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VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Artists: Matt Huppertz—'*WORK!*'—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, May 29th —June 27th; Derek Sargent—*Allure Me*—and Julie Robinson—*One To Rot And One To Grow*—at Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, June 5th—July 5th; various artists—*the first show*—FORMAT. June 4th—December 24th; Sophie Green—*Threshold* and Eugeniusz Lipczyk—*Constructis*—FELT Space, July 2nd—July 18th.

by Ken Bolton

'LOVE'—WON'T IT TEAR US APART?

Matt Huppertz's '*WORK!*' (at the AEAF over June) is very spare—the elements few—but the pieces possess the gallery, its second space particularly, and are reassuringly self-sufficient. Even the first room, which seems initially not to offer a lot, stands as very considered ante-room to the main experience—and finally gains substance from the room it precedes and foreshadows. The exhibition makes its sense from that second feature room, and the sense extends back into the introductory space, whose function might almost have been one of delay and suggestive but heightened intimation.

That first room is white, and, loosely, has a single, rather un-giving piece in it, a clear, tall glass-house, built to sit in, and fill, a small car trailer. Called '*Go West!*', it naturally gets

one's attention, being centrally placed, but it does not give much away. Practiced viewers are used to this sort of thing and either move on quickly or determine to nut it out, give it time, consider possibilities and effects. Clearly the glass house (tall, peak-roofed) is a little 'world' and exclusive. We can't get in—and initially it seems filled with a white, cloudy 'atmosphere', an atmosphere *in there*, not out where we are. Soon enough, with a change in the angle of vision, but not at all immediately, the viewer sees that the walls are mirrors. This again we might take as keeping us excluded, on the outside, perhaps looking vainly in. It is also a micro-second of shock to see oneself: What am 'I' doing in here—or 'in there'?

There are in fact three more pieces in this first room—is a single unframed photocopy reproduction—of the same sketch-like, ur-house shape—and a pair of mauve-purple images. None of these is big. The house outline (in '*Sink House Burn*') is perfunctory and made on what looks like a standard A-4 sheet, quickly photocopied: a sooty black stands behind the slightly incomplete and distorted image. The two other images ('*X-Factor*' and '*Hibiscus*') make a pair. They share a color scheme; and both show symmetrical, crystalline refractions of light, from a central shape or motif—exactly as one might find in a kaleidoscope. The colours (pink, purple-mauve, blue, and white) are faded; the imagery by convention is that normally taken to indicate trippy, out-of-body euphoria: pills. But these three two-dimensional pieces seem hardly there as works-of-art, existing maybe more as signs, indicators: the house 'drawing' emphasizes 'Idea'—and the idea of 'house': protected space, enclosure. The two spangly, euphoric images signpost the euphoria theme. The exhibition title is derived from a popular club dance tune, 'Work It To The Bone!'.

From that first room, which may not have detained the viewer a great while, one moves down a narrow, darkened passage, turns a corner and enters the exhibition's second half, a darkened room with three elements, each lit from more or less above. Nearest is a square-cube, box shape, chromed, and placed on the floor, the title: '*Solid*'. It reflects light around it, on to the floor: four sides giving four pleasantly distorted squares of light on the gallery floor where they float milkily. A reflection on the wall and another on the ceiling are similarly disarming and beautiful: slightly aqueous, fluid and gently pleasing. At a distance, and more central, is a grouping of functional furnishing elements that whisper 'interior-design'. These are '*Glory Box Variations 1, 2, 3 and 4*'—four vertical mirror panels (not glass, but mirror-finish stainless steel) with slightly deco, luxurious, gold-metal fittings (stainless steel sheet, stainless steel tube, milled steel etc, and plywood). The grouping creates a small world. They suggest booths, spaces for comfort and intimacy. Its perfect,

'schmick' finish and detailing are evocative of various forms of exceedingly luxurious functionality: luxury hotel fittings, the toilet and wet-area fittings attached to expensive bars and clubs. This kind of functionality *flatters* the individual, takes one in hand (it is for use, yes, but nothing *else* can be done there: one must give oneself up to it). It also *denies* the individual: it reduces one to a function, a function based on common needs, or based on gender. It says we are all the same, you are just 'another'. You might preen or check yourself before the mirror, with an eye to presentability, but only so as to pass as one among your kind.

