

inhabit me (like a memory)

NEIL EMMERSON

NEIL EMMERSON: *inhabit me (like a memory)*

This installation comprises a total of 20 units with the possibility of various modes of assembly.

10 frames and 10 panels measuring:

210 x 210 cm (x4)

210 x 150 cm (x4)

210 x 90 cm (x4)

210 x 60 cm (x4)

210 x 30 cm (x4)

Mixed media on paper and wood

NEIL EMMERSON

Born 1956 Melbourne, Australia

Neil Emmerson lives and works in Melbourne. He has also travelled widely in Europe, living and working in Antwerp, Belgium in 1987 and 1991. He has recently returned from travels in China. He is currently lecturing in Design for the Department of Landscape Architecture at RMIT, Melbourne.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1985 *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*, Lake Macquarie Community Gallery, Speers Point, NSW
- 1987 City of Newcastle Artist in Residence 1986, Newcastle Regional Gallery, NSW
- 1989 *De Engelenval*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, Victoria
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
- 1990 *Cul de Sac*, (with Brenda Ludeman and Kate Lohse), George Paton Gallery, Melbourne
Pure Screen, Studio 12, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
Chameleon Gallery and St David's Church, Hobart
- 1991 *Carta da Parati*, Studio 12, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1988 *A Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
New Artists: Melbourne, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
- 1989 *Imaging AIDS*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and Linden Gallery, Melbourne
Art From Elsewhere, University of Tasmania, Hobart
In House, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne and Wangaratta Art Gallery, Victoria
- 1990 *Inland*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
- 1991 *Art Object Vending Machine Project*, Rhumbarellas, Melbourne
Ellipses, 13 Verity Street, Melbourne

Neil Emmerson: *inhabit me (like a memory)*

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

25 May – 27 June 1993

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of Jed Keehan

CATALOGUE

Published by the

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

May 1993, Edition 300

ISBN 0 947220 20 8

Copyright The authors

and The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

No material whether written or photographic, may be reproduced without the permission of the artists, authors and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. The opinions expressed in this catalogue are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

Word processing: Penelope Aitken

Catalogue Design: Ian Robertson

Printing: Econoprint, South Melbourne

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The artist would like to thank the following people and organizations for their support: Robert Schubert, Clare Williamson, Colour Square, Marion Crawford, Ros Atkins, Richard Harding, Kim Donaldson and the Australian Print Workshop Access Studio. The artist also wishes to acknowledge the Visual Arts/Crafts Board of the Australia Council for their generous assistance for this project.

— *Esensual Fragments* —

Neil Emmerson: *inhabit me (like a memory)* is presented as part of *Esensual Fragments* which was initiated by Juliana Engberg for the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. *Esensual Fragments* has received a generous project grant from the Australia Council through the Visual Arts/Crafts Board.

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

Dallas Brooks Drive South Yarra 3141

Telephone (03) 654 6422

Affiliated with Monash University

Director: Jenepher Duncan

Curator: Clare Williamson

Administrator: Mary Dancuk

Secretary/Assistant: Penelope Aitken



ACCA is assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

ACCA acknowledges financial support of Arts Victoria, a division of the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism.

Who am I?
Where do I come from?
I am Antonin Artaud
and if I say it
as I know how to say it
immediately
you will see my present body
fly into pieces
and under ten thousand
notorious aspects
a new body
will be assembled
in which you will never again
be able to forget me.

— Antonin Artaud

SCENE I

Modernism, at least that modernism that Michael Fried championed in the late sixties, could not tolerate theatricality. It was Minimalism's objecthood that became the historical focus of Fried's malediction against theatrical art. Characterised as non-art or by a literalist sensibility, Minimalism's theatricality was Late Modernism's pornography. With its obsession with the body *in situ*, it left nothing to the imagination. It was too physical, too here and now. Worst of all it was much too contingent for the high moral ground of late modernist dogma which sought in universal form, a presence next to godliness. A war was declared against the theatrical in art. Indeed, it was the war itself that constituted the very phenomena of the modern aesthetic experience. 'It is the overcoming of theatre', Fried wrote in *Art and Objecthood*, 'that modernist sensibility finds most exalting and that it experiences as the hallmark of high art in our time'.¹

Nor has Fried been persuaded to relinquish the theatrical/anti-theatrical nexus by the challenges issued by postmodernism.² The conceptual space established by *Art and Objecthood* has not so much been displaced as it has been problematised by the space between the arts or textuality. The deconstruction of the theatrical binary has not taken place and instead has become an aporia, for it seems that it is only a matter of dialectical time before the anti-theatrical *aufhebung* will lift *good art* from the *bad* and through a masterful trajectory in which art desires a secular state of grace, art will enter the kingdom of presence and vanquish the theatre once and for all.³

