

**Michael Stevenson's show "The Gift", Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, Aachen, Germany: the big dismembering night, Saturday 21st May**



'When one is an artist one has simply no time for people who won't respond. Has One? Why come to Paris if you want to be a daisy in a field?' (Katherine Mansfield, *Feuille d'Album*, 1920)

**A**achen is a fairly trim town for a butchery session. Gotta love the helpful folk giving directions to the little provincial art gallery in the German-style long grass park, past the youth hostel. Inside, backpacks on the floor, and then the rudest traveller of them all, the replica Ian Fairweather sailboat/raft on the smooth gallery floor, riding piles of National Geographics, looking weathered but OK after Sydney (where it was called "Argonauts of the Timor Sea"), the firth of Thames (near London), and now here. By the end of the night, though, it'll all be torn to bits. Which raises interesting questions about how it will be re-cycled for the 2006 Asia Pacific Triennale at the Queensland Art Gallery.

As the fat TIME magazine article on the show "Re-Mastering the Record" (Time August 29, 2005, pp58-59) breathlessly indicates, there are all sorts of affinities at work here over plenty of different distances, about art and artists a long way from home, and about how they are sustained in strange

lands, where they might need a few fraught translations to align with the institutional or art market parameters. Stevenson, it seems, is in this and maybe other cases intent on ranging over all sorts of economies and territories, trading his way round the place intersecting with whatever economies are up for grabs, and using whatever travelling apparatus are to hand. A failed 4WD Trekka in Venice, a Kiwi/English/Guatemalan proto-computer for Venice and further shows this year in San Francisco, etc. But it's the personal travel, rather than the mechanical, that tells the underpinning story.

Ian Fairweather was a quiet man, living in a beached boat down on the mangrove and mosquito edge of Darwin, and later on Bribie island, north of Briszy. Fairweather was a fringe-dweller, certainly, painting like early western desert Aboriginal artists on odd bits of cardboard, walking by the flickering light of his own fires, at a disorienting arms length from a core abstraction practice. His 1952 raft journey north across the Timor Gap went against the flow, and all up it was the frailest of crossings against prevailing sense and direction, semi-submerged. In the longer ambit across the gaps, Aboriginal Australians had sometime come from the north, in true nomadic pre-history, and so did later

generations of folk, white folk obviously through the Timor and Torres gaps, but another round of Asians too, to Darwin, and from the eighties in frail boats did they set out from Afghanistan and Pakistan and elsewhere down through the South East Asian peninsulas, and then across from Indonesia, following the old routes, and hoping for Australia, a caring wide open country. This wasn't the case, as the Sydney version of this show, with its big map of Australia showing just these trajectories made clear. In the middle of asylum seeker paranoid Europe, the distant Australian Fatal Shore brutality resonates all too well, in the simple frailness of the raft, and in its precarious cultural position, swaying uneasily on a sea of National Geographics in a temporarily installed museum hypostatization/reinvention.

Fairweather's journey must have been pushed by epic isolated craziness, given the looseness and desperation of the raft he pulled together, now only knowable through some rude sketches, which Mike used as point of departure for his flotsam/driftwood and WW2 war relic cast-off construction. No-one in their right mind would have let anyone try what Fairweather was doing in this kind of craft: evidently, no-one knew or cared. 16 days of delirium later, the Roti islanders fished him from the sea, or he washed up, a freak survivor, drifted a long way from course. For reciprocity, they cut up the raft's aluminium floats, made from discarded Zero bomber fuel tanks after the bombing of Darwin in WW2, and distributed them among the rescuers. Fairweather somehow made it to the embassy in Jakarta, and from there all the way back to the Tate where some of his paintings had an art world home. Back home in Devon, he had to dig ditches to survive, til he made it back to southseas beachcombing.

