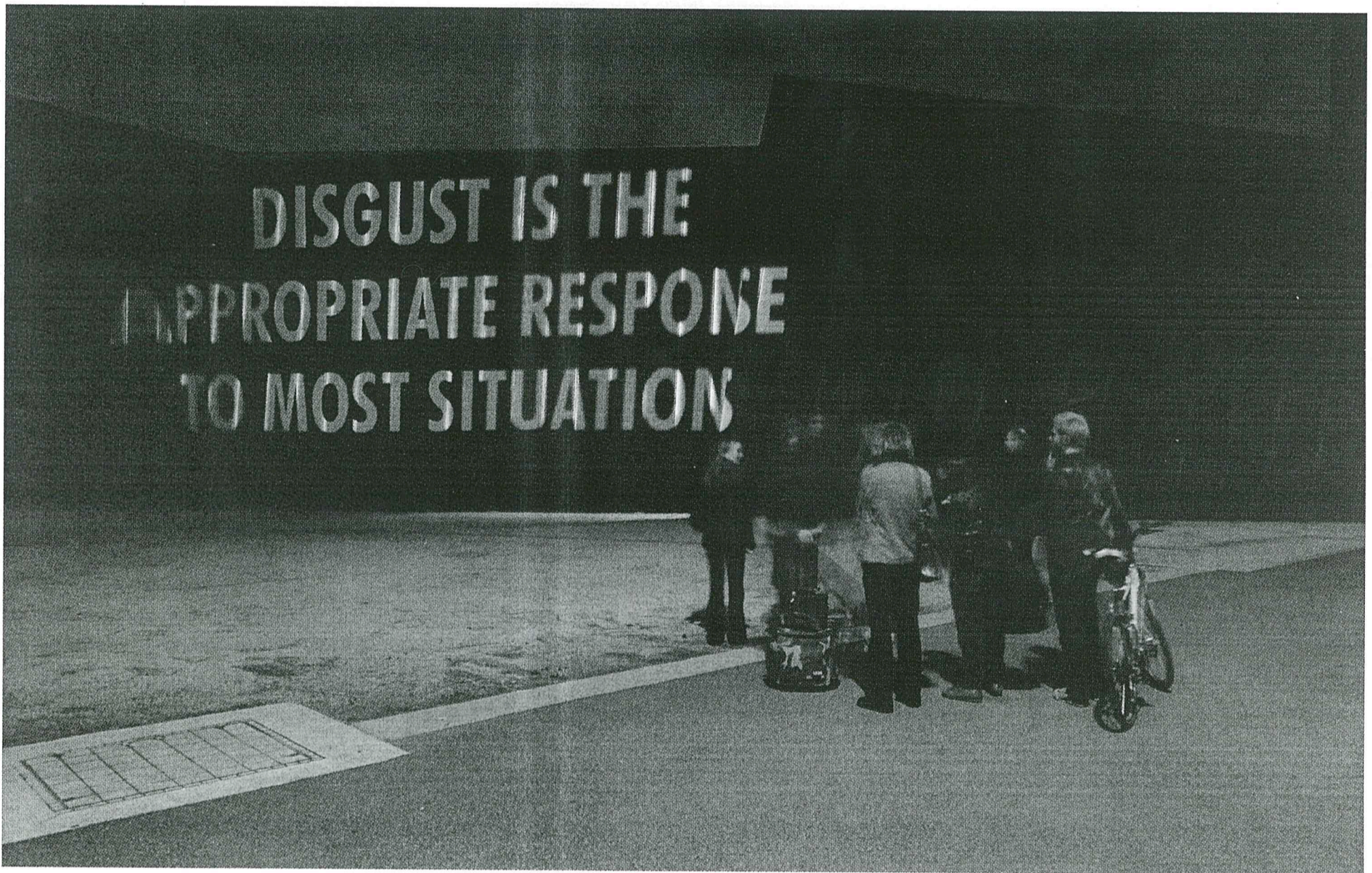


The disquieting impact of *The unquiet world* in Melbourne

JULIE ROBERTS

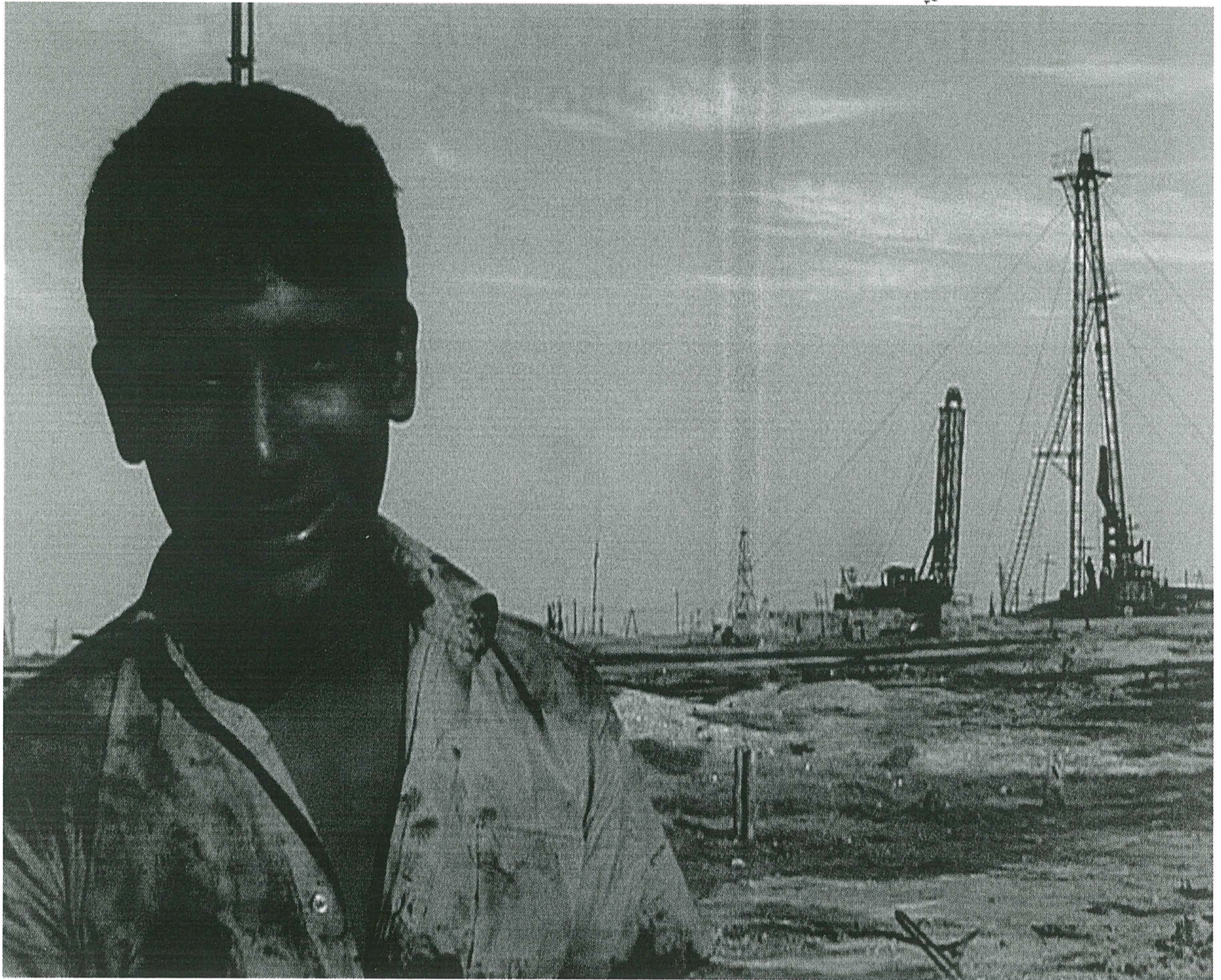


Jenny Holzer, *For the centre*, 2006, light projection. © Jenny Holzer 2006. Courtesy Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo John Brash.

