

Material #1
“destruction of the non-point”

1. I want to be a door: *Come In* and *Entropy in Reverse* at the Govett-Brewster, New Plymouth, July – September 2003

The first thing I would like to note is that I have just realised, astonished, that my bath is built into my flat in a way that means it hangs out over space, out over the back path; and so is every other bath in the twenty places in this block. Which is doubly odd given that I used to imagine that the deep green of my Radox bath salts already made the bath many times deeper than it was. Spooky.

Last weekend during a Krazy Karavan holiday in Raglan, I visited *Come In* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. This was a touring show provided by the Goethe Institut, and I have to say it was lovely to see so much sculpture in a public gallery. The Govett-Brewster needs to be congratulated for its ongoing commitment to contemporary practice, it really does. I just wish I did not have to drive so far to see it though. (Why oh why is there not more properly-funded major contemporary art projects in Auckland? Sure, there has been some good work at the dealer galleries, but otherwise it's all been so bitsy, seemingly oriented away from projects and towards small/existing/cheap work.)

To make the drive easier I get talking books out of the public library, and somehow the time flies by and I arrive in much better shape, and much less ocularly-nauseated by the scrolling countryside, miraculously. This time we had the pleasure, the surprisingly great pleasure, of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* – a full 14-tape unabridged extravaganza of vampirism. There was an interesting passage in this story where a protagonist marveled at the unflinching no-tears resolve of his American counter-vampire fighter. He called him a “moral Viking,” and posited that if America continues to breed these sort of men, they will be a force to be reckoned with on the world stage.

The show-stealer for me at *Come In* was work by Peter Rösel which entailed very realistic rubber plants that had been fashioned out of police uniforms. The premise of the show was “interior design as a contemporary art medium in Germany” and these Rösel works were there, it seemed, to raise the subject of how institutions of power try to make their oppressive interior spaces seem more cosy. Chilling. And more evidence that the police always make such great material. (On this subject, one of my very favourite New Zealand TV shows of all time, *Police 10-7*, is airing at the moment. The last one I watched featured an amazing policeman who spoke almost entirely in mixed metaphors, unchecked – “count your losses”, “you hit the button on the head” etc.)

These trompe-l'oeuil (well, at a few feet away) works got me thinking about a Rosalind Krauss quote that I had read in the excellent essay by Wystan Curnow in the publication produced with the 1998 post-object

show put on by Artspace and the Govett-Brewster. She said, in 1986, that the “logic [operative in a great deal of the work of the 1970s] involves the reduction of the conventional sign to a trace, which then produces the need for a supplemental discourse.” Did seeing a work that was such a conventional sign in this day and age displace the need for discourse? No, I really don't think so. As Curnow implied in his text, discourse starts with the making of the work itself.

I think many are settled with the idea that language cannot be factored out of the creative process, but the idea was taken a little further for me by something I recently heard on National Radio. The Reith Lectures were presented this year as a five-part series featuring the ebullient Professor Ramachandran, an Indian neuro-psychiatrist based in California. He said that recent brain function research has shown that language in fact developed out of the vision function in the brain. He gave the example that when we say “large,” our mouths are making a large open shape, and small, the opposite. Fascinating.

But back to the Govett-Brewster. I am not sure how the show could have been improved on other than extending the gallery spaces so that there is more ideal room for the proper display of sculpture and installation. The work in the back first-floor enclosed gallery, where Sam Durant's wonderful work, *Entropy in Reverse*, had been shown earlier in the year, worked really well, but the other more open galleries and traffic areas prevented the work establishing their own space, as sculpture is wont to do. (The strangest instance of this was in the *Break* show this time last year in which an enlarged Yoda Lego figure by Matt Elwood was placed on the stair landing on a plinth. It looked for all the world like a donations box without a slit.)

I have to say, as an aside, that the Sam Durant residency project work was completely great. One of the components was a 1999 video work projected that showed the Rolling Stones documentary film *Gimme Shelter* in reverse. This film recorded their 1969 concert at the Altamont Speedway in California, an event that has gone down in popular history as marking the end of the flower power era and heralding in a much darker time, one which would see heavy metal flower, thank god. The effect of turning this happening backwards was a surprisingly visceral one. Already with heightened awareness of how eyes connect to the rest of the body following car-sickness, I felt my eyes throw a line straight to my seat. Watching the Hells Angels forcing their way through the earth's atmosphere, backwards in time, modern Vikings, inciting riot – troubled presentient trippers parting like the red sea – made them more mythological than they already were in my own myth and legend system. The greatest looking men's fashion of all time coupled with their archetypal brutality and fearless destructive power AS TIME TRAVELLERS gave me a weird proxy sensation which can only really be compared to having



a string of pearls pulled from one's ass by someone one has wanted to run away with for years but were too afraid to. Incredibly sexy in other words. I venture that entropy itself is a vastly sexy concept, and one which no doubt contributed to Robert Smithson's charisma, and still makes blood flow to erectile areas of the fleshy vehicles of his fans.

