

and

Memory as *re*-representation, as making present, is always in danger of collapsing the constitutive tension between past and present, especially when the imagined past is sucked into the timeless present of the all-pervasive virtual space of consumer culture (Huyssen, 2003).



Untitled Installation - Robert Hood

The word 'and' often appears in mid conversation, just before the next thoughts have registered fully. The 'ampersand' is a strange but appropriate introduction to this exhibition, as a signifier that outlines the joining or *co*-incidence of things, whether people, objects or spaces. Some prefer that joinings happen in an orderly manner, organizing under stringent 'rules' of association. The imaginative and the psychoanalytic amongst us would probably prefer joinings that happen under the rule of as little rules as possible. On the 12th anniversary of the High Street Project (HSP), this symbol is particularly apt, carrying with it a pervasive sense of things being an afterthought. Included under the SCAPE umbrella, Ampersand nevertheless stands at a distance, its inclusion in the program feeling much like a postscript to SCAPE's primary visual and discursive framework. In any case, here we are now, thinking about Ampersand the exhibition as a staging of cultural memory, in its responsiveness to Christchurch, and more specifically, to the High Street Project, its artists, exhibitions, and its place in the city.



Untitled Installation (Detail) - Rae Culbert

Over a week in Christchurch meeting and talking with various Ampersand artists, one of the significant things that stands out is the comfortable way in which many of the usual suspects from the past decade and more at ILAM and HSP discussed both the artworks on show as well as their personal lives over the past years. Organized by Robert Hood and Sam Eng, the show marks time as much as it does space. Does it not stage what Huysen calls the 'constitutive tension between past and present', at the same time also exemplifying the strange tension we increasingly face between reality and the virtual? Hosted in the old Government Life Building, on the second level looking out onto Cathedral Square, the works populate spaces once occupied by various number crunching minions of the Inland Revenue Department. The next noteworthy thing about Ampersand is that all the artists involved have lived, worked and exhibited in Christchurch at some point in the 1990's – these artists and their works then are already part of the fabric of the city's cultural memory. As an afterthought to the international menu of artists offered by the main SCAPE shows, this celebration of the local and idiosyncratic reeks of nostalgia!



Untitled Installation (Detail) – Amanda Newall

Subsuming the Ampersand exhibition under the sign of *Nostalgia* orients the reader towards notions of cultural memory and time. Memory and the act of memorializing are always cultural activities taking place in the present - events that actively and continuously shape both the past and the future. Cultural memory is a dynamic and ongoing *process* of association that ties individuals to each other and communities to space and time. In this framework, what is nostalgia if not the mixed feelings of happiness, sadness, longing and hating that arise when remembering people, places, events and experiences of the past? Ampersand's artists participate in these activities of memory in executing their artworks for this event commemorating HSP's 12 years of existence. In an important way, many of the artists have returned to Christchurch to participate *through their works* in a process of cultural memorizing; a process that is as much about remembering as it is about repressing and forgetting (as Freud would be quick to point out).

Eschewing monumental approaches to remembering, many of the artists have opted to stage memories performatively. The works of Rae Culbert, Saskia Leek, Violet Fagan and Amanda Newall certainly do this. Perhaps the most interesting time in Ampersand occurred *prior* to the official opening, during the set-up of the show. The key performative dimension of the installations of Rae Culbert, Saskia Leek and Violet Fagan will have been missed by Ampersand audiences. Over the course of a day before the show's opening, Culbert worked his way through beer, cigarettes, and snacks. The lines of packaging, spilt beer, and half smoked cigarettes (organized as a loose cross)

confronting audiences remain as a trace of Culbert's performative responsiveness to Christchurch, the building, the context of a 12 year review of HSP and to *memories* of Christchurch and beyond. Prior to the opening, Saskia Leek and Violet Fagan re-worked a collaborative installation mounted for HSP a number of years ago. The excessive mountain of sweet and weird creatures is the result at least in part of their re-view of history and associations.

Amanda Newall's installation can be read as a performative commentary on parallels between processes of becoming and processes of cultural memorizing. Herself significantly absent in person, Newall leaves the viewer with a caged being in mid-*becoming*, circling inside the idiot box. The ears, paws, and tail sitting along the ledge suggest that we are somehow in a kind of Deleuzian changing room. Someone has stepped out of the tiger suit and someone is trapped in mid-becoming (in indeterminacy) in the television screen. It is as though the tiger-man attempted to become man by ditching the trappings of the tiger before leaping into the box. Once in the box the tiger-man unfortunately *remembers* that that which marks him is not so much the tiger ears, tail or paws... but rather his fantasy (memory) of being a tiger-man trapped in mid-becoming.



