

Between actions: working through Tom Nicholson's practice from the multiple-middle

Critical Mass does not position itself as a protest, but as a group of divergent people who meet to share a bike ride home. The group quickly proliferates into its own shaggy mass of traffic, consisting not only of cyclists, but also including smaller numbers of skaters, scooters, joggers and pedestrians. Self-described as 'a party on wheels', Critical Mass is a celebration of the activity of bike-riding itself. It's a form of life actual and propositional, streaming parallel to and within existing, albeit more dominant, modes of transportation. I think that at its best, Critical Mass does not engage in an easy oppositional practice with the principal traffic constituted by cars, it's more of a playful amplification of possibilities. It arises from within the predominant cultural situation, and cuts a line through the prevailing logic that is currently productive of habitual practices (like the radically increasing consumption of 4WDs, and aggressive driving practices that become obvious when drivers insist upon not giving way to pedestrians).

Critical Mass is not an activity that sits *outside*, but *alongside*. By way of the activity of massing together, a palpable feeling of embodied, concrete community converges. Within the midst and movement of the accumulating bike-body (there are bikes everywhere as far as the eye can stretch!), emerges an infectious, intensifying power. You almost can't wipe the smile off your face. It's a power that effectively transfigures the singular body of lone cyclist into a rhizomatic, carnivalesque body. This new, 'big' body is not just huge because of its amassing numbers, but it acquires a bulk by virtue of its own productive intensity. It's an extreme body-of-bodies that in turn provisionally transfigures the very fabric of the road. There is just so much 'space' in the city when glimpsed from the big-bike-body. This rambling volume momentarily slows the city down as it slugs its way through the urban grid, and in doing so, performs an opening of the channels of the city. It also speeds the city up in a fluid kind of way, because of the inherent, nimble mobility of bike riding. A bike never gets bogged in a traffic jam! The critical mass becomes a concrete proposition towards another, or a series of other, potential engagements that extend and proliferate possibilities that are already in play.

Sure, it really fucks drivers off on a Friday night after a shitty week in the office. But some drivers seem to hate anything that gets in their way, including other drivers, let alone cyclists. It seems to be about negotiation. It's about boundaries and what's deemed legitimate; what's positioned inside and therefore conversely outside these boundary lines. The prevailing order of things is sustained and maintained, because the very practices that this order buttresses, exist as if they were natural, proper, or 'just the way things are'. Their enculturation as natural fits them out with a cloak of invisibility. Engaging in extra-practices that interrupt or overwhelm this order, actively renders visible what happily thuds to the pulse of an otherwise



Critical Mass protest, 2004. Photograph: Bianca Hester.

unrecognisable tone. That which seems normal does so by way of being largely un-conscious, habitual, and insidiously righteous. This obviously applies to more than the traffic.

It's through my participation in Critical Mass that I approach a discussion of aspects of Tom Nicholson's banner marches that took place in inner city Melbourne on early February mornings. Like Critical Mass, I regard Tom's project as a kind of affective force that produces a potent and empowering interiority amongst those who participate. The 'propositional' burgeons from the multiple actions which structure Tom's practice. In parts, it is a practice which offers a glimpse or an outline for another, or extra, mode of potential together-ness and connectivity. It's from the concrete social activity upon which the projects hinge (and depend) that I think the *political* emerges. It's a *politic* that is experimental; not something pre-given, but rather something that arises and which is produced *in action*. The social body that forms in both examples, because of the gathering of individuals, makes a transitional and poetic connection with the city. This connection is momentarily and potentially transfiguring, because it rubs up against the social and economic codes inflected in and structured by the city's very materiality. These actions are powerful participatory events that are equally transitional, evocative and constructive in both their actuality and proposition-ality.

