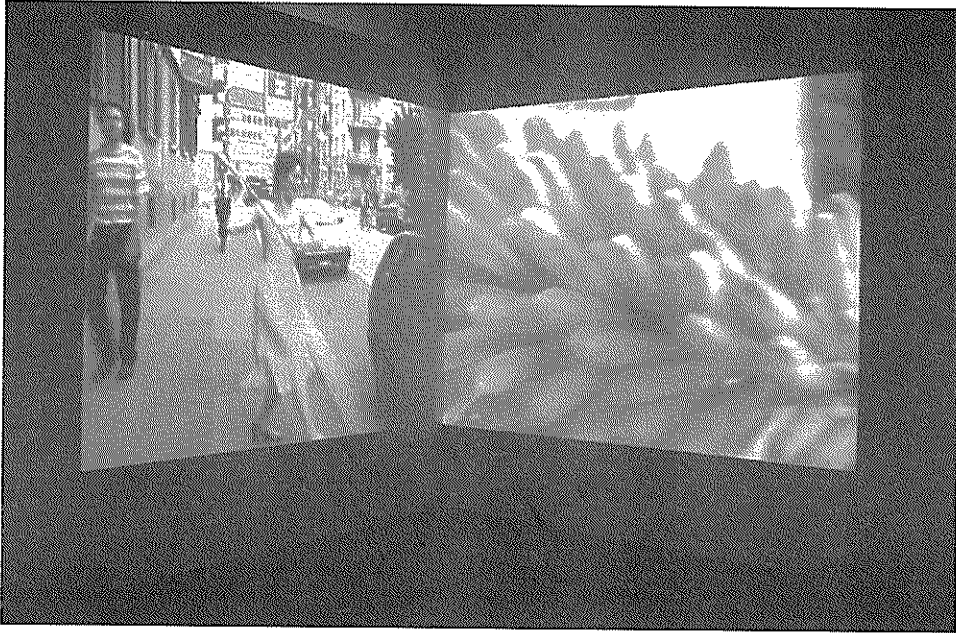


Pipilotti Rist, *Ever is overall*, 1997 Photo John Brash



## The various agendas of gender

*Humid*

Tacita Dean, Kate Daw, Ann Hamilton, A. K. Dolven, Pipilotti Rist, Mariele Neudecker, Christine Borland, Clara Ursitti, Nina Saunders  
Curator Juliana Engberg

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne Festival  
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The notion of humidity is ambiguous. For a long time ambiguity was another word for indecision and thus relegated as the enemy of many political groups, including feminism. Utilising the post-structuralist arguments of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* as a point of departure, Helen McDonald in *Erotic Ambiguities* argues that in the 1990s ambiguity posed a problem for feminists.<sup>1</sup> This was particularly evident under the constructivist light of post-structuralism which ditched essentialism for the notion of subjectivity as provisional, polysemic and historically contingent. For McDonald this precluded notions of agency based on the assumption of a self-determining, politically active individual.<sup>2</sup> According to Nestor Garcia Canclini, this paradox and visible contradiction in negotiating contemporary identity within global and local vernaculars can be defined as "academic constructivism versus political fundamentalism", or what has been known in various feminist groups as the 'nurture/nature' debate.<sup>3</sup>

Luckily for those who have little understanding [or interest] in the debates surrounding gender and sexual theories, Juliana Engberg's *Humid* exhibition does not assume any previous studies. Rather it provides a variety of vernaculars; discursive formations and modes performed by contemporary women artists today. Gender, as with sexuality, is presented as a fluid, shifting and polysemic clothing in which stereotypes and new subjectivities are tailored, coutured and refitted. In this way gender and sexuality are not excluded from other issues such as race, age and ethnicity; it is a scape full of the contradictions and paradoxes within contemporary identity. Illustrative of the elasticity of gender is Tacita Dean's filmic narration *Gellert*, in which she weaves together a mixture of the trivial and sublime, familiar and unfamiliar into a cacophony of poetic ambiguity. Her 16mm projection of mature female bathers blurs temporal frameworks; the viewer is the voyeur while simultaneously being unable to escape the feelings of intimacy, privacy and immediacy similar to a home movie. Dean's work as a type of video painting engages in the various 'naked and nude'/'male gaze' debates in art history raised by Kenneth Clark, John Berger, Griselda Pollock and Lynda Nead. It performs the familiar historical scapes curator Engberg sees as "the fantasy worlds of Alma-Tadema, Bouguereau or Ingres".<sup>4</sup> The use of liquid as a recurring site for the notion of humidity is taken up in the works of Dean, A.K. Dolven, and in Ann Hamilton's video works, Mariele Neudecker's diorama scapes and Clara Ursitti's *perfume*. A.K. Dolven's video 'canvases' present different moments in 'still lives'. Particularly seductive is the video piece entitled *still life*, in which a lush red-pink tulip is caressed with white paint until it assimilates with the background whiteness. Here whiteness operates as the ultimate sign of ambiguity – as Richard Dyer remarks, it is all colours and yet none.<sup>5</sup> Dolven's treatment of the flower is reminiscent of Mapplethorpe's flower studies in which the implicit violence of identity is always at play.

In keeping with Dolven's studies, Ann Hamilton's three videos – one showing mouth/stones, one water/neck and the last water/ear – are interludes in sensual moments. The queen of pheromone art works, Scottish artist Clara Ursitti offers us a Duchampian bottled scent of, supposedly, the artist's 'virginal' scent including

menstrual blood. Mariele Neudecker's *Things Can Change in a Day* presents us with an atmospheric reflective installation where shadows of water-scapes paint the surrounding walls. Like her work in the 1999 Melbourne Biennial, this too is enigmatic and enchanting.

