



PHILIP BROPHY:
DISSONANT
JUXTAPOSITION
AND POETIC
ESTRANGEMENT

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From his early experimental deconstructed disco and reconstructed soundscapes, to film scores, Japanese styled anime, re-scored rock video clips and audio-visual installations, Melbourne based artist Philip Brophy specialises in twisting the culturally familiar into the strangely unfamiliar. With an already well-documented practice now stretching over three decades, from early collaborations such as experimental group → ↑ → , to film projects such as *Salt Saliva Sperm and Sweat* (1987) and *Body Melt* (1993), to more recent pop video mutations such as *Fluorescent 1* (2004) and *Evaporated Music* (2000–), to his first interactive installation *The Body Malleable* (2004), Brophy has consistently intersected themes ranging from pop, rock, sex, anime, exploitation, monstrosity and gore within a remarkable range of audio-visual incarnations. In an era already gorged with myriad hyperbole and rhetoric surrounding interdisciplinary practices, Brophy has consistently produced curious mutant variations of popular cultural formations. Somehow, Brophy manages a collusion of the attitude, humour and theatrical vulgarity of rock and pop culture's many splintered sub-genres within the drier reflexivity of contemporary art without diluting the potency of either. Given the span and diversity of Brophy's practice, this text will focus primarily upon Brophy's most recent audio-visual installation practice, in particular *Evaporated Music 2: At the Mouth of Metal*, exhibited at Artspace, Sydney in 2006, *Fluorescent 1*, a three-screen installation commissioned for the Contemporary Art Projects at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney in 2004 (and subsequently exhibited at the 2006 *Singapore Biennale*) and *The Body Malleable*, an interactive quadraphonic digital animation commissioned by the Cinemedia Digital Media Fund in 2002, first exhibited at Melbourne's Australian Centre for the Moving Image in 2004, and most recently as part of the *Anne Landa Award* at the Art Gallery of NSW (2006).

For French critic Nicolas Bourriaud, 'style' is now determined by "ability to inhabit an open network)."¹ Brophy's 'open network' generates fluid relationships between pre-existing media, programmed scores and the installation of projection and surround-sound technologies. As with much contemporary digital (or so-called new media art), emphasis is typically less focused upon the specific origin of the imported fragment but rather on its subsequent translocation and manipulation. According to new media theorist, Kevin Robins, digital technologies place the nature and function of representation even further in doubt than mechanical reproduction, for "digital information is inherently malleable".² Brophy's imported fragments can range from whole video tracks to stylistic inversions of glam or manga surface, whilst his range of intervention ranges from technical manipulation to strategic exploitation of the dissonant yet poetic relationship between radically juxtaposed elements. Given that the expressive language of reconstructive sampling has largely overtaken ironic strategies of appropriation, new meaning is typically located in the poetic translocation of pre-existing signifiers. Gradually, as quotation and repetition become habit, they become the foundation of new forms of creative expression, whose trajectories have their beginning and not their end in ironic or apocalyptic estrangement. For Bourriaud, artists are no longer "creating meaning on the basis of virgin material", but rather "finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production".³ Ultimately, "the artwork is no longer an end-point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions".⁴

According to the late Australian critic, Nicholas Zurbrugg, although contemporary culture can be considered in many ways "apocalyptic... superficial, weightless (and) static", it is nonetheless finally capable of functioning more 'profoundly', 'weightily', or 'radically' when considered against "the complex creative potential of its ever-evolving technology".⁵ Brophy recognises that production methodologies are invariably experimental by consequence not design. As a consequence, he does not present the capabilities of technologies that he uses for their own sake. Rather, he employs technology in order to engage in contemporary cultural dialogue (which is of course highly technologically dependant). Brophy is as much a consumer as he is a producer of sound and image. Ultimately, both the meticulously composed original scores and the wholly appropriated or prosaic fragments in his work perform an equivalently meta-aesthetic role within the poetic whole. An archetypal 'prosumer', as foreshadowed by Marshall McLuhan, Brophy acknowledges that the strategic music producer is by default also a music consumer.

