

21st CENTURY

ART IN THE FIRST DECADE



I SAW THE HORSE PISS

Juliana Engberg

During the months of August and September of 2010, the Australian artist Bianca Hester transformed the large gallery of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) into an arena of eventful things. Her massive installation *Please leave these windows open overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning* involved numerous structures such as brick walls, a massive boulder and a huge pile of dirt; and actions and sound created by people, cars being pushed into the space, kids playing soccer, whistles being blown, skateboarders riding, and a live horse periodically entering the gallery.

Hester's ephemeral structures and performative 'disruptions' make reference to moments in art history such as Duchamp's radical gesture of 1942, in which he created a massive web of string within the 'First Papers of Surrealism' exhibition at New York's Whitelaw Reid Mansion. Duchamp's intervention was also performative, in that a number of children arrived during the exhibition opening to play football inside, obscuring and confusing the 'viewing'. Hester also references paradigm-shifting exhibitions such as Harald Szeemann's famous 'When

Attitudes Become Form' (1969), which indicated a radical shift in art making from the certain, authoritative object to the quixotic, transitory gesture and flimsy structure.

Hester's desire to engage with the aesthetics of the ephemeral, transitory and disruptive can be accommodated by a space such as ACCA, which is purpose-oriented to encounter and manage the unexpected. At ACCA we are prepared to punch holes in our walls, let a horse piss, have a bobcat heap dirt in our galleries, and permit skateboarders to turn the space into an obstacle course. We understand that Hester is playing with the language of public, private and institutional space. We are up for it. We will manage the extraordinary pressures that come with such an effort. But if we were an Art Museum, I think the story, quite reasonably, might be different.

Ever since art 'dematerialised' in the mid-1960s, it has thrown up challenges to the collecting institution. As the designator suggests, art that previously tended towards the graspable, purchasable objects of painting, sculpture, drawing — and even fine art photography — changed

radically towards the ephemeral midway through the last century. This shift was political as well as aesthetic. Artists were disentangling themselves from the art market and distancing themselves from commodification, official sentiments of authority and, consequentially, any stakehold of permanence. Their tactic was to make art temporal and momentary.

Even though this radicalism registered a wilful resistance to the idea of the art collecting institution, inevitably new temporary 'institutes' were required to make space for certain activities. In the early 1970s, a proliferation of small 'white cube' rooms became spaces for an art practice that was, in the spirit of the times, temporary. Neither commercially oriented nor burdened by collecting, and unconcerned with the linear story-making that art museums made on behalf of a learning audience, these new art spaces were containers for a constantly transforming practice — cognoscenti-driven and cognoscenti-oriented.

Art as idea, conceptual art and an 'expanded field' of practice gave momentum to a range of events, activities, actions, performances,



BIANCA HESTER Installation view of *Please leave these windows open overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning* at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2010 / Photograph: Andrew Curtis

and exhibitions as installations, which privileged non-traditional art making and materials, including the body. Artists lived in galleries, invited audiences to witness ritual actions, brought in common items from the street and then carted them out again, piled dirt in mounds and extended it with mirrors; some even locked the gallery, excluding the opportunity of an encounter with art all together. Each and every variation could be removed and erased, the space restored for a subsequent inhabitation, action, installation and momentary monument.

Parallel art universes emerged at this time: the Art Museum or Art Gallery that collected, catalogued, disseminated and kept the canon tidy, on the one hand; and the 'alternative space', in which everything was up for grabs, yet unobtainable, on the other. A line was drawn between modern and contemporary art.

While art during this early phase of dematerialisation strove to be renegade, and artists' intentions transitory, 'tangibles' were still made. In fact, much

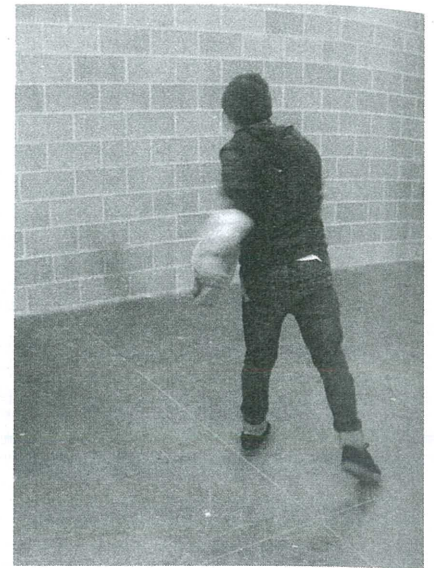
art became 'document': lists, taxonomies and serialisations in photography and text formed a new conceptual aesthetic, reinforced by the display apparatus of index and filing boxes, manifesto hangs and text-based works on posters, cards, pages and paintings. Pictorialism and abstraction momentarily disappeared, replaced by concrete information, formulae, philosophical propositions, sociopolitical statements and actions.