Mike has had extraordinary international institutional support in recent times, good and ugly: but he's certainly gone out on some limbs with this project, and enjoyed a kind of frail journeyed reliance on the assistance of a surprising set of crews. Seascouts in Kent helped Mike unsuccessfully sail the thing down what might have been its home-leg had Fairweather been more successful. The Aachen collectors have sustained the far from home Stevenson too, and he's sent them rounds of gift economy treasures in return. Tonight they will help him dismember the raft. They'll choose some part of the raft to take away, and then he'll turn their choice cuts into objects for their walls. This will mean hell to pay for the Australian art institutions who are now belatedly clamouring to buy the replica raft for institutional sums of money. Water in the desert, it could be, but too late for Mike... and that's the twinge of being here so far away, relying on the kindness of strangers... that's the immediate expediency of the gift economy for you, under improvised circumstances.

So, the cut-up night in Aachen, to be presided over by the gift getting Aachen collectors ('Twodos', their tribal name, lost in translation), a famous visiting academic, and a little group of expats Kiwi travellers on variously frail trajectories through expat and residence Europe. The famous English anthropologist giving the talk on Gifting Rituals and economies came from Cambridge, and sketched a plausible



route map back from Mike Stevenson's raft into questions of currency convertibility between hybrid systems, the interface between the calculations of a gift economy and the calculations of a mad mariner, and what people did to his raft when it washed up. Three of the central pages of her talk had come adrift, and she was temporarily at sea. The collectors whispered knowingly together about the English academy's high absent mindedness away from home... There are three Kiwis, Mike, Ronnie van Hout, and me, all travelled long and separately, and tonight allied to some more expat Anglo Saxon folk, variously Berlin based. The atmosphere's a bit like an expat houseparty in some Southeast Asian developing country, with an exotic/indigenous theme: everyone feeling more at home with each other than their exotic locale, and all acting just a little off-key around the cultural borrowings. Except that here, the Germans, and in various ways everyone else, is right at home, and pretty much Euro-centred. Which makes the off-keyness around the artefact all the more palpable.

But the collectors are generous in their dispositions, if a little uncertain of what their explicit, much mentioned implication into a gift economy is leading to. They're happy to contribute in kind, however, and when the time comes and it all gets physical and bloody we cut up the beast together like we were dressing a pig for a big football club barbeque. The hand-made saw is a piece of roughly, artisanally constructed stuff, a kind of craft that is very much a part of Michael's typical self-defence against art and its institutions, even the kinder ones like Aachen. With Michael it's a skill provocation, this



art, increasingly successfully improvised across distance and time, finding itself able here, in Aachen, to do the job, render the object. It's all very hard work, involuted, but clear and pragmatic in the execution. Expatriate, clearly, in numbers of aspects, sensibility, cultural translations and misunderstandings piled up, and not fully explained by National Geographic or any other ethnography. A bit Mansfield-like, perhaps, in its spare crafting, but tonight it's a bit more Hemingway, considering affinities between his pared midwestern modernism and the primal colour of bullfight.

Fairweather and his ambiguous, wandering intent are easily swept aside in such avatistic proceedings. Down in the bullpit, the collectors, artist and Kiwi contingent quickly revert to shared ancestral barbarism, of the kind that ultimately gave us Anglo-Saxon economics and Ricardian political economy. There's more than a sniff of blood in the air. The hand-held number 8 wire-type saw slams into the torn edge of the carcass, the Jap Zero bomber aluminium bomber petrol tanks. Art collectors will have blood on their hands at the end of the evening, from heaving hard on the crude two-ended saw, rasping it across the aluminium belly of the raft according to crudely-drawn chalk territories and claims. Institutional patronage was never so visceral: the floats shriek with the blade at their tin throats. Twodos, Kiwis, and all hold down the prey.

By the end of the night, it was roadkill carnage/blood sacrifice: bits of sawn up raft everywhere littered the floor,

men leaning on equipment and debris, aluminium sawdust, the gang heaving after a day on the chain. New Zealand's one big abattoir, red and tooth and claw, and its artists – expat or not – live on the edge of tectonic cultural dismemberments. Art market capitalism at one level is all about creative destruction, but in the main it usually preserves its object/vehicles at whatever cost. Provincial Institutional Art at its best is a bastion of civilisation: it can be polished, generous, even noble in its sacrificial savagery, whichever civilisation you wash up in.

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**David Craig teaches Sociology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.**