The first installment of Brophy's pop video mutations, *Evaporated Music 1*, exhibited domestically and internationally between 2000 and 2004, utilised found footage of familiar pop icons and transformed them into unfamiliar noisemakers. In a world in which most of the raw materials of culture are privately owned, high budget music videos by Elton John, Billy Joel and Phil Collins, Gloria Estefan, Celine Dion and Mariah Carey were projected unedited, the original sound track having been replaced by eerie abject gasping vocals and commandeered distorted sounds in full Dolby 5.1 surround-sound. Here Brophy's constructed alien cinematic sound design appeared to synch with every on-screen movement, and consequently, the viewer's expectations of pop culture's generic audio-visual synchronicities were hilariously dislocated.

Brophy's *Evaporated Music 2: At the Mouth of Metal* (2006) takes this idea of dislocating generic audio-visual synchronicities one step further. At the Artspace installation the viewer was greeted by an inviting black leather couch and a DVD displayed on a widescreen TV with Dolby 5.1 surround-sound. Utilising a pirated live band performance from an early 1990s TV show called *California Dreams*, Brophy has synched a specially composed death-metal track complete with lip-synched lyrics to the existing mouth movements of the on-screen performers. For *Evaporated Music 2*, a range of appearances by 'fake' bands consisting only of actors on TV shows such as *California Dreams*, *Saved By The Bell*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *CHiPs* are rescored with metal music to match the performers movements and vocalisations. *Part A—California Dreams (My Song Growls Wasted Air)*, is the first instalment in this series, and introduces popular culture's most demonic 'other', the deliciously throbbing sore that is death-metal, to perhaps its the most G-rated antithesis possible. Paradoxically, it is the healthy, racially diverse and squeaky-clean *California Dreams* that actually starts to resemble a corpse once the installation comes alive to the throbbing relentless barrage of quadraphonic death-metal.

Although, in and of itself, the unaltered reuse of an entire saccharine sweet rock performance (complete with network watermark) from a family orientated TV show might initially remind us of *Pictures* generation artists Richard Prince or Sherrie Levine's ground-zero strategies of collage (or