What's art got to do with it? is the pressing question hanging over the exhibition, *The unquiet world*, currently on display at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne. What is art's place in the commentary and critique of world conflicts? What does it offer? What can it offer? In this exhibition of works by seventeen Australian and overseas artists, curated by ACCA Director Juliana Engberg, a handful of works demonstrate art's ability to give form to the unsayable, to articulate silences, to prompt shifts in our understanding from easily digested short grabs of information presented to us via our television and computer screens to something more complex and compelling. But many works in this exhibition do not achieve this. Instead, they lead us to question the place of art exhibitions in debates and discussions around contemporary issues, and to query the place of works of art that appropriate the language of documentary and news reports in order to critique that media. What place

do these works have in art galleries? How relevant are these works in this context?

The unquiet world demands time and attention from its viewers. To watch all the video work in this exhibition from beginning to end would require nearly a day's participation. Few people, I suspect, would be prepared to dedicate this time. So instead, much like channel surfing at home, we move from one image to another, one screen to another, pausing when something arrests our attention, moving on when bored, uninterested or fatigued by the seemingly endless tally of atrocities, conflict, war and humanity's exploitation of the earth and its population. At times it feels a little like watching the television news on an endless loop. If the objective is to inform viewers, to present alternative views then one must question the success of such works. How do they impact upon our understanding beyond the intellectual pleasure gained by recognition of subversion and manipulation of known tropes of communication?

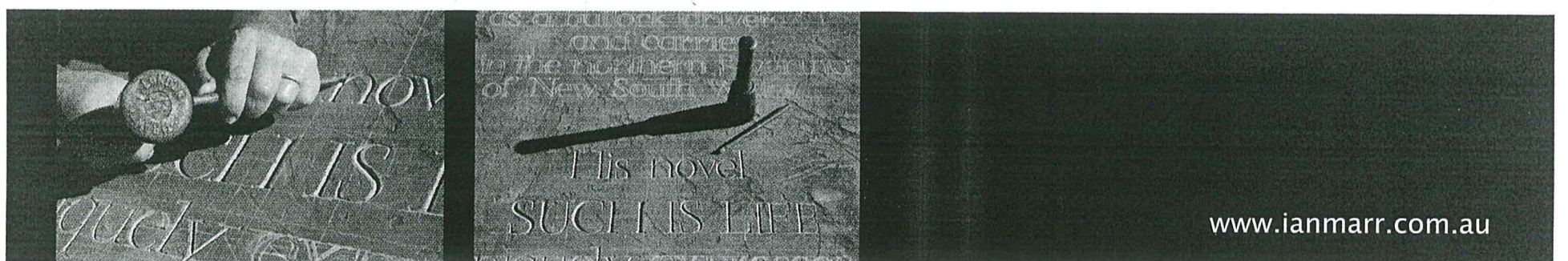


Still from Ursula Biemann, *Black sea files*, 2005, video installation, 43 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

For most of us in Australia our relationship with war, major disasters (natural and man-made), conflict and displacement is voyeuristic. We watch it, rather than experience it directly. The exceptions are those who choose to participate, such as aid workers, members of the defence forces and journalists. For most of us here though, human suffering through bombings, invasion, war-sanctioned rape, murder, genocide, all happens to an-Other, a people we only know through the screen, or more rarely, whom we might now glimpse 'resettled' into our communities. Our knowledge of their pain comes pre-packaged in containable bits of information on the TV news, squeezed in between sporting highlights and weather details. We rarely witness these events directly. We never have to smell burning or rotting flesh, we never have to gaze with impotence and despair at the ruins of our home, or village, and we never have to hold in our arms someone whose grief at losing a

parent, a partner, a child, a sibling – or an entire family – is beyond consolation.