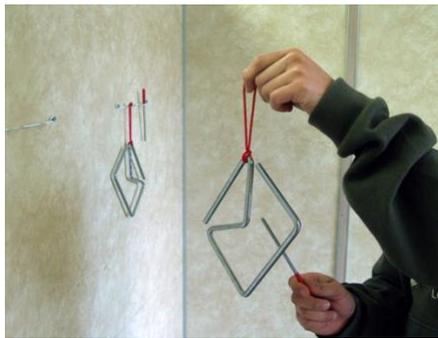
Untitled Installation – Simon Lawrence

While Newall, Culbert, Fagan and Leek deal more with the performance of cultural memory, Simon Lawrence's work (featuring a computer generated 3D model, assembled into a paper dog) outlines the increasing blurring of boundaries between reality and the virtual. While film, television and video games have seen the transposition of 'real world' concepts and structures into the virtual world of online or console gameplay, Lawrence's work charts the transposition of 'virtual' objects such as the 3D modeled dog into material 'real world' contexts. Some might argue that the art world is hardly a real world context. To this, we might reply by reference to Zizek's point that the subjective worlds and experiences we consider as social reality are *just as virtual* (or imagined) as our experiences online and in art. That is to say, the experiences we have are perceived through *transference*, that is, animated and distorted by the 'virtual' fantasmatic scenarios that structure our daily lives. Reality television is a recent phenomenon that has given rise to debates about how 'real' (as opposed to acted or performed) reality tv actually is. Here the point can be made that of course reality tv stars are *really* acting / performing, in as much as we all are acting or performing every moment of life anyway, under the ever watchful gaze of the Other.



Prairie – Edward Clemens

Returning to our theme of nostalgia, Eddie Clemens' works are the only ones to be titled in the show, and stand out for being so comfortably *at home* in these old offices. Clemens' work features uncanny objects, which at first glance appear deceptively ordinary. Responding like the other works to memories, these works appear to emphasize how quotidian objects such as heaters, supermarket bags, calculators and wire racks provide us with a sense of continuity over time (these forms and their normal functions tend to remain constant), acting as familiar affective cues within the larger landscape of cultural memory. The works all share a heavily manufactured but effortlessly slick aesthetic. Staying within a conservative palette of white, black, red and chrome, the objects initially look *completely* machine made and finished. Having watched Clemens at work however, I realize they are far from being products of automated mechanical reproduction. True, Clemens utilizes industrial tools and machinery in manufacturing his objects. However, *Triangle* and *Prairie* have been painstakingly designed and produced primarily by hand. *Triangle* for instance features a series of six orchestral 'triangles' bent by hand with the help of a 'bender' machine into a form that instantly recalls New Zealand Post's logo. *Prairie* features a modified heater rack, with the calculator cradles welded and finished by the artist. In his practice, the artist approaches art-making by orchestrating unlikely co-incidences – in *Triangle*, Clemens orchestrates the co-incidence of an iconic commercial signifier with an orchestral instrument. In *Prairie*, the banal heater drying rack and oil heater (both purchased from The Warehouse) coincide with a set of three identical calculators (available only from Corporate gift wholesalers), each echoing a swan motif (a motif recurring through all the works) in the displays' curve upwards off the base.



Triangle (Detail) – Edward Clemens

What we have here are commercial forms (e.g. calculators, model car tyres, drying racks, plastic bags) subtly perverted by the artist towards a horizon of zero functionality and pure aesthetics. In late Capitalism where downsizing, automated manufacturing and e-commerce are standard practice, increased *surplus value* is 'extracted' by reducing the costs involved in human labor (machines don't need to be paid salaries). Aesthetically, the result is precisely what we see in our local supermarkets, hardware stores and malls – sterile, slickly packaged, and boldly colorful products that look (and usually are) machine manufactured, processed and distributed. With these products, there is absolutely no 'mark' at all beyond the machinic sign of globalized commerce. Clemens' works share this 'look', but in fact involve an excessive (and obsessive) amount of physical labor and material engagement. In this way, Clemens subverts the late Capitalist formula and it is in this subversion that one begins to detect what may come to be Clemens' signature strategy. Paradoxically with Clemens, it is in these works where the mark of the hand is erased that one finds the 'signature' – a mark that is typically inscribed through the sweat of labor onto the objects themselves. Are Clemens' objects not eminently *auratic objects* as Walter Benjamin would say?