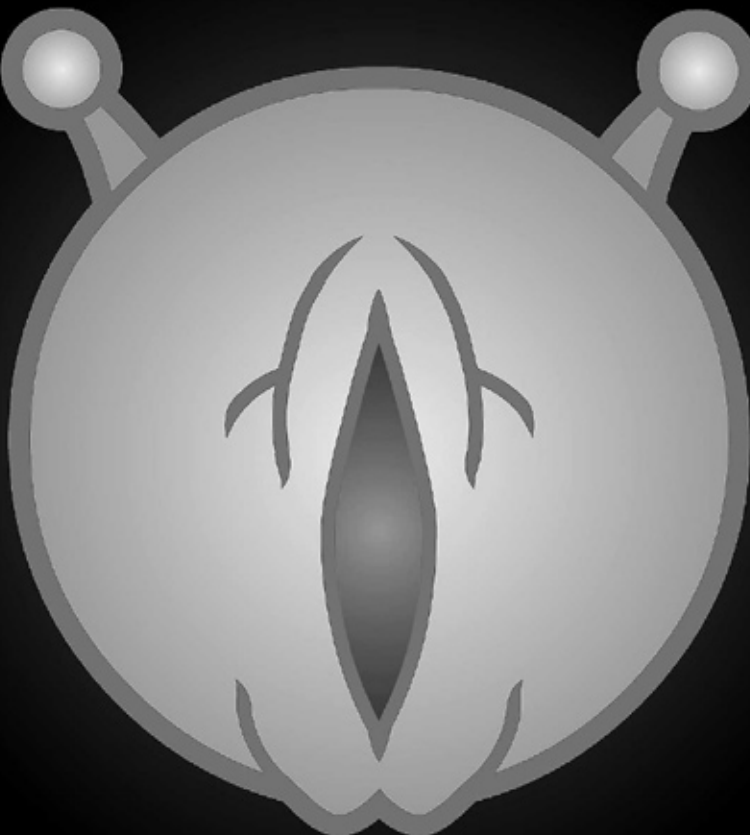
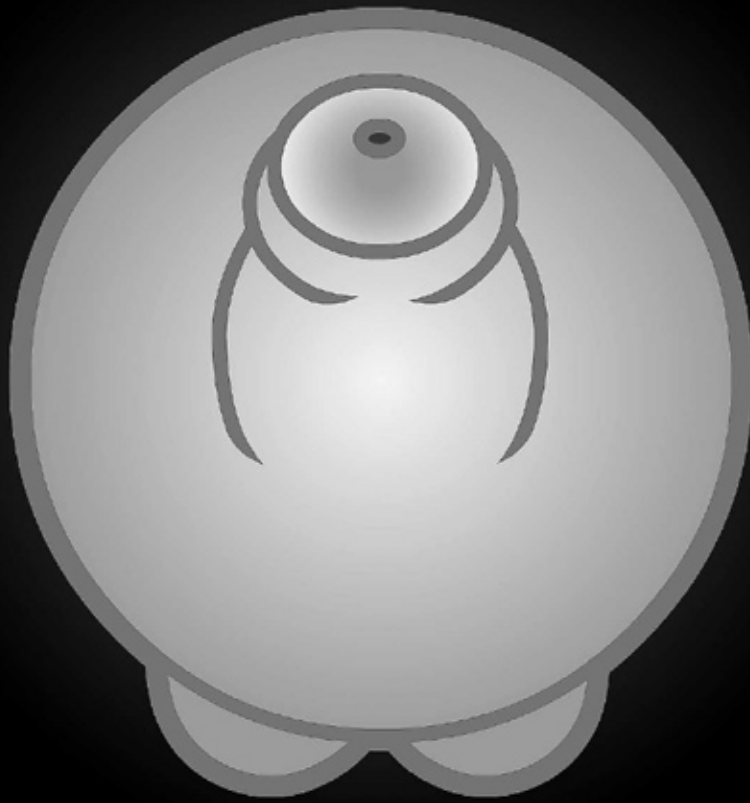
rephotography) of the late 1970s and early 1980s, but such a comparison quickly pales once we absorb both the complexities and poetics of such a dissonant audio-visual juxtaposition. In erasing the 'original' music and substituting a specially programmed and perfectly lip-synched death-metal soundtrack, Brophy reveals just how skin deep our acceptance of style actually is.

To produce this first installment of *Evaporated Music 2: At the Mouth of Metal*, Brophy first locked up a click-track digitally to the existing pirated song and then erased it. Next, his new vocal parts are overlaid in synch with the pre-existing mouth movements of the band. According to the artist statement provided the next stage of the process involves working without looking at the pirated visuals in order to focus upon the new composition. In the spaces between the vocals, and working to the click-track, Brophy composes a new track, working in the style of contemporary Scandinavian and Eastern European death-metal (and yes we can confirm with any surprisingly friendly death-metalheadz exactly where the new centres of death-metal are), then adapts the mix to his signature quadraphonic space, "jettisoning drum elements widely across the space, and splaying shredded guitars and slabs of fuzz into front and rear spatial spectra".⁶

Considering that Brophy has long rallied for the significance of the movie soundtrack versus the primacy of the image, it is interesting to note with both *Evaporated Music 1+2*, he has successfully added extra emphasis to his audio compositions by using only unaltered visual elements. A visual arts audience, by default, is therefore forced to actually listen in order to read the work. Despite any precursory dismissal by a visual arts audience of his po-mo styled appropriation, the visual simply becomes a platform, on which one can really take notice of the soundtrack. Any manipulation, authoring, or editing of the visual component would distract from the importance of the audio elements.