Art reacts to its time and to itself in a sequence of pendulum swings — after dematerialisation, there was a return to the object and the collectable. The postmodern period, while in some instances was aligned with European theory-driven anti-authorial gestures, also ushered in an alternative banality. The Charles Jencks-influenced tendency of mimetic postmodernism saw much art manifest itself as a formal engagement with history through quotational pictorialism. This trajectory of practice ushered in big canvases, colossal, glossy sculptures and new commercial prospects.

Since the early 1980s, galleries have been designed with tall walls and expansive atriums to accommodate the new postmodern monumentalism and retail outlets.

Collecting is a fraught, crystal ball-gazing business at times. Already many of these works have been consigned to the storage facility, awaiting their next moment of popularity, or perhaps a TV mini-series, which might give them star appeal — as has happened recently for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with the hilarious *Desperate Romantics* drama.¹ Taste is a hard mistress in the collecting business.

Understandably, this often rhetorical period of postmodernism bred a quick artistic revolt and discontent. While some stayed with the portable object, many artists reactivated the tactics of earlier times. In particular, site-specific and site-related works began to emerge, classified as installation; off-site projects rejected the gallery system anew and used the urban and natural landscape as locations for interventions and



BIANCA HESTER Installation views of *Please leave these windows open overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning* at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2010 / Photographs: Andrew Curtis

temporary encounters. Even the designated 'alternative' art spaces were at times seen to be too institutional for these rephrased alternative gestures.

Other items were added to the fray. Video art emerged as a force and, because of its particular technical and environmental needs, the necessity and usefulness of architectural spaces was reconfirmed. Responsive spaces, such as the smaller public institutes and centres, led the way. Major museums eventually followed. For instance, it is interesting to note that the Tate Modern's first survey of video work did not actually occur until 2003, many years after smaller spaces had already registered a drift from moving image to more material encounters again.

The issue for Art Galleries and Museums, which are established to gather art works for posterity and to enable the visiting and learning public to understand art and its transit, is how to engage with these reactive and counter-reactive art tactics. Because it is true that a stroll through most collecting institutions these days will seem curiously *without* some of the important art events, installations and ephemera that make up recent times. Frequently, when taking such a stroll, I think '... but hang on — this was not the 1980s, 1990s and early 21st century; these are not the things that defined those moments'. Of course, some art maintains its fugitive, outsider attitude.

It will wilfully resist perpetuity. Some things are just too left-of-centre for collections governed by conservators, registrars and economic constraints.

When temporality is not the highest priority, works that are difficult to accommodate, store, preserve and conserve will turn up in the holdings of the ever-increasing private collection and private museum. Gathered by wealthy individuals with a certain devil-may-care attitude to 'eternity' issues who have created spaces where they can literally reconstitute the work, whole shows or major installations in their impressive foundations and galleries, the contemporary and transitory have found a home.

It is of course true that some of these holdings may be temporary themselves. Without the same processes, constraints and policies, such as deaccessioning, that tend to govern major public collections, private collectors can strategically breed pedigrees for their purchases and then sell to capitalise on their investment. Around the world such emporium collecting is increasing, adding economic pressure and competition in the marketplace where public institutions also shop.

Magnificent as they often are, however, only rarely are these private enterprises able to contextualise a work historically. A drift around spaces like the François Pinault Foundation's Palazzo Grassi and Punta della

Dogana in Venice would offer the impression that most recent art is made at a grand scale; is concerned mostly with sex, shock and schlock; and wants to occupy space in a bombastic fashion. This runs counter to so much we know about current practice. Nearby, the more modestly scaled Peggy Guggenheim Collection, neatly housed in her villa palazzo, continues to compel with its storytelling capacity and sense of a history of practice. It makes a fine case for the counter proposition, which is that private collectors sometimes see the emerging avant-garde before the 'official' Museums.

