

Nonchalantly unimpressed

Victoria Park Gallery July 25 - August 11, 2007.

Kel Glaister, Stephen Palmer, Ben Raynor, Melanie Upton, Keith Wong.
Curated by Kel Glaister. Catalogue essay by Amy Marjoram.

Kel Glaister emailed off some instructions for the *Nonchalantly unimpressed* invitation to Stephen Palmer, crop to the left, add this etc.... She checked her inbox a day later. Unfortunately, in that frantic rush that exhibitions can induce, she had accidentally clicked on the address of a mystery Stephen from a graphic design company, who had been included in her address book at some point for reasons she can't remember. Although mystery Stephen has never met Kel, he had promptly attended to her instructions and the documents were attached. I'm not sure if he was nonchalantly unimpressed by her request, but this accidental Stephen episode somehow fits nicely within the themes that run through the *Nonchalantly unimpressed* exhibition where things work, yet not in the most expected way.

The works in *Nonchalantly unimpressed* are the awry and inevitable fall-out of early conceptual art, particularly it's employment of a minimal look that has matured over the decades into a default, self-consciously 'whatever' aesthetic. Conceptual premises are now predominantly resolved along a highly formalised and formulaic aesthetic; the resulting 'conformalism' is like art by rote learning, a tick box that has 'think of idea', tick, followed by 'go to Ikea', tick. This approach is on the surface dispassionate and cynical, yet there remains much complexity in the material relations between artists and their work. If early conceptual art's approach was sometimes a rejection of fetishisation of objects, today's artists often utilise the same methodology yet actively toy with and frequently love the unimpressive and blank nature of their materials. We hunt for perfectly 'neutral' card tables and worship 'archetypes' like yellow post-it notes. We may want 'whatever is least obtrusive' but we pay a lot of attention to it.

Glaister plays with these ideas in her recent work installed as part of *Nonchalantly unimpressed* that simply consists of a square of adhesive neatly stuck to the gallery wall. Its purpose is to collect dust, a sampling station for minute debris, an archive of almost nothing. Visually unimpressive, this is not Man Ray's photograph of *Dust Breeding* from 1920 that, through a two-hour exposure, captured with clarity the dust over Duchamp's work *The Large Glass*. Rather than a years worth of dust on a masterpiece, Glaister's work is a few days worth of dust on some sticky plastic bought at Spotlight.

Glaister's work is not necessarily about the elevation of dust to our attention. Baudrillard has suggested that visibility is "the most degraded form of existence." Is the Victoria Park Gallery dust victim of our desire to understand the unimpressively blank? Baudrillard says, "What people desire is a spectacle of banality. This spectacle of banality is today's true pornography and obscenity. It is the obscene spectacle of nullity (nullité) insignificance, and platitude."

Perhaps art has understood Baudrillard's concerns for awhile, were the often boring results of monochrome painting sometimes simply about facing the conundrum of not wanting to do much? Stephen Palmer's work makes sense if this is correct. Entitled, *The second most boring shade of grey* (2005) it is a painting of the second most boring shade of grey, or thereabouts. I discussed with him if the paint was purchased straight or mixed up (the latter) and the scale of the work which Palmer calls "modest." Then I ran out of questions.

I went away and decided that Palmer's title was perhaps the most essential part of the piece. Painting, despite exploring a "restricted vocabulary of geometric shapes" and colours, often didn't shy away from evocative titles. Frank Stella's black monochromes from the late 50's had names like *'Reichstag'* and *'Arbiet Macht Frei'* (Work makes [you] free)- the motto inscribed on the gates of Auschwitz. Palmer's title is explanatory not evocative and the work is a nice size to fit in a Dockland's apartment. Another Palmer work is equally wary in its title, though a little more double edged, *one hundred and thousand* (2005) consisted of a single hundred and thousand carefully perched in the middle of a white plinth. It was pink.

If all these works are 'emptied out' this is not simply the production but the concept of the work. They consider the space between artist and art work "the dirty air" is what Glaister calls it. How to materialise thought? How to communicate your thoughts in a dry dispassionate style when it's what you feel like doing and have anyone care? Of course sometimes they won't. If we are paradoxically engaged by the partially disengaged it may be as Baudrillard suggests because,

"people are fascinated (but terrified at the same time) by this indifferent "nothing-to say" or "nothing-to-do," by the indifference of their own lives... This corresponds to the inalienable right or desire to be nothing and to be regarded as such. There are two ways to disappear. Either you demand not to be seen (the current issue with image rights); or you turn to the maddening exhibitionist display of your insignificance. You make yourself insignificant in order to be seen as such. This is the ultimate protection against the need to exist and the duty to be oneself."

It seems being nonchalantly unimpressed and unimpressive, isn't simply the prerogative of angst-filled teens or smart arsed, young artists raised on a diet of po-mo cynicism, but a conundrum that we all face (and often petulantly enjoy).

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy arranged via telephone to have five enamel paintings made by a Berlin sign factory, this was in 1922. Since 2006 Keith Wong has used the phonebook not simply as a facilitator of art making but as medium. He's first ad read "WORK DELIVERED AND MADE TO MEASURE." The two thousand dollar advertisement resulted in a Yellow Pages advertising advisor unwittingly turned art critic, contacting Wong to advise him his advertisement was 'too vague.' Despite this vagueness (Wong didn't change his message) he received a couple of calls from people and he tried to help them out. But he didn't charge anyone "because I haven't done anything."