On a different tangent, *Fluorescent 1* (2004), a three-screen installation commissioned for the Contemporary Art Projects at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and later exhibited at the 2006 *Singapore Biennale*, features the artist as a simulated sexually ambiguous glam rock icon. As Brophy struts across three giant screens singing lyrics that exemplify glam's narcissistic celebration of androgynous polysexuality, he highlights the brash disposability of pop culture and once again demonstrates just how skin-deep our acceptance of the pretence of identity or style actually is. Although Brophy positions identity as a recombinant reiteration of pre-existing symbols and styles, his simulated pop star, from its awkward movements to its camp make-up, is certainly far trashier and unforgivingly human than the carefully airbrushed, choreographed and sanctioned rebellion or neatly gendered sleaze found on post-millennial MTV. For Brophy, glam's collision with the warts-and-all lighting and embryonic production techniques of 1970s television resulted in a far more confronting and abject display of ape meets sci-fi glamour than its contemporary stylised and regendered incarnations.

Again using surround-sound and split image formats, *Fluorescent* teases out the often arbitrary, yet sensationally omnipresent relationship between image and sound that defines popular cultural landscapes. This arbitrariness is further exemplified by the occasional sound lapse within the ongoing



video performance, begging the question; is the fictionality of the image more or less evident without its constructed audio accompaniment? Also, in separating the various tracks that comprise the song across the full Dolby 5.1 experience, significantly altering the way that one hears the piece in different parts of the room, Brophy both simulates that raw warts-and-all, sweaty beaded makeup and awkward nakedness of a 1970s glam television performance, and at the same time takes full dimensional advantage of twenty-first century technology. Although relatively quickly dismissed as a gimmicky smear on the face of pop culture, glam rock's legacies, via the process of historical retrospection, have been brought alive again and again. Given that issues of race, class, gender and sexuality coincided with both the rise of video technology and the evolution of installation and performance based artistic practices, it stands to reason that the subject of the body remain so inextricably linked to contemporary video, performance and installation based new media arts.

Continuing with established themes (sexuality, animation, surround-sound and the body) *The Body Malleable* introduced interactivity to Brophy's oeuvre in the form of the penetration of a single finger into a pod-shaped ball. This cheeky interactive quadraphonic digital animation was first exhibited in 2004: *Australian Culture Now* at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne and most recently in the *Anne Landa Award*. Part ultra suggestive Japanese anime, part sexually biomorphic digital pun, *The Body Malleable* consisted of a user manipulated digital animation and synchronised audio installed in a small private darkened space. In that Brophy's proposal was concerned with producing an experience that did not specifically reference the subject of interactivity, a simple pod-shaped interface was placed on a table in front of a suspended screen, with speakers both surrounding the viewer and beneath the seat. A series of simple animated, yet highly sexualised images with an accompanying synchronised soundtrack could be manipulated by moving one's finger in and out of the hole. Tracey Clement, writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, likened it to "a giant sex toy from the sci-fi classic *Barbarella*".⁷ The animated images themselves comprised a series of morphing yet stylised possible body parts, orifices, protrusions and organs, whilst the soundtrack was constructed from digitally manipulated fragments of the human voice. This orgy of penile, vaginal and anal shapes was also strangely flattened and depersonalised, a cartoonesque celebration of the endlessly replicated surface of our primal priorities.

The subject of 'surface' (especially its quotation and translocation) still inspires contested division within contemporary art debates and it is typically within these debates that artists such as Brophy find their most likely critics. One *Artlife* blogger, referring to *Evaporated Music 2*, was unable to "believe that anyone can be bothered with mix 'n' match appropriation... let alone be willing to commit the energy to even consider what it might mean."⁸ Somehow, former oppositionalities such as theory/practice, or style/substance are still apparent. Although critical theory is a useful tool with which to analyse the cultural and political conditions surrounding artistic practices, it is certainly not a precondition of contemporary art. Important ideas are also developed from film, music and drug cultures, science fiction and popular media. Ideas such as appropriation existed as conceptual strategies in the visual arts well before poststructuralist and psychoanalytical inspired critical theory had developed intellectual currency.