This darkened second room of the gallery welcomed the viewer but also offered the challenge of its inscrutability and of its too-good-for-mere-mortals finish and beautifully engineered facture. One did not see at first that the panels had a mirroring effect: and here again one was brought up sharp, for a moment, at the sight of oneself shadowily appearing, adopted by the work and its purpose. In fact the group of quasi-booths could at first seem to hide other people—even to represent other human presences: so the installation initiates a brief 'night-club' anxiety for the viewer first arriving: am I alone, will I be welcomed? **'WORK!'** proposes things about individuality, and about the flight from it, the escape from it, that the dance club euphoria can give—derived from its inclusiveness (you join the protection, the membership, of a particular culture, a particular enthusiasm and demographic, etcetera, etcetera) and derived from surrender of personal identity to the freedom of the trance-like repetitions of the music, of dance, the body's range of simple, repeated movements.

The fittings also allude to impersonal sexual experience and to an ethos urging that one find oneself (or find out things about one's self) in this safely anonymous sexuality—find oneself and *lose* oneself, abandon, briefly, many of the specificities constitutive of the identity, its guilts and shibboleths and imperatives and personal history of vacillations and determinations. The mirrors that offer one's image back here—shadowy, warmly golden and dark, and not quite instantly recognizable—suggest one's own identity as similarly unstable, fluid, available to this untethering and this 'knowledge'. Huppertz is keen to give some permanent visual expression to these kinds of realization and kinds of escape—and their source in gay, clubbing culture. Earlier exhibitions have dealt with it: notably a 2012 Huppertz showing at Greenaway in the *Instinct* exhibition. The work in *Instinct* was good, but **'WORK!'** (and not just because it is a solo show) is more total. It makes an environment, more than an exhibition of individual pieces, however evocative—and one much less to be accessed simply by visual contemplation. The exhibition works many forms and kinds of psychic association.

A third piece abided in that same room: a set of glassy perspex boxes, that would seem akin to kinds of display fittings (for jewellery, say—at least in size—each 75 x 43.3 x 21.5 cms). Mounted about 4 feet off the floor on thin-legged metal frames, these made an assemblage of clear, ideal rectangular shapes that floated in the dark. Lit from above by special light their edges glowed in an arrangement of different colours: two lines of electric blue and a green. The colours, and their glassy, spacy 'abstract' materiality/immateriality echoed the crystalline, icy mauves and blues of the pictures in the first room. As with the 'booths', the objects had odd holes that—given their titling as *'Glory Box 1—3'*—suggested the, at least by convention, 'darker' identification—as mechanisms for impersonal, anonymous sex. Many viewers will have felt seduced by the enticing fittings so carefully made—and will have come up against these meanings with something of a start. Others will have taken it well in their stride. Some will not have guessed.

The darkened room's meanings wash back outside to the initial white room, and to the achieved and fleshed-out building 'diagram'—mounted as a three-dimensional reality—in the trailer. Its cloudy white atmosphere now reads as a kind of club-land environment, or perhaps as the mental space of a participant high on a buoying rush of chemicals, adrenalin and freedom. Was it the 'head-space' of a nominal club-land punter? It might even be read, metaphorically, as a metaphorical 'head', one 'lit' and 'filled' by those chemicals, that music and light. Was it a (self) portrait?

The diagram of the standard 'house' shape (*'Sink House Burn'*) looks, more certainly now, to name these themes: themes of desired release, protection, privacy and communality. 'Desired', 'promised', 'attained'.

Interestingly maybe, much of the exhibition's hold on visitors derived from the care and impersonal precision of the works' making. It suggested the effortless power of big-moneyed manufacture: high production values we don't often get in the art world. In contrast, the old metal trailer itself was not a manufactured one, it was hand-made. Not shiny, not sharp. Huppatz had found it and claimed it: aside from wheels and tyres the rest of the trailer was just slightly more folksy—'softened' by a dowdiness (of small dints and bendings and patching and hammering-into-shape). Attributes that made the object more approachable—rather than seductively magnetic. Was it the (unselfconscious, and slightly vulnerable) *body*, beneath the white, gas-filled house-shaped 'head' that grew out of the trailer-body? All of this would have to be metaphorical, maybe allegorical as the art-world used to understand the term. Maybe it is a stretch too far.

