

Victoria Lynn, 'Apart, we are together', **Adelaide International: Apart, we are together**, Adelaide Festival, 2010, pp 6-11

The apparent paradox in the title of this exhibition – that even though we may be apart, we can also be together – is, at one level, the perfect expression of the process of collaboration that went into curating an exhibition featuring 11 international artists and collaborations at five contemporary arts organisations in Adelaide. *Apart, we are together* is also an expression of the ways in which the artists follow the journey of the heart – the symbol for the 2010 Adelaide Festival. The heart can take us in many directions: to memory, secrets, longing and emotional thresholds. It is with the heart that we form connections with others. What does it take to communicate? What forms of resistance and resilience do we find? Together – and apart – the varied body of work in this inaugural Adelaide International provides a beating force that invites us to bond with seemingly ungraspable horizons, even if the connections are tentative, temporary and replete with contradiction.

As Lucy + Jorge Orta have commented, to make a link with the heart is to form 'the vital connection that fosters our relationship to others through dialogue and action'.<sup>1</sup> The condition of 'apart, we are together' is integral to the Orta studio, based in France. Their work often arises from events initiated in the public realm that combine practitioners from diverse backgrounds, such as the creative disciplines of art, fashion, design and architecture, and individuals drawn from humanitarian, immigrant and refugee groups. The work presented at JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design is a new chapter in the Ortas' Fluid Architecture project that began at RMIT, Melbourne, in 2002, where over a period of four weeks, diverse groups made sculptures, performances and drawings around the creative idiom of Nexus-Heart. The Orta's art is created and situated in a way that both traces and interprets these shared experiences, while valuing multiple interpretations.

Tara Donovan's work offers a more abstract way of thinking through the notion of linkage. The simple polystyrene cup – disposable, manufactured and plentiful – is accumulated in massive numbers to create a sculptural wonder. Exhibiting some debt to the history of minimalist sculpture, this US artist transforms an everyday receptacle into a contemporary, floating spectral presence that has associations beyond the summation of its parts. The sense of bond is all the

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Orta, 'Fluid architecture', [www.fluidarchitecture.net](http://www.fluidarchitecture.net)

more powerful because Donovan relies on the physical properties of her materials – which on other occasions have included toothpicks, mylar, paper plates, straws and pencils – to determine the ways in which the items are affixed. Such is the power of being ‘together’, these collections of objects seem to have a will of their own, and yet also have ‘a limitless potential to fall apart’.<sup>2</sup> The push and pull between the singular object and its status as a part of a vast mutable force is what gives these works their abstract dynamism. Her large, pulsating suspended sculpture in the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art invokes the circumstance of connection as transformation itself. In combination, the works of the Orta studio and Donovan attest to the spectrum of interpretations offered by the notion of ‘being together apart’, a simultaneity that is as relational as it is abstract.

‘Apart, we are together’ is from a 1897 prose poem by Stéphane Mallarmé entitled *Le nénuphar blanc* (The white waterlily). Set on a river in summer, the narration takes the form of a man’s wistful imaginings. Lulled by the humid beauty of his surrounds, he is surprised to detect a rustling sound in the landscape. He supposes that it is the woman he was to greet, but rather than proceeding, he chooses to remain ‘apart’, immersing himself in his dream of her presence. From an emotional register, the poem is an expression of desire in the face of separation. It embodies an awareness of disconnection, but is also expectant of togetherness, suggesting that the two states are not necessarily oppositional – that the condition of being together is to be separate and, that the inverse is also true: in the company of disjuncture is conjunction; amid separation, forced or otherwise, is a will to bond. In relation to the heart, the phrase can be read as an expression of an impulse to connect with an object, a person, group, place or state of being.

