

# OPENING SPEECH BY ROBERT SCHUBERT.

ACCA

29th February, 1996

## Artists

Kim Donaldson - *From the Lecture: A Reminder of Life*

Dennis Del Favero - *Motel Vilina Vlas*

Graham Harwood - *Rehearsal of Memory*

## Testimonial

It's not by any stretch of the imagination that the three exhibitions which open the 1996 year for the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, are what you would call light. Here we have Graham Harwood's *Rehearsal of Memory*, which through interactive technology maps the collective experience of criminally insane rapists, murderers, arsonists and kidnappers; Dennis Del Favero's *Motel Vilina Vlas*, which works from the documentation of the condoned and systematic rape and murder of women in war; and Kim Donaldson's *From the Lecture: A Reminder of Life*, an installation marking a very personal life and death by AIDS. Now let's face it. The works are not exactly what Matisse, in his more theoretically inclined moments, would describe as comfortable armchair art - and neither are they, works towards which anyone of us can remain altogether indifferent. They are works about big issues, sometimes macabre, dealing on an intimate scale with death - issues made larger, I suspect, by their relation to the media through which many of us glean some understanding of the experiences at stake.

It is this intimacy of the works, rather than the more simple assertion that the three shows are about death, which I think links them more closely together. The shows do struggle to make death meaningful but what seems more crucial here is the way that each refuses the hunger for spectacle on which the media feeds, the kind of spectacle which lead thinkers like Baudrillard, for example, to claim that contemporary wars do not take place, that wars don't effect real bodies, in real time and space. Instead, these shows take testimony, or indeed the failure of testimony as a means of producing visual languages - languages which offer alternatives to the reification of experience prescribed by the media.

When you read Nikos Papastergiadis's catalogue essay on the metaphors of rape, his analysis of how nationalism savagely appropriates the bodies of women as part of the machismo of war, is always grounded in the testimony of Amira S. When he writes that the experience of war rape is a site where "Language is stripped to raw nouns and verbs", this is less a theoretical abstraction than it is an understanding of Amira S.'s own testimony, indeed, how she finds language inadequate to representing her experience.

The testimony of Kim Donaldson's Father where he recounts the 8 months in which he cared for his son suffering from HIV, is constrained when compared to the usual if any coverage of the AIDS virus in the media, and its intimacy works against any idea of victimage. In the absence of her brother's body,

and like Amira S, Kim Donaldson's lecture which doesn't speak, again marks the place where language fails to take the place of the very physical presence of her brother.

And Graham Harwood's use of sometimes perverse personal histories is testimony of a different kind. Playing on the lure of the obscene, Harwood counteracts the cool interactivity of Multi-media technology with bits and peices of bodies of insane inmates, declaring manifesto like, that we assign machines our cultural dirty laundry, and that "Now is the time for filth".

These are works about bodies and their absence, bodies and their fragility and I want to congratulate the three artists on their work. It does take some courage to do what they've done.

Thank You