

The discreet charm of the bourgeoisie

The 2nd Auckland Triennial: *Public/Private Tumataniui/Tumataiti*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Gus Fisher Gallery, Artspace, George Fraser Gallery, 20 March – 30 May 2004

“Candor – my preceptor – is the only wile” (Emily Dickinson)

Interesting fact: introverts produce a much greater amount of saliva than extroverts. This was demonstrated on a British TV brain programme where two teams were pitted against each other – research scientists vs. camp leaders – to see who could lick the longest old-fashioned packing tape strips. The researchers could lick well over twice as much in length. It is unclear as to whether the dribble causes the introversion, or vice versa, or perhaps there is just a symbiotic co-existing propensity? Anyway, we can speculate. If *Public/Private*, the 2nd Auckland Triennial, had the prerequisite glands, we’re pretty sure that the four galleries hosting it would be ankle deep in spit.

But it is not so much introversion as sullenness that spoils things in this four-gallery show, curated by Ngahiraka Mason and Ewen McDonald. The reading of the work is stifled under a regime that does not allow the opposition established in the title to be deconstructed. As soon as you start to think about how artists are deconstructing this idea or that idea, you just get given the same title again, and we are back where we started. Titles are like that – they tend to stay the same throughout the whole show.

Come to think of it, it would be nice to have shows where the work stays the same but the title changes perhaps several times a day. Or perhaps a show that had a different title on the way in and the way out? But titles tend to stay the same, so I guess it pays to be careful with them, especially when it is a binary opposition title, accompanied in the press release with eternally unchanging dictionary definitions.

On the topic of titles, perhaps we could suggest themes for future triennials. Here are some we prepared earlier: Mind/Body; Rich/Poor; Male/Female; White/Black; Powerful/Weak; In/Out; Hooray for Essentialism! Admission \$7.00. If these ideas are not OK as ideas for a big show, then why is Public/Private OK? It only acts as a channel for all the other, less-tasteful binaries, played out within a rigid structure that reduces the work to an essentialist expression of one’s identity.

And then there is the idea that trying to make a binary distinction between public and private is fairly redundant anyway. It introduces a kind of reductive didacticism that is foreign to the poetics of the work. Viz. “The spatial configuration of inside and outside [...] seems to us a general and foundational characteristic of modern thought. In the passage from modern to postmodern and from imperialism to Empire there is progressively less distinction between inside and

outside.” (Hardt and Negri, *Empire*)

However, “public/private” was a theme that was embodied in content, rather than in social structures, aesthetics, or forms. But having said that, the media that offer compelling implications for exposing the social structures that construct the notions of public and private were unrepresented. Not that there was no video, there was heaps, but there was no Reality TV, no web cameras, no exhibitionists, no body cavity searches for viewers, no celebrity curator treasure island etc... The closest we came to that was the article in *The New Zealand Herald* about Auckland Art Gallery Director Chris Saines’ electronic organiser, admittedly a handy device, but it seems odd that it has gotten more critical attention than the Triennial has, in that publication anyway.

A lot of the show was indeed video-based with a tendency for works that took their aesthetic clues from cinematic talking-heads documentary conventions. On the whole, this concern for content begins to read as sociology lite and produces a palpable and insistent personal identity art vibe to the show. We would venture, however, that in these post-psychiatry, post-essentialist, post-passive times, many are trying to go beyond the I, to explore the not-I. Or at least the not-just-I, tilting to the crowd inside – as et al does so very finely.

Let’s just face it, identity art (“Oh no! A transitory and ultimately disappointing sense of self!” etc.) is just a bit boring – or is that just because we teach in art schools? But all-in-all, perhaps that is the best place for the earnest mulling over of self as a preliminary activity to better work made for an audience later in life? It is important, however, at the outset, to draw a distinction between introversion (endlessly fruitful) and self-centredness, for there is therein a world of difference. Look to the sparrows – they are not stuck in identity crisis loops.

Perhaps the answer is some sort of middle path between inside and outside, asleep and awake, open and closed, and other top polarities. The Dalai Lama reputedly said that the Soviet system failed because there was not enough emphasis placed on the individual; and that the American system too would fail because there is too much emphasis on the individual. Or maybe the answer is a conflation instead – one could instead answer, when asked to choose between two things, “both”.

Anxious self-obsessive patterns, and getting stuck inside oneself are a prime causes of depression, indeed one of depression’s symptoms is self-centredness, and that is what we felt the spectre of in this exhibition. (Not that depression is any person’s fault generally. We are taught anxieties, it would seem, to create needs, many of which we consume obediently, and desire acceptance. Capitalism is actually depressing, neurosis-city even.)



