

new08

politics of the nanogesture



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NEW is growing up. Melbourne's annual exhibition for emerging artists is six this year. Learned to walk the walk and talk the talk years ago. Traces of regression that 'mummy' sighted last year—a little scatological anal eroticism, the *informe* even¹—seem to have been eradicated (which isn't to say that sex isn't neatly sealed in the background). Juliana Engberg, *NEW*'s 2003 progenitor and principal curator over the years—*NEW*'s 'mummy' essentially—even lets *NEW* play without her this year. In fact, *NEW* has a new curator this year—Anna MacDonald. And like most of *NEW*'s playmates MacDonald is emerging in her career as well.

Oh, and *NEW*'s got a new 'daddy' too. Little Johnny's gone, Big Kevvy's in.² Could that be part of the reason *NEW* suddenly seems so spick-and-span, so genteel, so grown-up? Or is all this apparent good behaviour just a symptom of that common urge to reconstruct the familiar when it has already departed, to order what's already absent?

'Mummy' never wanted *NEW* to fit any particular mould or follow any particular ideology. Of course, *NEW* was still meant to show talent, to be exciting, experimental and oozing with curiosity, but in a generalised, non-dogmatic way. And it would seem that, for the most part, *NEW* satisfied, though occasionally there was trouble. Right from the start there was concern that some of *NEW*'s playmates were too old. And then when *NEW* was three, it was noted, rather astutely, that the child suffered a kind of social myopia, bordering on juvenile racism—*NEW* only seemed to want to play with children from the same Melbournian neighbourhood and to treat the indigenous kids with contempt, if at all.³ But at age six, all this seems to have been rectified—*NEW* even has friends from Perth and Brisbane! Moreover, concerns that the grip of the mother had limited *NEW*'s capacity for emergent curatorial expressions of autonomy in its infancy, might now be assuaged. If this sixth year is a guide, *NEW* has finally aligned itself with emerging curatorial as well as artistic practice.

NEW's choice of playmates still seems a little arbitrary. They've always seemed to be at somewhat different points of development and it's impossible to explain exactly why *NEW* would be attracted to them one year, but not another. That said, certain patterns have been recognised and generalisations made. This year it wasn't just "fluoro, day-glo, hello!"⁴ References to materiality and reinvigorating readymades have abounded in press reports. (Strangely, and despite indications that *NEW* had taken a scatological turn, the same references abounded last year as well.)

However, what was the most striking point of cohesion this year was the shared reverence for architectural space, the ubiquitous, apparently docile submission to the confining contours of *NEW*'s home, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Here was a surprise. At age four *NEW* had almost entirely disendowed the home of its spatial logic and authority—*NEW*'s playmates Makeshift Collective had installed a huge, discombobulating cardboard and wooden maze through it; Helen Johnson had drawn all over its walls, projecting new pictorial space into it; mirrors and video booths fragmented and shut out light and space. Not this year. From Daniel Argyle's geometric miming of the contours of *NEW*'s first exhibition space, with his carefully patterned *World Records* (2005-08) and *Mud Rug* (2006-08), through to the exhibition of Paul Knight's works, sealed off for grown-up eyes and ears only, each work seems married to the home. (MacDonald deserves congratulations in this respect for minimising audio disturbance between the audio component of Knight's exhibit and Gabrielle de Vietri's exuberant multimedia exhibit, which can otherwise be heard throughout the ACCA.)

It would be wrong however, to regard these as marriages involving the absolute submission of one partner, the artist, to the other, the exhibition space. *NEW* is riddled this year by a niggling, microscopic efflorescence of energy crossed by a barely audible demand for something more, something new, something different, something. This could be called the nanogesture of contemporary art—the minute but incessant subjective scratching—a faint echo of modernism's political avant-gardes and their attempts to change their future—that pierces a near total submission to the heaviness of the space and time of the present. Matt Hinkley's *Untitled* (2007-08) exemplifies this notion—meticulous markings, mediated through technology and art historical references suture precious strata into the surfaces of quotidian media without ever undermining their original integrity. Chris Bond's pair of *Twin Set* (2008) and *Mirrorworld* (2008) had a more acerbic, nihilist flavouring. In each of these, Bond coupled mimicry of chaos with an attempt to duplicate or exactly invert that same mimicry. Two paintings copy each other as copies of Pollock. Their verisimilitude wasn't exact and their surfaces weren't encrusted as indexes of spontaneity in the way Pollock's were. They displayed infinitesimal differences, but these were dwarfed by their exasperating sameness—microscopic creativity falls under the reigns of eternal reproduction.