'WORK!' was installation with a difference. With very few means it occupied the gallery space entirely. Perhaps it could be said to have accepted the mantle available *from* the space. Darkened corners of the gallery were completely out of the viewer's consciousness—so it wasn't as though it was installation as transforming and enlivening the space. But neither was it a case of the work failing to fill the gallery properly. It is interesting to have these experiences brought—distilled, excerpted—into an art gallery. **'WORK!'** proposed their self-sufficiency, their autonomy: an escape from one form of the administered life. It probably intends to offer them as a paradigm of freedom, selflessness and belonging. The exhibition might be taken to vaunt these things or to be a tribute to them. Earlier exhibitions by Huppatz have proposed a like utopia.

MEAT MARKET

The Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia hosted a pair of exhibitions over more or less this same period. In the Project Space Derek Sargent had an installation, ***Allure Me***, themed around nascent teenage male homosexual desire and the lack of representations furnished in film and TV—hence its 'unimaginable' status: there are no role models and the lack works as part of the suppression and forbidding of gay sexuality and identity. The mainstream media, meanwhile, are full of endorsed heterosexual desire. This is only marginally less the case now than it was fifty years ago. On the other hand, it is not news now and the artworld has been dealing with it in ways like those employed here for some time. Keep on punching, I guess. The installation was well executed: a lowered ceiling formed of tautened, stretched white cords that ran down to pockets of imagery. These latter were palely monochrome light-box scenes of adolescents looking moodily romantic and uncertain, or joyous and innocent. I think. They were hard to make out—a correlative of their being hard to find. The images themselves were effective, as was the overall staging.

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In CACSA's main gallery Julie Robinson (***One To Rot And One To Grow***) dealt in the Old Testament imagery of gilded calf and pagan sensuality—to offer a number of instantiations of 'stages of life': ***Folk Death*** offered a goat, or probably a sheep, being led to its death (head covered in a blindfold, sticks attached to its legs to make it seem both controlled, hobbled, and much put upon). It was a strong enough work, reminding of one of Joseph

Beuys's hares (see his *'Eurasia'*), similarly treated with dis-abling stilts. (Robinson also uses a lot of felt, wood and fur—a look Beuys introduced way back, now an available, off-the-peg style-combination.)

Also strong was the CACSA middle room, which was occupied by a small funerary building, *'The Middle Place'*—of a sort that might, conjecturally, have been traditional since the Neolithic and into the early twentieth century. Like the workers' shelters in Southern Italy. Well, plausibly. Its shape reminded of coffin, tent, igloo: it was intriguing and visually interesting as a shape and a volume: shingle cladding covered most of it aside from its long, felt-covered, shallow entrance. Not quite instantly knowable though familiar enough somehow. Engaging, therefore. There were some pieces relating to the birth process (*'The loud wound'*) and maternal abundance, nurturing.

The rest of the exhibition combined Robinson's anticipated animal forms, usually just the hind quarters of cloven-hoofed animals. Tellingly, sheep, goats—no powerful claws, no lions or tigers, no might or authority. And sexy: these were not the victims, the scape-goat or the Lamb of Christ: emphatically pagan and Old Testament rather than Gospel Christian. Pairs of hindquarters (amusingly grey-trousered) were placed to suggest copulation, half hidden under gold canopy. Death, insurrectionary sex, a concise, sharp view of life, of the life 'cycle'—with a meaningless (but too good to forego) frisson from the pagan and 'Egyptian' (or maybe 'Byzantine') sensuality. It reminded of the vaguely Cecil B de Mille, orientalist antiquity produced by Lord Leighton and Alma-Tadema. This wasn't really very serious in the 1870s and might be less so now.

A problem with the show is the uncertain or unstable degree of anthropomorphism: when is it animals, when humans, who are thought to be having a good time or a bad time? And how precisely is anything ever suggested? When, for example, are we hooded and led to be slaughtered? Or is that one 'just for animals'? How sexily splendid is sex for animals—or was all that gold to indicate its human dimension? Perhaps it was a one-way traffic: the whole body of work had animals stand for the human. Somehow there is something—again, uncertainly—cute, or sentimental, or childish about it. Not that I mean to lay into *The Wind In The Willows*.