The Banner Project took the form of an 'abstract protest' involving between 15-20 people who met at dawn in different sections of the city ranging from the former gasworks at Albert Park, to a nature strip outside of North Melbourne train station. From these positions the group mingled for half an hour, assisting with the set-up of the banners, drinking coffee and asking questions. There were many familiar and unfamiliar faces; including artists, activists, friends and Tom's



extended family members. From these meeting points, the group walked along designated routes set out by Tom, which were itineraries determined by historic boundary lines (the division of Northern Ireland or the momentary annexing of East Timor in 1975). These lines were layered-over the streets of Melbourne and the marches became a temporal re-tracing of them. In the walking of these lines, we were transitionally enacting a geometry formed by embodied human struggle, based upon the folding of relations of power into the actual materiality of place. We were participating in multiple places in time and space; the fuzzy, unknown and dense places of an unimaginable past, and the actual, yet equally unknowable, places of a city we participate in everyday.

This detail of information was known only to the walkers though, and not rendered present by the marches themselves. The banners outwardly presented dot-matrix images of faces half-smiling. It was difficult to actually see the faces because they perpetually dissolved into their own surfaces unless you stood a long way back. Any clear or central 'subject' of the marches seemed concealed and also embedded to the point of it being obtuse and un-discernable. I thought this was interesting, because it plays at the limits of notions that protest participants lack an appropriate understanding of what they're involved in. We've heard this many times in commercial media which repeatedly and violently denounces any WTO demonstrations, as well as the more recent protests opposing Australian involvement in Iraq (or really, any protest at all these days). We witness the absurd fiction of 'rent-a-crowd' becoming active here. The banner marches were potent because they adopted the *form* that signifies a protest, but with the central or defining 'issue' literally ejected. The subject of the march then became the form/activity of walking itself¹. This turned the marches into a poetic-political activity centered on a collective walking body. Like Critical Mass, this collective body had no hard outside edge that situated itself in terms of a stark oppositional relationship with the city. Instead, the marches quietly wove themselves through the streets, proposing forms of activity not habitually engaged in during intensive peak-hour flow.

The force of the collective walking-body, physically sharing and distributing the immense load of banner structures, was underscored by interaction and dialogue. This is where I believe the 'politics' of Tom's practice to be operating; in its facilitation of a brief moment of together-ness that then

Tom Nicholson, *Seven days*, 2003-4, traces of actions, in three parts: six banners, all digital prints on synthetic canvas, sewn linen; *Seven days* (Double video projection), each 3 minutes 54 seconds in duration; and *Book of Seven days*, digital prints on etching paper, trestle tables, acrylic, 1150 x 90 cm approx.

becomes a proposition for future modes of collective participation.² Excitement was in the group. There was an acknowledgement of carrying the work out for Tom, and therefore of having a central, over-riding objective. However, this did not seem deterministic. There was a sense that we were participating in something affective, and that this simple, quiet activity resonated subtly with the event's general socio-political context.

I have often heard Tom's practice referred to as political, as if it were a type or genre that was pre-given and easy to locate. I think that this identification compresses the practice into something too easily branded. What I'm trying to suggest here is that Tom's practice is potentially many things, depending on the contexts it generates (and all art-work inevitably generates contexts). For me, the context of the works' making, based in the enactment of social relations, is its most potent production of the political. When the work then arrives at the site of display, and in this case for the recent show 'NEW' at ACCA3, I am less certain of where that political force now operates.

ACCA was the destination for material traces extracted from the marches, such as looped video footage, the banners (minus the wooden frameworks constructed to carry them) and highly rendered prints of the traced boundary lines. These prints sit under glass on top of long trestle tables. Newspaper spreads from the days that the marches took place, and in which they were advertised were also present. My focus for engaging this display was to search for where and how the political was now operating. On the street, Tom's work was edgy, alive, difficult, messy, social, political. The museum as the site of presentation offered up an entirely other condition. What happens when a practice like this (considered as a kind of material, social and productive 'force') encounters the force of the institution? What is that institutional force anyway? It seems that the institution often partakes in a flattening of the divergent, contradictory processes and unwieldy complexities of a practice, homogenizing them into art-chunks for consumption (both cultural and economic). This is a force that inevitably and repeatedly appropriates practice and

presents it as artifact. It seems that the practice and its many by-products (presumably 'art') is assimilated by the institution, generally (but not always) on the institutions terms. It's from this framework that my questions arose for Tom's work in this museum context offered by ACCA.