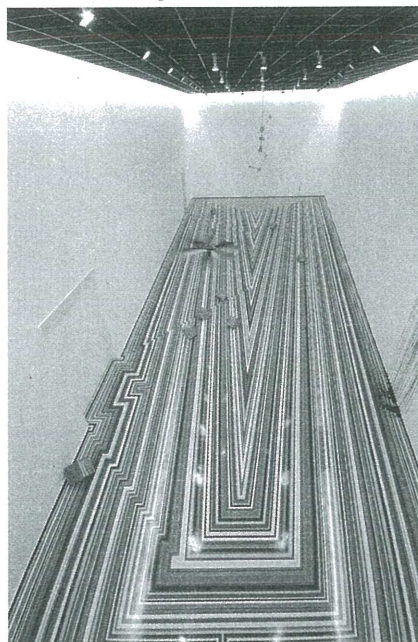
Contemporary art spaces such as The Kunsthalle, smaller public spaces, university galleries and artist-run initiatives, provide a parallel engagement with contemporary works. Spaces in Australia such as Melbourne's ACCA, the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, Artspace in Sydney and various others, actively commission new works as temporary opportunities within their programming. Without the concerns of being a collecting institution and therefore determined by perpetuity constraints and 'getting it right' storytelling, these spaces manifest a program that is responsive and reactive to the situation now. Together with artists, we are creating the history of practice as it unfolds. When we make a curatorial gesture of gathering in surveys and themes, our reconstitutions of history are informed by currency and relevance to the art of now.

In collaboration with artists we might dismantle our space, let a naked person wander about an installation, accept that turning all our lights off is part of the artistic gesture; we are there for the momentary and episodic event. At other times we might mimic the unfolding sequence of space that resembles the 'Art Museum'; but that is a construct of a context. The fact that the same space a month or two later might be the site of disturbance is a part of our intentional manipulation of space and time. This is programming, not just in content but in intent. And it is an evolving process.

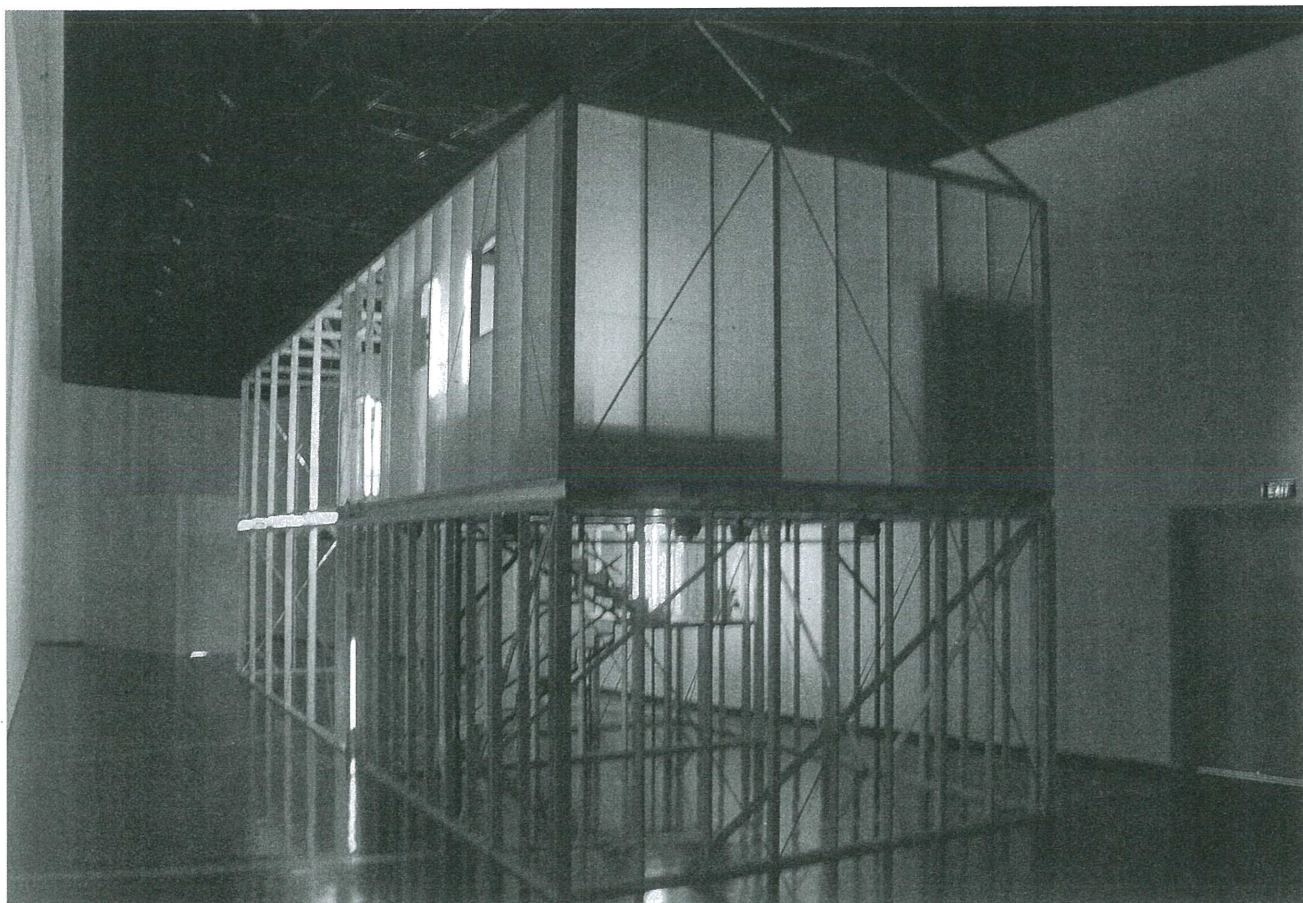
Alongside Bianca Hester's massive work, for instance, ACCA programmed an international survey titled 'Gestures and Procedures'. In this exhibition, the performative moment was made manifest as a suite of video documents. The pairing of these two exhibitions gave weight to the evolution of studio and performative practice. Increasingly larger museums are reconstituting our

