

Reestablishing lost connection ...

PS Art Space, Perth 4 - 18 February 2017

In 1975, Dutch - American based artist, Bas Jan Ader disappeared at sea whilst embarking on what was to become his final project. *In Search of the Miraculous* would see the young artist set sail across the Atlantic in a twelve foot sailing boat. Three months into the voyage radio contact had been lost, after another three months the empty vessel was found submerged off the coast of Ireland - Jan Ader had vanished - leaving his final work shrouded in mystery and melancholy.

Contrasting to this absence of the artist in his final work, Bas Jan Ader's earlier works - a small yet poignant collection of videos and photographs, feature the figure (the artist's own body) as a central focus. The affects/effects of gravity, sorrow and failure are played out on screen, the artist surrendering himself to uncontrollable/invisible forces. This is perhaps what makes his final work so haunting - we are left without any visual trace of the artist.

Unlike his earlier work where the audience bears witness to his actions, *In Search of the Miraculous* is void of this visual representation. Mythologies and conspiracy theories ensue - much like the global quest to find evidence of the MH17 Malaysian aircraft wreckage or the former Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt's peculiar departure from the coast of Victoria - we sit uncomfortably with the notion of disappearance.

"Nothing disappears, nothing must disappear: that is the watchword of this new therapeutic overzealousness, the overzealousness of memory and archaeology. A hypertelic memory which stores all data in a constant state of instant retrievability, excluding any work of mourning, any resolution of the past."

Jean Baudrillard, p.72, 1994

Putting together this exhibition of work of the late Jurgen Kerkovius has also provided me with a similar anxiety. The artist is absent - yet there is a plethora of evidence of work yet to come. Trawling through hours of video footage, images, scribbled texts and recorded conversations - red herrings, corrupt files, things that have gone missing. Thus the selection of work on show is not so much a retrospective (backwards looking) - but a retro speculative - work made since Jürgen's departure from Perth to Sydney in 2011 - unseen works made visible - Reestablishing lost connection.

Included in this exhibition alongside the final Elise/Jürgen work *Experiments in Divergence* (2012) - that Consuelo Cavaniglia has provided an essay for, are three other projection works. One from *The Approaching Storm* (2013), another from *Terror Australis* (2014) and a third untitled video - which has not yet been exhibited (perhaps not intended for exhibition) yet resonates with the context for this show as it was a work he made on returning to Perth in 2013.

Experiments in Divergence

Having worked with Jürgen under the name Elise/Jürgen from 2006-12, first meeting during our undergraduate studies at Curtin University Department of Art, WA (2005 -09), I was fortunate enough to observe the shifts in Jürgen's methodologies and critiques and of contemporary arts practice. His intense desire for knowledge coupled with an aptitude for building things - and taking them apart, made Jürgen an intense and influential artist to work with. Upon his relocation from Perth to Sydney in 2011 he began a new trajectory in his way of working, not an unusual *modus operandi* for Jürgen.

Formally ending our collaboration in 2012, concluding with a six month residency at Artspace, Sydney (courtesy of Artsource WA) Jürgen embarked on a solo practice whilst also finding employment as an installer in many art spaces across Sydney including White Rabbit, Artspace, Museum of Contemporary Art and Artist Run Initiative - Marrickville Garage. Within his short time living and working in Sydney (2012-14), Jürgen established many intense friendships within the Sydney arts community - each of whom significantly influenced his practice.

Thus Jürgen's methodology of working collaboratively continued and in an unusual way materialised in his first solo exhibition entitled *The Approaching Storm*, where he developed an imaginary collaborator named John Ferguson as a way of shifting from (although still referencing) his previous identity - a formally trained artist born in South Africa who came to Australia via New Zealand, and to Sydney via Perth.

John Ferguson is a self-trained landscape painter from rural Western Australia with a particular interest in Heidelberg school representations of landscape. He believes that by producing copies of these paintings accessed via the internet he would be able to acquire the same technique and skill. In doing so he naively constructs augmentations of the original representation. I aim to use John as a performative means to examine the augmentative relationship between the digital and the foreboding qualities [of landscape] presented by the Heidelberg school.

