

**Photo: Sculpture, Theatre etc...**



**A**s philosophers have told us our making good art out of bad, even horrific events comes at a price (let's call it the Goya: *Third of May* effect, the *Guernica* effect). By linking visual fulfilment to such 'fine spectacles' we long ago entered a Faustian pact, and this pact forms the basis of much of our (over) lauded western humanity.

The texts I quote in *PHOTO: Sculpture, Theatre etc...* are examples of journalism. In each case the writers used poetic metaphor to heighten our empathy for the events described. In two cases (*Hardcore But Beautiful* and *Vaporize*) the quotes end the original text with a highly dramatic (manipulative?) flourish. We become 'concerned' but we also relish our concern: "We are reminded of the story that Socrates tells in the *Republic* of the man who, unable to resist the desire to look upon a ghastly scene of mutilated bodies, finally gives in and cries out to his eyes, "There, ye wretches [his own eyes], take your fill of the fine spectacle!"<sup>1</sup>

Much art that wants to help the world is based upon an impossible binary, it conceives of itself as belonging to a world

Scott Redford, *Photo: Sculpture, Theatre etc...* (2007) Installation views, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne.

separate from the 'real' world. Here perhaps is evidence of western art's ancient links to the concept of the two worlds found in the bible. The scriptures describe two worlds: the present 'evil' world we are living in and the world to come. Indeed the bible is often absolute and extreme: "Whoever is a friend of the world is an enemy of God" (John 2:15). Again philosophers stress art's own terrible origins, proposing that western art 'began' with the invention of ancient Greek theatre and that all western art may have its genesis in the beholding of tragedy.

In much 'concerned' contemporary art there is a real inability to bridge a kind of conceptual 'gap', and to be honest this work is not so different. Indeed I suspect that within us is a subconscious reluctance to even acknowledge that a gap may exist, because we cannot bridge it. Art cannot do anything except perhaps despair, or as Chris McAuliffe put



it recently: "I think you see a lot of artists who say: I feel despair, I feel a sense of helplessness about what I see going on in the world".<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the urge to infuse art with 'the political' is a tactic to overcome this sense of helplessness.

However too much thinking about art today uncritically presents the political as an already known category; a genre like landscape or abstraction, with certain artists consistently deemed 'always political'. The world of art is too often cast as a kind of separate 'good' place where hope, fears and despair are presented in quaint, aesthetically ambient terms. This thinking is academic, *normal* even. Despair is undeniably useful but only as a beginning point, there is always possibility within any situation: "Aesthetics can no longer rely on art as a fact. If art is to remain faithful to its concept... it must develop a sense of self-doubt which is born of the moral gap between its continued existence and mankind's catastrophes, past and future".<sup>3</sup>

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#### Notes

- 1 Gary Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2003 p. 286
- 2 Corrie Perkin, 'Age of Aquarius has dawned' *The Australian*, 19 April 2007
- 3 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* Routledge & Kegan, London 1984 pp. 464-470.