Christian Capurro: SLAVE

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

16 August – 28 September 2014
Artist Biography

Christian Capurro was born in Dampier, Western Australia, and lives in Melbourne.

In 2012 he was International Artist-in-Residence at Maumaus — Escola de Artes Visuais, Lisbon, courtesy of an Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship; and through late 2012 into early 2013, when ‘SLAVE’ was filmed, an artist-in-residence at the Sammlung Lenikus, Vienna.

Recent solo exhibitions include: *Amateur props* (2014) and *Mouthpiece* (2011), both Milani Gallery, Brisbane; ‘IS’, Sammlung Lenikus, Vienna, and *Bootleg*, Breenspace, Sydney (both 2013); and *a vacant bazaar (provisional legend)*, Artspace, Sydney (2010).


His work is held privately, both locally and overseas, and in the public collections of the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales/Kaldor Family Collection, National Gallery of Victoria, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Monash University Museum of Art, University of Western Sydney and the Queensland University of Technology.

Christian Capurro is represented by Milani Gallery, Brisbane. [www.christiancapurro.com](http://www.christiancapurro.com)
Artist Practice

Melbourne based, Capurro works across a range of media including drawing, photography, print, video and installation. His work is process-based and conceptually oriented. He is known for his “erasure projects”, where the pages of glossy magazines were erased over a long periods of time using rubbers or correction-fluid. In Another Misspent Portrait of Eti- enne de Silhouette (1999-2009), for example, a copy of Vogue Hommes(#92 September 1986) was systematically erased by over 250 people, each noting how long it took and what it that labour might have cost calculated on their usual hourly rate of pay.

“Capurro’s practice is grounded in the re-mastering, residue and decodification of the image.” Simon Rees, Sculpting in Light, ACCA Catalogue, 2014
SLAVE: The Exhibition and Artwork

Phone-videos of monumental works by American minimalist Dan Flavin, refashioned into large-scale filmic ‘captures’ by Australian artist Christian Capurro, feature in SLAVE, part of ACCA’s Important Australian Artists program.

Capurro’s phone-videos were made during a residency at the Sammlung Lenikus, Vienna. An ongoing series, they are part homage, part theft, yet also compelling portraits of Flavin’s iconic fluorescent “Monuments” for V. Tatlin. Capurro re-monumentalizes these works at an architectural scale in ACCA’s own iconic architecture.

SLAVE represents a strain of the new film and image making that plays with some of the conventions that operate in the domains of reproduction, especially how they apply to, and are used in presenting the work of art.

In his filmed encounters with Flavin’s light sculptures the viewer sees the technology, the body and the unity and stability of the representation in reproduction put under pressure, and their limits tested. The hand-held camera shakes, the artist’s finger covers the lens, disrupting the footage and the iPhone camera sensor struggles into correct exposure.

The scale of the works is core to SLAVE. The installation of the 8 large (4m high x 2.25m wide) screens, placed around the dark gallery on different angles creates a mysterious, deep and dark environment, where the viewer moves around and interacts with the screens and footage. Moving through, past and around the works, the viewer sometimes appears a part of the work, captured in silhouette on the screens. Standing in front of the projections, the viewer appears smaller in scale, compelled by the size, luminosity, light and flickering being projected.

In relation to the scale of the work, Capurro has said: “The projections themselves are scaled in relation to Flavin’s “monuments”, the plasticity of the moving image, and the space they’ll inhabit, whilst also taking into account how this registers on someone, a body, standing amongst them. They present the “monuments” at a size not much larger than they are in actuality.” The original scale of Flavin’s “Monuments” for V. Tatlin are approximately 244 x 59 x 11cm large.

The title “SLAVE” is intriguing and lends itself to a variety of interpretations. One could start by interpreting it with reference to the prolific, mass consumed technology (the iPhone) used to create the work to comment that we are ‘slaves’ to technology. SLAVE is also reminiscent of the light sensitive photographic device called a ‘slave’ which is attached to the camera’s flash and can ‘sense’ when a photographic flash has been fired, and causes it to fire off simultaneously. In a similar vein, the explosions of light seen in Capurro’s SLAVE projections appear to be ‘set off’ by one another and are connected by a central network.

