



Dividing Lines

Model Citizens

Archimedia [David Cox, Molly Hankwicz], Bronia Iwanczak & Suzanne Treister, Andreja Kuluncic, Mez
Curator Jacqueline Phillips

My Sun

Wang GongXin

4 – 27 October, 2001

Necessary Invention

Hany Armanious & Mary Teague, Mikala Dwyer & Anna Peters, MEXICO*3 [Koji Ryui & Natsuho Takita], Regina Walter, Adam Boyd
Curator Brian Thompson

Artspace

22 November – 15 December, 2001

Three recent exhibitions at Sydney's Artspace provided an enlightening perspective on varieties of divergent, possibly antagonistic approaches to contemporary art. The first two shows, held concurrently, centred around the continued possibility for politically engaged art. The following exhibition was a type of mini survey of current neo-formalist trends. In fact the attraction of considering these exhibitions together lies in drawing parallels between them whilst acknowledging contemporary art's fraught and complex relationship with reality. While the two shows explored social concerns, certain works encouraged formal deciphering rather than elaborate political decoding. On the other hand the third show, while indulging principally in material display and whimsical invention, inadvertently raised some confounding questions about the reified place of the contemporary aesthetic object.

The first of these exhibitions presented the work of Beijing artist Wang Gongxin. His multiple projection work entitled *My Sun*, was encoded with a variety of political messages referring to the personal and historical repercussions of Maoism. *My Sun* immediately required the viewer to interpret a variety of encrypted symbols. Nevertheless, the work's openness permitted free interpretations. One of the most recognisable of its messages referred to the divestment of subjectivity in a culture of enforced communalism. *My Sun*'s inherent problem lay in the fact that much of its imagery had long been rendered clichéd by Western media. In fact a sense of familiarity pervaded the work. Ultimately its impact was theatrical rather than rigorous. *My Sun* is a work of undeniable technical mastery, yet its cinematic orthodoxy ironically encouraged standardised responses.

Bronia Iwanczak and Suzanne Treister's collaborative video installation formed part of *Model Citizens*, curated by Jacqueline Phillips. Their work betrayed a vastly contrasting approach to equally political contents. Here the two artists worked closely with school children from the local Woolloomooloo area. The children were asked to respond to the social issues that impacted most directly on them by producing a series of cardboard placards. Wielding ad hoc banners denouncing such things as war and drug dealing, the children marched on the multi-million dollar development of Woolloomooloo's Finger Wharf, opposite Artspace. The artists recorded the event on video, as the children strode shouting slogans under the complacent and patronising gaze of Sydney's lunchtime nouveau riche. Such an event could easily have been exploitative, yet Iwanczak and Treister maintained a genuine interest in these children's concerns. At the same time the viewer was left unhindered to conjure the self-aggrandising politicking of our leaders prior to the last election or the brutal war against terrorism, the work emphasising society's hypocritical disregard for the attitudes of the under-age in whose interests they claim to act. Alternatively, the work highlighted the frustrations and limitations of public protest in the face of global multinational might.

Far from such obvious social interests, Artspace's following exhibition *Necessary Invention* highlighted the dominant role of formal experiment in recent Sydney art. Mikala Dwyer and Anna Peters' collaboration was a frenzied rumination on the spatial possibilities of the gallery itself. Crude architectural models were suspended upside down from a series of inter-connected platforms and painted surfaces that spread seemingly arbitrarily among the gallery's wooden pillars. Hany Armanious and Mary Teague constructed a huge, partially hollow sand dune entwined with multi-coloured plastic piping raised on cast concrete pillars. In these installations the viewer was encouraged to appreciate the material dexterity of the practitioners. Yet it was easy to read these phantasmagoric flights of fancy, like the symbolism of Wang's film, as representing yet another orthodoxy. Not quite neo-expressionist, these works nevertheless maintained a traditional preoccupation with the extent of their own artfulness. At their most insightful they succeeded in emphasising the limitations of artistic literalness. However, in this instance a fine line barely separated stubborn adherence to myths of creativity and their deliberate debunking.

