

Unconditional Regard

A Constructed World event

Wednesday 1 June 2005, 6.00 – 6.45 pm

Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne

A glimmeringly beautiful artwork was the centerpiece of the recent single evening event by A Constructed World (the collaborative duo Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva) at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces in Melbourne. Flowing lines of multiple tea-light candles on the floor spelt out the words Unconditional Regard in the manner of handwritten script. Like a lovely two-word poem on a continuous loop, the phrase formed a flickering circle, which became the mesmerising focus of the room.

The advertised duration of the event was a mere forty-five minutes. I arrived reasonably early and so had a chance to view the work before the room became crowded, walking slowly around it and taking some moments to consider its meaning. [*Unconditional*: without proviso, total, unreserved. *Regard*: to look upon, relate to, respect, esteem or consider.] Without at that time knowing its origins in psychotherapy, the phrase conveyed to me a sense of openness, generosity, and empathy, a reading that to my art writer/curator's mind seemed reinforced by the work's inherent radiance, its bountiful glow.

The candles not only generated light, but also a surprising amount of warmth; before long many of us were stripping off our winter jumpers and coats. The mood was cheerful; people liked the work and were generally glad to be there; the simple device of the candles on the floor had proven to be an effective one, giving the room a festive atmosphere. After a while, Jacqui handed me a long match and asked me if I wanted to help re-light the candles that kept blowing out, particularly those by the door that caught the cold draft.

I was happy to join in as I was between conversations and glad of something to do. (Perhaps Jacqui, like a thoughtful host, had known this.) As I reached to the floor to re-light the candles, I felt as though I were performing a quietly symbolic, ritualistic act, though I didn't quite know what it meant. I think, more than anything, it was the enjoyment of taking part in the aesthetically pleasing and uplifting work that had brought us together that night.

It was clear that we, the guests on that night (it wouldn't be right to call us the audience) were totally part of the occasion, in a mutual embrace with the work. The invitation to the event had sounded a welcoming and inclusive note. "A convivial gathering, bring everyone", it enthusiastically announced. Though I hadn't quite known what to expect,

I knew it would be both a social and art event, except that unlike more conventional art exhibition openings, the social aspect of the night would be integral to the meaning of the work. For some time now, ACW have explored how concepts of sociability, hospitality, conviviality and generosity might be thought of within the context of art, as a means of enriching our experience of it.

Since that evening, I've discovered where the phrase 'unconditional regard' comes from. According to American psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1902 –1987), unconditional regard is when one person is completely accepting toward another person. This is not just a show of acceptance, but is an attitude that is then demonstrated through behavior. For therapy to work, Rogers argues, the therapist must have an attitude of unconditional regard toward his or her client. To me, it sounds very similar to the unconditional love that parents need to have for their children, in order for the children to thrive. So, perhaps, midst the cut and thrust of the art world, we have a work that, with a lightness of touch, evokes the shining ideals of love and respect. And what's wrong with a bit of idealism? A Constructed World has never shied away from that.

I remember two paintings by Geoff from 1995 – 1996 called *Universal Love, Unconditional Regard nos. 1 & 2* in which rays of light (like the light of the Annunciation) beam down from the sky onto the landscape below which is littered with images evoking a kind of sixties free-love/rock music/nature-inspired paradise. So there is a history to circles of light in A Constructed World's work and a connection between love and unconditional regard has been made before in their art.

Freedom from censure, of our own or others' feelings and thoughts, is implicit in an attitude of unconditional regard. It's about being allowed to say what you think without fear of judgment or reprimand, about letting down defenses and being open to others who have done the same. Of course, it is easier said than done: something to aspire towards. It's in exploring new ways of framing the relationship between artists, viewers and artworks that ACW have most typically applied these kinds of ideas. Respecting and esteeming 'ways of saying that aren't valued', as they put it, has been a *modus operandi* of their diverse and open-ended art practice. (For example, in their exhibitions, publishing projects and workshops, they've often included and encouraged amateur and non-art-specialist voices in the discussion and creation of contemporary art.)

At one point in the event at the gallery, a woman walked right through a part of the work, scattering the candles and



the word they spelt with her skirt. It was an embarrassing moment and a form of 'participation' that she neither intended nor desired. The candles were calmly replaced, the lettering swiftly re-formed, and decorum restored, but it was a reminder of how accident and chance can intervene in even the best-laid plans. Whilst the incident was minor, it made me reflect on how ACW never edit such inadvertent human foible or awkwardness from their work; after all, when our cheeks involuntarily redden and the chinks appear in our armour, we might learn something new about ourselves and our relations with others.

Perhaps everyone that evening had a different interpretation of what the work might have meant; many people probably gave themselves over to the experience without thinking too much about it. Indeed, it's sometimes better not to try to pin down the meaning of artworks, but to muse on their implications over time. That's surely one of the pleasures that art can offer. Even Geoff and Jacqui profess not to know what their works might mean until some time after they have been made, if ever? For me, those luminous words, little more than forty-five minutes in existence, float in my mind as an ACW sign or marker, a meeting place, and a compelling addition to their repertoire of images. Happiness

at having been the recipient of the artists' cordiality and goodwill stays strongly with me too.

An independent curator and writer now based in Melbourne, Sue Cramer was formerly Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Director of the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; Exhibitions Coordinator and Acting Director at the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art. She has contributed numerous essays on contemporary art to catalogues, magazines and *The Age* newspaper (where she was art critic in 1984). She currently lectures in the School of Art and Culture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.