SLAVE could also suggest that Capurro’s film captures are beholden to their master: they rely on the Flavin’s to exist. The architectural installation of SLAVE physically suggests entrapment and the light in the Flavin fluorescent tubes, flicker and explode, trying to escape the frame, but always appear back in focus, trapped. SLAVES to the projection.
SLAVE began during Capurro’s residency at the Sammlung Leni-kus, Vienna and with the acquisition of a new tool– the iPhone. As a professional photographer and artist, he was curious about how people were using this tool and how they orientated themselves around the use of their camera phones: how and where they stood, how and where they looked etc. He started exploring his own iPhone and began to understand it as an image-making tool.

Capurro was particularly curious about the way the iPhone camera captures still and moving images. The lens and capture technology within camera phones that manages the scanning rate and how it captures light is not as advanced as digital cameras. This is why some iPhone photos appear blurred, under/over exposed or un-sharp, colour altered. Like the aperture in a camera’s lens the scanner in the iPhone attempts to adjust to the exposure (amount of light being captured), however it is not as responsive as our naked eye or digital cameras. Capurro was particularly intrigued by this when capturing the footage of Flavin’s light sculptures and he noticed that the camera, after being slightly shifted or the lens disrupted, struggled to swiftly find it’s correct exposure and resulted in an explosion of light on the screen, before it adjusted itself to find the image again.

Capurro was also fascinated in exploring his own physical limitations when filming the Flavin’s using his iPhone. He did not use a tripod or additional lens. He simply used his iPhone 4s and his body to hold the camera and focus on the frame. Although he began filming, standing quite steadily, holding the camera, over time his hand and body got tired, and his position shifted, causing camera shake and at times his finger to come into the frame and disrupt the lens. In these cases the space is interrupted by the body behind the camera.
Materials and Techniques

SLAVE, 2012-2014, 8 channel video installation

Capurro used his iPhone 4s to film Dan Flavin’s “Monuments” for V. Tatlin whilst they were on display in an exhibition at the Sammlung Lenikus, Vienna in 201-2013. To film Flavin’s work he visited the gallery on numerous occasions (around 15 different times) to record the 8 monuments. This resulted in 8 films created and in the ACCA exhibition these camera-phone films are presented as an 8 channel installation on 8 separate screens.

Capurro did not use a tripod or specific lens to film the Flavin’s. He only used his body and iPhone to create the footage. When filming each ‘monument’ Capurro measured out the distance between the Flavin and himself quite arbitrarily, taking 7 steps back from the work, to make sure that the image being filmed was at a constant (but not perfectly exact) scale.

There was minimal post-production involved in making these works. Capurro downloaded the footage from his iPhone onto his computer and edited the various recordings together; each of the 8 sculptures were made into their own composite of filmed footage. This resulted in eight films, each containing a range of different filmed sequences, of the eight sculptures. Each of the eight video works were saved and programmed on a loop as an .mp4 file onto a flashcard. Each flashcard was inserted into one of the eight Sony VPL-FHZ55, 3LCD Laser Light Source Projectors and connected to the Media Player within the Projector. They are programmed to play and project the camera-phone videos through these Players.

SLAVE is installed at ACCA as an eight channel video installation, projected onto 8 large screens (4m high and 2.25m wide) installed around the gallery space – each with a slightly different orientation or angle. Each screen has been built with a timber stud frame and plasterboard cover and they are bolted to the gallery floor. The projectors have their own steel frames and are attached to steel supports that hang down from the gallery ceiling, off the gallery ceiling crossbars. The projectors sit in these frames on their side and face the screen. These Projectors are quite unique, as they project the image through a blue laser, rather than a globe that traditional projectors use. Because there is no globe the projectors can hang from their side and they do not emit heat.

