Sonic Network R2 and Fragments

John Astland: Sonic Network R2 and Fragments

Gallagher & Lynch
Sydney
25 November – 16 December 2006

The retinal radar so disclaimed by the de facto grandaddy of conceptual art is very much in evidence in these intricate paintings by Melbourne-based John Astland. One immediately feels the eye vibrate as it attempts to register the competing colours that zing out from these tightly structured and (relatively) modestly sized canvases. The majority of the works, entitled Sonic Fragments 2006, share a common motif comprising a central disc with different ripples either side. The motif provides the template for the artist’s experiments with colour and perception. As the eye roves from one painting to the next, the after image lingers at an almost equal intensity, adding yet another layer to each. However, the works together, rather than remaining within the confines of retinal stimulation, seem to entail pulsating rhythms that one feels as much as sees, one even comes close to hearing.

This synaesthetical effect is important to Astland’s project, given his interest and background in sound art, an interest with an electronic bent. (During the 1990s, Astland was a member of the electronic music group Clan Analogique, which explored the contours between sonic and visual information.) The patterns depicted in the paintings are, as their titles suggest, in part inspired by sonar waves. Although not to be treated as sound, Synaesthesia—the ability to perceive information intended for one sense by means of another, such as hearing colour or seeing music—has for some time been associated with heightened states of brain and lateral thinking. Famous synaesthetes include the great colourist Wassily Kandinsky, Albert Einstein, and modernist composers such as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Some recent research, moreover, suggests that synaesthesia played a key role in the development of language. Apparently sounds used to name many everyday phenomena were not completely arbitrary, but connected to synaesthetical effects—for example, sound reflected the shape or feel of an object.

The objective of simulacra a synaesthetical experience for the viewer; there, might be to facilitate an awareness of how one comes to a state of knowledge, thereby also aiming to invoke alternate ways of knowing. Certainly, these paintings seek to capture in a still image the time-based nature of synesthetic experience and the way of knowing in the sciences of human perception and sound. The paintings activate the full spectrum, they heighten both the viewer’s cognition of their body as an interpreter of stimuli, and their awareness of the process of meaning making.

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Hence, while Astland’s paintings Sonic Fragments: Sonic Crosscurrents and Sonic Networks revel in the joy of colour and pattern, they evince much more than a retinal filter. Their iconography connects macrocosm and microcosm: vision and sound. By way of the artist’s skilful manipulation of form and colour and by thorough grounding in the sciences of human perception and sound, the paintings activate the full spectrum of synaesthetic experience and the way of knowing in the sciences of human perception and sound. The paintings activate the full spectrum, they heighten both the viewer’s cognition of their body as an interpreter of stimuli, and their awareness of the process of meaning making.

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Printed by: John Astland. Sonic Network R2, 2005–06. Oil and acrylic on linen. 30 x 30 cm. John Astland, Sinead Crosscurrents Fragments 1, 2006. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 45 x 45 cm. Courtesy the artists and Galaxy 59. Sydney

"Out of Time: A Contemporary View"

Museum of Modern Art, New York
3 August 2006 – 9 April 2007

Shortly after seeing Andy Warhol's "Empire" 1964, a silent black and white record of New York's Empire State Building shot at twenty-four frames per second and projected, for eight plus hours, at sixteen frames, filmmaker Jonas Mekas wrote of Warhol’s "celebrating our existence by slowing our perception." Warhol’s minimal variation opened up time, feeding the illusion that we are seeing more; time appears dissolved as we watch. Warhol’s generosity here is on a par perhaps with that exercised in his multiple portraits screened on a single surface—the Elgin, or Marilyn—but now the tragic edge that underpins his redemptive gestures is more apparent. Writing on the 1964 Flower paintings in 10X0, at a time when it was not certain Warhol had a practice with a future, John Coplans noted how their "flesh of beauty...suddenly becomes tragic under the viewer's gaze". Warhol filmed the building from daylight to dawn, remarking the film image’s own passage into abstraction. Arrested in a flash of light, the image, like the landscape, passes into darkness.

"Empire" opened "Out of Time", the Museum of Modern Art’s most recent re-installation of its Contemporary Galleries, a task undertaken as part of its ongoing revision of contemporary art. A show hung on its ideas of "exploring some of the tensions in recent experience of time", the exhibition was more simply and correctly a survey of work from the past forty-four years loosely concerned with time. Indulged among the artists were Jeff Koons, William Anastasi, Vitso Accord, Janine Antoni, Robert Morris, Bill Viola, Pipilotti Rist, Klaus and Louise Wise, Carsten Höller, Richard Ritter, and Luc Tuymans, an impressive enough roster but the work included here frequently lacked the phenomenological depth of a work like "Empire". This quality, which only ever exists as potential, as something to which the viewer must attend and give time, was largely absent from the show. In MOMA’s telling, that old time is almost over.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Marilyn: Crescendo of a Career: The Collected Drawings of Marilyn Monroe, 1954–62. Here, a gallery’s lights have been programmed to turn on and off at five second intervals—light, darkness, light, darkness, et cetera and et cetera. Creed has made a practice out of training on older precedents that can claim some nominally conceptual intent—Richard Artschwager’s textured punctation points, or the minimal gesture that beards the context of viewing as subject of the work—but he always trades down, miniaturising them. Other works of Creed can be more engagingly experimental, like Work No. 200: half the air in a given space, in which viewers must move their way through a room filled with inflated balloons containing half the air inside the room, but Work No. 227 takes all of a little over ten seconds to get. Creed has suggested art should take itself less seriously; brevity may be a way to do this.

While Creed’s work here was the best example of the kind of cut-drama implicit in deviations by contemplation, it was not alone. Mona Hatoum: 1994–2004, a circular tub of sand alternately stirred and smoothed by a mechanical arm, was a good companion piece. Any examination of postmodern temporality must return to the issues of bodilyity, but Out of Time merely signalled this in a cursory inclusion of work by Accad, Anastasi, and Morris, along with Janine Antoni’s more recent reprise, Butterfly Kisses 1995–99. Anastasi, Morris and Antoni were put together as a group to emphasise formal similarities, a procedure that works brilliantly in the Transforming Chronologies: An Atlas of Drawing, the Museum’s two-part re-instatement of the Drawing Department, but this is itself marked to acknowledge the limits of the comparative scanning in series demanded by a lot of work invested in iconoclastically. Eileen Atkins: Carving A Traditional Sculpture 1972, her photodocumentation of body changes while dieting, comes to mind here, perhaps the gridded installation of its 144 images should have taken too long to look at.

Renate Djikstra’s eight-piece photographs of Amstel, a young Bosnian asylum seeker living in Amsterdam, made over eleven years (1994–2005) is a distinct acknowledgement of this earlier mode of working: its choice of subject matter—the results of historical displacement, the process of accommodation in displacement—is on a par with the show’s shift from experiential to historical time. History here figures as a narrative of denial—Carrie Mae Weems on slavery and repression, the Wilson sisters on East Germany’s secret police. And, in October 15, 1977 1998, Richter’s suite of paintings centred on the Boader-Meinhold group, specifically on their mysterious deaths in custody, the possibility of historical narrative appears entirely forgone. Batz and knowledgeably ponderous, these paintings take on not only their nominal subject matter, but also the possibilities of painting as an historical medium. Time here weighs heavy, as Richter intended, affording no relief.

In a show which otherwise contains too little that profits legitimation, this is an appropriate ending.

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