



The Fear of Fear

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In Michele Barker and Anna Munster's installation *Struck* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (8 February–22 March this year), three screens featured a blurred central figure of a naked woman, animated sketches and abstract electronic imaging against a mechanised audio background, occasionally pierced by faint cries and breathing. This was complemented by a narrative relating to the diagnosis of a neurological disorder, suggesting an institutional sequence of symptoms-diagnosis-consequences. On initial inspection, this work was about the (incompleteness of) interaction between art and science and the fragility of human subjectivity caught in the objective scientific gaze. Yet, on another level, *Struck* was also an insight into the process of creating contingencies in contemporary science, through its interaction with imaging. Or rather, it was about the lack of process, in the sense in which it was largely abstract, unfinished and contradictory.

If science was always about the production of knowledge and scientific truths, then never before have we been exposed to such a degree to the process of construction, and the value contingencies and absolute truths that play into that process. The aestheticisation of science is evident in the increasing popularity of 'medical' TV shows such as *Autopsy: Life and Death*—featuring live dissections of human cadavers by Freddy Kruger's anatomist cousin Gunther von Hagens—raising both the question of media ethics and popular taste (and when exactly live autopsy became a part of it). *Struck* provided an entry point into such intersections of art and science, by exposing some of the decisions and judgments that hide behind notions of objectivity. It asks us to consider the validity of information that we are given, echoing the more general

scepticism towards knowledge today. On one level, this is also evident in contemporary phenomena that expose the creation of knowledge such as Wikipedia.¹ Yet on another level, this is an insight into the politics of creating that knowledge. Just as Wikipedia acts as a form of "virtualised Athenian democracy"² making public the political convictions that always played a part in the creation of encyclopedias, *Struck* exposes some of the stakes implicit in contact between the body and the science of medicine. Yet, more importantly, *Struck* also suggests a mode of subjectivity, a position for the subject of that discourse. And in doing that, it serves as an important insight into how aestheticised science may point to a still-emerging conceptual framework for thinking about our subjectivity.

This question of the intersection between medical science and the body also featured in Barker and Munster's more recent video work *Something Which Does Not Show Itself* (2007), at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney. We were faced with a twitching amputated limb, shot in grainy black and white. Although on initial inspection the work dealt with the loss of a limb—or rather a phantom limb returning as the uncanny organ without a body—all traces of violence were enclosed by the white cloth wrapped around the arm, suggesting a sense of rebirth and resurrection. Yet, all this was set against the audio of buzzing electric current, thunder, the clicking of a camera shutter and the diagnostic monologue of medical examiners. Emerging out of several inaudible voices—which in fact was one voice juxtaposed—we heard a detached, objective discussion of symptoms of a disease.³ The voice was manipulated to produce repetition of expression, particularly in the use of the word 'something'. Out of the confusing and overlapping expressions emerged a thread of phrases: "symptoms of a disease... certain occurrences

in the body... which show themselves... and which in showing themselves as thus showing themselves indicate something which does not show itself." Thus, on one level, this seemingly nonsensical rehearsing of 'forensic' scientific objective language certainly referred to the inquisitive (and invasive) nature of the medical profession. In referring to the symptoms which, in showing themselves "as thus showing themselves" indicate something that is absent, the work recalled a sense of investigative medicine that adopts a forensic approach in seeking out the hidden symptoms. Yet, on another—more ideological—level, this work also referred to the way seemingly (a)political contemporary practices always work against a background of disavowed beliefs that "we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values".⁴ Interestingly, the very phrasing of the audio recalls the famous statement by Donald Rumsfeld on the relation between the known and the unknown:

*There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. This is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.*⁵

