

If Anything.

Gail Hastings, *But is it Art? Sculptural Situations by Gail Hastings, The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, November 2003.*

Local crimes against art journalism. Case scenario: you're a freelance critic moseying around the globe on an east-meets-western world art junket of assorted biennials and major museums. Subsequently you're inclined &/or obliged to file a review or two back home. Possibly you couldn't be bothered. Possibly you've been field-tripping long enough to fail to appreciate that the dearth of arts publishing back home renders most published criticism fairly visible, and thought to write off the same review to two different national publications. As did the former national art critic for *The Australian* newspaper this month. Oh dear. Near word perfect, save for some super-subtle editorial tweaking (alternating 'engaging' for 'compelling' for example). Though the least subtle proves the most revealing. In the newsprint version readers were treated to the comment on a particular artist's work, 'I have no idea what it means, if anything, but as an art installation it is utterly mesmerising'. Fascinatingly the editor of the magazine version saw fit to scrub this dumb & dumber quip from the face of the earth and printed only 'It is an utterly mesmerising installation'. Shame we'd already read it in the paper. A tired refrain, but if anyone gave two hoots about arts journalism around here this writer would cop the same slagging as his fellow skanky-ho (Labor MP Mark Latham's choice of phrase) opinion columnists at *The Australian*. No surprises though when local paper *The Sydney Morning Herald* runs a short grab on this year's Turner Prize nominees together with a truly shock horror impression of the Chapman brothers entry, which the reader might mull over further by going to an online poll titled simply 'But is it Art?' Aye, the media is devilishly, dastardly dire.

Possibly a fact not unnoticed by local artist Gail Hastings, going by the title of her recent exhibition at The Cross Art Projects *But is it Art? Sculptural Situations by Gail Hastings*. This is a relatively recently opened gallery in Kings Cross that subtiles itself 'a space for independent art and curatorial studies'. Housed in the spick front rooms of an old-style house, you arrive to an entranceway of floor to ceiling books (the venue doubling as a 2nd hand book dealer). Match this with an insightful critical essay on the artist commissioned and distributed as the exhibition invite, and the stage is set for some smart art. How exciting! Art for 'adult audiences', that is by grown-ups for grown-ups to think about, a blessed respite from the non-stop Youth gravy-train. And indeed this body of recent works is intriguing, complex and so very finely wrought, it is a pleasure to perceive an artist so fully in their working stride.

Hastings' recurring construct or motif is the detective story, whose various tropes and characters frame the alternating presence, absence or very question of the 'work of art'. Many pieces here take the form of drawn and painted hybrid texts, blueprints or architectural

plans through which the movement of characters and the unfolding narratives surrounding each work are traced. From the 'Primed' series of sculptural situations (2002), three framed watercolours on paper are quietly accompanied by similarly sized primed blank canvases. These vividly coloured and delicately drafted 'plans' speak of an 'Encyclopaedia of a Work of Art Yet to Be', where the blank central space of the design mirrors the blank canvas alongside, from which a maze of departing lines become both corridors for painted script and the locations where, for example 'five secret intelligence officers are presently meeting to finalise what will be painted on the preceding, primed canvas - whereupon it will be painted and the work of art completed'. This layering of image, narrative, concept and pattern (the linear design and central void setting up a kind-of likeness to Arab tile patternings) demands an agreeable combination of looking, reading and thinking from the viewer. From the 'But is it Art?' series of sculptural situations (2003), five smaller watercolour texts declare "But is it art?" asked the Art Judge with a penetrating stare that scrutinised this page', neatly turning the question of the work of art back onto the questionable construct of the art prize. On an end wall hangs 'The Big Cover-Up: white with blue stripe' (2003), a heavy stitched vinyl relief wall panel or cover, spatially deciphered by a painted extract from the 'Encyclopaedia of Invisible Art' which translates the cover's pattern and colouring as various chambers, where one might find 'tins of invisible paint on shelves'. Here the viewer is implored to investigate a 'big cover-up', to 'go disguised as an art viewer and note all suspicious circumstances - such as other art viewers. And remember, nothing is ever nothing'. If anything, that is.

In his accompanying essay George Alexander credits Hastings with achieving 'a new interdependence between the creative and critical spirit... ingrained in the very carpentry and design of the work itself'. And such very fine carpentry too. 'To enter, to leave (no. 2)' (2003) shifts further into the third dimension as a utilitarian sculpture/furniture object in deluxe heavy plywood, intriguingly integrating the forms of desk, bookshelf and seating within its strong modernist design. Likewise it functions as a multi-faceted painting with its richly coloured surfaces and inset panels painted with constructivist motifs, plus the 'walls' on which more small framed watercolour texts hang, as well as a library via its inspired selection of books and catalogues housed in the inbuilt shelf and laid out on the desk tops. With classic titles like Slavoj Zizek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, *Dot and Circle*, *Grids* by Rosalind Krauss and Lucy Lippard's *Six Years*, with pleasure I could have spent a lot more time than I had putting this piece to its thoughtful purpose.

Though I did find some surprise take-home reading amongst the discrete clutter of invites etc in the entrance, a snappy A5 booklet titled 'HearHere: A discussion paper published by the Kings Cross branch



of the Australian Labor Party'. How interesting! The crisp layout and design has Hastings written all over it, and indeed she is one of a range of contributors of short texts and opinions on local issues such as the injecting centre, city bike plan, crime and conservation concerns together with bigger picture issues of Medicare & Australian commitment to war in Iraq. In all a thoroughly readable and intelligent insight on real people and issues *sans* media spin and Emerald City hype, as the back cover suggests, in a clever twist on the city council motto, 'not a living city, but a much more liveable city'. While personally I'll be batting hard for the Greens next year, an election year already shaping up as a sorry spectacle, it is spurring to come across an artist activating the realities of their surrounding political and community consciousness, an engagement that might only, if anything, promise a more rigorous climate and conversation around and about art in Australia.