Spatial concerns were behind Billy Apple's alteration of the gallery's stairs to good effect in 1979, a work that Callum Morton took a step further in his *Billyput*, a parallel project to *Come In*. He added a small door underneath the stairs of a scale to make it (squeals of joy) "little people" sized t' be shure. From it emanated sounds of house cleaning and socialising chimps. "I want to be a door" jokes ensued, and from the handout I learned that Morton tilts to the Ken Russell Film *Altered States*, made in the same year as Apple's aforementioned *Altered Staircase*. This film features a scientist that experiments with isolation tanks and hallucinogens to achieve other levels of consciousness. Perfect for New Plymouth, the mushroom capital of our fair land. Indeed, driving back to Auckland, at one point in the Taranaki farmland, I sensed the hills were covered with electric dottings of these native fungi. I also saw a trip (what a typo! I meant trio) of Hells Angels going in the opposite direction. (I often see them too out mu work-room window as my street is the short-cut from Mt Eden – where their clubrooms are – to the northern motorway system.)

Another parallel project was material from David Clegg's body of work *The Imaginary Museum*. Towards this Clegg toured Europe photo-documenting museum spaces and interviewing staff about these interiors, these symphonies in generic design. The work is presented as gridded photos and sound recordings. I thought that this was curious and telling work, and disarmingly slight, which seems to be Clegg's style. It almost looked like he had put up the work behind the staff's back. I know I am projecting, but its slightness made me think again how I am more than a little disappointed by the way in which public galleries in New Zealand are generally, with a few notable exceptions, unwilling to spend much money on projects by contemporary New Zealand artists. Despite the "we have no money" appeals emanating from institutions, they seem to be able to find the cash for artists from "overseas" when they require it.

Sam Durant, *Entropy in Reverse*, installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

2. Civilization and its discontents: the Elam open day, University of Auckland, November 2003

Apart from good old cultural cringe, there does seem to be something squeezing out artists here in an unspoken way, something affected by the stealing of time maybe? Maybe this economic malaise was behind the latent violence that imbued a handful of stand-out students' works at the Elam School of Fine Arts open day last month. (Or maybe not. Who can say?) In particular, that of Peter Madden and Eddie Clemens, both completing their MFAs; some years, I might add, after completing their respective undergraduate studies – something which made their work seem a whole lot less studenty.

Eddie Clemens' barbershop striped tape and foil-backed packaged razor-blades and bubble-gum made my stomach lurch with the implied slicing of flesh. Apparently the gum and blade component was related to a Christchurch legend about people fixing razorblades inside the hydroslide at QEII Park. Before I was told this I thought they looked like ready-to-go whizz accessories. Barbershops we always to me more about tobacco and smoking paraphernalia too come to think of it. Higher than the rows and rows of shonkily stuck up tape was the black cutout figure of a cat like one might find for sale in a roadside tearooms. The piece of wood this was cut out of was stuck behind several rows of stripes, like a prisoner taped to a chair.

The cat itself was sort of outside the space established by his work, almost as if it was creeping into the area occupied by Peter Madden's. His practice has involved, singularly, for a number of years now, collaging things sliced from National Geographic magazines. Rather than confining himself to the two-dimensional, he has been making element-defying sculptural works and installations out of the glossy paper animals and people and scenes he has retrieved with his scalpel. The cloud of associations characteristic of Clemens' work, in combination with the mania and dense pile-up (with none of the schmalz of *Baraka*, or arty microscopic nature films, don't worry about that) in

Madden's really cheered my hysteric soul way up.

I also enjoyed the coincidence they presented to me – I had the day before written a semi Nietzsche-ish haiku about my new cat: <The kitten sure seems to represent to me the will to papercut>. Mainly, I think, I was digging how there was something vaguely out of control about both these works, an attribute sadly lacking in a lot of the work in Auckland lately. There's almost a tacit neo-conservatism and fear of chaos going on that I don't think is helping matters much. So much of Auckland art has been so well-behaved lately to the point of grateful, and virtually autistically untroubled commodities and/or group show components that claim no space of their own. On the subject of not doing anything about one's disadvantageous situation, I earnestly penned an economics haiku: <The thing about shit is that if you hold your nose it's nice and warm and soft>.