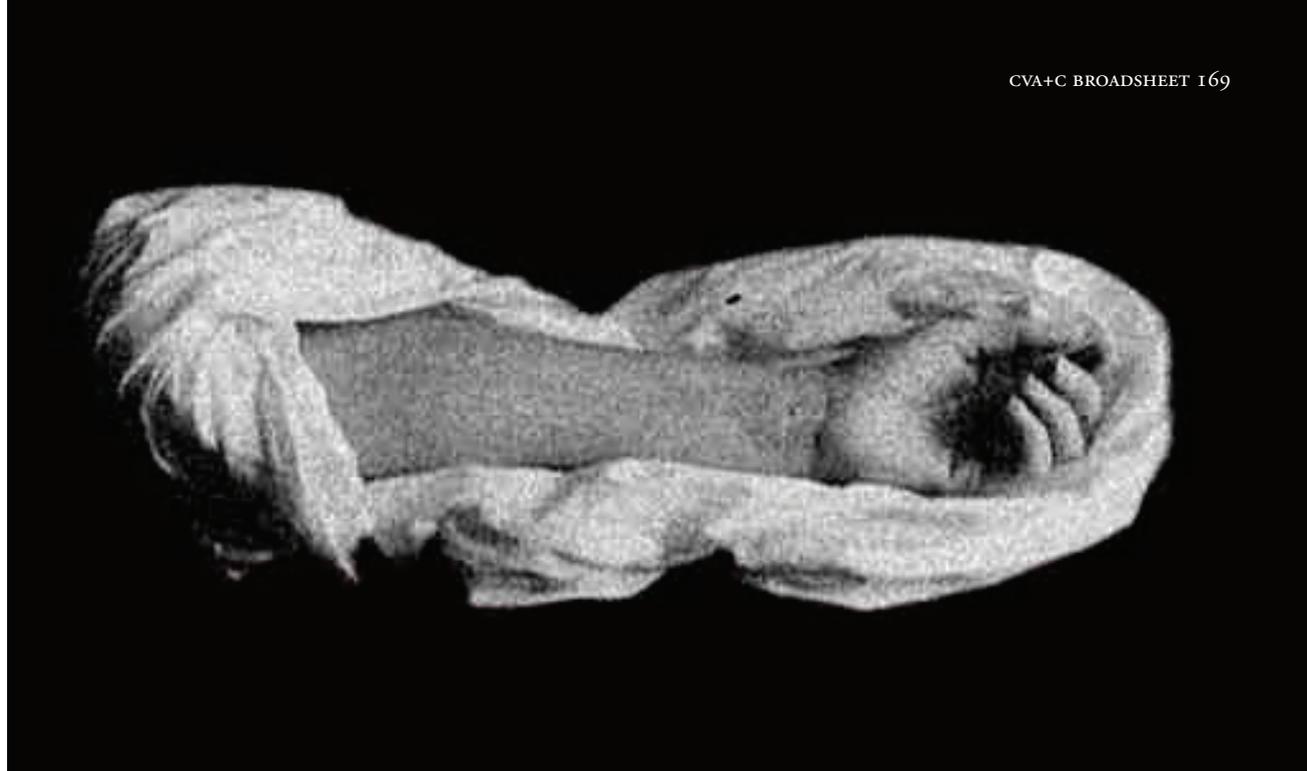
What the work articulates is precisely the fourth category that is missing from Rumsfeld's thesis, which is the "unknown knowns" of contemporary ideology, referring to the unwritten beliefs, codes and rules working silently against the background of public values.

It is precisely in forging links between such seemingly unrelated phenomena that we can fully grasp the political co-ordinates of cultural projects/artistic interventions today. Because it

is only in this way that we can politicise them and re-ignite their critical potential. Much in the same way as these two works provide both an insight into the way scientific discourse may frame our subjectivity and into contemporary ideology, a personally witnessed instance on the way to the exhibition opening of *Struck* indicated how the notion of fear provides a conceptual framework for understanding of the world today.