Art exhibitions can provide opportunities to move beyond simplified representations of the world's atrocities. Art, at its best, can shift our perceptions and understanding beyond the talking heads and the well-framed image, the ubiquitous shot of the orphaned and injured child. It can represent the messiness and confusion of such events, the degradation, unbearable anguish, and the simple foolishness and greed that so often lies at the heart of these ordeals. There are quiet moments of questioning and exploration in *The unquiet world* that come close to achieving this capacity of art, but sadly they are almost drowned by the cacophony of too many screens, too many talking heads, too many voices talking too much. Some of the best art does work in this exhibition context, and moves beyond intellectual



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Lida Abdul, *The white house*, 2005, 16 mm film transferred to video, 5 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

posturing and clever manoeuvring to strike a deep chord of recognition or understanding within us, others, while no less worthy, probably need to be experienced in contexts other than the gallery.

In her series of photographs of texts inscribed on flesh, *Untitled (Selections from Lustmord)* 1994, Jenny Holzer takes us into the irrational inner world of the perpetrator of a heinous crime – a world with its own obscure logic, that permits sexual degradation as a by-product, perhaps even a fringe-benefit, of war. Alongside the voice of the perpetrator is that of the confused resignation of the victim, as well as the detached observer. Three different voices speak through the printed words on unidentified skin, their disturbing words producing a visceral impact on the reader/viewer. Hung on either side of the entrance to the main gallery space, this series of works frames the exhibition. One statement from this work resonates particularly as we move from screen to screen, from voice to voice: 'YOUR AWFUL LANGUAGE IS IN THE AIR BY MY HEAD'. The awful language of dislocation, displacement, disaster and despair is echoes in many works in the show.

Ursula Biemann's *The Black Sea files* 2005, a series of short video files, playing in a set of five paired, TV-sized screens, sits alongside Holzer's photographs. In her short video works on the impact of the Caspian Sea, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, Biemann uses documentary modes to convey various perspectives from the 'corporate imaginary', to the direct impact on the lives of innocent bystanders. Placing two screens side by side so that each 'file' is told in multiple simultaneously, Biemann

seeks to subvert the easy pre-digested techniques of television documentary. She resists the omniscient, omnipotent voice-over of a narrator persuasively and authoritatively leading interpretation, and instead intercepts her narrative self-reflexive analysis: What am I doing? she asks, Is this art or is this fieldwork? Am I an anthropologist or perhaps a secret intelligence worker? More penetratingly she asks, what sediment do I probe in my artistic fieldwork? It is in the asking of these questions, as much as in the work she presents to the viewer, that Biemann shifts her pseudo-documentary work into the realm of art. Her self-reflexivity works toward this transmutation, but doesn't entirely convince; in the end we are presented with familiar modes of scrolling text, news footage and interviews and lapse into familiar modes of uncritical reception.

In her work Biemann wants also to avoid aestheticising human suffering. She asserts her intention of resisting the desire to make a symbol,

acknowledging the ease with which the camera translates the pain of another into the ready currency of the media. Biemann's anxious quest to resist the distillation of complexity into a single expression lingers as an implicit critique of Michael Leunig's cartoons in this show, and raises questions about appropriateness and context. Punctuating our channel surfing meanderings, Leunig's small works are exemplars of the media grab, that is, they consist of a single idea and image, albeit one encapsulating and critiquing the easy assumptions and complacent acceptance of the madness of the world. In the context of the newspaper, where we normally encounter Leunig's work, his images have the power to halt our easy assimilation of horror into normality. In the context of this exhibition these small works seem guilty of the very thing that Biemann, so wisely seeks to avoid. They seem glib and trite, a reading exacerbated by the scattering of his work throughout the exhibition, like afterthoughts rather than considered curatorial inclusions.

Leunig's works are amongst a number of jarring moments in this exhibition. George Gittoes's documentary, *Soundtrack to War*, which has already screened on television, seems inappropriate here, as does Kamal Aljafari's *Visit Iraq* 2003 and *Baghdad Blogger: Constitution* 2005. Each of these works is valuable and of interest, but they are better suited to viewing via the medium they appropriate. A catalogue essay on Gittoes claims that the 'brilliance' of the work lies in 'its strategic positioning for maximum access to large and captive audiences, conducting, in a sense, its own infiltration mission.'¹ Each of these longish video pieces (the shortest

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is twenty-five minutes) would best be viewed in a context of 'infiltration', that is, via our television screens at home. Standing for the length of time required to view these works in their entirety, particularly in the context of experiencing the entire exhibition, is, simply, asking too much, of even the most dedicated viewer.