The gallery walls are black and the floor has been painted over to create a dark, semi reflective surface. There is no additional light in the gallery space (besides a safety exit light), only the light projected from the Flavin’s in Capurro’s video works. The entrance to the gallery has a light-lock entrance, to ensure ambient light from the outside does not enter and interfere with the dark, mysterious atmosphere.

To assist him realising and conceptualising the installation Capurro constructed a wooden model of the ACCA Gallery One and he made to-scale screens to experiment with the placement and orientation of each film. This informed the floorplan and installation of the artwork.
Part theft, part appropriation, part homage

“Since 1998 technology has ever evolved. Video cameras, as such, seem nearly redundant. Almost everyone carries a small portable device capable of taking photos, making films, navigating places: creating, connecting and sending images and words out into the fibre-optic world. The idea of protecting copyright, of preventing unauthorised photography and filming has been more or less defeated by the ubiquity of recording devices and the sheer multitude of unmonitorable occasions in which copyright is challenged. Most recently, the advent of the ‘selfie’ has become an active witnessing and declaration — I was here, next to this thing — #whateveritwas#awesome — adding to the misdemeanours performed with other people’s art.”


SLAVE prompts discussion and thought around contemporary appropriation strategies, and undoubtedly raises questions amongst students around copyright. What is most intriguing about Christian Capurro’s SLAVE is that it is part homage, part theft and part compelling ‘retakes’ and portraits of iconic artwork.

SLAVE represents a strain of the new film and image making that plays with some of the conventions that operate in the domains of reproduction, especially how they apply to, and are used in presenting the work of art. As Juliana Engberg writes, given today’s technology it seems easy and inevitable, albeit audacious, that artists can ‘bootleg’ (illegally take) another artists’ art. But as she explains:

“The fact is, very few artists actually take the work of others and make it their own. When they do it is still generally within the theoretically defined post-modern concepts – ideas brought firmly into focus by Sherrie Levine’s appropriation of the photographs of Walker Evans — of questioning authorship, hierarchy, authority, gender; retranslating, post colonial, ironic etc. I’m not sure these post-modern propositions are at stake with Christian Capurro’s phone-films of Dan Flavin’s iconic fluorescent tube works. The original is not denied, authorship is not questioned. Indeed the title SLAVE suggests that Capurro’s film captures are beholden to a master. But it is true also that Flavin’s works, so iconic and recognizable, are now in service and slave to Capurro’s new filmic apparitions.

Instead of appropriating for post-modern stakes, it is as if Capurro is inventing, testing, experimenting; researching the phenomenology of translating the material into the immaterial. In many ways, in this process, Flavin is an innocent bystander, and his works a kind of ready-made. And yet his status as originator cannot be denied. To quote Flavin himself: it is what it is.”

A transformation occurs in Capurro’s act of filming and projecting the Flavin’s in SLAVE. Their state changes: from still image to moving image. Their scale changes: projected larger. Their appearance changes, seeing things not perceptible to the eye when encountering an original Flavin: the hypersensitivity of the iPhone camera captures and creates colour in and around Flavin’s white fluorescent tubes; and the pulsing, jittering and exploding of light in the tubes is magnified and clearly visible to the viewer.

Christian Capurro’s response to the question: What is your response when people ask, “is this theft?” Would you consider this work as an appropriation of Dan Flavin’s work? Why? You have said it doesn’t matter they are Dan Flavin works, but doesn’t that change the content of your work?

Thinking of Slave as an abduction of Flavin’s “monuments”, to be used for my own purposes is, perhaps, more apt. It’s a fair description of the, let’s be honest, forcible taking and holding of, at least, their semblances, which is their currency. Though Flavin’s works matter less in and of them-
Dan Flavin (1933 – 1996) & ‘Monuments’ For V. Tatlin

Dan Flavin was an American installation artist and painter. His father intended him to become a priest and from 1947 to 1952 he attended a seminary in Brooklyn, New York. In 1954 he studied at the University of Maryland Extension Program in Osan-Ni in Korea and in 1956 at the New College for Social Research in New York. He continued these art history studies in 1957–59 at Columbia University, New York, but was self-taught as an artist.

