

## REVIEW: SIGNS OF LIFE, MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL 1999

*"An ordered conglomeration of signs (sometimes taken for wonders), galleries function as frames that contextualise, construct and reconstruct particular meanings". (1)*

Reflection upon the nature of art as a cultural construct and its mediation by institutional mechanisms has led to formulations for a "new museum" - one in which space is understood as both a physical and phenomenological reality. This space recognises that "the meaning of an object continues in the imaginative work of the viewer who brings to their own agenda, experiences and feelings". (2) To experience **Signs of Life** as a kind of "open work" is to make an idiosyncratic voyage; an exploration of the relation between art and life in which the transformative power of the museum is engaged through the elusive yet potential space of the imagination.

**Bobe's Legend** by Robert Gligorov is a time-lapsed recreation of time-space in a video performance of the sequential emergence of nesting birds from the mouth of a man; "a being that has lost the confidence of birds". (3) In the "deistic" tense of becoming, this work is both self-creative and self-reflexive. We watch suspended on the cusp between nothing and something, poised, waiting for something to emerge... and are startled and wonder... How does the bird rest so peacefully inside the mouth? How fascinating that one quivers and trembles and then returns, while others seemingly decide to leave the nest with ease like the soul leaving the body. This piece sustains perplexity with a calm centred awareness in which freedom (and the anguish of freedom) is both familiar and elusive; never absolute. We attend to a dimension of experience where disciplines and explanations fail - a fixated frozen view of things is undermined in favour of the contingent, ambiguous creative characterisation of selves and the formless potentiality at the centre of experience. A wordless creative process, an awakening, a fiction, a reminiscence. A shared hiding place. Man is complicit, his eyes finally open. Revelation never occurs.

Andrea Lange's **Refuge Talks** is a life-sized video which delves into song, in languages that are mostly unfamiliar to me. A sequential performance, open and transcendent, in which the body becomes song to communicate beyond words, cultures and traditional forms. Ethnic upheaval and almost-forgotten customs are revealed, despite and against surroundings lacking beauty, warmth and place. 'Performers' are displaced people without foothold or belongings, in stockinged feet, with cigarettes and improvised instruments. Singing into the silence they conjure a sense of worship and ritual comfort; a melodic memory like an incantation. They sing their world into being and we travel with them. A string of songs broken only by silence, their complete failure to conceal means that we also feel how one becomes undone.

In **Le Temps Du Sommeil** by Francis Alys, numerous small paintings like retable convey a sense of public ritual and pagan belief. The formal elements of the images - little people in grey suits and green splodges of landscape - appear to document contemporary gestures and situations but it is unclear for whom these moments are recorded. Is the artist telling himself a story? What is the story? In this inventory of ephemera there is a kind of colour blindness; a sense of not knowing, which also suggests a faith in structure, order and system as carriers of meaning. I am reminded of Latini's tesoro, Diderot's encyclopaedia, Leonardo's cosmology and the bestiary of Borges. Considered as acts of communication through which meaning is established, these images constitute a representational universe which may be viewed both as a coherent totality and as a fiction.

Perhaps the space of the imagination may also be considered as the place where language structures fail.

### *References*

1. Cook, R., "The Fine Art of the Gallerist", *Art & Australia*, 36.4., 1999, p.542.
2. Silverstone, R., "The Medium is the Museum" in Zavala, L. & Miles, R., (eds), *Towards a Museum of the Future*, Routledge, London & New York, 1994, p.165.
3. Bachelard, G., *The Poetics of Space*, Jolas, M. (trans), Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, p.95.