Gabrielle de Vietri's work was apparently the most high-energy for the year, taking the social encounter as its primary medium and involving numerous dance performances, dance classes, live and recorded songs, video, sculpture and books. Yet if her work strived for social change, as the press release for *NEW* suggested, it was certainly not through eruptive libidinal overflow that it sought to achieve it. The highlight of de Vietri's exhibit was a dance routine, *Where's my Community?* (2008) which she devised through a *mélange* of video footage of individual dances. Willing participants were offered

training to learn to formation—dance to the routine. They then performed it in the exhibition space synchronous to the video *mélange*, which was projected onto opposite walls—the live dancers being framed within its mechanised flow and the space alike. Other moments of ‘social encounter’ appeared frozen into sculptures around the performance space. The social thus finds its expression through training, confinement and solidification. De Vietri gave us the message that anyone’s individuality can be universalised, but the inverse also comes through—‘individuality’ might be generic.

Sandra Selig and Jonathan Jones both engaged illumination as a metaphor for signification. Selig’s *Lensing Room* was a poetic machine-installation that used motile acetate strips to reflect glowing phosphorescent paint within a darkened environment. The machine operated cyclically—after several minutes of darkness, an electric light illuminated the space, revealing the mechanism of the machine (somewhat in the style of Olafur Eliason) and allowing the paint to recharge, before darkness returned. It released its ghostly quasi-signals *ad infinitum*, though without any hope or wish to break through that first level repetition into a Nietzschean future of eternal recurrence.

In Jones’ *Speak Softly And Carry A Big Stick* (2008), fluorescent light from two neo-minimalist boxes illuminated patterning etched in the back wall of the gallery. The patterning was akin to traditional Wiradjuri design and its illumination could be seen as a political reminder of indigenous presence and traditional ownership. There was an exceptional gentility to Jones’ utterance and at the furthest edge of the wall from the light boxes, where the etching was barely distinguishable, he even allowed us to see its limits. Perhaps this was the most profound indicator that something about *NEW* was out of joint this year. For the better (or more accurately, the worst) part of the last decade indigenous welfare and reconciliation dropped off the national agenda. The Howard government treated indigenous political demands as the fodder of ‘black armband history’, which it conjured up as an anti-Australian ideology that assaulted the great successes of colonial Australia. In turn, oppositional impulses tended to be transmuted into an indefinite waiting-to-be-heard. This is surely what characterises the soft persistence that irradiates from Jones’ work and abounds in *NEW08*. However, indigenous welfare and reconciliation did re-emerge in the public lexicon in 2007, as the Howard government attempted to counter widespread criticism of its disregard for social policy through its ‘intervention’ against child-sex abuse in indigenous communities. And did I mention that *NEW* had a new ‘daddy’? Whether the Intervention had any particular effect on the overall trajectory of national politics in 2007 is a highly speculative matter. However, what followed it—Rudd’s accession to the Prime Ministerial office on the back of an election campaign that promised and quickly delivered a symbolic indigenous reconciliation through a national apology to the Stolen Generations—altered the political terrain of this country in a way that seemed unimaginable twelve months earlier. Back then, Jones’ gentle nanogestures would have made perfect sense; now, however, their mildness might seem anachronistic.