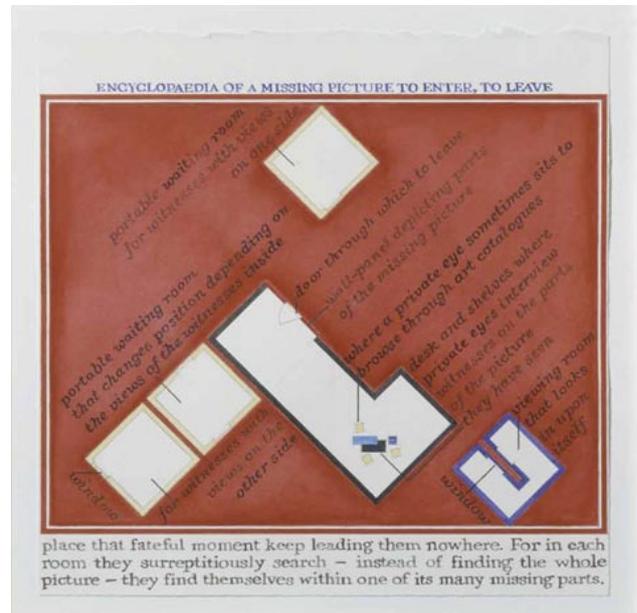
Lisa Kelly is a Sydney-based artist who just discovered Adelaide.

Exhibition view from the entrance with 'to enter, to leave (no.2)', 2003, in the foreground, and the series of sculptural situations 'But is it art?' in the background.

An emailed note concerning an art talk by Gail Hastings

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I went to a curious event where the artist Gail Hastings spoke to Kings Cross and Paddington branch members of the Australian Labour Party. She made a curious claim about the “theatre of the gaze” and how the more interactive “conceptually” a work becomes, the more political by nature it is. I thought her theory was more an argument about the cognitive nature of objects in space than simply a social or political one. To be both things simultaneously, a work of art would need to be designed as such, and to be understood by a complete audience in a comprehensive way. Hastings gave her long rave artfully and passionately, an argument full of problematics and inaccuracies as a sort of lecture-performance. Now the rhetoric of politics applied to art is an important issue for politics as much as it is for art. I thought that Hastings’ work was overtly academic and in an architectural sense it was conditional of that functional order to be read. There are no natural technicalities here. So from a people’s-art point of view, it would fail being an appropriate political apparatus or an articulate social tool. Agitprop it ain’t, elegant perhaps it is. As a leftist I was not convinced in the slightest. But I was prepared to enjoy something else – I liked the theatre of her proposition. The proposition didn’t matter for me, the rhetoric couldn’t have been better, the body language attractive, her mannerisms unique and almost televisual. As a theatrical monologue, Gail has developed a new voice and position. She looks wonderful standing in her own installation working to convince, that is the local artisans, the hairdresser, the actor and ecologist, ex-academic come bookseller, retired lawyer and rank and file, as well as her fellow artists/travellers. Here, art became the setting and the evidence of her political non-aspirations, her fantasy, as a neo-constructivist engineer of optical historical truths – this damn cognitive interactive thing (and sort of Weinesque sensibility). Strangely, Gail was unaware of the potential to extend the art she makes beyond art as object, audience gaze “the we and the them”, and into a form of communication particular in itself, by rendering ideas into a political sphere. I am reminded a little of the way the Atlas group works or how anthropologist Michael Tausig performs “on stage”, so what I’m suggesting is possible. “But that doesn’t matter”, I kept saying to myself and to people like the historian Craig Judd, “if she fabricated the argument against the historical lineage of ‘this is art.’” I felt inadequate the day I started art school. Having studied music and theory at high school and avoiding the art department and those seriously interesting Gardiner’s books of the western history of art. Art history seemed barbaric compared to music that had theories of history, periodicity, style, genre and judgments in quality. Once at art school I settled around the composer David Ahern who taught in what was then the most obscure department of new media. We were all proto-Futurists, both Cagean and Cardewian Maoists whether we understood it or not



Second of two watercolour pages from ‘to enter, to leave (no.2)’, 2003; the first page having read: ‘They are looking for the whole picture and need to find it fast to solve this one. Unless they do, their client will solve them by hiring some other private eyes. Yet opposing views of what took ...’

– it was just what evolved and got handed down and along the chain of command. The thing which cut the music/sound/noise mustard most apparently was the historic distinction between the avant-garde and experimental camps in early 20th century western music. Gail would be amused if these distinctions were now applied to art in an age of intermedia. In Melbourne where Gail comes from, the anarcho-left makes experimental art, writing and music, and is mostly ignored by the academic avant-garde. Perhaps in Australian art, experimentalism is considered as the perverted, and ignored in favour of an important (and imported) international avant-garde. It is the avant-garde that most locals subscribed to. In writing and in music there have been natural opportunities for developing alternative non-mainstream dialogues and platforms and other hybrid forms of collective documentation. Artists with Gail Hastings’ aesthetic aspirations would naturally find little opportunity to develop meaningful debate and interpretation around her work (overtly intellectual), and to attempt to dramatically argue her self-styled rhetoric seems a logical enough sort of divertimento. But I’m afraid, in the end, as art, it remains fairly quarantined and academic, a sort of colonial outpost for conceptual modernism and the avant-garde, an import substitute with beautiful and formal carpentry.

Ruark Lewis is an artist and writer living in Sydney.