A young man boarded a train carriage in Sydney's key train station, with something protruding under his jacket and began singing/muttering as he sat down. His behaviour became threatening to the point of inducing panic, not because he corresponded to an Islamic-terrorist stereotype, or because his behaviour was anti-social, but because it appeared as uncertain and unpredictable. Professor of Criminology Richard Ericson argues that this urge to treat "every imaginable source of harm as a crime" is rooted in contemporary neo-liberal political cultures that are obsessed with uncertainty.⁶ This process of criminalisation occurs in relation to an ever-expanding array of harms that includes publicly demonised enemies—from broadly and abstractly defined 'terrorists', to welfare 'frauds' and online 'perverts'—and fosters widespread prejudice that through trickle-down effects impacts on the social relations of everyday life. In such a climate of uncertainty, where everything is seen through its potentially criminal element, the general culture of suspicion is so pervasive that there is a marked increase in "distrust of people and institutions, discriminatory practices, and fragmentation into population segments of aliens and the alienated".⁷

On the one hand, the presence of constant threat has been used to limit civil liberties and promote neo-liberal economic policies under the guise of promoting patriotism. Yet, the breach of civil liberties is always articulated as a matter of our own democratically constituted choice. This appearance of choice is deceptive, as it is always underpinned by unwritten rules that force us to make the "right choice".⁸ For instance, in the face of the recent horrific shooting at the Virginia Tech University in the USA, George W. Bush refused to even consider the issue of gun control. A day after the incident, he defended the right to bear arms as a matter of individual choice, albeit one that was increasingly opposed by the public.⁹ Similarly, during the predictable outpouring of politicians' teary-eyed patriotism that accompanied this year's ANZAC day celebration—including the over-protective hysteria against the desecration of the ANZAC memorial in Bathurst by five teenage girls¹⁰—it became apparent how the mythology of ANZAC illustrates the primary rules of culture in neo-liberal economic rationalist Australia today—culture should not be costly (it should be cost-effective); culture should not be materialist (it should be above material concerns); and culture should not be political (it should be depoliticised). The powerful and enduring presence of the ANZAC mythology in Australian popular culture is certainly due to people's genuine belief in its narratives, yet its official promotion should also not be underestimated. The ANZAC mythology is a highly profitable tourist industry, evident in the annual parades and pilgrimages to Gallipoli in Turkey. The ANZAC mythology is universal and can be easily displaced from any material concerns. Even with the present high level of opposition to Australian military intervention on foreign soil, the ethos of ANZAC strongly resonates and is able to capture the hearts and minds of many. Further, the ANZAC mythology—including ideas of solidarity (mateship), egalitarianism (fair go), and persistence (the battler)—can never be too closely linked to Australian political and economic



interests. There was clear evidence for this in the outcry against the media campaign in 2005 that involved Australian war veterans condemning the Australian Government's exploitation of East Timor's oil resources.¹¹ For contemporary sensibilities, it was deplorable to even contemplate linking the ANZAC mythology with Australian international politics. Effectively, the ANZAC spirit was above such concerns. Yet, the fact that 2007 was the first year to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans in the ANZAC Day parade (albeit separate from the main parade in Sydney) indicates how a universalised mythology of ANZAC forestalls the consideration of Australian local history and the colonial legacy.

Alternatively, all problems today are universally and automatically translated into problems of tolerance, as the central tenet of neo-liberalism. Accordingly, racism and sexism are no longer seen as problems of justice but of tolerance. Philosopher Jacques Ranciere identifies this depoliticisation as endemic to contemporary obsession with the State—or rather 'hatred' because of the failure—of democracy. He argues that today's hatred of democracy is based on the fundamental paradox of democracy—the democratic social order is based on the belief in the equal rights of all citizens and the ability to pursue them, yet on the political level, democracy is about containing the excess that emerges out of the drive of those citizens to fulfil their desires. Placing the blame squarely on democracy:

*doubles the consensual confusion in making the word 'democracy' an ideological operator that depoliticizes the questions of public life by turning them into 'societal phenomena', all the while denying the forms of domination that structure society.*¹²