In addition, myriad popular political and ideological shifts that have occurred since the 1960s and 1970s, as indicated by the proliferation of psychedelic, sexual and image consciousness in media, advertising and rock music, have all contributed significantly to contemporary artistic production methodologies without necessarily being ‘informed’ by academic anti-formalist criticism. Both anti-formalist criticism and contemporary art are contemporaneous responses to shared cultural and historical conditions. Australian critic Chris McAuliffe sees both as initially developing from “a limited and eclectic anti-formalism”, which later “split into critical and commodified streams”.⁹ Daniel Edwards, writing for *Realtime*, compares Brophy’s *Fluorescent* to Mike Parr and Adam Geczy’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism: Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay* (both exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW).

*Fluorescent and The Mass Psychology of Fascism are two sides of the postmodern coin. Brophy’s work celebrates the notion of self as nothing but the endless recycling of symbols and styles already in circulation. In contrast, Geczy and Parr’s visceral installation highlights the fact that in such a media-saturated environment it has never been easier for ideologically driven politicians to dictate the words, images and symbols through which the contemporary subject makes meaning.*¹⁰

It was typically within the identification of such a split between critical and commodified streams that critics such as Hal Foster had first defined their assault on the latter. For Foster, “commodified postmodernism” had become a “neoconservative” formation, “defined mostly in terms of style”.¹¹ Two decades later this split is still apparent, albeit with a new swag-bag of rhetoric, often unwittingly and paradoxically contributing to contemporary art’s globalisation of anti-globalisation. Biennale has followed biennale of politically correct (re)politicised video installation art, with accompanying catalogue essays so sympathetic that they invariably forget to mention art at all (as if art’s political function can really be read so literally). Conversely, Brophy’s approach, perhaps to a certain extent simply an updated extension of that of Warhol or Koons, is to engage with the infinity of surface. For Brophy, depth of surface is epitomised in contemporary Japanese culture, particularly manga, which is of course a primary influence; “In Japan, surface is sublime. Reality is not what they’re interested in. To them, it’s only an image! The amount of energy that can be packed into surface in Japanese culture is mind boggling.”¹² So, for better or worse, and despite the efforts of critics such as Foster, formations “attached to the more palatable notion of style”¹³ continue (hopefully at least self-reflexively) to be produced, exhibited and discussed, remembering of course that even the pretence of radical political disjuncture is of course itself ultimately reducible to style. For as observed by American critic Douglas Crimp in 1983, “If all aspects of the culture use this new operational mode, then the mode itself cannot articulate a specific reflection upon that culture.”¹⁴ Perhaps, only once the paradoxical limitations of political radicality within the institution are acknowledged, can the more persistent noise and poetry of subtle transgression continue.