In addition to Neudecker's work the two strongest works in my mind are Tacita Dean's *Gellert* and Pipilotti Rist's *Ever is Overall*. Rist's larger than life-size video projection – in sharp contrast to the painterly and dreamy scapes of Dean's – presents the viewer with a seemingly linear narrative of a woman walking down a street with a metal flower. As she walks along in slow motion in her Wizard of Oz red shiny shoes, her long pale blue dress flows. Every so often she swings the flower into a parked car's window breaking it; in one instance while a police officer is walking behind her. The presumably male police officer takes off his hat to reveal that he is a 'she', and smiles in a type of empathetic way at the blue-dressed woman.<sup>6</sup> Rist presents a constructed world in which fiction [collective] and fantasy [personal] are interwoven, stereotyping, deconstructing and performing the elasticity of gender.

As Canclini asserts, we need to "analyse identity not as a temporal essence that is expressed, but as a construction that is narrated."<sup>7</sup> In *Humid*, the audience is presented with various trajectories, surfaces, voices, corporeal scapes and digital canvases in which the narration of identity [specifically gender and sexuality] can be fluid, diasporic, in flux and under continuous performance. While some works are more successful in presenting gender as a less didactic narrative, *Humid* provides many contemporary modes for agency, empowerment and choice. In other words, the various agendas of gender.

Notes

1 In Judith Butler's 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble* she reassessed her post-structural arguments in relation to 'performativity', and 'heteronormativity'. For Butler, one of the major ongoing problems with gender debates is that they end up in an essentialist versus constructivist divide. This, Butler asserts, is due to an inability to understand the regulatory patterns gender performs under the often unquestioned binary of sexual identity [as outlined by heteronormativity]. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London, 1999 [revised]. Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, Routledge, London, 2000

2 McDonald, 2000: 21

3 Nestor Garcia Canclini, 'Re-thinking Identity in the Time of Globalization', in Nikos Papastergiadis [ed.], *Art and Culture: Hybrids and Clusters*, Academy Group, London, 1995: 36

4 Juliana Engberg, 'Humid', *Humid* catalogue, Melbourne Festival, 2001: 3

5 Richard Dyer, 'White', *In the Matter of Images*, Routledge, London, 1993

6 This echoes the Duran Duran film clip *The Chauffeur* in which the apparently male chauffeur, who has been peering on the mistress in the back seat, at the end takes off her hat to expose that she is a woman too, thus reconfiguring the presumed male gaze

7 Dyer, 'White': 36

Larissa Hjorth

Lyndal Jones, *Deep Water/Aqua Profunda* [video still], 2001  
Photo courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art



## Seagreen

Lyndal Jones: *Up to and including... Deep Water/Aqua Profunda*

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
5 December, 2001 – 28 January, 2002

Lyndal Jones' screen and sound installation *Deep Water/Aqua Profunda* was commissioned by the Australia Council to represent Australia at the 49th Venice Biennale. It was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art along with excerpts from some earlier works. Weirdly, this exhibition isn't a part of the MCA's summer "Photography Season", which includes the pay-entry show *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection*, Peter Robinson: *Sharpies* and *Photo Works from the MCA Collection*. The big wall text in the MCA's entry gallery makes a claim for photography's ability to embrace a range of modalities, but all of the photographic images in these shows are two dimensional and wall based [even though a claim is made for a Susan Norrie work to be 'sculptural' because of its presentation of a photograph in a lightbox]. Jones' works too, as presented here, are mostly photographic [as static images, single and multi-channel screen works, and installation] and as such offer a broad definition of photographic practice.

Entering the MCA's fourth floor gallery the initial overwhelming sensation is the sound of chirping birds courtesy of five monitors, fixed low along the walls of the entry corridor, showing imagery of gently swaying poppies. I was reminded of the controversy surrounding Jones' use of live finches in the initial installation of *From the Darwin Translations*, of which this work forms a part [Adelaide Installations, 1994]. There are no live birds here, but their sound causes a momentary double-take in relation to the view from the adjacent windows out across Circular Quay, where the Botanical Gardens sprawl eastward behind the silver apartment buildings.

In a dark room off the corridor is *Spitfire 1,2,3*, including a DVD projection shot from a spinning fighter plane, the space criss-crossed by sound broadcasts that can be heard via infrared headphones as you move through the room: the buzzing of the plane engine, then a sensual female voice speaking of sexual intimacy. A similar voice is heard in the sound component of *Deep Water/Aqua Profunda* at the end of the corridor. In an anteroom is a vertical wall-set plasmascreen showing a moving video-portrait of a female actor speaking softly, and from left and right speakers behind the viewers, other texts are spoken in English and Italian. "Now it's about kissing, deep kissing, with the tongue there, in the mouth, in the cunt...", says the right-hand English female voice. "Deep trouble... deep water... what is it about water?" In the bigger space is a five screen projection work. A set of three big screens shows sequential imagery shot from a craft moving along the canals of Venice, the close-up topography showing water-lapped masonry and occasional gondola inhabited byways. Then it switches to a shot from one of Sydney's ferry wharves, and the rusty pocked paintwork of the side of a Sydney ferry gliding across the screens. Not having seen the work in Venice apparently designed for the Australian Pavilion, I wondered how it translated to this more generic space.

The show, which is touring in various forms, seems at first disjointed, and to be fair, if you're in the right frame of mind it's all fluid. But that's not an over-arching metaphor: it rubs against the two digiprints documenting performances from the 1970s *At Home* performances, and the 1981 to 1991 *Prediction Piece* works [a new installation using material from the MCA's Contemporary Art Archive]. I was sort of at a loss. Did the work seduce me? Or was it the proximity of the commuter ferries churning up the green water in the Sydney summer haze that gave my second and more considered viewing of this show its weight?

Christopher Chapman

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