So, it wasn't enough for me to assume that the work was operating politically, just because of its prior social-political force in the context of its participatory production. At ACCA, I was looking for the modes in which the work 'worked' at re-politicizing itself in this intensive institutional situation. A radically different work, how did it now grapple with this new set of constructive problems?

I think that all work is 'politically engaged' by the ways it relates to the traditions, codes and relationships to knowledge, power and representation embedded in aesthetic contexts. If considered in this way, then many (sometimes seemingly 'unlikely') practices can open a potent political space in terms of how they operate in relation to the institutional field (and in turn how they transfigure that field). Practices in which the political is pinned down as the aestheticized subject of the work, too often politely and obligingly adopt conservative institutional regimes⁴. In doing so their so-called political content gets heavily white-washed and deadened.

I think though, that aspects of Tom's work rendered at ACCA shuddered interestingly at the limits between the action and recollection of social actions (across time and place), and the historicizing, knowledge-conferring, validating force given by the institutional framework. It did this most successfully in the videos that had been edited so that their images repeatedly dissolved into themselves, affectively negating our attempts at placing them in coherent, or linear time and place. Their editing rendered them perpetually stuck in their own repetitious moment. Like the experience of bearing the banners, there was a sense of celebration of the march for its own sake above and beyond a utopian, transcendent 'project'. The videos seemed to echo the absence of subject that I think underpinned each of the marches. The videos' projective presence hovered like a kind of weather that pervaded the entire installation. As a viewer, I was happily left with a series of bits and pieces of information, to join and rejoin into loose, un-resolvable wholes. These bits then expanded from being traces of action (finished and closed), and became tools or propositions for future engagements and activities. In becoming propositional, the work started to escape a regime of display in which it was positioned as a series of static artifacts. The work then began to leak out of its temporary institutional context, forming virtual connections with the multiple, social places stuttering beyond the actual building. As all this floated in and out of focus while I engaged the work, the videos continued dissolving and folding into themselves, like the floating, almost un-discernable faces on the banners' surfaces, resisting ultimate identification and containment.

Bianca Hester is a Melbourne biker who divides time over chunks of practice, collaboration, teaching, solo-skipping, excessive broadband usage, and a bit of writing. She is a tired Capricorn

and a committee member of CLUBSproject inc. Thanks to Scott Mitchell, Lisa Kelly, Stephen Bram and James Lynch for invaluable advice and support!

Notes

1. This was most potent on the last march on a Saturday evening through the streets of Brunswick. We carried no banners this time, and just walked as a small group of talking people towards Occular Lab, where Julie Davies and Alex Rizkalla had prepared a meal to celebrate the end of the march events. The extremely-absent subject of this last march was really potent for me, and it reminded me of New Years evenings when I was a child, wandering the streets with family and friends aimlessly and festively.
2. I would argue that this is precisely what some 'artist initiated spaces' facilitate. They are dynamic situations that arise from the active engagements and contributions of divergent people. A plastic community emerges. At best, this discordant group are empowered by virtue of their efforts at constructing contexts for independent activity and dialogue.
3. *NEW* is an annual exhibition held at ACCA that began in 2003. *NEW* is a "showcase exhibition of invited projects by six young and outstanding Australian artists" (quote from ACCA website www.accaonline.org.au/exhibitions). The works in *NEW* take up equal chunks at ACCA, and are presented in a divided and autonomous fashion. Artists for this years show are: Guy Benfield, Nadine Christensen, Anthony Hunt & Steven Honegger (in collaboration), Sangeeta Sandrasegar, Tom Nicholson and Parekohai Whakamoe.