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ARTS VICTORIA  **MONASH UNIVERSITY**



Daily Practice
Danius Kesminas + Michael Stevenson
14 October to 12 November 2000
Opening 13 October 6-8pm

 **CORPORATE INITIATIVES**
Audio Visual Specialists

Photo: Andrius Lipsys

Daily Practice

If we could somehow eavesdrop on the long, desultory, tangible babble of human beings talking about objects of art in their worldly presence, we would know the true, raggedy, contingent history of art. Dave Hickey

Danius Kesminas and Michael Stevenson's video work *Daily Practice* is the imaginative dramatisation of a 1992 interview between the famous German painter Gerhard Richter and the critic Doris von Drathen. These two notable personages are played by actors Tom Considine and Heather Bolton, who bring this dialogue alive in a peculiarly local setting. Widely publicised with a clichéd movie poster, featuring action portraits of Considine and Bolton with a foody scarf, *Daily Practice* promises to tackle a number of big questions such as: 'What is the social responsibility of painting?' and 'Is it possible for painting to empower socially?' Whether or not these questions are answered is fairly unimportant to the project, rather it is the 'process' which counts. After opening with Considine's Gerhard Richter attending a North Melbourne foody practice, the focus moves to the Lithuanian Social Club, where his dialogue with Bolton's von Drathen is staged. Here, the sets and costumes are deliberately unobtrusive, simulating a rehearsal of this earnest, philosophical conversation. Taking its cues from Louis Malle's *Vanya On 42nd Street* in which the focus is not just on the actual play but also on the interactions surrounding it, *Daily Practice* shows us the cast and crew assembling and chatting beforehand. One of the key differences between Louis Malle's film and Kesminas and Stevenson's video, is that the realism they carefully simulate is frequently punctuated by the absurd. The actions of the interlocutors consistently undercut the theoretical rhetoric flowing between them. While the acting in *Vanya* was professional, based on method acting techniques, the performances in *Daily Practice* are deliberately mannered and the poses they strike are more reminiscent of soap opera than stage drama. Like soap actors, Considine and Bolton encourage a self-consciously flirtatious rapport which is doomed to endless deferral, lending a compulsive dimension to their 'profound' verbal exchange. In order to create a credible environment in which to convene the interview, Kesminas and Stevenson mocked up Richter paintings and collected assorted artefacts to place around the set as signifiers of this 'great' artist's identity. At ACCA this stage detritus is exhibited alongside the video work as evidence of the interview's North Melbourne re-enactment. Kesminas and Stevenson's collection of ephemera constitutes an installation in its own right, leading us to see formal similarities with the stage set. These props both undermine and

reinforce this 'high art' dialogue. Among valid references to Richter's actual practice, the directors have also inserted bogus objects into the set, creating a sense of disjunction between what is being said and what is seen. There are self-referential items like a video of *Vanya*, multiple copies of *Daily Practice*, the script and shooting schedule, as well as cast and crew portrait photos to commemorate the event. Along with this miscellany are drawings of the set and the actors' costumes by Stevenson's parents which bear little resemblance to the final product, suggesting a vast gap between intention and realisation. Also included is a mass of North Melbourne foody paraphernalia, ranging from a football to an inflatable kangaroo. The recurrent foody theme functions as a comic strategy, but also serves as a way of bringing this hieratic dialogue down to a demotic level. Richter, a painter of heroic stature, is humanised through his evident passion for the local game. It is also a way of including a dominant aspect of Melbourne culture into this text which originates from the Northern Hemisphere. Evidently, Kesminas and Stevenson have identified the double bind of trying to be 'authentic' artists in the Southern Hemisphere where the dominant core aesthetics are mostly imported. In *Daily Practice* they show how the tendency to adopt theories from elsewhere can lead to various manifestations of the provincial grotesque. Cannily, they have reversed the usual trend by appropriating this German icon and localising distinct aspects of his personality. In an audacious gesture, they have delivered their version of Richter's interview back to European audiences in several exhibitions, complete with German subtitles, and to much acclaim. While Richter and von Drathen's dialogue in *Daily Practice* is compelling in its scope, dealing with immensely complex subjects, its unlikely geographical transposition tends to make the viewer distrust the veracity of the great artist's pronouncements. Kesminas, a Lithuanian Melbournian, and Stevenson, a New Zealander living in Berlin, choose to enact the displacement of Richter into a 'foreign' context, thereby throwing his reputation into relief. Clues to Kesminas and Stevenson's identities are embedded everywhere in the text of *Daily Practice*, reminding us that no translation is pure, especially in the fraught relations between the Old World and the New. By bringing their respective heritages to bear on their interpretation of this 'high art' dialogue, they provide us with a idiosyncratic critique of artistic pretension, both here and abroad.

Brigid Shadbolt

Danius Kesminas and Michael Stevenson

Recent Solo Exhibitions

2000 *Daily Practice*, Lombard Freid Fine Arts, New York (w/- Slave Pianos), China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles
The Compromised Economy of Desire and Fear (w/- Slave Pianos), The Public Office Carpark, Melbourne
1999 *Emancipate the Dissonance* (w/- Slave Pianos), Lombard Freid Fine Arts, New York
An Evening with Slave Pianos, Lovers, Melbourne
Slave Pianos, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Recent Group Exhibitions

2000 Rent, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; Overgaden, Copenhagen
Uncommon World (w/- Slave Pianos), The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Lit. Fig; Work from Words, The Space @ Media Triangle, New York
Non-Objective Brass, Slave Pianos with The Burley Griffin Brass Band, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth
'Slave Pianos', 4th Sergey Kuryokhin Festival, Leningrad Palace of Youth, St. Petersburg
1999 What Your Children Should Know About Conceptualism, Neuerachenkunstverein, Aachen; Brandenburgischer Kunstverein, Potsdam
The Queen is Dead (w/- Slave Pianos), Stills Gallery, Edinburgh
Toi Toi Toi (w/- Slave Pianos), Museum Fredericianum, Kassel, Germany; Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland
The Music of the City (w/- Slave Pianos), Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Select Bibliography

Elizabeth Morse, 'A Play on Words', *Artnews*, April 2000
Adrian Dannatt, 'Duchamp and Beuys, not Debussy and Beethoven', *The Art Newspaper*, No.99, Jan 2000
Sebastian Smees, 'Slave to the music', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1999
Stephen O'Connell, 'Slave Pianos', *Art/Text* #67 1999
Julian Holcroft, 'Slave Pianos', *LIKE, Art Magazine*, No.9 Winter 1999

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Gallery Co-ordinator: Vikki McInnes

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