

shape shift

Peter Henderson

Joy Hirst

Shaun Kirby

Vera Möller

Fran van Riemsdyk

IF YOU ARE READING THIS TEXT it is likely that you have gained access to this exhibition via the established codes of the art world – the invitation, the Almanac or the advertisement – or at least have responded to the sign of cultural authority tied to the fence outside, which proclaims 'Australian Centre for Contemporary Art – Now Open'.

The questions for whom the institution is open and on whose behalf the gallery speaks, have long been central to artistic and curatorial practice. Exhibitions often now take an amorphous, critical form and act to subvert the dominance of the single-sited blockbuster.

As a guest of the institutions of ACCA, the British Council and Museums Australia, my position was privileged; my access unlimited. My brief was to concentrate on artists completing senior tertiary studies at Melbourne's art schools. My remit was restricted only by time – a selection of artists to be made before my return to England; by exposure – artists should have had limited exposure within the wider cultural environment; and by budgetary considerations.

Though an outsider, it was to be expected that I would subscribe to some of the notions of what is current and significant within contemporary art practice in Australia, bearing in

mind the internationalism of my profession, though the selection process was thoroughly inclusive. How then might a guest curator avoid a selection of work which would be a parade of 'young stars', or as a stylistic trawl of this particular cultural moment?

Across Britain at present an unrivalled series of refurbishments and relocations are taking place within galleries as a direct result of the National Lottery awards.¹ This process has engendered fierce debate on the role of, and access to, the gallery, and in particular the visitor's experience of exhibiting spaces across the country. Mindful of these discussions, I was struck by the unique identity and physical circumstance of ACCA within the context of Melbourne.

A gallery visit necessarily entails a negotiation of a series of barriers or boundaries. As the writer, Douglas Crimp has suggested, 'the museum is a space of exclusions and confinement'.² As neither a museum nor purpose-built gallery, ACCA has adapted and developed organically and is sited at the outer limits of the botanical gardens. Entering the park, we move from a space of metropolitan hubbub to a controlled serenity. Unlike the grand portals of the museum, the entrance to ACCA is neither imposing nor remarkable. Led up the garden path, we are directed past the front door (the most obvious entrance point), through the gates and past a series of blocked windows. On arriving in the foyer, we encounter a screen and either turn towards the white cube or the domestic rooms of the former house through the reception area, part shop, part waiting-room. We are watched on camera, as our every move is controlled unwittingly by the architecture of the building.

Through my discussions with artists across the city, I began to map an exhibition, which might begin to investigate the experience of the spaces

of ACCA. These five artists have been brought together to offer individual explorations of the building or the institution of art. This project was to be experimental, resisting a restrictive curatorial premise.

Shapeshifters were historically the mistrusted members of society in Britain. The name once conned witchcraft or magic and now suggests a subversion of the status quo. These contemporary shapeshifters play on the visitor's assumptions of ACCA, exploring the physical make-up of the building and traversing the oppositions of inside and outside, public and private.

Guided through the entrance, the visitor will discover that the signage has been relocated. In its customary position, Peter Henderson offers enlightenment of a different kind – a domestic light, seemingly out of place within the gallery or museum, offering the means to read without the text. At this crucial boundary of domestic house and gallery extension, Henderson disorients the viewer with the absence of signage and an irritating sound of running water. The inquisitive are led behind the screen to the lavatories and storage, where the murky image of a man diving into water flickers across the end wall; the path is blocked, the experience voyeuristic yet compelling. Replacing the spectacle, this image assumes a position of privacy, while encouraging a public engagement. The viewer has no choice but to turn and leave, emerging from the nether regions of building, normally associated with bodily functions.

In marked contrast the Smorgon Gallery offers an accessible route out of the gallery. It is to the systems of control and mapping within the outer environment of ACCA that Joy Hirst refers, however. Her performative mapping of the botanical gardens which took place early this year is here reconfigured for the gallery extension. Through logical and mathematical means, Hirst refers directly to the historical

construction of nature – to the Colonialist conceit inherent in the title 'The Royal Botanic Gardens' – and indirectly to the constructed relationship between viewer and object within this purpose-built space.

As Hirst signals the geographical context of ACCA and the false neutrality of the white cube, so Fran van Riemsdyk explores the psychological tension within the park, between leisure and crime, enjoyment and menace. Her forensic experiments, which lead the viewer into the hidden elements of this site, play with notions of fact and fiction. It is here, as with Shaun Kirby's work, that the methods of experimentation are used to parody artistic truths and values. Henderson and van Riemsdyk also both examine the veiling of bodily presence in the gallery.