Indeed, given the screen-based focus of *The unquiet world*, seating was curiously in short supply in the exhibition space. Many of the works ran for substantial lengths of time and it seemed willful to not provide more seating. Was it implied that audiences would not be permitted to view such works in comfort? The effect was that slow-moving works, such as Sandra Johnston's *Something you may later rely on* 2006, which deals with the troubles in Ireland were largely ignored by audiences. Passing by they seemed tedious and unengaging, especially with prolonged periods of blank screens.

More successful are the works that substantially shift their position from identifiably mainstream sources to languages we more readily associate with art. Susan Norrie's *Twilight* for instance is a hauntingly moving piece. Projected large on a wall in a dedicated space, this work takes us on a journey through the seemingly abandoned Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra as night falls. Shot in monochrome, with momentary exceptions such as the red-orange flames of a dying fire and the soft pink hue of a young man's hoodie, the camera pans slowly through the campsite lingering on old banners ('Australia + US partners in genocide') and tent flaps blowing in the cold wind. It pauses on a television showing black and white footage of atomic testing at Maralinga, the familiar beauty of the lethal mushroom cloud slowly blossoming before us. Norrie's voyage through this emptied-out space conveys a sense of forlorn aspirations, abandoned hope and the sorry demise of activism. The opening of this exhibition in the same week that the violence of Aboriginal community life in the Northern Territory was filling our newspapers and air-waves, imbued this work with added power and distress.

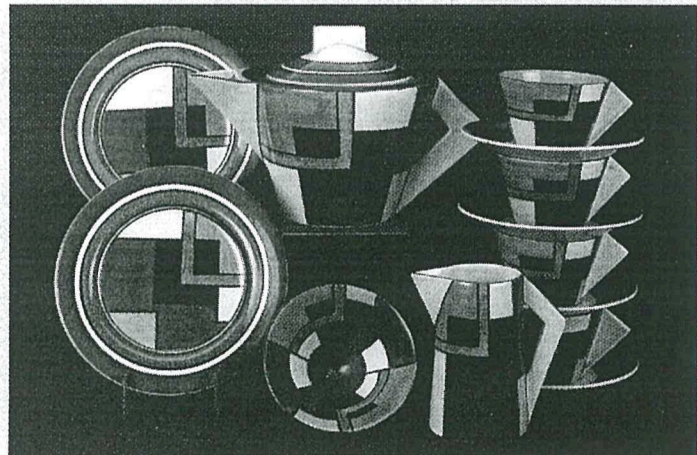
A similarly haunting quality pervades Lida Abdul's work *The white house* 2005. Abdul, an exile from war-torn Afghanistan, says she wanted to 'articulate what are ruins and what are monuments, and what is our relationship to them. How do we understand history after catastrophe and, as artists, how do we move on?'² In her large-projection video the artist, dressed in black, whitewashes a ruin in a ravaged landscape, and, using a broad, crude brush, also paints a man, similarly clad in black, treating him as if he too were part of the ruined architecture of place. Not located in a specific time or

place, the work intrigues and compels. Placed before the large project of *The white house* is a Persian rug, on which sit three monitors, each projecting a different aspect of displacement, homelessness and exile. In one looping video Abdul drags a model home through urban streets. In another she walks city streets with the model on her head. In the third monitor she washes the rug, which is now lying in the gallery, before dragging the rug along her journey, her remaining possession of home, perhaps. Everywhere she goes she takes with her this baggage; on strange streets and foreign cities she is always an exile whose home is an imaginary, unlivable burden she is doomed to always carry. These are powerful, moving images that linger and resonate, as do the delicate embroidered works of Louisa Bufardecì. Initially appearing to be perhaps in Arabic script, they are renderings of 'captured telephone conversations – all one minute long'. We don't know who the two participants in these conversations are – 'Dan St Clair with her' is one label, for instance – nor can we decipher what it is that has been said, we can only experience the aesthetic pleasure of this representation of their sound waves, and speculate as to the significance, or not, of their communication. We are left thinking, but not knowing, what these signs might mean.