Jürgen, June 2013

The Approaching Storm

with John Ferguson, General Store, Sydney, 8 – 25 May 2013

“This body of work is the starting point of a collaborative project between Jürgen Kerkovius and John Ferguson. Using Walter Withers' "The Storm" (1894) as a point of departure for engaging with an Australian landscape that is mythologised as inherently malevolent, the project explores the disquieting relationship between the body and this particular mythology. This project sets off an enquiry into the body's positioning within a mediated landscape, exploring the augmentative influence of digital representations on such imagery and the body's erasure from that landscape.”

Jürgen, May 2013

The Approaching Storm took its inspiration from a Walter Withers work entitled *The Storm* (1896) housed in the Art Gallery of NSW collection. Having not seen the original - albeit being accessible, Jürgen/John sourced images of the work from the internet and painstakingly transcribed each pixel by hand as graphite on paper via projection.

The next development in this process involved another distortion - a reproduction of the first drawing. A small detail of the work was stretched and magnified via projection and again transcribed in graphite over an absorptive black painted canvas. The resulting work being a phantasmic reiteration of the previous work, as it could only be seen from a particular vantage point and only whilst spot lit.

As a mirror to this process a third work was made - projected footage of a summer storm that Jürgen filmed whilst visiting the Blue Mountains. In each recorded loop the footage magnifies - eventuating in a heavily pixellated image, a slow digitised erasure of the original source.

The final work in the series responds to the culmination of erasure present in the previous works - a metamorphosis. Returning to Jürgen/John's original drawing, the central figure (the tracing of a woman cowering from the storm) is literally erased from the work and finds itself re-formed sculpturally with malleable eraser.

The Approaching Storm thus became Jürgen's initial exploration into the Australian Gothic. Drawing influence from Australian films of the 1970s - *Wake in Fright*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Long Weekend* - and from his many trips across rural Australia (NSW, QLD, TAS, SA and WA) with his then partner Kiernyn, his interest in researching the Australian landscape as an environment that enacts upon the body and its relationship through digital transformation became an ongoing pursuit and instigated his PhD at UNSW Art & Design in 2013.

“What are we looking at when the Australian landscape, as a mythologised and culturally significant landscape, is represented and mediated through a digital lens and screen? How might the digital augment or change the ways in which we understand landscape and the Australian Gothic?”

Jürgen, January 2014

Terror Australis

Marrickville Garage, Sydney, 2 – 4 August 2013

“Terror Australis seeks to question and examine the body's phenomenological understanding of the digital in relation to a mythology of malevolence within the Australian landscape. By tracing a history of how the Australian landscape has been mapped through representational practices such as landscape painting and cinema, I aim to investigate and question a process whereby this landscape has been mythologised and projected as part of a particular 'Australian' psyche. The creative practice that supports this thesis will extend this research to focus on how the digitisation of the body's surroundings is affecting its relation to and understanding of an 'Australian' malevolence.”

Jürgen, June 2013

In a work made for an exhibition at Marrickville Garage, iPhone footage of a mangrove in the Murray River was continually imported/exported - with each corruption of the digital file, the footage becomes more threatening until it is completely abstracted. Jürgen's interest into what he called the 'rural strangeness' of the Australian Gothic which *“positions [the Australian] landscape as the central motif of the malevolent terror, fear and isolation”* (Jürgen, January 2014) became his central focus during this time, whereby he began to experiment with digitally corrupting landscape - repeatedly importing, compressing, decompressing and exporting iPhone video footage that he had taken on his travels.

Untitled / Unmapped

Like Bas Jan Ader's *In Search of the Miraculous*, Jürgen had also planned a voyage into the unknown, proposed as part of his PhD the project remains untitled and unrealised, the artist missing from the process.

Jürgen had planned to travel across the Australian landscape, tracking his location via GPS and then tracing those movements via a complex process of digital conversions, digital lines - compounded pixels over time.

“The audience would see only the resulting digital drawing, another simulacrum of disappearing referents recording a body made invisible by the digital form, moving through a newly unidentified landscape ...”

Kiernyn, March 2015

Elise Harmsen, January 2017

Experiments In Divergence

Elise/Jürgen, 55 Sydenham Rd, Marrickville, Sydney, 29/5 - 14/6/15

In the work titled *Re/trato* (2003), Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz paints a self-portrait in water on stone. Heated by the sun, the hot stone causes the water to evaporate almost as soon as it touches the surface, making the painting disappear before it is even completed. The artist's hand works quickly, but we never manage to see the image as a whole. And like a fleeting memory, with each repeated attempt to draw the portrait in full, the image is changed.