Although the works of Adam Boyd, Koji Ryui and Natsuho Takita were not perhaps the most optically engaging in the show, they seemed best suited to bridge the gap between hermetic formalism and the world. Boyd's objects established a concrete specificity with the wooden interior of Artspace by reconfiguring it as a series of playful associations. Here the gallery was transformed as skateboard, surfboard and landscape. In this way the gallery's very materiality was in continuous dialogue with the works themselves. At the same time the gallery's operations were symbolically extended to embrace the texture of the urban world. This concern for actual environments was also encapsulated in Koji Ryui and Natsuho Takita's collaboration. In this work a scale model of a local traffic island floated in circles within an inflatable domestic pool to recurring strains of Hawaiian music. While the work was unresolved, its potential was indicated through witty conceptual displacements of urban iconography. Overall, these two distinct offerings at Artspace posed challenges to artists still engaged in articulating the necessary interdependence of reality and experimentation.



Top: Hany Armanious+Mary Teague, *Neo phantom thing*, 2001
Bottom: Archimedia [David Cox+Molly Mankwicz], *Urban Strechnology Kit*, 2001
Photos courtesy Artspace

Alex Gawronski

Mark Wallinger, *Angel* [video still], 2001 Photo courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery



In the name of God

Angel and Threshold to the Kingdom

Mark Wallinger
Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne
6 – 22 December, 2001

That British art has been at the forefront of visual arts media over the last decade is not news. The coded message – yBa, yBa – has been transmitted to the colonies through the agency of *Frieze*, *CVA* and the British Council. Like his English counterpart John Lennon, Mark Wallinger is bigger than Jesus on the contemporary art scene today. After his ordination as the British representative at the *2001 Venice Biennale*, Wallinger is now one of the chosen. His Venice exhibition followed his installation of a statue of a naked Christ for the empty plinth at Trafalgar Square.

Wallinger came to international attention in the early 1990s with his paintings of thoroughbred horses – the front half of one and the back half of another. His work utilises particularly British iconography – racehorses, the Union Jack, football stadiums, the paintings of John Constable, and the London Underground. Wallinger's work is sarcastic, humorous and cheeky – qualities in evidence in much of the work of other young British artists. In one well-known work produced in 1994, Mark Wallinger had himself photographed grinning in the middle of a Wembley football crowd holding up a large Union Jack banner, his own name printed upon it.

At Anna Schwartz Gallery, just before Christmas, two video works were presented. *Angel* and *Threshold to the Kingdom* are described in the gallery flyer as "studies of belief and spiritual connection in the modern world". In *Threshold to the Kingdom* Wallinger placed a video camera [apparently unseen] in the Arrivals Hall of a British airport. The arrivals spill out of the self-opening double doors in a slow-motion trance. After crossing the hall, some of the passengers simply fade away – ghost-like – as they approach the picture plane. The currency exchange counter is reflected in the glass doors, out of which people come, but never enter. A dazed man with a trolley of luggage struggles to get his bearings – the text on his plastic shopping bag reads, "See, Buy, Fly". Capitalism is heaven. As Guardian critic Jonathon Jones remarked of the arrivals in Wallinger's video, "they have cleared customs, they've been saved!"¹ This banal interstitial space has been turned into heaven, made sublime. This humorous yet poetic work is viewed by an audience standing, as you do when waiting to meet someone in an airport arrival hall.

Angel, the other video work in the show, shares the same floor to ceiling projection screen. This work is less humorous and tries harder. Wallinger is first seen as a blind man at the foot of a London Underground escalator. His sideways movement of the white cane beats the rhythm of his mimed walking movement. We see commuters going up on one escalator and down on another, our blind man has an escalator to himself. Wallinger is speaking a text, of which I could only make out the first six words, "In the beginning was the word...". Something was not as it seemed – it was not just that the videotape was playing in reverse, [deduced from observing the escalating commuters], but the awkwardness of the performer's speech. The text provided by the gallery informed the artist was repeating the opening verse of St. John's gospel, and "to ensure the text was intelligible when the film was reversed, Wallinger recorded it by pronouncing every word backwards, as in certain satanic rituals which aim to invert the holiness of the scripture". It sounded like the videotape had stretched, and made me think of Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven* with references to the backmasking myth. The somewhat predictable ascension of the blind man up the escalator to an unseen heaven to conclude the work was nonetheless humorous. The blind man was really travelling down the escalator to hell – a reference to biblical inversions such as, "he who is first shall be last" etc.

Wallinger's work operates in interesting territory, questioning our subjective drive for the sublime and the divine. He questions ideas of faith – particularly organised religion – with great cynicism and flair. Beyond the wit though, Wallinger's interest in God really does make you wonder, why the subject, 'God', is so important.

Note

1 Jonathon Jones, "The Magical Mystery Tour", *The Guardian*, Saturday, 28 October, 2000

David O'Halloran