinary objects look interesting) was avoided this time, and the entire huge space was filled with bright even light. The Gallery was generous not just with its space, but also with its power bill. Instead of creeping about in a dimly subterranean search for enlightenment, viewers could move in all directions through the great diversity of works without feeling that they were supposed to be on some sort of pilgrimage.

This was not a good year for the Adelaide Festival, nor perhaps for a number of other things that make Australia a civilised place, but *21st Century Modern* created a mood of cheerfulness and optimism at a most unlikely time.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Carol Duncan, 'Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth Century Vanguard Painting', in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (eds), *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Harper & Row, New York, 1982: 81–108