His early work of the late 1950s and early 1960s was influenced by contemporary American art and included paintings with added objects. Beginning in 1963, Flavin adopted commercially available fluorescent light as the primary medium for his art. Notably, he preferred standardized, utilitarian fluorescent light to custom-designed, showy neon. He confined himself to a limited palette (red, blue, green, pink, yellow, ultraviolet, and four different whites) and form (straight two-, four-, six-, and eight-foot tubes, and, beginning in 1972, circles). Within this restricted visual vocabulary he began a decades-long investigation into the behaviour of light.

Fluorescent light is produced by filling a glass tube with a mixture of mercury vapour and argon gases. When electrified, the gases emit an ultraviolet radiation that causes the phosphorescent compounds that coat the inside of the sealed glass tube to glow. Different phosphors radiate at different wavelengths, thereby producing the multiple colours. Because coloured light behaves differently than pigment, Flavin’s works often defy the expectations of viewers, who are frequently surprised and amused by the discovery of the properties of light. For example, mixing colours across the spectrum in pigment renders paint black; blending the colours of the light spectrum results, instead, in white light (seen in Untitled (to Henri Matisse).

Fluorescent light is produced by filling a glass tube with a mixture of mercury vapour and argon gases. When electrified, the gases emit an ultraviolet radiation that causes the phosphorescent compounds that coat the inside of the sealed glass tube to glow. Different phosphors radiate at different wavelengths, thereby producing the multiple colours. Because coloured light behaves differently than pigment, Flavin’s works often defy the expectations of viewers, who are frequently surprised and amused by the discovery of the properties of light. For example, mixing colours across the spectrum in pigment renders paint black; blending the colours of the light spectrum results, instead, in white light (seen in Untitled (to Henri Matisse).
Between 1964 and 1990 Flavin directly approached the genre of the monument in his series “monuments” for V. Tatlin. These were made in homage to Russian Constructivist artist Vladimir Tatlin and his unrealised tower *Monument to the Third International* (1919) – a project for a colossal (bigger than the Eiffel Tower) tilted revolving iron tower intended to support Lenin’s “Plan for Monumental Propaganda”. Although it was never built, Tatlin’s monument became a symbol for the ambitious, yet unrealised, utopian dreams of the Russian Constructivists.

In Flavin’s “monuments” series he captures the architectural and utopian, constructivist style within the arrangement of the fluorescent tubes. Some appear like the Russian Sputnik spacecraft, others like the Empire State building spires. The cool white light memorialises Vladimir Tatlin and his dreams of art and science. On the series, Flavin confessed: “I always use ‘monuments’ in quotes to emphasise the ironic humour of temporary monuments. These ‘monuments’ only survive as long as the light system is useful.” In this Flavin stressed the impermanence of the fluorescent lights – the bulbs will eventually burn out and need replacing. Interestingly, in Capurro’s SLAVE the lights do not need replacing, they are on permanent digital record and ‘monumental’ again.

For more information and research into Tatlin, Russian Constructivists and Flavin see:


TATE: Flavin: [http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/flavin-monument-for-v-tatlin-t01323](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/flavin-monument-for-v-tatlin-t01323)


Interview With Christian Capurro

How did you go about starting the SLAVE works?
It was a fishing trip — done because it could be done. With a new tool, the iPhone, an encounter with the Flavin “monuments” that I came across in Vienna, I had a curiosity to see what they had to say to each other.

What would you consider to be your rules of engagement?
Putting to one side the casually inappropriate militaristic overtones of that term, if you mean did I follow a plan making this work, the answer to that is, not as such. Things did pan out in quite a particular way though. While in Lisbon and Vienna, I seem to recall many of the film shoots being precipitated by raging arguments with my wife, leading to me storming out of the apartment. That is certainly a truth of the engagement here. Otherwise, I only even used the phone-camera, hand-held.