However, the most aggressive submission of the whole open day was, for me, that of painting student Fiona Connor. In a dingy back room of the rickety mansions that house a goodly portion of the department she presented a grotty old Pacific Motel sign so huge I found it hard to understand the logistics of how it was introduced into the space. It looked like it had been ripped straight from the ground, as evidenced by the concrete plugs at the base of its tubular metal supports. I was impressed and loved the violence and the destructive giant that the work implied. (I was raised on children's books about giants and still love the effect of people drinking from miniature spirits bottles.) I thought that this was a triumph of youthful found object art. Later I found out that she had made the whole thing as an elaborate factice. What an excellent reversal of expectation! Normally people want to be admired for their model-making skills and make things obviously models rather than aiming for the effect of a found object. Or am I just being dense? So doubly confusing to leave me doubting the veracity of her having made it herself. So passive aggressive and fantastic.

3. People are saying "zeitgeist" again: Hany Armanious and Louise Weaver at the Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland, September – October, and November 2003 respectively

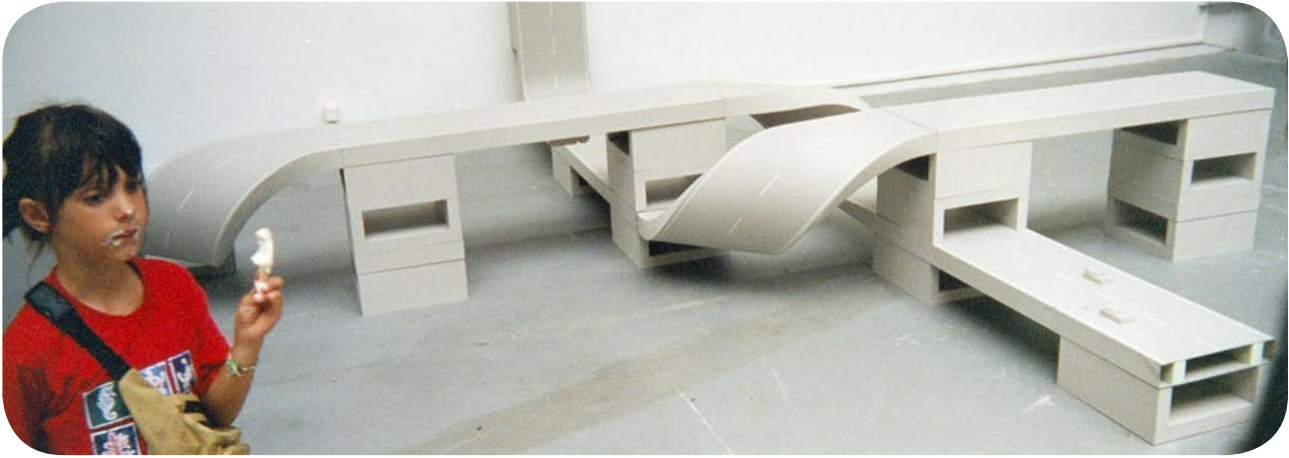
To make a return to spatial issues, I especially enjoyed the two showings of slow-release works by the genial Hany Armanious at the lovely new Michael Lett Gallery this year. The first of these featured lengths of ordinary pastel-coloured PVC piping leaning against the long wall. Each had been cut at an acute angle which resulted in lending them a solid hypodermic effect. (Again, the giants.) The second showing featured a plinth covered with cheap, odd, stemmed glasses, the recesses of which had been filled with a luxury modelling compound in a variety of very nice decorator colours. Some even had a fine cosmetic or car-paint-like sparkle. The "plugs" were then inverted and stood on top of the glasses to make curious sculptural "outies". Both works made the gallery over into a space for receiving impressions, molded ones to be specific. The colour range of both was, to me, reminiscent of Ancient Egyptian things like scarabs – the effigies of the little mythic beetle that rolls the dung sun across the sky. Such simple and affective interventions are wrought by Armanious upon found

objects.