Daniel Argyle’s creative intent seemed more obscure. With *World Records* (2002-06), some viewers may have recognised Rosalind Krauss’ championing of the ‘revolutionary potential’ of the obsolete in Argyle’s endless handcrafted patterning of old EMI record slips—readymades that have lost their use-value and been made redundant through technological innovation.⁵ Krauss’ revolution would certainly be nanogestural. All innovation would be confined within the repetition of the past. However, through its incorporation of Islamic design, Argyle’s work was apparently also a meditation on the potential beauty of Islamic and Western cultural conjunction. In this it raised questions about the politics of religious and cultural difference. It reminded me of the frequent adaptation of Islamic architecture for Christian use in southern Spain, where the form given to religious belief by one culture was reduced to a mere formalism after the *Reconquista*, becoming the ground for the superinscription of a different set of religious forms. The Mezquita in Córdoba is probably the most exceptional example of a Roman Catholic cathedral grafted into an Islamic shell. Visitors are provided with a statement to the effect that

Opposite: Jonathan Jones, *Speak softly and carry a big stick* (installation detail), 2008
Photo courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney
Pages 134-135--: Chris Bond, *Mirrorworld*, 2008
Photo courtesy the artist and Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne; photos by John Brash

the building’s continued existence is testimony to the generosity and openness of the Roman Catholic Church to other religions and cultures. Opportunism is the word that has often described Christianity’s adaptation of pagan rites. I write this only because I felt confronted by a terrifying political muteness in the presence of Argyle’s *World Records*. Ours has been a time when foreign and domestic policy has been spurred by fantasies of threatening ‘others’ propelled by religious intolerance, rather than a commitment to understanding.

It was Paul Knight’s pristine photographs of coital couples, their actions captured almost indifferently on anonymous white bed sheets, which on first glimpse, appeared to exceed all *NEW*’s exhibits this year in their confinement to the most insular fantasy world. The presence of an accompanying audio piece, *Untitled* (2008) and the works’ physical closure from the rest of the exhibition in a separate darkened space seemed to reinforce this sense of self-sufficiency and isolation. Gradually however, Knight’s photographs (which introduce the dimension of time through their titles: *11 months, 17 days #2...*) stretched the real from their representations of enacted fantasy, letting us see not just the sex act, but moles and blemishes, stubble, melanin disfiguration, hairs shed on sheets. The audio’s hollow, abstract sounds of wooden blocks shifting in and out of phase were far from the lush, integrative, neo-romanticism of John Taverner’s score used by Nan Goldin in her *Heart Beat* (2001). Goldin wrings desire and sexuality like treacle from her fifteen-minute slideshow of chiaroscuro bodies in various states of undress and ingress, powerfully subsuming their physicality within a lusty haze of fantasy. The hard emptiness of Knight’s audio seemed to provoke the very opposite effect—an almost surgical excision of the body from the fantasy.

It was only through the reproduction of the most generic individual fantasies that old ‘daddy’s’ rule was able to sustain itself—with *home-ownership, every aspirational Australian’s dream...* Knight offered an exit card from the realm of fantasy into a more immediate, rawer preciousness. This said, his work still inhabited an intensely private realm of contemplation. Politicisation involves the identification of power with difference within a public sphere, beyond purely private interest. During the last decade, the capacity of cultural production to attract any such interest at the federal level in Australia suffered severe etiolation. But if new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was being genuine when he described the intention of the recent 2020 summit as, “throwing open the windows of our democracy to let a bit of fresh air in”,⁶ if his actions and rhetoric are not merely reducible to the media-stunt type that the cynicism induced by the *ancien régime* so accustomed us to, then perhaps this no longer needs to be the case. So, *NEW*, I can’t say if this ‘daddy’ will be any better for you or your mummy. But here’s my advice. Let your old ‘daddy’ go. I hate to say it, but he really never cared about you anyway.

Notes

¹ Juliana Engberg, *NEW07* (catalogue), Australian Centre for Contemporary Art: 6

² This is not, of course, meant as a reflection on *NEW*’s ‘mummy’ in any way

³ Anthony Gardner, ‘NEW05’, *Broadsheet* Vol 34 No 2, 2005: 120–121

⁴ Headline from Australian Centre for Contemporary Art’s media release for *NEW08*, February, 2008

⁵ Rosalind Krauss, ‘A Voyage on the North Sea’, *Art in the Age of the Post-medium Condition*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999: 53

⁶ Quoted in Josh Gordon, ‘Republic, Tax Reform Top the List’, *The Age* 20 April, 2008: 1