understanding of recent art history and the expanded field of practice by realising that photo and video documentation play legitimate roles as artefact.

The emergence of video in particular started to address the concerns expressed by Walter Benjamin when he wrote, 'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'.² Video, while not a perfect facsimile, has come close to delivering a real-time, real-place record. During the 1960s and 1970s, artists realised this potential and accordingly made works responsive to new technology. Bruce Nauman recorded himself bouncing in the corner of his studio and stamping on the floor, expecting that this record would 'become' the work; photographs were taken of Chris Burden being shot, in order to verify the authenticity of this action; Yoko Ono was filmed having her clothes cut away, to enter



JIM LAMBIE Installation view of 'Eight Miles High' at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2008 / Image courtesy: The artist / Photograph: John Brash



DOMENICO DE CLARIO Installation view of 'A Second Simplicity' at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2005 / Image courtesy: The artist

the archive of protest; Marina Abramović and Ulay's performances were filmed and photographed to perpetuate their stand-off; Joan Jonas acted out for the camera and saw the outcome as the performance. Since the 1980s, the video has become an art medium in its own right.

The use of photography as a recording mechanism and the emergence of portable and affordable moving-image capture via video, used to record actions, performances

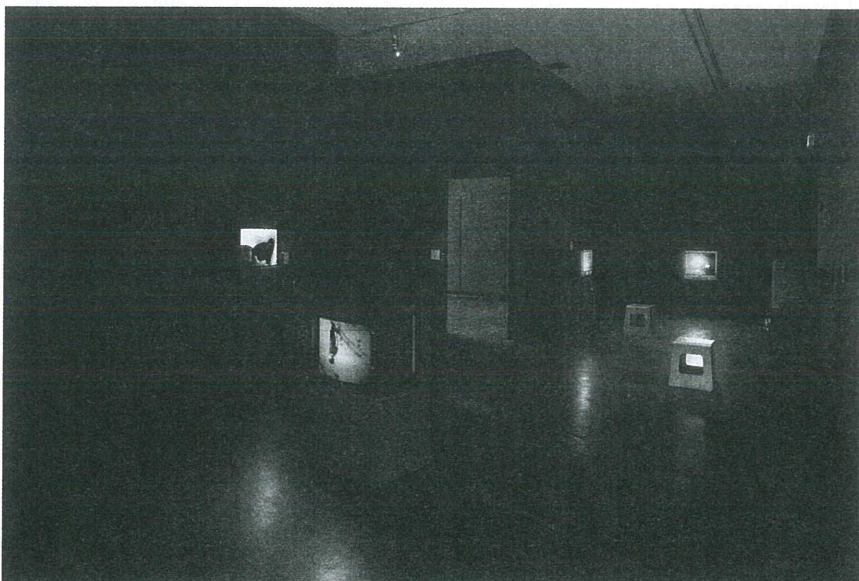
and events, has created a parallel object. It makes permanent the impermanent. And now that playback systems are less cumbersome and more affordable, and the storage systems for these 'documents' more reliable and duplicable, the Art Museum is able to extend its canon.