More from the cargo cult of imported Australian art, I made some notes following an interesting conversation at the opening of Louise Weaver's show at the Michael Lett's. The gallery was filled with large fake rock outcrops on top of which perched little sparkly fox-like animals. I was standing by one of the works by the door with my friend and a guy from a band came up and started talking to us. I thought he was my friend's friend, and my friend thought he was a friend of mine, and neither of us caught his name. We were all poking at the rocks trying to work out what they were made of. Spray on resin from the vast Australian resin industry no doubt, my friend said, and I agreed. The guy said really, and we said no we were making it up. He asked us if we thought the rocks were part of the work. He thought they might be although Peter Madden swore they couldn't be. My friend suggested looking at the list of works to see what was for sale, and that that would provide the info needed, and surely they were just plinths. I thought that was a shame as I liked the rocks best. By this point my friend had walked away for another drink. Stranger asked me why, and I said that it had something to do with an article I had read written by Siegfried Kracauer called "Mass Ornament" written in Germany in the 1920s. I had originally interpreted this as a justification for making plaster rocks: "In other words, the unchecked development of the capitalist system fosters the unchecked growth of abstract thinking (or forces it to become bogged down in a *false concreteness*)." (In reality I muttered something about "fake rocks" I think.) I was aware that I was dragging literature into my reading of art again, but I can't seem to help it. It just automatically repeats on me. He asked me if I did not like the animals and I said I did, especially the one with the AC/DC-esque neck band, but that they ultimately didn't do anything to my brain. Like Australian music, said the clever stranger. Except the Dirty Three, and the obvious, we agreed, whose music is an intense emoto-bodily experience. I told him that the Dirty Three's drummer bit me once and this was pretty much the end of the conversation. I am not sure what all this means, but I guess there is an interesting spatial issue for art in there. It is more than the dichotomy between discrete object art, and art in the expanded field sense; I think it might have something to do with the depth of the surface? Or maybe the shallow of the day? Daylight savings shortens the night, and diminishes its wintry depths, giving with one hand, and taking away with the other...

4. Venice, the first Panama: Zenomap: a presentation of new work from Scotland for the Venice Biennale 2003, June – November 2003

Luckily I avoided the worst of the winter as I went to see the Venice Biennial etc. I hadn't realised how I had really ended up feeling about Venice until I saw it in the background in an underwear ad on TV. And then in a shampoo ad. "Stupid old Venice," said my brain. Yes, buildings only come in old in Venice, and the incessant Baroque and neo-classical and ecclesiastical and sopping-with-history buildings end up wearing one out. Like along the Loire where chateaux start becoming banal. (My co-editor thinks that Venice is like a 500-year-old version of Disneyland but with art instead of rides. Myself, I remember being told that



Thomas Bayrle's work and fan

Venice was thought of as the juncture between East and West in ancient times.) I feel like I am sounding like a brat when I am saying this but maybe it has something to do with the actual hard-to-pin-down effect of Venice in a heatwave (or touristic/scenic Europe generally?). Trying to make sense of my adverse reaction I read *Death in Venice*, which was on the bookshelf in a friend's apartment in mercifully temperate Berlin after going to Basel after Venice. I had swum in the brackish Mediterranean outside the hotel on the Lido with some very genial Scandinavians where the film version of this marvelous Thomas Mann book was filmed.

(As an aside, I think we can really learn from the Scandinavians at Venice. The way their arts council has played it is by presenting with utmost style and grace and humility, slowly learning and networking internationally – this requires people who are thoroughly involved in art in their home country and abroad, and know how to talk to strangers with politesse – over a number of years with the goal of starting to be included in the international art world sort of organically. Aside from their national pavilion they also do small independent shows at Venice such as the excellent *ReShape!* project put on by IASPIS, an artist-in-residence programme based in Stockholm, and an institution supporting Swedish artists exhibiting abroad. They chose an old school gym close to the Giardini – the work was great, “focusing on reconstruction, recycling, collaboration and customization as strategies of creation” and refreshingly low-fi, the budget off-set catalogue great, and they also set up deckchairs in a cool leafy courtyard with fizzy mineral water.)

In *Death in Venice* (1912) I found two passages that seemed to shed light on my weird experiences in Venice:

“He had been snatched away now to the Elysian land. To the ends of the earth, where the lightest of living is granted to mortals... and the days flow last in blessed idleness, with no labour and strife, for the sun alone and its feast they are all given over.” (p232)

Was this why it felt so silly to be expected to tear around looking at art in this indolent heat?

