BLAIR TRETHOWAN

TCB, Melbourne
November 10 - 20, 1999

Past the dumb question of whether painting's back again is a more interesting question about where it goes when it disappears. Over several years, Blair Trethowan has followed fine art into the realm of mass culture, media, and advertising. The result is a number of "collections" assembled from print media: variants on Warhol's 15 minutes of fame; Picasso-ish representations; art jokes; things entitled "the art of ..."; artists depicted in movies; and so on. The collections are by no means exhaustive, simply evidence of a close reading of the abundant source materials at hand.

"The Finishing Touch" is the first exhibition arising out of this research project: 12 color photographs of the sides of buses decorated with digital or mechanical brushstrokes. The images were taken on a two-and-half-week whirlwind bus tour of Europe during which Trethowan spent many hours waiting at bus stops. Each photograph frames the differently decorated panels to the exclusion of most other details. Only through small incidental motifs at the edge of the frame—a tire rim, a door handle, the reflection of some place in the glossy paint job—is it possible to orient the image and identify its source. Otherwise, they seem simply to document 12 different graphic styles in honor of the painterly brushstroke.

I guess this is one of many places Warhol and Lichtenstein trickle down. Yet why now and in this revised fashion? 1991 is a key date for Trethowan: the year Big M, a flavored milk producer, turned its sleek '80s trademark into a pretentious handmade brushstroke. Other examples abound throughout the '90s that seem to mark an ostentatious expressive, gestural trend, evidence of a human touch in a decade otherwise dedicated to technological shifts and pure digital flows.

Indeed, the relationship described here between corporate culture, the media, and representation provides an alternative history of art, which suggests that painting continues, but paradoxically, by other means. By this reckoning, painting might have nothing at all to do with its practice but rather the manipulation and adaptation of a static sign of "gesture" which was sealed in the '50s and '60s through Pop. This concept of expressive painting is certainly still alive and well in ad land, clear proof of its vitality outside the art world. In fact, despite the death, impasse, uselessness, redundancy, or even dereliction of this kind of painting, I'd still have to acknowledge the verve of some of Trethowan's purloined graphics, their admixture with bus travel producing a strange, ineluctable attraction to the journey by road.

Trethowan's project ultimately attests to a breach in the conception of painting, in the very idea of art, between the most popular or persuasive kinds and specialized art world practices. Recognizing the art world's hierarchical conceit, Trethowan returns the painterly Pop motif to its supposedly lowly origins; but the trickle runs in many directions, and not just down.

STUART KOOP

Blair Trethowan, *Untitled*, 1999, C-print.

LOUISA BUFARDECI

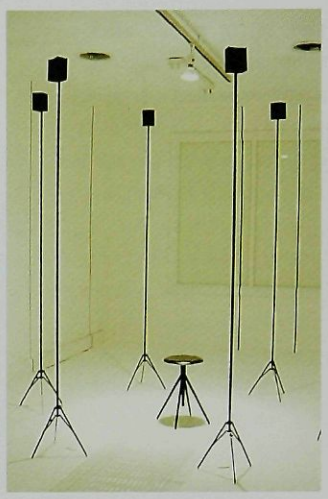
studio 12 at 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
December 3 - 18, 1999

A sign on the door outside Louisa Bufardeci's installation, *Another Rounding of the Facts*, instructed visitors to enter one at a time. Apart from creating an unprecedented queue outside the space on opening night (and the impression, at first sight, of a blockbuster exhibit, or, even, an outbreak of incontinence), Bufardeci's instruction heightened the claustrophobic character of Studio 12. Inside, the sense of enclosure was articulated through a continuous white, in which every available surface had been painted, and a faint beeping, pulsing but arrhythmic. Bufardeci had installed six digital metronomes on seven-foot-tall stands arranged in a circle, each set to a different rhythm. Their irregularity, punctuating the quiet of the space, seemed to be a function of this intensified experience of interiority, like shutting out the rest of the world and listening to the sounds of one's own body.

