

Bringing ideas to life

VISUAL ARTS CYCLE TRACKS WILL ABOUND IN UTOPIA

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,
111 Sturt Street, Southbank, until
September 26.

Robert Nelson Reviewer

There's something elegiac, sad and terrible in the title, *Cycle tracks will abound in utopia*. It sounds like the kind of promise chanted by suicide bombers: riches, virgins and glee await them in paradise.

Ideology sometimes shares a certain holy temper with religion: believers willingly suffer in the name of a greater good; pleasure is deferred for something higher, a kind of sustainable joy to be had by future folk in excelsis.

The theme of this international exhibition is the artistic afterlife of ideology. Some of the artists are close to the spirit of public campaigns, such as Raquel Ormella's restaging of conservationist headquarters in Hobart. Others are almost morbidly defeatist, such as Tony Schwensen's *Banging your head against a wall*, in which a man literally acts out the futility suggested in the title.

Some works evoke the vigour of past generations in public protest, such as Dmitry Vilensky's videos and installation of heroic voices and action. And some works involve mass collaboration, such as Christian Capurro's curious piece, which involved the labour-intensive systematic erasure of text and image throughout a fashion magazine.

The exhibition doesn't accept the idea that ideology is dead, just that it's elusive. A number of works deal with the failed ideologies of modernist architecture, as with Callum Morton's *The heights* (a scaled-down modernist facade) or Pia Roenicke's documentation of public space, enlightened in intention but dire in mood.

Alban Hajdinaj contemplates the impossibility of rectifying alienating architecture in his *Eye to eye*: a woman gazing at



Christian Capurro's *Another Misspent Portrait of Etienne de Silhouette*, 1999-2004 — a magazine erased.

an ugly building is no better off when the same building is painted in bright colours by an international artist.

Louisa Bufardec's *Team joy* translates the countries of the world into bright colours alongside various measures of their international prowess. Tagged with their email subscript, the competitive nations prop up one another in their several precarious bids at diplomacy.

The most poetic work in the exhibition is Katya Sander's video installation *What is capitalism?* You enter a booth with mirrors, so that the landscape projected on the wall goes on forever, just like your own reflection beside it. A woman walks into a field with a microphone. Occasionally, a bypasser or even a whole family appears, whereupon the woman asks the question: can you tell me what capitalism is?

The answers are awkward, passionless and hesitant. They're mostly academic in nature, but usually inadequate to the purpose, without concern for social justice, much less Marxist indignation. The

wayfarers sometimes explain earnestly that capitalism is a system for identifying equivalences in the value of items.

These fruitless vignettes occur to the sound of the wind, on a dreary paddock in dull weather. The land is undoubtedly owned by private capital, as is the occasional jet aircraft that flies over it. We

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appear to be dependent upon capitalism and yet we find it abstract, imponderable and bewildering, with no presence in the imagination.

It's as if the interviewer genuinely has no knowledge of capitalism. Perhaps this omnipotent social order has ceased to be understood because it's all there is: nothing presents as a credible substitute. And like the humdrum backdrop of

commercially exploited resources, the people who try to define capitalism only reproduce mechanical economic theory.

But Sander's work, like the exhibition as a whole, isn't pessimistic. The exhibition eyeballs a quandary that needs to be faced, and with humour.

The funniest work is Carey Young's video showing the artist in training as a revolutionary speaker. She has engaged a coach to enhance her projection and persuasiveness: suited and charged with corporate motivational rhetoric, he gets her to sound more genuine, more sincere and self-convinced with a heartfelt message.

Just now, Sander seems to say, the revolutionary Other must speak the competitive language of marketing. But try as she may, she cannot assimilate the stifling sanctimony of the executive. And so, while capitalist culture prevails, it's also doomed to self-parody.

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