“Had he not read that the sun turns our attention from spiritual things to the things of the senses? Had he not read that it so numbs and bewitches our intelligence and memory that the soul, in its joy, quite

forgets its proper state and clings with astonished admiration to the most beautiful of all things the sun shines upon.” (p234)

Was this why I was so entranced with Tobias Rehberger's hanging pendants of glass piece in the Italian pavilion? Ah, beauty which is form leads me to intoxication and lust and back to the abyss... It made me think that the perfect shop to find would be a Murano glass underground store that specialised in Venini-style crack pipes and bongs. What objets d'art they would be.

“This was Venice, the flattering and suspect beauty – this city, half fairy-tale and half tourist trap, in whose insalubrious air the arts rankly and voluptuously blossomed, where composers have been inspired to lulling times of somniferous eroticism.” (p245)

Was this why I could not think? Had I fallen thoroughly into my body and had become too helpless to be that far from home? Is this why there are three channels of free-to-air softcore porn at night on Italian TV?

One thing I did think about, albeit in a dreamy sort of a way, was imagining not a New Zealand pavilion in the Giardini, but an Aotearoa at Venice contingent. Perhaps involving a summerhouse fale in the Giardini under the shady trees, perhaps “manned” by the Pacific Sisters? – unruly, fabulous, craft and performance and entrapment of the straying crowd... The reason I think I was imagining this was that it was clear from the main curated part of the Biennale that the Pacific, even Australia, was absolutely invisible. The sort of thinking that lead to nuclear testing? The naming of the bikini?

As far as the New Zealand “pav” went, I really enjoyed Michael Stevenson's work, and thought the catalogue was excellent, but was baffled by Creative New Zealand's choice of venue. A deconsecrated church “ages” away from the Giardini where the national pavilions were and the Arsenale “next door” where the curated shows were displayed, or any other satellite shows for that matter. Given the way in which many people only go to Venice for the vernissage, or opening days, and given the oppressive and psychoactive heat, it is crazy to not situate such a heavily invested-in show closer to the action. I mean when it is 40 degrees it is all anyone can do to stagger to the nearest oasis.



Furthermore, Stevenson looked like he had tried very hard to cover up as much of the church as was possible in his installation to stop it being an element in the work – a pretty affronting situation for an artist to deal with.

On the whole, I really enjoyed the national pavilions as they were much less curated, more artist project oriented. The highlight of the Biennale was for me the Scottish pavilion, or more correctly *Zenomap: a presentation of new work from Scotland for the Venice Biennale 2003*. This was one of the off-Broadway presentations, but unlike New Zealand's it was on the Grand Canal, and therefore right on the public transport – there are nothing but boats in Venice – and among half-a-dozen or so other country shows, which added incentive to visit it. From memory, I think the award-winning Luxembourg pavilion was nearby. (It might be interesting to note at this point for future contenders that they seemed to win the prize for having the best airconditioning. In 2005 the prize may well go the pavilion with the nicest drapes.) It was held in an unmolested 18th century palazzo dammit that was beautifully distressed in the way only Mediterranean peoples can handle (“whatever” being a time-honoured response to gardening, panel-beating, smoking, cholesterol and siestas, smoking while installing work, etc.). It had wonderful original brocade curtains that were in tatters, baroque oil paintings, Murano chandeliers, tapestry-clad walls, marble floors, gilt mirrors and it was ALL THAT.

It was not just the fantasy architecture that enamoured me to this showing – I kept thinking about Byron as I had just learned that in the six months or so he lived in Venice he kept a menagerie of foxes and peacocks and liked to make a spectacle of himself swimming in the canal just down the “road” from here – the work was outstanding. It was a gift in its site-specificity, a massive relief from the autistically discrete offerings

Simon Starling, *Island for Weeds (Prototype)* (2003) in *Zenomap: a presentation of new work from Scotland for the Venice Biennale 2003*.

that had been curated into the flagship group shows at the Arsenale, a complex of stripped out 17th century ship-building yards. This Scottish work seemed to personally speak to me in the space I was in, and this affability was swelled by how the space was staffed with actual weirdo artist kids, just like there should be. I felt really at home and stayed there for ages soaking up the work and the atmosphere and the cool breeze coming off the canal through the flung-open doors....

A key thing here is that the Scottish Council have actually allowed artists to create spaces with their work. The motto of their arts council is “championing the arts in Scotland”, and they are indeed going about that in a way that actually allows artists to make the sort of work they want to make, rather than allowing curators the shrink control. (Which reminds me, one of the weirdest things about the Biennale, which should not have surprised me really, was a wide glossy terracotta backgrounded postcard that had silhouettes of the principal Biennale curators posed as if the figures on an ancient Roman pediment relief sculpture as if they were the most important people there. Crazy daddy.) Here, however, there seemed to be here a genuine reflection of an important aspect of new work in Scotland, first hand.