Earlier works by Robinson have for me very strongly brought to mind one phase of Bruce Nauman. His concern was with our junking of the natural (bio) world. Nauman offered a kind of potlatch massing of truncated and misassembled animal parts—deer, as I recall. The brutality of the forcefully enjambed body parts being a correlative of our violence

towards the animals and, generally, Nature. Earlier work by Robinson has suggested some of this. The artist's current show is more decorous.

So to **One To Rot**'s rationale. Yes, we still die. And we *are* animals. We can read **One To Rot**'s exhibited animal presences as about Life. We can read them as about *our* lives, specifically because of our commonality with animals. We can read the animal presences as surrogates for us—so, again, about 'our' lives, not via that commonality but as surrogate actors. **One To Rot** didn't seem to me to say a great deal read under any of these counts.

Consider the gallery's own words on the show—though a review of the catalogue is not the same, or quite as just, as a review of the artwork. Here the proposition was that the work is somehow investigative of a human history of dealing with mortality and with the stations of life. So the CACSA material proposed. But the range of attitudes to Life seemed not wide or sourced from a great many separate belief systems: the biblical Middle East, the European. Nor did the work seem to mount a critique of them. Perhaps it was powerfully *synoptic* and its distillations were offered as, um, efficacious, as 'appropriate', as celebration even? 'Resurrection' got a look in, I noted.

CACSA's accompanying floor-sheet has it that "Through her investigations Robinson's strong figurative element of her practice [sic] starts to break down and whatever animal or human presence remains becomes dissolved, disguised or disintegrated." The grammar is not the artist's fault. But, *were* they investigations? (It is amusing, though exasperating, how vague transitive verbs are when used in the art world about what art does or is: symptomatic, surely, of a sense of its practical ineptitude—or the logical weakness of what is being proposed. But left unexamined or unchallenged these usages *do* make the art seem important: "investigations"—that sounds like work.) And *what of* the forms' becoming "dissolved, disguised or disintegrated"? Why was this significant, and what did it signify?

THE CREW COMPARED THUMBS

Format's first show in its new location—was in fact an opening-party gambit: a film (called '*the first show*'?) was effectively the event. (Or it was the revelation of the space—and the film showing in the corner on a monitor). The film showed the restoration and refurbishing of the gallery, somehow 'after the manner' of sixties conceptualist performance art. It was even called '*Document*' and made by Paul Gallasch, a member of the collective. It was

replete with energetic, purposeful repetitive action (sawing, hammering, polishing, sanding), with the artists looking both 'serious young insect' and artisanal: they were doing 'work'—presented here as a performance. Opening night introduced the crowd, a segment of the art scene, to the new premises. If it gets off the ground and stays afloat FORMAT might be set for a long and successful run in oh-so-central Hindley Street: which would be a good thing for art in Adelaide. It is being set up to be—over three levels—a coffee shop, a bar-and-performance area, and a gallery. Bon chance!

COOL ENOUGH FOR YOU?

A pair of complementary shows are at FELT Space over the first half of July: Sophie Green's *Threshold* and Eugeniusz Lipczyk's *Constructis*. The artists share a cool sensibility and feel, and both make very restrained 'footprints' in their material, Green in particular. Sophie Green's work recalls some of the simplest conceptual art of the sixties, the sort whose work was making manifest a singular, immaterial, 'concept' and showing it as imposed (human, constructed) 'idea'. Fifty years later Green's works remark on the unremarkable to ask, *Ever thought of this?* The answer is, *Yes, involuntarily almost—but not so often that it bothers me.* Green's pieces allude, rather mutely and undemonstratively, to the outlines, borders, approximate positioning or definition, of some basic physical entities, most existing invisibly but notionally. We know 'the atmosphere' is out there: how does 'it' (the inverted commas would be the works') relate to a single breath? Where does the northern sky 'end' and the southern 'begin'? Both are identities we impose on the physical world. When even a single heater is turned on—one Green work consists of a heated panel—the planet warms up, no? About how much?