Mallarmé was writing in the late 19th century, a world away from the contemporary art of today, and yet his phrase chimes a chord with the contemporary condition. The philosopher Jacques Rancière compares Mallarmé’s poem with Georges Seurat’s painting *Bathers at Asnières* 1884.<sup>3</sup> For Rancière, the ‘being together apart’ comes to refer to much more than the romantic imaginings of Mallarmé’s protagonist. In his view, the two works speak to the class divisions between a life of leisure and a life at work. Making a further comparison with the contemporary French activist art group Urban Encampment, he suggests that in the early 21st century, ‘being together apart’ comes to be about the loss of a social bond through dislocation and rampant

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<sup>2</sup> Jen Mergel & Nicholas Baume, ‘Second nature’ in *Tara Donovan*, Monacelli Press in association with the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Boston 2008, p 11

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘Aesthetic separation, aesthetic community: scenes from the aesthetic regime of art’, *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol 2, no 1, 2008

individualism. As such, the artist can have a role in manifesting renewed senses of connection. Such gestures need not be sentimental or nostalgic. Rather, they come from a position of both compassion and resistance, embracing a spirit of inclusion and hospitality, as well as a celebration of difference.

From the perspective of visual composition, the phrase ‘apart, we are together’ invokes assemblage, bricolage, collage and the associated filmic technique of montage. These methods of composition are used by the artists in this exhibition to create a community of images, objects and texts that can be both familiar and unfamiliar to one another. Meaning is generated across gaps, fragments, edits, multiple screens and parts, through the processes of analogy, metaphor and association. These are visual/aural/textual clusters that can tolerate both the commensurable and seemingly incommensurable. Narrative sequences are interrupted and interwoven with others. The audience is invited to use their imagination to bridge the disparate elements, and thereby bring together that which appears to be apart. The incommensurable, the unlikely combination and the strange juxtaposition are utilised as positive forces, for generating meaning through a dynamic visual interplay.

Mallarmé is also author of *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (Dice thrown never will annul chance), a 1897 poem that signalled a new form of dynamism. He had the poem typeset in a range of scripts and sizes across ten folios of the magazine *Cosmopolis*. A single sentence – ‘dice thrown never will annul chance’ – dominates the text in a large point size. The poem offers more than one possible interpretation as words, phrases and letters take their turn, as it were, to arise and retreat on the structure of the page. Both the image of the typeset poem, and its content, meditate on the notion of chance. The random processes and encounters that we find in a child’s game can ignite a seemingly unrelated action or image. As Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* suggests, the game structure allows for interactivity, multiple interpretations, performances and unfolding processes. Mallarmé once wrote, ‘to name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little: to suggest...there is the dream’.<sup>4</sup> Such states underpin the works of Li Mu, Iman Issa and Donghee Koo.

In 2008 and 2009, Li Mu worked with young prisoners (under the age of 18) in the juvenile reformatory in Shanghai. He gave them three bookshelves with approximately 300 books. Every

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<sup>4</sup> Mallarmé cited in Umberto Eco, *The open work*, trans Anna Cancogni, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1989, p 8

Friday, they had access to this library and were allowed to communicate freely. Alongside the books were 30 blank sketch-pads for them to draw or write on. In the afternoon of the last day of each month, the artist joined the inmates to draw pictures, read, talk and play games, including ‘knock drum to pass a flower’ (a version of pass-the-parcel) and blowing up balloons and bursting them. This project also took the form of a photographic and video work, entitled *Blued books 2008–09*, reflecting upon the question of entrapment and freedom, and the associated states of being both apart and together, in the hope that ‘each participant will enjoy a sense of freedom, purity and peace while reading the books’.<sup>5</sup> Several worlds and states of being are counter-poised in relation to one another – prisoner and art publication; game and reflection – so that inevitably one is entangled with the other and a kind of conduit is created between them.

The Austrian writer Karl Kraus once wrote, the more closely you look at a word, the more distantly it looks back.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, the more closely one looks at a place, the more distantly it looks back. The individual encounter with an urban metropolis is the subject of Egyptian-born Iman Issa’s series of c-prints *Making Places 2007*. Like Li Mu, Issa’s actions are motivated by a belief in chance: she throws a ball up against a vast skyscraper, shines the light of a torch into a pedestrian tunnel, and empties a bucket of water into a functioning fountain. These gestures consider the diverse economies of scale in civic space, and underline the necessity to make one’s place local. Countering the monumental grandeur of New York with temporary, un-monumental actions, Issa’s response may seem futile, but its strident simplicity creates temporal bonds with an otherwise epic architecture.