Bufardeci's work is related to what might be described as an emerging thread of abstraction among young Melbourne artists, evident in several exhibitions in artist-run spaces through 1999, most clearly in "System," at Linden Arts Centre and Gallery (in which Bufardeci was a participant). This take hinges on the relations between, on the one hand, systems of abstraction, and on the other, social divisions. *Another Rounding of Facts* was characteristic: at the base of each metronome stand, and barely discernible at first, was a tiny printed text. Each text described how the rhythm of the corresponding metronome had been determined: for example, "Australian Deaths in Custody and Custody-related Police Operations 1996." Such statistical titles, each revolving around instances of death through the disciplinary arm of the state, significantly inflected the phenomenological dimension of the installation. The beeping became a kind of Morse coded lamentation, or utterances of the wronged and the dead, only in an age of secularism and mass assassination, in which posthumous pleas are constituted not through ghosts, but statistical data. The subject of this inflection, both literally and linguistically, was the body.

Bufardeci has repeatedly returned to simple mechanical rhythms. In her Myer Window installation of 1998, projected texts were only visible by peering through small peepholes in an otherwise blacked-out window, which alternately flashed at the viewer to "breathe in" and "breathe out." Like most of Bufardeci's work, the piece was structured by the tension between an insistence on the body and its negation. In *Another Rounding of Facts*, the body was a schematic presence in the metronome stands, elongated and balanced with fragility. While the metronome itself is, in its very raison d'être, regular (as against the vagaries of the body), both the faintness of the sound and the overall arhythmia generated a sense of pathos familiar to the experience of our own bodies. Importantly, the irregularity of the beeping–and its apparent endlessness–was only comprehensible over time, demanding acute attention to memory as sounds overlapped and then drowned in ceaseless and fugitive movement. In *Another Rounding of Facts*, this thematization of our capacity to perceive was a connection between physiological and historical memory. It was also an address to the body–indeed to the potential inherent in it–beyond the cultural logic that predominates within capitalism.

TOM NICHOLSON



LOUISA BURFADECI, *Another Rounding of Facts*, 1999, mixed media.

"HACK"

GREY MATTER CONTEMPORARY ART, SYDNEY
NOVEMBER 19 - DECEMBER 12, 1999

Housed in the meticulously prepared rooms of a small flat above a Chinese restaurant, Grey Matter opened with a group exhibition presented by "Michael & Michael Visual Art Project Management," claimed by the artists as "a parody, a celebration and a rejection of a tightly curated show all in one."

Parody, however, could well be claimed as one of the defining conditions for contemporary practices of art and exhibition making, if a contingent, almost ambivalent parody, a state of hedging one's bets. In this way, parody becomes an almost hermeneutic state, self-referential to the point of collapsing into and so evacuating its object–parody devoid of the bite of willful exaggeration. So here, for example, the very use of a corporate-speak appellation for an essentially collective undertaking both parodies the managerial organization of contemporary art while also illustrating an expedient adaptation to it.

MICHAEL LINDEMAN, *Taking a Dive*, 1999, installation view, Grey Matter, Melbourne.

If "Hack" was truly parodic of the curatorial enterprise, it was in the incorporation of a wide spectrum of artistic modes–a catchall of reflections upon daily life. Michael Dagostino pinned telephone cable in the outline of two intersecting hearts to one wall and fixed a crusty old mobile phone to the wall opposite. Across the apex of two walls, he located a large color photograph of a boarded-up storefront of similar style to that below the gallery, a quasi-ironic, self-identifying image of urban cool. Jonathan Wilson and Andrew Salter both evoked the body via its overt displacement, the former by smoothing out one corner of the main room with a solidified creamy pour, the latter with a modified retro wing-style office chair with door knobs protruding in places that would make it extremely uncomfortable. David Griggs colonized the corridor with a set of black-and-white skull canvases, painting slumming in the world of outsider memorabilia. Paul White propped two crudely hewn blanket banners up against the wall, each featuring a stitched-outline drawing (one a front-end loader, the other a tank). Finally in the most complex piece of all, *Taking a Dive*, Michael Lindeman staged a teddy bear's high dive from a platform fixed to the gallery wall into an upturned video monitor below, on which a record of this very act played in a narcissistic but compelling dialogue between the material world and that of illusion. If these descriptions sound vaguely familiar, it might be due to the sophisticated double movement of identification with and departure from rather generic models of 1990's practice.

So "Hack" was all it claimed to be, and also all it claimed to depart from. It was one of the tightest, most curatorially coherent and sparky shows I saw all year. I couldn't help but envisage how successfully this exhibition would serve as a small museum show, drawing attention to the increasingly hermetic structures in which contemporary art is packaged irrespective of context or site. Then again, "Hack" both negotiated this with aplomb while indicating its artists' readiness for institutional advancement.

BLAIR FRENCH