Of course the vagueness of Wong's advertisement is not straightforward, the advertisement as the work of art is extremely clear and self explanatory- it is delivered and made to measure. Yet the work also exists as 'relational aesthetics' for the attentive, who find his add and call *Y.Pages (2006-)* is an ongoing work with an ad each year. Wong writes "with many statements set to go- the work cannot proceed, it must wait until the time comes, for the year to arrive. And it is in waiting for the arrival of time, that the work is sustained, sustained by its own immanence." This sense of time, of catalogues and archives, is in Glaister's adhesive waiting for dust and Wong's annual P.R foray's. Time here is not quite entropic nor about innovative possibility. It is straightforward, mundane time.

The works in *Nonchalantly unimpressed* not only employ a process where things develop more or less signification than we would expect, they also turn on the head the places where this normally occurs in art making. The ideas are conceptually clean yet are reliant on their material realisation to gain resonance, yet their material realisation is often highly unspectacular. The 'sticking point' where the work matters hovers undecidedly between idea and realisation. Perhaps this is where the idea of 'Nonchalantly unimpressed' is most accurately located, hovering in the 'dirty air.'

Like popping bubble wrap or wiping words off whiteboards with your fingers then inspecting the powdery ink staining your hands, sometimes pleasure is difficult to locate between the anticipation and the result, and all up the experience may be unimpressive yet excessively tempting. Ben Raynor's work 'Archive' is teasing in its evocation of this. 'Archive' is written in black on an otherwise perfectly clean whiteboard. Like other works in *Nonchalantly Unimpressed* the title both highlights and problematises meaning. Like the question Palmer's work induces- is this shade of grey even boring? Archive begs the question, is this work an archive? In some ways it is, in that the words impermanence requires similar ongoing management and conservation as do traditional archives. Also there is a possibility of a ghostly trace of the word existing if it was to be rubbed out, as archive of the word archive. Yet if this work is an archive it isn't recording much, except the fact that no one has wiped out the word, which is an interesting fact when a new perfectly clean duster is teasingly left.

Similarly Stephen Palmer's three radios hang in the gallery providing surround static. There is something oddly comforting in static, the constancy and consistency of the jumbled waves crinkle with soothing familiarity yet static is also melancholic in its lost, scattered state. I wonder if listening to it constantly could create insanity. Baudrillard states, "If everything end with visibility... (the most degraded form of existence), the point is still to make such a loss of symbolic space and such an extreme disenchantment with life an object of contemplation, of sidereal observation (sideration) and of perverse desire." Perhaps visibility, or more broadly attentiveness is central to all these works, in that you may be 'nonchalantly unimpressed' by their materiality, their presence, yet you remain awkwardly engaged. The fall out of pragmatism becomes a democratisation of attention.

This is literally realised in Glaister's object interventions *No Dice* and *The morning after the night before* (both 2006). *No Dice* consists of two white dice sanded of their numbers, each face a blank homogenous replica of the next, suddenly one equals two equals three etc. *The morning after the night before* is two playing cards neatly stuck together to conceal their value, the archetypal red on white decorative pattern left exposed from all angles.

These works are petulant and stubborn, yet funny. If you role dice with no numbers or play with cards that have no faces you can't win, but equally you can't lose, it supports a nonchalant ambivalence. The removal of use value and consequently the normal signification of these objects by Glaister's erasures make these works a denial of luck, with its inherent connections with destiny and all the intuitive methods used to explain and maintain luck.

As a society we often value totally useless objects, if their purpose was from the start to be useless trinkets and novelties. Glaister's interventions instead demand that we value the less relevant qualities of once slightly purposeful objects. Hmmm, dice are great little plastic squares with nicely rounded corners, aren't they?

Melanie Upton's casting process follows a similar process, for *Nonchalantly unimpressed* she is collecting rubbish local to the gallery and casting it in plasticine. Just as dice are relegated the sad task of having to be random, rubbish is relegated the sad task of just being there. We often think of rubbish as transitory detail, yet paradoxically it is also a permanent fixture. This is appropriate when rubbish acts as trace of our continual consumption. Equally Upton continually consumes this rubbish in her casting. With the plasticine materiality of the casts at VPG, Upton further interrogates the blank forms, stripped of their branding, as these casts are squashed and mashed in and around the gallery space, cleaving to it.

As the *Nonchalantly unimpressed* exhibition progresses it will be interesting to see if Upton's sculptures, scattered around the gallery, are damaged, as their plasticine malleability sets up the potential for accidental transformations. Upton's simulacra may take on a life of its own. The works material openness, as the labour of the casting process is not solidified into something impressively fixed but rather vulnerable to sudden shifts, relates to the artists refusal of a definitive end result. Instead idea and realisation have inbuilt possibility of folding back over each other. As such, the work has a slight 'blankness' that surpasses the aesthetics of form; it is the blankness of the propositional that accepts the potential for unimpressive results that may require improvisation or nonchalant acceptance.

Keith Wong is facing this prospect too. As he waits at Victoria Park Gallery on the Wednesday of the opening for the delivery of a new work. He has precariously sent a balloon through the post to himself, leaving him stuck at the closed gallery awaiting its arrival. He may open the box to find the white balloon, with the word POP lettered on it, intact. Or it may be a small, shrivelled scrap with POP in shrunken minute letters across its unimpressive, puckered surface.

Amy Marjoram, 2007.

Baudrillard quotes from, Jean Baudrillard, *Dust Breeding*, 2001, www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=293.