Like the work of Li Mu and Iman Issa, Korean artist Donghee Koo utilises playfulness to bridge a divide in a decidedly adult world. Her video *Static electricity of cat’s cradle 2007* takes its title from the game cat’s cradle, where string is looped on the fingers to make an elaborate pattern that can be transferred to other players and varied accordingly. Connections are made, entangled and reassigned in this video, where a young man joins his harness to that of a woman (who is apparently asleep) and they are both hoisted into the air by a complex pulley system. Their precarious balance between being at once apart and together, willing and not willing, is at one level a game, a slow tease. At the end of the video, the ‘trick’ is revealed in the figure of a puppeteer who is literally pulling the strings. An additional element is a film within a film: the

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<sup>5</sup> Email from the artist, 26 June 2009

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Walter Benjamin in his essay ‘Hashish in Marseilles’. See Michael W Jennings et al (eds), *Walter Benjamin: selected writings: volume 2, part 2, 1931–1934*, First Harvard University Press, USA 2005, p 678

young man uses a remote control to begin a filmic backdrop that could also represent a shared space of the couple: their memories encapsulated in the form of film fragments.

Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani, Rossella Biscotti and Apichatpong Weerasethakul work with the idea of the memory flash through the history and materiality of film. The recollections embodied in these narratives connect voices, emotions and places across time. *Spelling Dystopia* 2008–09 by German artists Fischer and el Sani is a video diptych focusing on the public perception of the uninhabited Japanese island of Hashima, near Nagasaki. An important location for coal-mining until 1974, in 2000 it became the location for a blockbuster science-fiction film. In the video diptych, the artists combine the memories of a former inhabitant of the island with the narration of two high-school students who recall fragments of the movie *Battle royale*. Archival material is used in the video: photographs of the island when it operated as a mine, books about its history and manga images are shown in short sequences. It is not so much that memories are being resurrected in a way that is accurate or truthful, but rather new associations are made and formed. Layers of reality and fiction are intermingled; the official and unofficial are intertwined. These representations become sensitised by each other and the viewer's own experience of *Spelling Dystopia* becomes part of the loop.

The notion of collective memory that arises in Fischer and el Sani's work encapsulates the spirit of 'apart, we are together', for a collective memory is as varied as it is conjoined, as heterogenous as it is shared. Equally, Italian artist Rossella Biscotti comments, 'my work investigates the individual and collective memory, confusing the idea of truth and reconstruction. I am interested in the modification of history, in the remixing of the line of time. Pieces of the past which fall into the present and stay there... Amnesia is part of this process'.<sup>7</sup> *The sun shines in Kiev* 2004–06 is a film, slide projection and a poster, presented at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation. At its basis is a film by Vladimir Shevchenko, one of the first filmmakers who was allowed access to the 'red zone' after the meltdown of the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl in 1986. Much of the original film has disappeared, and what remains shows white spots, like flashes, where radiation has seeped in. Biscotti's interviews with Shevchenko's widow and camera assistant reveal contradictory stories. It is either memory loss or self-censorship that allows 'official' histories to be modified and vice versa. Biscotti's film and slide assemblage brings together these disparate memories of a life cut short that, in turn, is interwoven with our own collective memories of the incident and its after-effects.

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<sup>7</sup> Francesca Boenzi, 'Rossella Biscotti: tales of ordinary amnesia', *Work. Art in Progress*, Nov 2007

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's feature films and video installations are punctuated by characters that connect, disconnect and are reborn through the memory flash across time and location. Apichatpong's digital video projection *Morakot (Emerald)* 2007, shown in this exhibition, is set in a dilapidated Bangkok hotel of the same name. The filmmaker invests the hotel with new memories, as we listen to the exchange between three 'spirits' amidst a slow dance of dust particles. Apichatpong has compared the video with *The pilgrim Kamanita*, a Buddhist novel written in 1906 by the Danish writer Karl Gjellerup, in which the protagonists are reborn as two stars and take centuries to recite their stories to each other until they no longer exist.<sup>8</sup> Echoing Mallarmé's *Le nénuphar blanc*, the female spirit recites a poem that she composed for a man she once saw, but decided not to approach. At the close of the video, we can just detect the images of two faces, without bodies, embedded in the pillows.

