

Noun Torture



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It has been twenty years since Bruce Nauman presented his *Clown Torture* (1987), a video installation with the now-iconic elements—stacked colour monitors, large colour-video projections on walls, intense and gripping sound and looped narrative sequences. It is considered a milestone in video art. Aggressive, immersive and playing with the arrangement of monitors and audio, *Clown Torture* makes itself known to you even before you come face to (painted) face—since you hear its infernal racket on approach. In one of Nauman's loops, "No, no, no, no (Walter)", a clown screams the titular word over and over while jumping, kicking, or lying prone. This is the artwork as presence, albeit a blunt and more or less painful presence, but are those not the ones we remember, that we recall as having presence?

'No' comes forth powerfully. In Jean Baudrillard's short essay 'Holy Europe' (2005), he writes of the unrestrained 'yes'-ism that surrounds the concept of a unified and bureaucratised Europe and notes the French rejection of a proposed European Constitution. 'Yes's from all sides provoke an instantaneous No—"by a reflex of both pride and self-defence, the unconditional 'yes' spontaneously calls forth an equally unconditional no." Baudrillard characterises the 'no' reflex as an "automatic return of fire" against the coalition of all those who are on the side of universalism.¹

Two decades after Nauman's clowns, the Art Gallery of New South Wales presented the 2006 *Anne Landa Award for Video and New Media Arts*. Curators Natasha Bullock, Edmund Capon and Linda Michael with this version have made the award a relevant and instructive cross-section of young Australian video art.

It might seem both the artworld and the general public do not give video art enough credibility, either through internal cynicism or external scepticism. There is a world-weary 'yes'-ism prevalent—yes more video-performance, video-installation; or yes false-economy artworld lunacy. Such an award may be seen by some to be representative of this 'yes' platform, bringing a preselected range of video art into the museum environment of the AGNSW. Luckily, the works were strong enough to determine a (Nauman-esque) contradictory 'no'. An attempt to canonise video amongst iconic homegrown paintings (in physical orbit of the prize), these videoworks resisted being mainstreamed, they remained subversive.

The Anne Landa Award is similar to the *Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award* in that it is also a well-funded prize for major emerging figures, as opposed to the *Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship*, which is more an aggregation of very emerging artists. The artists represented in this *Anne Landa Award*—Philip Brophy, Daniel Crooks, James Lynch, Tony Schwensen, Grant Stevens, Monika Tichacek and Daniel von Sturmer, are well 'established' via residencies, biennale appearances and other institutional stamps of validity. Since it is an acquisitive prize the AGNSW is now the owner of Monika Tichacek's *The Shadowers* (2004), that caused such a public stir at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne several years ago.

Doubts this prize should exist, whether it leaned towards an Sydney-Melbourne artist-axis or attempted a more national scope are irrelevant. While the award served as an introduction to video art to the general public, its opening and prize giving ceremony coincided with the AGNSW trustees' Christmas party—as such it was a much older audience in attendance than one would imagine for such a genre—nonetheless, appropriate, given its potential mainstreaming of video art, more so perhaps than if it were held at Sydney's Artspace, Performance Space, or even the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Across a handful of interconnected rooms were installed a spectrum of current practices, from digi-morphic to dry performance. Daniel Crooks' *On Perspective and Motion (part 2)* (2006), continued to pull video art into closer alignment with the tropes of modern painting, while grounded firmly in the everyday. Philip Brophy's interactive *The Body Malleable* (2004), was a sort of biomorphic sex toy for the eyes. With a webcam-like interface controlled by the probing finger of the viewer, a pink nebulous blob punctuated by dark outlines changed shape into ridiculous sexed forms, accompanied by an irritating soundtrack. James Lynch also entered a similar territory of the mind with *Everybody Was...* (2006), with animated dreamscapes set amongst low rent Christmas lights and lawn chairs.

Tony Schwensen cleverly staged his endurance video *Weighty Weight Wait* (2006) in the packing-room of the gallery, which has traditionally played the role of 'cheeky' annex to the *Archibald Prize*. With artists like Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic and Ulay as exemplars, Schwensen's twenty-four hours on the scales drew a neat line back through the historical use of video in conceptual performance, while remaining relevant to the artist-as-subject theme that is an undercurrent in all 'prizes'.

Grant Stevens' *Turtle Twilight* (2006) continued to integrate textual narratives with banal imagery, but was let down by a tinny sound system and a slight sense that there needed to be either no imagery at all or, more depth to the images. Daniel Von Sturmer (soon to represent Australia at this year's *Venice Biennale*) had pride of place in the first court, but *Screen Test* (2004) was not as resonant as works previously seen—the twisting tape rolls and paperclips leaving a little to be desired this time around.

Monika Tichacek's *The Shadowers* as stated was the winner of the award for 2006. On three screens, Tichacek presented a long and involving narrative of lyrical abjection, which echoed the work of Matthew Barney, amongst others.

Tichacek's work deserves recognition because it manages to achieve a most difficult manoeuvre—to engage with some of the more important artistic moments of the recent past, which also happen to be the most celebrated (the endurance art of Mike Parr, the classical tableaux of later-Cindy Sherman, all of Matthew Barney, and even the tonal palette of Bill Henson)—to make her own statement, rescuing some iconic stylistics from overexposure and reinstating them in a powerful imaging of the body on the screen.

Ultimately, this prize should be about one thing—video—as opposed to 'new media'. The word 'video'—noun, verb or adjective, first appeared as far back as 1935, as the visual equivalent of audio, from the Latin *video* "I see"—first person singular present indicative of *videre*. And what we want to see is the artists included in this prize, torturing the noun (like a clown), splicing it into its own clone as adjective and verb—slipping across its possibilities as distinct from cinema, television or networked digital interfaces.

This award offered a faithful and resonant affirmation to counter the faint-praise of the non-believers. To those who devalue the intrinsic worth of video art, desire it to be relegated to other screenic forms, who seek the digestive calm of attractive paintings and photographic portrait prizes, it must be said: "No, no, no, no."

Note

¹ Jean Baudrillard, 'Holy Europe', *New Left Review* 33, 2005

ANNE LANDA AWARD FOR VIDEO AND NEW MEDIA ARTS
ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, SYDNEY
17 NOVEMBER 2006 – 11 FEBRUARY 2007

ARTISTS: MONIKA TICHACEK, DANIEL CROOKS, DANIEL VON STURMER, TONY SCHWENSEN, PHILIP BROPHY, GRANT STEVENS, JAMES LYNCH