Untitled – Edward Clemens

A certain perversity is to be found in Clemens' untitled checkout bag work consisting of a supermarket bag dispenser and 3000 red plastic bags each marked with a modest text box *quoting* an Everywoman overheard in Rotorua shouting, "You bloody raped me and you think a trip to the Warehouse will make it better..." at a man following her in a car with the license plate 'SOLJAR'. Is it not a bizarre co-incidence of notions – a violent 'bloody' scene of rape and a domestic scene of shopping for household requirements in The Warehouse? As though one can actually *make up* for such an intrusion (rape) into another's material subjectivity, this 'soldier' had the ludicrous thought that he would make up for it *at a bargain price!* Is The Warehouse / Whorehouse not constantly reminding us that at their stores, *everyone gets a bargain?* To shift to a different register, are we being bought at bargain price, with our complicity acting as an unspoken lever against us? Can art finally make up for all the traumatic incursions over time into our subjective experiences, at a bargain price?



Love will tear us apart – Edward Clemens

Love will tear us apart is the sentimentally titled last work in this suite, consisting of 35 white swans and 1 black one encased in vacuum formed high frequency welded blister packages. Visually, the eye is instantly drawn to difference, to the single black swan amidst the sea of white swans. Is the image and notion of the 'black sheep' not already over-determined? This artwork provides the perfect occasion to illustrate a key theoretical concept in psychoanalysis – that of projective identification. The idea is that sometimes we end up feeling or 'wearing' things for other people (for whom those feelings are so intolerable that they have to be projected out). The black sheep is the target of such projections, containing all that is socially repressed or disavowed. Installations and performances frequently perform a similar function – that of containing and mediating the 'specters' of society, history and cultural memory, those disavowed and repressed affects and effects that always return to haunt the living in the present moment.



Untitled Installation – Francis Upritchard

Speaking of history and the return of the repressed in these politically correct times, one has to wonder if Francis Upritchard's work is not a thoroughly self-reflexive act of irony? Upritchard's installation consists of a set of carvings and tribalesque objects, many appearing clumsily made (much as a 'primitive' might have made it perhaps). The simple hanging arrangement on one wall conjures up a false air of other worldliness, an atmosphere of naiveté. There is also the charming idea of how the primitive makes full use of the throw-offs of Western civilization – e.g. the racquet and hockey stick, redeeming these objects by conferring upon them new contexts. One wonders if *she* is perhaps the modern primitive? Or is it rather the case that history repeats itself *through* Upritchard peddling the anthropological myth of the tribal primitive... *and* selling back to Queen and Country these 'exploits' ripped off indigenous cultures, *and* making a killing at it? Is this not the ultimate self-reflexive ironical *and* cynical act? George Santayana said that *those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*. Is it not more likely the case that those who *can* remember the past are condemned to keep forgetting it?

If the time-consciousness of (high) modernity in the West sought to secure the future, one could argue that the time-consciousness of the late twentieth century implies the no less perilous task of taking responsibility for the past. Both attempts inevitably are haunted by failure (Huysen, 2000).

What does the act of taking responsibility for the past or future consist of? What is the point if, as Huysen argues, failure is already over-determined? To answer, we could perhaps look to the Octave Manoni's psychoanalytic formula – *Je sais bien, mais quand meme...* I know very well, but all the same...



Untitled Installation – Sam Eng

Author

Leon Tan

BA, MHSc (Hons), PhD (enrolled)

Leon Tan is a doctoral candidate at Auckland University's Department of Art History. His research interests are contemporary performance and installation art, interactive games, and cultural theory. He is an artist and game designer as well

as a lecturer and psychoanalytic clinician at the Auckland University of Technology. leon.tan@aut.ac.nz

References:

Huysen, Andreas (2003). *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and The Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Huysen, Andreas (2000). Present Pasts: Media, Politics, and Amnesia. In *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, Iss. 1. Duke University Press.