Projected on the wall of the large main gallery is *Avalon* 2005 by Mutlu Cerkez, Marco Fusinato and Callum Morton. In this work the three artists stand in what seems to be an old quarry, relentlessly, endlessly, throwing rocks at something or someone unseen. The artist as delinquent, the mindlessness of bored vandalism, and a sense of latent violence is underscored by the title, *Avalon*, with its connotations of a mythical time and place where masculinity was defined by courage and valour.

Each of the artists who participated in *The unquiet world* have approached the issue of world conflict, terrorism and humankind's inhumanity with considered intent. Not all the works however succeed in their objectives. Whilst the overarching curatorial premise was to present artists' 'profound and moving insights to help us navigate our way through some of the most compelling issues we now encounter', more pertinent was the question of art's capacity to do this.³ Perhaps I interpret Marianne Baillieu's work, *The faith* 1981-2006 inappropriately, but this small room with a table and church-like bench filled to overflowing with used paint tubes seemed both a testament to art's desire to have meaning and relevance, and its continued futility. Faith, Jean-Paul Sartre reminded us, is a matter of choice, often made in the absence of evidence to support our decision. Art may not always fulfill its desire for meaning, relevance

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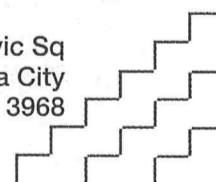


Clarice Cliff Collection Until 5 November

An exhibition surveying the work of celebrated ceramicist Clarice Cliff displaying pieces from the private collection of Greg Slater; author of 'Comprehensively Clarice Cliff'.

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and power, but that does not mean it cannot continue to aspire to these objectives. Baillieu's emptied paint tubes attest to the faith of the artist in their trade. And artists can, at least, like Cerkez, Fusinato and Morton, continue to throw stones at the graven images constructed by a self-serving media. Art can register its concern for the state of humankind. But the assertion that it can help us 'navigate our way through some of the most compelling issues we now encounter' based on the exhibition of *The unquiet world*, is unproven. The world is unquiet, but we knew that before we entered the sanctified safe space of ACCA. We leave disquieted and moved by many of the images in the exhibition, and re-enter the unchanged world.

The unquiet world opened at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, on 27 May and is on display until 23 July.

Julie Roberts lectures in the history and theory of art and design at Monash University, Melbourne.

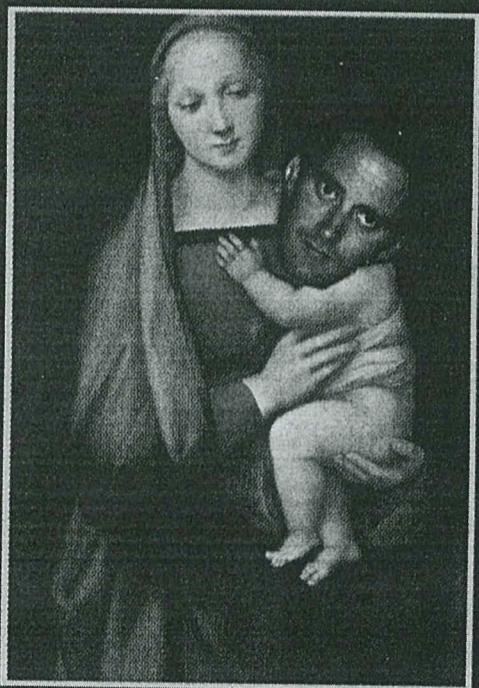
Notes

1 Author unidentified, 'George Gittoes: *Soundtrack to War*' essay for forthcoming catalogue to accompany exhibition.

2 Megan Blackhouse, 'This terrible beauty', *The Age*, 31 May, 2006, p. 23.

3 Statement in the exhibition program flyer from www.accaonline.com.

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