Fish tails, shells, fruit, serpent-like forms and even a stingray have become attached to body shapes in Julian Hooper's sequence of ink drawings on paper presented at Flinders University City Gallery. These assemblages, recalling the work of Arcimboldo, are set in minimalist architectural environments, as the figures hover, pose and walk, as if on a catwalk. Some interact, others are loners. Hooper has compared them with figures from fashion magazines, but the absurdity of their attire transports them from an everyday location or identity into their own universe. These unexpected combinations recall the discordant practices of surrealism and dadaism, but Hooper's work is not so absurdist. The artist's oeuvre has been characterised by this process of finding links and connections between seemingly unfamiliar territories. Previously, he has made hundreds of watercolours based on his ancestral heritage, which has the complexity of a fictional story, transiting from Transylvania to Samoa, Fiji and finally New Zealand. In this new body of work, he exhibits a more observational eye. Yet his whimsical combinations thwart the ethnographic gaze, and unravel the absurdity of the act of 'observation' from which the botanical references are derived.

In the work of Indian artist Praneet Soi, the human form is also dissected and bifurcated. Rather than being attached to non-human imagery, however, Soi's figures appear to be wounded by torture, warfare, dislocation. Their faces often express a combination of pain and bewilderment. In a work entitled *Crippled leads the blind* 2009, two bodies are so entwined that it is not possible

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<sup>8</sup> James Quandt (ed), *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, Austrian Film Museum and SYNEMA, Vienna 2009, p 241

to distinguish where one begins and the other ends. Art historian Linda Nochlin has suggested that the body in pieces implies the ‘social, psychological, even metaphysical fragmentation that so seems to mark modern experience – a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value’.<sup>9</sup> Soi’s paintings, working collages and wall paintings (a combination that attests to a research-based practice) take inspiration from the history of modern Indian painting, but are very much located in a global environment of conflict. This work is a mediation of what it means to be driven apart, literally and metaphorically, and how this is experienced within the body. For this exhibition at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Soi premieres a new body of work based on his experiences during October 2009 in the 3rd Riwaq Biennale, Ramallah.

The work of Palestinian artist Raeda Saadeh is presented alongside Soi. The artist’s body is a central motif in her videos and performances. Drawing on the notion that gender is in itself a performance, Saadeh depicts herself vacuuming a barren and vast mountainscape in the two-screen video *Vacuum 2007*. The video uses this humorous action to ask more serious questions. Not only does it consider women’s struggle, but also the role of cleansing in the wider context of the contested territories of Palestine and Israel. Like Issa’s gesture of spraying a can of paint into the air from a bridge in New York City, Saadeh’s vacuum cleaner is a futile device. But at another level, it is a complex symbol of the desire to connect with place in a turbulent region.

The artists in this exhibition are part of a broader trend in contemporary art that seeks to form connections between disparate entities. Such assemblages and encounters often result in an unravelling of one world view behind another, not simply to create an alternative, or an amalgam of possibilities, but to invent a different mode of connection that is entangled, intermingled and temporal. It is no accident that much of this work is based in process or performance, in the use of the interview or the documentation of sites and behaviours, for the artists are very much concerned with their contemporary everyday world, even if it is a place they do not belong. As such, they resort to the everyday, modest gesture – sticking, conversing, playing, recording – to create works that emanate from a sense of heartfelt compassion. This is also about trying to make sense of a world that has such extreme economies of scale, apparent in our civic spaces, contested homelands and global media. Such monumental symbols are countered by un-monumental relations. It may be argued, as Rancière does, that these concerns have distinguished both art and

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<sup>9</sup> Linda Nochlin, *The body in pieces: the fragment as a metaphor of modernity*, Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures, Thames and Hudson, New York 1995, pp 23–24

society since Mallarmé's time. The line 'apart, we are together' is, for Rancière, an expression of the ability for disconnected entities to have meaning in relation to one another, even though, on the surface, they have an unequal relationship. The works in this exhibition, and the ways in which they are situated across the city of Adelaide, celebrate collective experiences and memories that are simultaneously woven together and disparate, split and combined, belonging and estranged.

**Victoria Lynn**