Indeed, this exhibition seems bogged down in ideas of property and individual identity as if they were ideals. It has a weird sort of right-wing vibe; and so seemed depressed, anaesthetised. (Has anyone else noticed the new Panadol Plus ads where the kayaker declares “I won’t let pain get in my way”. This tablet has the mysterious addition of caffeine – what is that about? Feel less and go faster?)

When walking about in the show, the film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* came to mind; and the thought that not everyone has such nice interior or domestic space that they want to protect it at all costs. (Oh no, identity theft! I am being watched! Oh dear, I don’t live where I was born! Who am I when I wear this? etc.) The difficulties that were raised as curatorial themes, and in the narratives of some of the work, seemed to be little more than luxury problems.

But what happens if your personal space is polluted?

Kathy Temin, *Audition for a Pair of Koalas* (detail), 2002, 12 pegasus prints mounted on aluminium, 510 x 760 x 15mm. Photo courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

We viewed *Monster* the night before visiting this show, and the image of Eileen Wournos haunted our viewer-experience, her “Jazzed” singlet saying (cursively) everything about being social road-kill. Standing in front of a video work where a pretty young Asian woman was patting makeup onto her face from a Chanel compact, *Public/Private*’s spoiled, um (what is the new word for bourgeois?) atmosphere somehow seemed in poor taste.

In “poor taste”, but handled well, Kathy Temin’s 1998 video of humping koalas, *Auditions for a Pair of Koalas*, offered a lightness of touch that was missing from most of the other works in the show, and despite not being the only work that used humour as a strategy



et al, *Untitled (The Second Practice)* (detail), 2004, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

it sure felt like it was the only one. Polly Borland's photos of adult babies, the other notable attempt to be funny, fell somewhat flat, with its sniggering-but-trying-to-keep-a-straight-face documentary style reading more as a touristic gaze at another person's sexuality. This is territory that has been explored more engagingly in the series of British documentaries about sexual deviance for those of us lucky enough to watch them on Prime. Unlike Borland's work, the documentaries allowed those who were depicted to speak for themselves, giving them an agency that sometimes seems at odds with their "deviation".

This work seemed to imply a photographer invading someone else's privacy. (Although in this type of photography the invasion is just a construction, rather than really taking place.) We do think it is good to problematise the way privacy is held up as an ideal, as generally it keeps people apart. If secrecy lies at the very core of power, surely paying no heed to institutional or other kinds of exploitative privacy is potentially revolutionary? Insistences on privacy often have fascistic or manipulative undertows, so it was pleasing to read Elias Canetti write, in *Crowds and Power*, "It is only a step from the primitive medicine man to the paranoiac, and from both of them to the despot of history. In him secrecy is primarily active."

On the subject of eavesdropping, Callum Morton's *International Style* (1999), a big model modernist house with flashing lights and kooky sounds, reminded us of the ploy used by a young Macaulay Culkin in John Hughes' *Home Alone*, where life-size cardboard silhouettes are motorised in some way to

fool a couple of lousy burglars into thinking that there is a party going on. As such, it seems more like a ruse or a decoy to stop you from finding out what is really going than it is a device to make you wonder what's going down behind those miniature Freedom Furniture vertical blinds.

Andrew McLeod's recent digital print and paint combinations in *The People's Monocle* seem to position the viewer as slightly behind his eyes looking out or slightly behind his eyes looking back. The Tourette's Syndrome rants and sprawling blueprints seem to taunt the pop psychology house-equals-self metaphor. McLeod's house seems somewhat in disarray. This nightmare of "the self" is surely linked to real estate obsession. You need to have somewhere to go and hide when you find yourself in a Schopenhauer moment: "as soon as we attempt to ...turn our cognition inwards, strive for once to attain complete self-reflection, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void, find ourselves resembling the hollow glass ball out of whose emptiness a voice speaks that has no cause within the ball, and in trying to grasp ourselves, we clutch shuddering, at nothing but an unsubstantial ghost." (Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*)

Jane and Louise Wilson's 1997 multiple video projection work, *Stasi City*, was a stand-out. Its key was the way the work explored amazing spaces – the former headquarters of the East German Stasi,



the GDR intelligence service, or Stasi City as it was colloquially known. These are spaces one simply does not ever get to see, and the scoop aspect of this was quite thrilling. One corner was a projected steady cam-type walk down an institutional looking corridor, all flickering fluorescent lights, eventually arriving at an operating theatre or interrogation room empty except for a large light and paint peeling from the ceiling. The other corner was inhabited by an androgynous figure in a tracksuit who just sort of floated around in the space. It was a really great tracksuit, its seventies communist futurism matching the wood-paneled cupboard doors that slowly opened and shut slowly of their own volition, as if breathing deeply.

Lorna Simpson's noirish black and white film, *Call Waiting* (also from 1997), with its three-way phone conversations, and multilingual innuendo, is compelling in the way that it is always promising some kind of action, only to put it off with one delay tactic or another as separate storylines shift around and interweave. Reminiscent of a classy porno or a soap opera, Simpson's film is all newish domestic interiors and stereotypical offices, bosses, affairs, envy; and, like soap opera, seems to be dealing with the problems that you worry about only when the bare facts of your existence are well and truly sorted out.