The increase in the rhetorical stakes in discussions of democracy suggested here—and in phrases like "state of exception", used when discussing the present 'crisis' in which we find ourselves¹³—signal a shift in the relationship of individual subjectivity to democracy, articulated through State sovereignty. Contemporary projects that concern themselves with the relationship between the present

'state of exception' and democracy, such as the group exhibition *If you See Something, Say Something*¹⁴ take the present to be both an extension of modernist capitalism and a series of imposed 'radical' breaks in accordance with the linear modernist time flow of historical progress.¹⁵ International in scope, works that were broadly speaking activist and political, argued that modernism's crisis both extends itself into the present moment, and that the present constitutes a radical break with the past. They questioned the premise that the state of exception was constitutive of modernity itself and that it—articulated through dissent—remains as the only viable political option in the face of recent events.

Featuring sixteen artists in three galleries, and complemented by a number of workshops, events and a newspaper, this project was admirable both in its scope, ambition and ability to clearly articulate and co-ordinate a message. Several of the works addressed the role of personal narratives within larger, often traumatic events. Al Fadhil's video installation *Home Sweet Home* (2006) used the metaphor of habitation to reflect on the recent events in Iraq and their terrible impact on the artist's family. Despite its sad and traumatic content, this work was also about hope and its possibility in difficult times. While *Home Sweet Home* was not a political work, it was directly concerned with the ethics of political choices. The personal narratives of loss, hope and habitation appealed to the audience as universal messages. Yet, the fact that they were positioned within the specific co-ordinates of contemporary global politics gave them a powerful message that was not directly political. As such, it was admirable in its ability to gently reverse the attitudes that have accompanied recent discussions about the 'problem of Islam' in Australia. Namely, in all these discussions, Islam is treated as something that is both an excess (of belief, faith) and an absence (of a political dialogue) that is to be tolerated. Yet, importantly this tolerance is to be based on the absence of politics.

An example of the way in which the question of race has been displaced as a political issue can be found in the controversy that surrounded the comments made against Islam by French novelist Michel Houellebecq.¹⁶ Discussing the publication of his novel *Platform* in an interview with *Life* magazine just



prior to 11 September, 2001 in which he describes an Islamic terrorist attack on a bar in a Thai tourist resort, Houellenbecq openly expressed his contempt for Islam. A case was mounted for religious and racial incitement. However, Houellenbecq successfully defended himself on the grounds that it was impossible to be racist against Muslims because they were not a race but a religious group. Inasmuch as his comments were directed only against a religion that was “stupid” and “hateful” and not its adherents, Houellenbecq’s words were deemed to carry no racism or intolerance against Muslim people. While this may be an example seldom found in Australia, this kind of attitude has been frequently replayed in recent reactions towards alleged Islamic terrorist threats towards the Australian people.

The debates over the detention of the Australian citizen Mamdouh Habib in Guantanamo Bay prison (who opened the exhibition *If you See Something, Say Something*), the treatment in Australia of illegal refugees from Islamic countries, the exclusionary nationalism exemplified in the ‘border control’ protection, or the frequent news reports over alleged threats from the neighbouring countries with large Muslim populations (such as Indonesia), are all indicative of this shift. Yet they are offset by the media boasting of spontaneous outbursts of ‘traditional’ Australian values, most notably of ‘mateship’ evident in the generous aid by Australia to the victims of the tsunami tragedy that struck Asia on 26 December, 2004. This reflects the doubling effect of the ‘unwritten rules’ at play in Australian multiculturalism, wherein there is a gap between the over-protective attitude in breaches of Australian national security by elements of ‘difference’, and the willingness in Australia to promote human rights on foreign soil.