Zenomap featured the work of Simon Starling, Jim Lambie and Claire Barclay, all presently riding fame waves that decrease in size respectively. (Why call it *Zenomap*? The organisers are referring to a 14th century collaboration between a Scottish explorer and two Venetian brothers who specialised in cartography and navigation to discover the new world.) Simon Starling occupied the first room one entered into,

the massive main room that looked like it was built for dancers with big dresses. His work, *Island for Weeds* (prototype), is a raft/island floating on barrels covered in rhododendrons and other straggly unwanted plants – there has been a movement in Scotland to exterminate the rhododendron and other plants deemed to be threats to the native ecosystem. Originally proposed for Loch Lomond in Scotland, this work works with eerie site-specificity in Venice. As a raft, replete with mooring chains, it worked as triumphantly (as only a great idea can) with the way the inner ear continues to rock for hours after the incessant vaporetto rides. The ground keeps moving under one's feet making even the architecture feel like it is floating and bobbing.

Stepping over the phat but not gold anchor chains of Simon Starling's floating 'isle flotante' I found myself gravitating to a floor covered in white and black strips of gaffer tape, a Jim Lambie floor, a floor that would have produced a stripey an op-art zing had the effect not been somewhat diminished by the dusty footprints of all the too-hot art butlers and butleresses. Domestic doors and bedroom mirror had taken the hint from the zany floor and contorted into zigzags edged in mirrors and painted in hot '80s block colours. Here we have domestic disco, ordinary glamour, contrast-communing with the floor-to-ceiling mirrors and chandeliers in the space.

Claire Barclay's work was a very slight architectural intervention making me wonder whether it was a Scottish economy of means at play, i.e. "look after your pennies and the pounds will look after themselves". Or was it a matter of letting the boys show off? Probably neither, just an interest, according to a handout, "in suggesting a potentially spiritual role for the hand-made object in contemporary society". She had made a screen-printed fabric screen that melded with the existing brocade patterns in the room, that suggested a place to undress, amplifying the baroque sexual promise of the exotic space. There were a couple of rod-like objects in the room – glass encased in leather and metal sheathed in fine pink crochet that further played up some mysterious atmosphere, like a minimalist plot structure.

After Venice we went to the Basel art fair, but I remember little of the art there. The day I visited the fair, my father was side-stepping my questions about whether my dog I had left with them was still alive or not, and I think my body knew the answer. That night I remember looking at a beer coaster in a Mexi-Swiss bar that had a picture on it of a young man with two broken arms about to try to pick up a glass of beer. My traveling companion translated the text on the coaster above the picture and it said "what is this?". I identified with him strongly.

The only other thing I remember right now (other than a beautiful orchid-covered log suspended in space and producing thin streams of white cloud by Henrik Håkansson) is a conversation about a Matthew Barney work we saw at the fair. It was a movie still of a scene that features a woman that had both her legs amputated below the knee. It made me feel ill, like Barney had maybe paid her to have her legs cut off. Like he had found an expensive hooker-looking suicidal woman who agreed to have her legs cut off if he would keep her smacked to the eyeballs until the film was over at which point she could



Jim Lambie, *Paradise Garage* (2003) in *Zenomap: a presentation of new work from Scotland for the Venice Biennale 2003*.

self-euthanase... I shocked myself by this hideously depressing response to the work. My friend suggested I write it down and turn it into a play. I said I didn't want to as you just can't talk to people about suicide like that. It repels them.

It's a shame I don't have better recall of the work at Basel because I was told on very good authority that it was better on the whole there than in Venice. Curatorially too, I reflected, in that what I was presented with in Basel was a trade show showing art-as-commodity openly and freely – something that was unspeakable in Venice – and as such represented an interesting study resource of the collision and collusion between art and capital. Oddly I think I remember better the clothes of the amazingly preened ladies of leisure in their wonderfully impractical shoes. Strange how, in my overloaded, the superficial slips in, first in line, taking advantage of my work-tired brain. Or maybe these beautiful women were just far more profound than the art in their affluence and ease. Ah, Europa...

Gwynneth Porter is a writer living in Auckland. She is a member of the organising committee of Cuckoo, and itinerant artist-run space project. When she was proofing this she had a dream that she was working on a magazine called "destruction of the non-point".