Technology will inevitably always provide new opportunities. Recent developments in affordable and convincing 3D imaging offer exciting new possibilities for an historical

account of those things that, while wishing to be temporal, might also be willing to exist as historical evidence. While a project such as Hester's *Please leave these windows open overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning* is made with the intention of engaging the audience as witness and structural temporality, it is now possible, should it be desired by the artist, to archive this project and its constituent parts as a 3D record. I imagine some artists will resist such an alternative to strict ephemerality but, for those who wish to participate, it offers an amazing future for activating a parallel space.

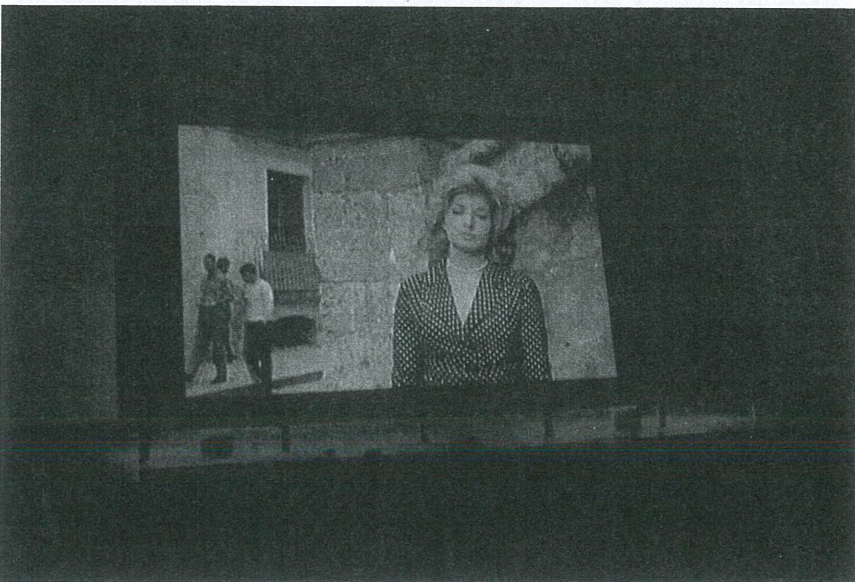
Installation view of 'Gestures & Procedures' at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2010 / Photograph: Andrew Curtis

MONICA BONVICINI *Destroy she said* 1998 / Two-channel video installation: two projection walls, colour, sound, 60 minutes / Installed for 'Cinema Paradiso' at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2009 / Image courtesy: The artist and Castello di Rivoli - Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Torino



I would not be surprised if we see the emergence of large-scale 3D suites in most major art museums as a place for re-encountering the long since dismantled, disbanded and fleeting. Indeed, I predict we may even see the emergence of art made specifically to engage with this new technological potential, just as we have seen with film, photography and with first phase video. In his essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', Walter Benjamin cited Paul Valery:

For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.³



As it was then, so it is now. The historical memory site can and will be activated. The technology exists to enable the transient to be distilled and stored. Artists will eventually decide if this is something they want, or not. Meanwhile, in non-museum spaces, we hope for active and engaged participation at the original moment of happening — it is great and important to be able to say 'I saw the horse piss'.



JANET CARDIFF AND GEORGE BURES MILLER *Opera for a small room* 2005 / Installed for 'The Dwelling' at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2009 / Image courtesy: The artists, Gallery Luhring Augustine, New York, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

Endnotes

- 1 See Germaine Greer, 'Desperate Romantics? The only desperate thing about the pre-Raphaelites was their truly bad art', *Guardian*, 17 August 2009, p.G2:22, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/aug/16/pre-raphaelite-brotherhood-germaine-greer>>, viewed 18 October 2010.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, translated by Harry Zohn, Fontana, London, 1992, p.214.
- 3 Paul Valéry, from *Pièces sur L'Art* [1931], quoted in Benjamin, p.211.