The Spanish word 'retrato', like its English translation 'portrait', is linked to the verb to trace, to make a mark, to draw forth or draw over again, and it is this very action of re-tracing and mark making that emerges consistently in *Experiments In Divergence*. A portrait of Jürgen is at the centre of the series of drawings that form this exhibition. The image of his face is traced with light, in charcoal, in chalk, or projected onto clouds of powdered graphite. The materials are impermanent and ephemeral, so that unlike the image fixed by a photograph or film, the portraits become fleeting. And as in Muñoz's disappearing drawings, we are brought to focus on both the idea of transience and the counter-effort by our faculties to hold on, through memory, to that which may pass.

The film portraits by Tacita Dean (of Merce Cunningham, Cy Twombly, Mario Merz and others) are an interesting consideration because of their ambiguous position in regard to fixity. In the first instance, her use of analogue film as a superseded technology negates the idea of a 'forever' for the portraits. Further, while they may be seen as memorialising great figures of our times, the films work to counter this by focusing on small, mundane actions performed daily by the subjects – dusting, arranging, sitting, eating – so that instead of fixing in time a heroic instant, Dean slows time down stretching it to sustain a series of moments.

The works in *Experiments In Divergence*, similarly aim to slow down rather than fix time. They don't memorialise but instead look to extending the amount of time we have with the subject. Flipping between drawing, video and projection, the portraits are constantly re-traced, not in an endurance effort to retain the image but more as a sustained engagement with the subject. Elise, in a recent conversation spoke of the inability of the photographed or filmed image to make her feel close to a person. The act of drawing on the other hand, allows her to 'realise' the person and feel a connection.

In *Drawing 1*, a two-channel work from 2011-12, Elise begins with eyes closed in concentration, by drawing a portrait of Jürgen from memory. In the first projected video we see her trace an invisible line mid-air with her index finger. Jürgen then picks up the line, and following her projected image traces her movements with a stick of charcoal to re-draw his own portrait. This action constitutes the second projection. In this we don't see Jürgen's drawing, we just see him from the side, faintly outlined by the light emitted from the projection of Elise, as he moves his hand to trace the line drawing off-screen.

The charcoal Jürgen holds makes contact with Elise's finger as they trace the same line. This point of contact however happens at different moments in time and through the interface of the projection, so that in fact no physical contact is ever made. The work is intensely intimate, though this intimacy is not experienced through the act of touching, but rather through the space created to regard oneself and the other.

Drawing 1 was developed by the duo as an extension of the drawings that Elise had done to find a connection to her mother shortly after her death. In a dark and sorrowful turn of events it is now the point from which new lines depart to trace Jürgen's image afresh, to slow time down and 'realise' him once again after his untimely passing in 2014.

Throughout the seven years of collaboration the focus for Elise/Jürgen was on the consistent interrogation of the very meaning of collaboration. Ideas of dependence, support and rivalry were explored in different works. *Screen Test* (2008) saw them work in unison to hold up the oversized board that the work was then projected onto; while in the mesmeric video *Pressure/Compression* (2007) they blew a white powder in each other's faces in a combined act of violence and poetic destruction.

Unlike Gilbert & George's often quoted claim of 'two people are one artist', Elise/Jürgen did not meld into one entity but rather used the collaboration to find the limits of their individual identities – to see where one started and the other ended. The forward slash confirmed their maintained individuality as it denotes a choice between the names rather than a fusion of them into a single entity. Working primarily with black and white they used the palette to focus on the interplay between negative and positive space, yet instead of slipping into simple oppositional distinctions this allowed them to create contrasts to find the edges of representation of their physical form and the limits of their identities.

As part of a series called *Experiments in Convergence*, *Drawing 1* was one of several works where Elise/Jürgen performed actions in front of the camera, to test how they might obscure or reveal each other in a continued search for the cross over of the boundaries between the self and other. *Experiments In Divergence* instead begins to test points of departure, changing orientation to explore how from a common point, things may branch out and extend in different, future directions.

Consuelo Cavaniglia, May 2015