Even the distinction once drawn between material and stylistic appropriation by Crimp cannot be neatly applied to Brophy’s oeuvre.¹⁵ Although appropriation was in the end “just another academic category—a thematic—through which the museum organises its objects”,¹⁶ for artists such as Brophy both the recycling of styles such as glam, metal, or manga, or the material reuse of video-clips or television shows are as much a given as the digital technologies now used to produce artworks. Ultimately, both the computer and its recycling capabilities represent simply a means of artistic production, not an exhibited or critically significant end in and of itself. From the appearance of sampling in seminal African-American hip-hop in Brooklyn during the late 1970s, to iconoclastic punk rock poster and record sleeve designs, to retroactive fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood or Jean-Paul Gaultier, to the inversions and reiterations of sexual stereotypes offered by performers ranging from David Bowie to Madonna, retroactive variations in popular culture have generally been at least contemporaneous with comparable variations in the visual arts. Far from directly informing or pre-empting its endorsement in popular culture, academic postmodernism can be more accurately described as a contemporaneous response to shared cultural conditions. Despite the fact that many influential French thinkers explored their ideas using examples cited from popular culture, places and events, ‘serious’ art criticism has often been more concerned with establishing relationships between French theory and art history. At the same time, parallel formations within music, fashion and film have also relied heavily upon the specificities of their own histories. Perhaps it takes an artist like Brophy, someone who “encountered Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Andy Warhol and David Bowie at an impressionable age”¹⁷ to recognise and intersect those parallel sub-histories. Just as in the visual arts, styles in music and fashion are often self-reflexively generated within specific vocabularies and information channels related to specific prototypical forms and staged in mock opposition to dominant codes. Even with the addition of the internet, cable television, and interactive digital technologies, the pattern remains the same. Each cultural sub-group continues to navel-gaze at the specificities of its own histories, albeit in infinite globally connected detail. It is finally irrelevant whether we read Brophy within the specific rhetoric of contemporary art, music, new-media, performance, film or indeed whatever fashionable intersection of all or none of the above that we care to choose. It does not matter. His work represents a contemporaneous response to shared cultural conditions in a technologically and now ‘glocally’ infinite present.

Brophy’s hybrid and interdisciplinary practice is predicated on fluid movement between medium and context. Beyond simply recontextualising a rock video clip in a contemporary art space, Brophy consistently challenges the role of audio as merely an accompaniment to the primacy of the visual in both film and contemporary installation art. The fact that most audio-visual installations are exhibited in sonically inappropriate white cube gallery spaces with the sound turned right down in order to minimise noise within the range of neighbouring exhibits is in itself testament to the primacy of the visual. Using surround sound systems in darkened and at least partially dampened (using curtains) rooms is certainly a step toward levelling the playing field. Even with such measures in place, the sound of death metal reverberating through the floorboards proved too much for Artspace’s upstairs neighbours, with the volume subsequently significantly decreased after the opening night and for the duration of the exhibition. Metal up your arse!

Notes

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, NY: Lukas & Stemberg, 2002: 38

² Kevin Robins, ‘The Virtual Unconscious in Postphotography’, in Timothy Druckrey ed., *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, NY: Aperture, 1996: 156

³ Ibid: 17

⁴ Ibid: 20

⁵ Nicholas Zurbrugg, *Critical Vices: The Myths of Postmodern Theory*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2000: 63

⁶ Philip Brophy, *Evaporated Music 2: At the Mouth of Metal, Part A—California Dreams (My Song Grows Wasted Air)*, Artspace, 28 September—21 October, 2006

⁷ Tracey Clement, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Arts Reviews, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts-reviews/anne-landa-award/2007/01/02/1167500109346.html>, accessed 2 January, 2007

⁸ <http://artlife.blogspot.com/2006/10/so-little-time.html>, accessed 16 January, 2007

⁹ Chris McAuliffe, *Idees Recues: The Role of Theory in the Formation of Postmodernism in the United States, 1965–1985*, Harvard University PhD dissertation, 1997: 10

¹⁰ Daniel Edwards, ‘History’s Great Escape’, *Realtime*, http://www.realtimearts.net/rt60/edwards_flur.html, accessed 16 January, 2007

¹¹ Hal Foster, ‘(Post) Modern Polemics’, *Recordings*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1985

¹² Philip Brophy quoted by Chris Boyd in ‘The Morning After: Performing Arts in Australia’, 29 September 2006, <http://chrisboyd.blogspot.com/2006/09/rapt-20-contemporary-artists-from.html>, accessed 20 January, 2007

¹³ op. cit: 383

¹⁴ Douglas Crimp, ‘Appropriating Appropriation’, *Tension 2*, 1983: 12

¹⁵ Ibid: 13

¹⁶ Ibid: 14

¹⁷ Philip Brophy quoted from ‘Australia Council: Arts in Australia’, http://www.ozco.gov.au/arts_in_australia/artists/artists_new_media_arts/philip_brophy/, accessed 16 January, 2007