SCENE II

What is most striking when one enters Neil Emmerson's large concertina screen is its theatricality. Part of Emmerson's memory is art historical. He pays due respect to the signifying force of repetition and size which made of the Minimalist work a stage and actors out of viewing subjects. But a repetition which expands and contracts in size along a deductive and attenuated sequence of differentiation makes of Emmerson a size queen in ways that have to be accounted for in philosophically unconventional ways. The subject position of the Minimalist body has been remade and with it is a reworking of the phenomenological body which so enamoured the Minimalists to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Emmerson is asking you to occupy a rhetorical body which does not move within/out the engendered, non-sexual and ostensibly neutral body of minimalist perception or *vision*. It is a body splayed across *visuality*.⁴ What this reconfiguration proffers is an understanding of the gay body as style. And style – how one works the specifically gay body into art or makes of this subjectivity a sign – is theatrical through and through.

Emmerson's work answers Fried's imagined aporia by recourse to a frame of reference which is not, strictly speaking, modern or postmodern. The relationship between *this body* and the theatre alludes to a more troublesome theorisation of the body found in the post-asylum writings of Antonin Artaud. For Artaud, as much as for Emmerson, theatricality and the body

are one and the same thing. Artaud would never cease to make his project for the Theatre of Cruelty move through what he called 'the menacing,/ never tiring/ presence of my own body', and to find there, a 'foundation in the non-outside,/ the imposition of the outside which sleeps,/ like an inside ...'.⁵ So too, with Emmerson's body. It is *bis body* that you are inhabiting and, like Artaud, the inside and the outside have become doubtful borders which would otherwise categorically limit the interior from the exterior or the modern from the postmodern. The work is an invocation of an irresolute place where theatricality and flesh adhere in decidedly heterogeneous ways. Theatricality 'must traverse and restore "existence" and "flesh" in each of their aspects. Thus, what can be said of the body can be said of the theater'.⁷

But what we can say about this alleged restoration is by no means assured of a logic which privileges the mind over matter, nor one which encounters the body as a biological entity. Artaud's theory of theatricality is fraught with a logic that moves constantly between a desire to make of representation a living theatre and the impossibility of such a life lived by the sign.⁸ Emmerson answers this impossibility with a tautology. *Inhabit me (like a memory)* is already the deferment of an erstwhile body.⁹ The passage of recollection is always a movement from body to sign or from sign to body and thus has its own strange semiotic rules. Memory transforms the libidinal surface of the body into hermeneutical strategies. 'These marks', writes Allen S. Weiss, 'transform lived time into [art] historical destiny, where the past (as memory and the unconscious) ordains the future'.¹⁰ Like the theatre of cruelty, Emmerson's body has yet begun to exist.

SCENE III

Etham Mauden once wrote that on the night Talullah Bankhead went on stage, the whole world turned gay. Well at least it turned gay for those of us willing to accept that the theatre/body rapprochement has a particular and sexually significant function in gay male culture. For gay men the theatricalisation of the body has been an historically powerful arena in which to unmake the sanctioned zones of the body and display them in ways which subvert the given assumptions between procreative sexuality and hetero-normality. But perhaps 'unmake' is the wrong word to use for what Emmerson is doing here. He is not undressing and then cross-dressing the body. He is inventing it.

To 'unmake' a body would infer that he is adopting prescribed representational models for the body like the one provided by Freud in *Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Emmerson's habitation is not structured by a desire which sublimates the oral, anal and genital dialectic of Freud's theory and then turns it around to fit, more precisely, gay male desire. Emmerson's use of the ace of spades is a ruse. It might be seen to stand in for a schemata of the body (the so called glory holes are proportioned to fit genital alignment) but the ace of spades is also involved in a game where the rules change to fit the circumstances of the state of play. The ace of spades approximates a gay body and is remembered as a tautology since it is constantly

undergoing redefinition through the force of play, passion and contingency. This gay body is 'actualised as a playground'¹¹ where, as Adrienne Rich wrote, 'whatever we do together is pure invention'.¹² For gay men, however, the games we invent to reconcile our bodies to our desires can have mortal consequences. The canalisation of the outside skin seen from the inside, like a lesion, holds the transparency of self and surface up to the gaze.

Similarly, the mirroring that divides this two-sided habitation is a red (and blue) herring. You are not inhabiting the discursive space of the mirror reflection shown by Lacan to be constitutive of those formative years. You are enclosed within the surface area of a body in which the skin has been peeled back to reveal the lining of the *rectus abdominus* resplendent in its pink and blue meaty glory. You are in a space that always refers back to the surface from the surface. It's an inscribed surface where symbolic depth and absence have given way to a field of libidinal intensities or what Artaud would call '*pressure*'.¹³ It is a field which encloses you like the warm embrace of an anal glove and whose affective power is augmented by an anal memory layered under the skin of decoration turned muscular.

