John Astinidou: Sonic Network 92 and Fragments
Galleri S, Sydney
25 November – 16 December 2000

The reinal flutter so disdainful by the de facto grandaddy of conceptual art is very much in evidence in these initi- al paintings by Melbourne–based John Astinidou. One literally feels the eye vibrate as it strains to register the competing colours that zing out from these tightly struc- tured and (mostly) modestly sized canvases. The major- ity of the works, entitled Sonic Fragments 2000, share a cu- mulo-flocculent, comprising a central disc with directing ripples on 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-images linger at an almost equal intensity, adding yet another layer to each. However, the works together, rather than remaining within the confines of reinal allusion, seem to emit pulsating rays that one feels as much as sees, that one even comes close to hearing.

This synaesthetic effect is important to Astinidou’s proj- ect, given his interest and background in sound art, an interest that is interpreted on a sonic bent. (During the 1980s, Astin- idou was a member of the electronic music group Cilen Analogus, which explored the confinements between aura- l and visual information.) The patterns depicted in the paint- ings are, as their titles suggest, in part inspired by sonar waves, attempting to stress sound. Synaesthesia— the ability to perceive information intended for one sense of another means of such as hearing colour or seeing music—is of some time been associated with heightened awareness and lateral thinking. Famous synaesthetes include the great composer Wensley Kandinsky, Albert Ein- stein, and modernist composers such as Nikolay 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 synaesthetic effects—for example, sound reflected the shape or feel of an object.

The objective of simulating a synaesthetic experience for the viewer, then, might be to facilitate an awareness of how one comes to a state of knowledge, thereby also allowing to evoke alternate ways of knowing. Certainly, these paintings seek to capture in a still image the time- based nature and deeply embodied perception of sound. Given that vision is conventionally considered the least embedded sense—the sense most closely aligned with mind and spirit—the synaesthetic impulse of these paint- ings attempts to bring the viewer back into his or her body.

Hence, while Astinidou’s paintings Sonic Fragments, Sonic Crossreists and Sonic Network revel in the joy of colour and pattern, they evoke much more than a rei- nal flutter. Their iconography connects macrocum and microcum, vision and sound. Byway of the artist’s skillful manipulation of form and colour and his thorough ground- ing in the science of human perception and sound, the paintings activate the full spectrum. They heighten both the viewer’s cognisance of their body as an interpreter of stimuli, and their awareness of the process of mean- making.

Jacqueline Miller

’Out of Time-A Contemporary View’
Museum of Modern Art, New York
3 August 2000 – 4 April 2001

Shortly after seeing Andy Warhol’s epic ‘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, the film-maker Jonas Mekas wrote of Warhol’s ‘celebrat- ing our existence by slowing our perception’. Warhol’s minimal variation opened up time, feeding the illusion that we are seeing more: time appears distilled as we watch. Warhol’s generally here is on a par perhaps with that exercised in his multiple portraits screened on a single surface—the Elvises, or Marilyn—but now the tragic edge that underly his reproductive gestures is more apparent. Writing on the 1964 Flower paintings in 1970, at a time when it was not certain Warhol had a practice with a future, John Coplans noted how their “flash of beauty…suddenly becomes tragic under the viewer’s gaze”. Warhol filmed the building from daylight to dark, remicking the film’s own passage into the obituary. Arrested in a flash of light, the image, like the landmark, passes into darkness.

’Empire’ opened “Out of Time”, the Museum of Modern Art’s most recent re-installation of its Contem- porary Galleries, a task undertaken as part of its ongo- ing revision of contemporary art. A show hung on the idea of exploring some of the tensions in recent experi- ences of time”, the exhibition was more simply and cor- rectly a survey of work from the past forty years loosely concerned with time. Included among the artist’s were Jeff Koons, William Anastasi, Vito Acconci, Janine Antoni, Robert Morris, Bill Viola, Pipilotti Rist, Jane and Louise Wilson, Gerhard Richter, and Luc Tuymans, an impressive enough roster but the work included here generally 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 on the show. In MOMA’s telling, that old time is almost over.

Nonetheless, this show was much more apparent the New York Times reviewer, Paul Cread’s 2001 Turner Prize-winning work No. 227: The Lights Going On and Off 2000, here, a gallery’s lights have been programmed to turn on and off at five second intervals—light, darkness, light, darkness, ectoplas and ectoecto. Cread has made a practice out of trai- ning on older procedures that come some notionally conceptual intent—Richard Artschwager’s textured punctuation points, or the minimal gesture that treats the context of viewing as subject of the work—but he always trades down, ministrating them. Other works of Cread’s can be more engagingly experimental, like Work No. 200: half the air in a given space, in which the viewers must make their way through a room filled with inflated balloons containing half the air inside the room, but Work No. 227 takes all of a few over ten seconds to gather. In the show has suggested art should take itself less seriously, briefly may be one way to do this.

While Cread’s work here was the best example of the kind of dead literalism implied by deliberations on temporality, it was not alone. Mona Hatoum, in her Tate Modern installation 1994-2004, a circular tub of sand alternately stratified and smoothed by a mechanical arm, was a good com- pany piece. Any examination of postmodern art and temporality must return to the issue of indexicality, but ‘Out of Time’ merely signalled this in a cursory inclusion of work by Acconci, Anastasi, and Morris, along with Janine Antoni’s more recent reprise, Butterfly Kisses 1996-99, Anastasi, Morris and Antoni were part of an attempt to group a theme in formal similarities, a procedure that works brilliantly epitomised in ‘Transform- ing Chronologies’, the Museum’s two-part re-installation of the Drawing Department, but in this weakened attempt to acknowledge the importance of the comparative scanning in series demanded by a lot of work invested in indexicality. Eleanor Antin’s Carving A Traditional Sculpture 1972, her photodocumentation of bodily changes while eating, comes to mind here, but perhaps the gridded installation of its 144 images would have taken too long to look at.

Rinne Dijkstra’s eight piece photo-series, of Alm- eria, a young Bosnian asylum seeker living in Amster- dam, made over eleven years (1994-2000) is a distant acknowledgement of this earlier mode of working; its choice of subject matter—the results of historical dis- placement, the process of acculturation in displacement— is on a par with the show’s shift from experiential time to historical time. History here figures as a narrative of denial—Carole Rae Woon’s slavery, and repression, the Wilson sisters on East Germany’s secret police, and, in October, 1977 1988, Richard’s suite of paint- ings centred on the Biseler-Menloff group, specifically on their mysterious deaths in custody, the possibility of historical narrative appears entirely forgone. Baneful and and knowingly ponderous, these paintings take on not only their nominal subject matter, but also the possi- bility of painting as an historical medium. Time here weighs heavily, as Richter intended, affording no relief.

In which show whatever contains too little that profits lingering, this is an appropriate ending.

Ingrid Peritz

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