Several performance works questioned the relationship of public space and the possibility of artistic intervention into that space. Astra Howard’s *CITYtalking* and pvi collective’s *the loyal citizens underground* draw on the Situationist’ strategies of *dérive* and *detournement* to present ideological criticism through re-assembling of social spaces.¹⁷ Astra Howard’s *CITYtalking* is a mobile conversation booth that was moved around Melbourne’s CBD between 4 October and 5 November, 2006. Members of the public were encouraged to partake in conversation (with the artist) through an intercom, while remaining both anonymous and visually unfamiliar with their converser. pvi collective’s video screening of the performance *the loyal citizens underground* involved five ‘model citizens’ patrolling the streets of Perth seeking out anti-social behaviour (as defined by current laws) and trying to correct/reform it through conversation and ‘conduct cards’. Howard recreated a sense of social displacement inherent in communication by suspending the social relations inherent in communication. Her work was a combination of the anonymity of a verbal peepshow, and the safely-distant communication of the confessional. In giving a voice to the voiceless, she provided both a democratic archive of the vernacular, and prompted people to reflect on their own histories through dialogue. pvi collective’s performance—in at least temporarily suspending the laws of social courtesy and respect for private space in public—recreated some of the implicit public judgment brought about through new sedition laws. The performers offered themselves to public judgment based on their performance of ‘the judges of the public’, recreating the spectacle of public appearances. In doing so, they made both a powerful statement on contemporary social space and critically recreated the spectacle of public humiliation in reality television.

At a time when so many things claim to be ‘political’ and ‘radical’—Hollywood productions included—based on their ability to say something that is ‘new’ or ‘shocking’, *If you See Something, Say Something* was a breath of fresh air. As today political radicalism (or activism for that matter) has become a staple in the entertainment industry, politics itself has become a form of showmanship that emulates change and transformation. In contrast to the contemporary rhetoric of fear that positions ‘the new’ as the only way out of the perpetual crisis, this project established history as the site on which to work through the possibility of artistic intervention. *If you See Something, Say Something* saw inherent difference in the fabric of capitalism as the seed of dissent. And in this, it may provide some way forward in thinking about the present.

Notes

¹ Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) is a free online collaborative encyclopedia project that works on the principle of open editing for all users, coded so that all previous corrections are saved and visible. This provides a unique insight into the process of creation of archives of knowledge. For an interesting analysis of the political implications of this model, see Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, ‘Oppositional Politics and the Internet: A Critical/Reconstructive Approach’, *Cultural Politics* Vol 1 No 1, 2005: 75–100

² Ibid: 92

³ The underlying text is taken from a quote by Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. It is not intended as a literal reference that the audience needs to be aware of. My thanks to Michele Barker for this information

⁴ See Slavoj Zizek, ‘What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib’, <http://www.lacan.com/zizekrumsfeld.htm>

⁵ I am here referring to Zizek’s discussion of Rumsfeld’s statement. Ibid.

⁶ Richard Ericson, *Crime in an Insecure World*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007: 1

⁷ Ibid: 214

⁸ Slavoj Zizek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2006: 348–349

⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/still-bush-defends-the-right-to-bear-arms/2007/04/17/1176696841532.html?page=fullpage#>

¹⁰ For report see <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/bathurst-war-memorial-desecrated/2007/04/25/1177459750836.html>

¹¹ For report see <http://www.theage.com.au/news/National/War-veterans-fight-on-over-advertisements/2005/04/18/1113676701769.html?from=moreStories>

¹² Jacques Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*, London and New York: Verso, 2006: 92

¹³ An example is Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of the changes in the relationship of individual subjectivity to State sovereignty. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer—Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford California 1998 and especially *State Of Exception*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2005

¹⁴ Exhibition was held in Sydney in January/February 2007. For details, see <http://www.ifyouseesomethingsaysomething.net/>

¹⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (trans.) Catherine Porter, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993: 72

¹⁶ For full account see Sophie Masson, ‘The Strange Case of Michel Houellebecq’, *Quadrant* Vol 47 No 6, June 2003: 52–56

¹⁷ *Dérive* (literally meaning ‘drifting’ in French) is a strategy of passage through spaces to enhance their experiences. *Detournement* is a practice of hijacking cultural material and the rearranging of that material for the purpose of criticism. For detailed explanations of both concepts, see Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (eds), *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona ACTAR, 1996: 22