What is your response when people ask, “is this theft?” Would you consider this work as an appropriation of Dan Flavin’s work? Why? You have said it doesn’t matter they are Dan Flavin works, but doesn’t that change the content of your work? Thinking of Slave as an abduction of Flavin’s “monuments”, to be used for my own purposes is, perhaps, more apt. It’s a fair description of the, let’s be honest, forcible taking and holding of, at least, their semblances, which is their currency. Though Flavin’s works matter less in and of themselves than they do within a relay of ideas, affects, image-forms and relations, they remain very particular things, even in their re-figuring and their mimetic displacement. “The nature of an organism”, as Guy Davenport observed, “determines what kind of turbulence it can tolerate.”

How do these works link to your previous work, such as the erasure projects?
Normally, I’d say that they share a fascination with the fate of people and things, pictured and living in reproduction, with the spaces that open up between the template and its offspring. Or, something about processes of alteration, re-use, inscribing and, perhaps, dispelling. I might even acknowledge that my understanding of the temporal aspects of those earlier productions has been recast by the new filmic work. However, what strikes me right now is that, both now and then, there’s an inordinate amount of touching going on.

What are the spatial considerations for exhibiting the work? What was your reasoning behind the scale of the projections? For example, did you want the projections to be monumental in scale as a reference to “Tatlin’s Monument?”
As sensible and locatable things, I find the “monuments” rather elusive — their scale for example. Each time I returned to film them at the MUMOK I was surprised by their size, how big they actually were. When, however, recalled to mind, they always reappeared somewhat smaller. They suffer a similar fate when seen in reproduction. I suspect it has something to do with a slipping, on my part, from an apprehension of the actual lengths of the fluorescent tubing that structure these works — standard variable lengths, some quite long — when I’m in front of them, to, when I’ve left them, the more familiar, ingrained knowledge of fluorescent tubes of much shorter length in my everyday surroundings.

Temporally, as much as spatially, I am imagining that Slave will exist somewhere between the different dimensions of the things represented (Flavin’s “monuments” to V. Tatlin), the site of the filming (MUMOK, Vienna), the tools used to render them (an iPhone plus other electronic gear), and the place in which it will be seen and where it will “recreate” itself (ACCA, Melbourne). Each of these has its own particular capacities and resistances (tyrannies?) that, hopefully, will be answered in the work.

The projections themselves are scaled in relation to Flavin’s “monuments”, the plasticity of the moving image, and the space they’ll inhabit, whilst also taking into account how this registers on someone, a body, standing amongst them. They present the “monuments” at a size not much larger than they are in actuality. There is no plan to monumentalize them.

As an aside, for this exhibition I had a wooden model of the gallery made to assist in visualizing the installation plan. One day a visitor came to my studio and said something that set me aback. Not knowing of the upcoming show, the visitor, hesitantly pointing at the model, asked, what was I doing with that “child’s coffin”? 
Is there a lurking minimalism in your practice?
Do you really mean “lurking, verging on looming”, in the Tony Soprano sense? It is fair to say that a stripped-down, pared-back quality features across what I’ve made in the last decade and a half. However, that’s (only) a surface effect: one that gestures towards either what has been displaced, overwritten, subsumed; or, what might be a clearing, harbouring doubts as to just what is it that adheres there. There are certainly no essentialisms neither lurking nor looming.

What sorts of things have inspired your work or other artists you have admired?
These days, it’s the surprise of seeing artists and other practitioners persist in rare or differently-sensical endeavours. Those who produce work that has its own opacities, without much regard for the rather leaden instrumentalizing values our society would like to heap on it, when it’s not ignoring it altogether.