SCENE IV

What does it mean to turn the gay body into a sign? Not just any body but a collective body whose determinate metaphors could be either 'the excessive visibility of a doubly "phallic" encounter'¹⁴, or a memory of the anus encountered as a genital integument. There is a scarcity of obviously phallic signifiers in Emmerson's enclosure, but it is there in the swelling of the ace of spades. The doubling up of phallic encounter is precisely that: an encounter motivated by a swell and not rigidity (like two combative swords). The phallus is a blue veined, skinned surface swelling to the touch of other skinned surfaces. This is what makes it swell. The touch of the surface on other surfaces, sometimes from the inside.

Just as the phallus has relinquished its significance as a panegyricised symbolic appendage, the anus imaged as a glory hole, has relinquished its negative power as a socially abject hole-to-be-filled. It is encountered not as lack, but as a surface. It is a transition zone which turns penetration into a meeting of two lived surfaces. Emmerson has resisted the rhetoric of the *momentum mori* which would open memory up, so to speak, to Freud's anus. That would smell too much of lack and filling holes, of fetishistic negativity and death.

Instead, he has allowed the layered, decorative surface to build up its own affective intensity so that gay specificity is formulated through a concurrence of contiguous skins or a double epidermis that moves between phallic and anal (mem)(branes). Memory, not limited to the mind and like desire, plays across a somatised surface producing loci of intensities. For gay men, remembering is sometimes an itch between the epidermis and derma of a rim which needs other skins in order to give itself a name. This itch and its encounters is what we might call anal memory.

FINALE

Neil Emmerson has produced a space in which somatic memory is induced by what Artaud calls 'a criminal incitement of maybe'. It was in the theatre of cruelty that Artaud could stage the body's undoing from a 'premeditation of non-being'. Inasmuch as gay sexual identity is given over to the discourse of non-being or other, and given that theatricality is a mode of representation historically specific to gay culture, Artaud is an invaluable peer for gay men. Like Artaud, Emmerson can make 'human anatomy dance ...'.¹⁵

Robert Schubert 1993

• • • • •

NOTES

1. Fried, M., 'Art and Objecthood', *Minimalist Art: A Critical Anthology*, Battcock, G. (ed.). Dutton and Co., New York, 1968, p. 140
2. See discussion between Foster, Fried, Buchloh and Krauss in Foster, H. (ed.), *Theories after Minimalism and Pop, Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Vol. 1. Bay Press, Seattle, 1987, pp. 55-87
3. Clarke, D., 'The Gaze and the Glance: Competing Understandings of Visuality in the Theory and Practice of Modernist Art', *Art History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, March, 1992, p. 81. Clarke has convincingly argued that Fried's search for the essence of a non-theatrical aesthetic experience 'embodies a desire to abandon the unstable world of signification in favour of a purely visual encounter with the actual object. Greenberg tends to adopt a positivist rhetoric, but Fried by contrast is prepared on occasion to acknowledge his mysticism openly ... with the sentence, "Presentness is grace."'
4. Bryson, N., *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix*, p. 27. Norman Bryson opposes visuality to the perceptualist idea of vision in that it is a term 'larger than vision under the conditions of society and discourse, in a visuality as it unfolds within the human subject'.
5. Artaud, A., *Antonin Artaud: Four Texts*, Eshleman, C. & Glass, N. (transl.), Panjandrum Books Inc., Los Angeles, 1982, p. 75
6. *ibid.*, p. 31
7. Derrida, J., 'The Theatre of Cruelty', *Writing and Difference*, Bass, A. (transl.), Routledge & Keagan Paul, London, 1985, p. 232
8. Derrida writes that 'Artaud kept himself close as possible to the limit: the possibility and impossibility of pure theatre. Presence, in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to represent itself.' *ibid.*, p. 249
9. Emmerson's reference is to a passage in Barthes's *The Lover's Discourse*. 'Is the scene always visual?' asks Barthes. 'It can be aural, the frame can be linguistic: I can fall in love with a sentence spoken to me: and not because it says something which manages to touch my desire, but because of its syntactical turn (framing), which will inhabit me like a memory'. Barthes, R., *The Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Howard, R. (transl.), The Noonday Press, New York, 1990, p. 192
10. Weiss, A. S., *Iconography and Perversion*. Art & Text Publication, Melbourne, 1988, p. 16
11. Jackson Jnr, E., 'Scandalous Subjects: Robert Gluck's Embodied Narratives', *Difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1991, p. 119
12. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 115
13. Artaud writes 'I have not been able to introduce my texture into these aborted poems, to introduce into their words my soul O not my soul, but my pressure, the darkness of my congenital tension, of my excessive and arid oppression'. Quoted in Greene, N., *Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words*, Simon and Shuster, New York, 1970, p. 170
14. Jackson Jnr, E., *op. cit.*, p. 115
15. All quotes are from Artaud, A., *op. cit.*