Vera Möller's cloaking of the passage-way in the domestic area of the gallery with wall-hangings of latex gloves creates a physical experience which is both sensual and unnerving. Between the two small rooms, the gloves hang as trophies of investigation, like the skins of slaughtered animals. Möller's and van Riemsdyk's works play on the history of validation of the spoils of war in the museum. Led through this passage-way, we finally come upon Shaun Kirby's strange object of investigation. A straightforward consumption of the work is thwarted by both the conceptual and physical manifestation of Kirby's work. The table is not an examination slab, as the hole for the head might first indicate, but a door. So too, the site of dissection is replaced by a monitor; the act of dissection performed not on a body, but on a piece of cheese. Kirby's object overlays meaning upon meaning. He plays with the definition of sculptural practice (parodied in the plastering of holes in the cheese), with the 'hole' and within the context of ACCA, winks cheekily to the sexual and the unseen.

Through this exhibition, shifts occur in the viewer's expectations of a visit to ACCA. The

institutional spaces are not compromised, the offices and mechanisms for selection and display remain, but the experience itself is changed. What was unspoken is exclaimed. What was unnoticed is revealed.

Claire Doherty Curator

- 1 See C. Doherty, 'On the Game', *Broadsheet*, Summer 1996-7.
- 2 D. Crimp, 'The Postmodern Museum', *On the Museums Ruins*, MIT Press, 1993, p. 287

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LIST OF WORKS

Peter Henderson

Blue Domestic 1996
electric light, shade, tripod & video
dimensions variable

Joy Hirst

INSTRUMENTS OF GARDENING 1996
mixed media
dimensions variable

Shaun Kirby

LABOUR BRIDGING NOTHING 1996
video, vinyl lettering, aluminium, paint, paper, wood
dimensions variable

Vera Möller

ego(relaxed) 1996
latex gloves on plastic backing
dimensions variable

Fran Van Riemsdyk

Analysis of Dust Sample, Room 3, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Nov. 6th 1996 1996
laser prints
dimensions variable

Diagram detailing source location of Dust Sample, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Nov. 30th 1996 1996

laser print
210 x 295mm

SELECTED BIOGRAPHIES

Peter Henderson

STUDIES 1995-6 Master of Arts, RMIT University, Melbourne

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1996 *Interiors*, Project Space, RMIT, Melbourne

1995 *Smoke and Mirrors*, Project Space, RMIT, Melbourne

1993 King Street Gallery, Melbourne

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1996 *Dead Nearby Dialogue*, Keel Street, Melbourne
Game Over, Plenty Ranges Arts and Convention Centre, South Morang

Reversal, Faculty Gallery, RMIT, Melbourne

1995 *If Six were Nine*, Caulfield Arts Centre, Melbourne

Joy Hirst

STUDIES 1995-6 Master of Arts, RMIT University, Melbourne

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1995 *Site Index*, Temple Studio, Melbourne

1993 *Constructed Landscape*, Temple Studio, Melbourne

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1996 Game Over, Plenty Ranges Arts and Convention Centre, South Morang

Reversal, Faculty Gallery, RMIT, Melbourne

1995 *The Save Albert Park 9x5 Invitation Exhibition*, Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne

1994 *Spoken Because I'*, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne

1993 SITE 1, Roden Street, Melbourne
No Vacancy Site, Rathdowne Street, Melbourne

Shaun Kirby

STUDIES 1996 Master of Arts, RMIT University, Melbourne

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1996 *International Headache Congress*, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide

1995 *Old Dust and Medical Gas*, Sym Choon Gallery, Adelaide
Labour Exchange, Public Art Project, Adelaide

1994 *Blot Maladies*, Adelaide University Union Gallery, Adelaide

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1996 *Ruins in Reverse*, RMIT Storey Hall Gallery, Melbourne

1995 *Frankthing*, Sym Choon Gallery, Adelaide

1994 *Ideal Home Show*, Ebenezer Studios, Adelaide
Ruby Haze, Adelaide Biennial Installations Project, Adelaide

Vera Möller

STUDIES 1995-6 Master of Fine Arts (research and exhibition), Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1996 *my wild life*, Studio 12, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
details from my wild life, Linden: St. Kilda Arts Centre, Melbourne

1995 *rip project*, Southgate Complex, Melbourne

1994 *Strapped and Cut*, ether ohnetitel, Melbourne

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1996 *Alluring*, Project Space, RMIT, Melbourne

Display, Platform 2, Melbourne

Dermatology, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne

1995 *Compulsive Beauty*, ether ohnetitel, Melbourne
ArtWorkz 7-101 Collins Street Acquisitive Prize, Melbourne

Fran van Riemsdyk

STUDIES 1995-6 Master of Arts, RMIT University, Melbourne
Arts University of Melbourne

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1996 *Suspended Particles*, Westspace, Melbourne

1992 Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1995 Australian High Commission, Singapore

1994 Adelaide Fringe Festival, Lynx Gallery

1992 *Computer Generated*, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

1991 *Digitize the World*, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
Technologically Assisted Works of Art, Monash Studios, Melbourne

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Shapeshift

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Visiting curator: Claire Doherty

Project manager: Jennifer Colbert

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Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra 3141. Telephone 61 3 9654 6422

Affiliated with Monash University

Director: Jenepher Duncan; Curator: Clare Williamson

Administrator: Jennifer Colbert; Secretary/Assistant: Vikki McInnes



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