It's like how the characters in *Friends* are put forward as normal when there is no way they would be able to afford an apartment like that – a fact that doesn't stop them from whining. Incidentally, Jennifer Aniston was on the cover of the *The New Zealand Herald's* "Canvas" magazine, the day after the show opened.

Andrew McLeod, *The People's Monocle* (detail), 2004, gouache and inkjet on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

The second spread in was a double page ad for the show advertising events of the week before, and inside, an article: "Chris Saines Says I Can't Live Without My Electronic Organiser".

According to an excellent article by Walead Beshty in the most recent *Afterall* magazine, "Notes on the subject without qualities: from the cowboy flâneur to Mr Smith", Benjamin Buchloh wrote that "the condition of subjecthood appears... restricted to those that are fortunate enough to have privileged access to... the apparatus of subject formation". This places the subject of this triennial firmly in the upper middle classes.

Is individual identity a capitalist construction made possible by consumption? Is this why everyone wants to be right up the foodchain? Why folks are so sad and lost and struggling when they have no dishwasher, yacht, holiday house, new computer? Are they really suffering an identity crisis in not being able to feed the demands of their subjectivity; getting lost and falling behind? Are they muttering "must drink more coffee and redouble my efforts to beat this hell of self-erosion...?"

These questions are interestingly played out in the museum, the spine of the heritage industry. It is a perfect site for playing out concerns about perceived



Lorna Simpson, *Call Waiting*, 1997, video projection, 16mm black and white film transferred to DVD. Photo courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

threats to self, as pointed out by Matthew Hyland and Jamie King in their 2003 essay “The Conflict of Everyday Life: an Inherited Agenda for Annihilating Nothingness”: “...the hallucination of the Western self’s infinite precariousness and fragility is a defining element of its ornamentality. (This experience of personal identity, something like a precious vase, may also explain the widespread habit of relating to one’s own past life as *heritage*, that is, an object of anaemic aesthetic curiosity rather than as living-present potentiality.)”

Even though one hates to admit it, it is compelling how in *Jackass* they flout, ignore their supposed human body fragility. It’s really quite great to see people demonstrating their resilience. It is a magical thing, intention, and how if you want to be robust you somehow will be. And the reverse is true too – it is commonly known (have you ever been to self-defence classes?) that projecting fragility invites destructiveness...

Incidentally, speaking of attacks, the Maori in the title, *Tumatanui/Tumataiti*, translates to “open, public, without disguise”/“secret and private”. Both contain the word-part *tuma*, which connotes abscess or threat. And indeed it was the *paa*, that masterpiece of fortress architecture, that was the subject of another of the talks in the *Public/Private* symposium, given in great humour by the architect Rewi Thompson: “The electronic PAA – towards future communities”. Despite the perceived threat connotation of the motif, his argument was one ultimately about sustainability, community and good design.

In the interests of going beyond the self, the most interesting discursive element of the show was Albert Refiti’s talk at the symposium. It focused on “a spatial duality paradigm that exists at the heart of Polynesian spaces where the notion of private and public is opposite to the Western concept of space. The centre in Polynesia is the point of extreme transparency where the private individual becomes obliterated. It is the domain of what is termed in Samoa the *va* (*wa* in Cook Island Maori, *ma* in Japanese) ‘the in-between space that holds separate entities and things together’ (Wendt, A) resides. Thus what is central or public is an in-between space, a relational opening cut up by dialogue and the spoken word.”

This fascinating paper would have been very interesting to take on board as central to *Public/Private*. Such points of contact between *va* space and relational aesthetics would make for a genuinely interesting bi-/multicultural project. *Public/Private* may have had a Pakeha-Maori curatorial combo but there wasn’t much of a sense of this project being as bicultural as its title, neither in the selection of artists nor the general *modus operandi*.

It was a shame that so much interesting, and sometimes controversial, material was corralled off into the symposium – for example, this was the only place that the foreshore/seabed debate was mentioned. We would have preferred that the overall project had the same recognition that other sorts of spaces exist than the personal/mental, namely physical and social space. And all the other myriad of types of spaces that art trades in concurrently, indistinctly, porously, experientially, openly. And then we wouldn’t have had to write this horrible review and feel all toxed out and nearly have an argument.

Gwynneth Porter and Dan Arps are the co-editors of *Natural Selection* and both live in Auckland. Porter is a writer and is a member of the organising committee of the itinerant artist-run project Cuckoo. She thinks humans are a plague, but that it is most likely worth keeping on trying. Arps is an artist who thinks humans are quite fascinating creatures really, and is considering keeping one as a pet.