What kind of films do you enjoy watching?
Wouldn’t it be nice to turn that around and think, instead, as Jean Louis Schefer did, of “the films that have watched our childhood?” Or, better still, with Schefer in mind — and why not — look back, and towards films (as yet) unmade. Specifically, the one Philippe Grandrieux was to have directed in 1979 on Correggio’s painting The Mystical Union (c. 1526) that Schefer wrote the commentary for, which became the essay Light and its Prey. A short excerpt from its prologue appears in this catalogue as an invitation to further reading, further thinking, further making.
VCE Curriculum Linked Discussion Questions

**VCE STUDIO ARTS**

**Unit 2, Area of Study 2**

Analyse the ways in which art elements and principles have been used to create aesthetic qualities, communicate ideas and develop style in SLAVE.

Research Minimalism and Dan Flavin’s “monuments” for V. Tatlin series. Informed by this research, write an exhibition review, with personal interpretation of SLAVE.

Describe how Capurro has used materials and techniques to create aesthetic qualities and ideas and meaning in SLAVE.

After viewing the exhibition, write your own interpretation around the exhibition title “SLAVE”. Share interpretations as a class and discuss.

**Unit 3, Area of Study 3**

Would you describe this work as an appropriation, a theft, a homage or all combined? Debate as a class.

What are the legal obligations and ethical considerations that arise in SLAVE?

Analyse how Capurro has used his iPhone to develop his own style and communicated meaning.

**Unit 4, Area of Study 3**

Visit Optical Mix and then explore SLAVE by Christian Capurro. Identify and describe similar themes and ideas within the exhibitions, using select artwork examples to support your discussion.

Write a review of your experience viewing SLAVE including detail about the exhibition design, cura-tion (placement of artworks) and personal feelings/experiences felt viewing the works.

Every year ACCA presents an exhibition of work by a leading Australian contemporary artist. This is part of ACCA’s Important Australian Artists Program. Research ACCA’s mission, role in Melbourne’s art scene and gallery model. Use this research and exhibition visit to present as a case study for your studies.

**VCE ART**

**Unit 2, Area of Study 1**

Analyse SLAVE and the ways in which it reflects and communicates the values, beliefs and traditions of the societies for and in which it is created.

Using the Analytical Framework, compare and contrast Capurro’s SLAVE to Dan Flavin’s “Monu-ments” for V. Tatlin. In your analysis describe the differences that have emerged through the process of recording and projecting via iPhone technology.

Analyse the use of art elements and principles in the exhibition SLAVE.

After viewing the exhibition, write your own interpretation around the exhibition title “SLAVE”. Share interpretations as a class and discuss.
Unit 4

Is SLAVE an art theft, appropriation, homage or all combined? Research appropriation art and copyright law to inform your interpretation.

“Since 1998 technology has ever evolved. Video cameras, as such, seem nearly redundant. Almost everyone carries a small portable device capable of taking photos, making films, navigating places: creating, connecting and sending images and words out into the fibre-optic world. The idea of protecting copyright, of preventing unauthorised photography and filming has been more or less defeated by the ubiquity of recording devices and the sheer multitude of unmonitorable occasions in which copyright is challenged. Most recently, the advent of the ‘selfie’ has become an active witnessing and declaration — I was here, next to this thing — #whateveritwas#awesome — adding to the misdemeanours performed with other people’s art.”

Informed by this statement from Juliana Engberg and an exhibition viewing of SLAVE discuss what you think the role of art is in contemporary society.
Acknowledgements

Education Resource written by Helen Berkemeier, Schools Education Manager, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. 17 August 2014.

With thanks to Juliana Engberg, Christian Capurro: SLAVE Curator and ACCA Artistic Director and Jane Rhodes, Exhibitions Manager.

Terms of Use

This Education Resource has been produced by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art to provide information and classroom support material for school visits to the exhibition Christian Capurro: SLAVE. The reproduction and communication of this Resource is permitted for educational purposes only.

Bookings and Enquiries

ACCA Education 03 9697 9999 or education@accaonline.org.au
www.accaonline.org.au/learn