I *think* these are uninteresting facts. Of course they can be construed as poetic. That is, it might be thought that these works have us attend to the tiny 'weight' or volume of a breath, and that this is a good thing for us to do. Green's *'Tidal Volume'* alludes to this: a plinth, on the top of which is a shallow depression, barely perceptible, such as might accommodate that 'breath'. It might easily have been a small volume of fluid. It might *more* easily have not been registered at all and it is the accompanying notes ('All of the sky, one breath at a time', by Ash Tower) that identify the work as dealing with gaseous breath rather than a liquid quantity, or anything else.

As a whole the work in *Threshold* would be mute and unable to signal its meaning or intent—were it not for the slim chance offered by the pair of photographs, one green, one white, and both devoid of incident. Their titles—‘8:29 GMT (*northern*)’ and ‘8:29 GMT (*southern*)’—indicate the same Greenwich Meant Time, but different hemispheres. If the viewer is held long enough then the thought will arise (only from the prompt given by the title) that the distinction is rather sharp (one image green, one white) and the rectangular format is rather abstract, and arbitrarily so, as a representation adequate to any whole hemisphere. A consciously absurd sampling. Might the other pieces, therefore, also be about inadequacies or absences? The viewer will still likely need the nudging of the essay to arrive at seeing the rest as similarly about atmospheric measure, about measure itself, about quantification and delimitation of permeable and evanescent entities, measurement as the attempt to project fixity where there can only be fugitive or indeterminate phenomena. The pieces themselves are scarcely able to advert to their intentions: ‘*Distil*’, a sealed bottle-like container with a small amount of liquid; ‘*Diffuse*’, a blueish rectangular board leaning against the wall, a cord running from it to the electrical wall-socket and which is... a heater of sorts—though not visibly.

Eugeniusz Lipczyk’s pieces were more successful, though in a very current and ubiquitous mode that focuses on the brief frisson generated by the combination of materials—usually common, non-art materials, usually ‘found’ materials. The materials’ difference generates the charge that flows or obtains between the parts. In *Constructis* the materials were kept cleanly simple (the small footprint I alluded to earlier) and were few in number: metal and concrete in one case; in another, gleamingly clean and ‘fluid’ glass vessel and rough concrete—plus a dirtily dark fluid pooled within, and a metal tube; or again, glass, fluid, concrete, metal—and a bee. The charge, so-called, would derive from the affective qualities we endow the materials with (which we find in them or attribute to them. Or which they ‘just have’, if you are in that frame of mind).

Lipczyk’s ‘*Concrete Cylinders United By Brass*’—shown on the gallery invitation—was the simplest and maybe the most effective: two wittily conjoined forms. His other pieces dealt in more materials, and in materials more ‘affectively loaded’ culturally: the dark, prune-coloured liquid in the beautiful, glass, female bedpan looks a little more earthy (‘dark’ in another sense): is it a distillation (of wine, of brandy?), or a pooling of bodily fluids, or something else? The fluid is, by implication, sourced, via a small connecting brass tube, from within the rough-hewn concrete block. The work was ‘*Materials Composed, Concrete, Glass and Motor Oil*’. Lipczyk’s pieces were generally pleasing and had some mystery

about them, but mystery rather easily achieved. The formal balances and combinations were not unconventional.

Less humourful, but also a little less like dressage, Lipczyk's was a cool variant of the tour of effects and affects that Anna Horn gave in her ***Lightweight Heavy*** show at Fontanelle. Lipczyk worked with designer-friendly materials and contrasts, and much less with one's sense of weight and gravity than did Horn. He showed far fewer pieces. As Lipczyk stood to Horn, Horn's exhibition stood to the full-bodied workout of these effects in Louise Haselton's recent exhibitions.

The nervous-making paring, "affect and effect", has had a certain buzz in Adelaide art over the last few years. As has 'materiality'. A line of names could be imagined assembling, summoned by the sounding of this bugle—Michel Nikou, Nic Folland... Haselton, Horn, Julie Robinson even. A list of those with no connection to the materiality issue might be easier to devise. A no-brainer in some sense: because *for whom would the materials be irrelevant?* A 'post-object' artist?