

WHEN ATTITUDE BECOMES FUN 29.10.2003

by Ken Bolton

George Popperwell: *Fr. Lettuce*, CACSA, October 24—November 23, 2003

George Popperwell's work at CACSA has an amusing and amused air about it where his last few Adelaide appearances have struck very dark chords—think of *Region* (EAF, 1996) with its holocaustal references, and the collaborative installation made with Anton Hart, *The Cloak Room* (EAF, 2001), abuzz with intimations of instability, collapse and destruction. *French Letters* (to spell out the pun in the title) seems lighter, too, than the CACSA show of 1992, *Recent Work*, which came across as private in its investigations, as though able only to hint at its conclusions. *Fr. Lettuce*, in contrast, seems playfully to hide meanings.

The abiding strength that derives from Popperwell's arbitrary but, then, systematically applied procedures is a striking formal coherence and authority. The works have attitude and autonomy. None of the compositional features are mimetic or expressivist and in this they avoid most forms of cliché, of conventional readability. No personalising, autographic signifiers vouch for authenticity, or plead mere human failing: no invocation of landscape or the picturesque—thus no artful placement that must deny its artfulness. The big payoff, as I've said, is the air of self-containment, of the unarguable and systematic about the work's look and its ontological status: the work doesn't plead for attention.

Fr. Lettuce treats a number of instances of love and death and of sexuality in the lives of French poets, bold bohemian outsiders like Rimbaud and Verlaine, empowered aristocrats like the Duc d'Orleans. These pieces deal playfully with love and death, and might be instances of the life-force considered as valued only if it is risked, valuable only in the risking. So, the dangerous antics and attitudes of Rimbaud and Verlaine; Villon's ebullient courage or passion and his murder conviction; the pleasures of the mighty Duc. Enough of this is alluded to by the works' titles for the viewer to sense *Fr. Lettuce* as a set of cheerily

mordant exercises, transpositions, reductions and redactions of ... well, sophisticated, grown-up stuff.

On the other hand, *which* readers will guess, for example, that one work's colourings correspond to the colour values Rimbaud (in one of his poems) famously proposed for the several vowel sounds? And how many fewer will then know or look up the relevant poem and deduce the line of poetry spelled out by Popperwell's objects? The answer might be that none do. The catalogue's hinting that The viewer 'too' must 'do some work', is itself expected to do a lot of pre-emptive work on behalf of the pieces. It is an argument that seeks to defeat or censure complaint. I doubt that it is hoping, in good faith, to bring about any of the required research. Still, the show's air of gay, lighthearted, cryptogrammatic encoding (and the code's being made material and sometimes earthy—the towels and bath tiles that reminded of the early 90's Popperwell work), its air of play, and its formally forthright quality, were genuine positives and make it a strong exhibition.

It is almost as if conceptualism had entered a tough, brusque, 'what-you-see-is-what-you-get' formalist phase: the lives and lines of the louche French poets (in partnership with Popperwell's arbitrarily devised procedures) were the source of the work's formal outcome: they were not, in many senses, its 'meaning'. Conceptualism has done this before: Robert Morris's 'Box with the sound of its own making' which joked with the literalism of Frank Stella's what-you-see aesthetic. *Fr. Lettuce* is a more hermetic formalism. Knowledge of the alluded-to referents informed the works in some cases with a slightly dirty-minded kink that was fun, or with a possible pathos or heroism, or a kind of cheekiness. But of the whole show one was moved to ask, Why?