

## **Elevations of Trauma – Techno/Dumb/Show – John Gillies and the Sydney Front.**

Vikki Riley

In the past decade, popular culture's obsession with the politics of the body, or rather how to best expose and propel the body into performance, has led to an over-saturation of phoney sensuality. While much video art has sought to dismember and abstract the body away from its fleshy tangibility in order to talk about 'the self', television advertising and MTV (via a few Hollywood exploitation and horror genres) has consolidated the 'effects' of the body's performance into a cult of health and efficiency. The limits of mobility and severance of the body from the personal have been stretched - the body is now (for the moment, for the New Age) metaphor for a new kind of athleticism which promotes power in the form of virility and bodily agility - a regime which excludes and rejects the fundamental tenets of expression in the name of choreography.

The work of the Sydney Front sets out to reclaim the endless landscape of gesture, expression, bodily function and dramaturgy of the psyche. Primarily a performance troupe of actors, their prolific output and Artaud-like confrontation of the audience addresses immediately the fallacies inherent in performance when dealing with the abstract. The intense physicality of the performer's gesture means that abstraction becomes exhausted, expended, defined only in the end by the material limitations of the flesh and muscle... “...returning to where meaning is embodied, it aims to protect itself and the spectator from moral demagoguery, and from the terrorism of grand abstractions that cannot be lived out.”<sup>1</sup>

*Techno/Dumb/Show* more than documents the Sydney Front's lexicon of performative tropes. As the title alludes, it is a video 'workout' of not only the group's technique of expressing the body as the aesthetic, it re-integrates performance as a minefield of emotive play, calling upon various traditions of early cinema, mime and theatre in order to transgress notions of minimalism and

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<sup>1</sup> John Baylis, 'Australian Perspectives' Art Gallery of NSW, 1991 program note

melodrama by exploiting their very context. The result is a compelling urgency and desperation which introduces a heightened naturalism (or, dare I say, *primacy*) as the major drive in its non-linear narrative, a kind of contract with the viewer which enforces a feeling of necessary endurance, even pain.

After an opening sequence of a woman dialing a telephone, the work continues with head-on shots of what appear to be runners, or cyclists, racing towards the camera within a hyper-space of a protracted infinity where the focus is on the excess of energy, or how energy can be a consumption of the stress and tension which the body produces as combustion. Man here is alone, competing with himself, traveling nowhere but inside the body's mechanisms of internal movement and duress, a kind of individual test of durability, mortality. This section is followed by a close-up of a red, almost swollen face and slowed down facial movement brings the effect of the first sequence to a contemplative pause; the body, the face does not rest, but transforms into a gaze, the gaze repeats itself as a search. Like what the entire video tells us about the performer, it is impossible to escape the condition of the individual alone whatever situation you put him/her in. The next section logically takes the condition one step further: two figures sit by a phone, their hands play out a drama of anxiety, a stress of anticipation. Cut to a woman, laughing or crying, in a crowd. She is dressed in old worldly attire, wringing her hands, rolling her eyes in a nervous hysterical pose. It is here that clear correlations between the performers' placement within an 'artificial' scene and other, extemporal media emerges. The next scene seems to confirm this: a crowd scene in which the performers are placed strategically to indicate an audience or spectators of a grand spectacle - the emotive gestures transform, over a period of seconds, from extreme elation and surprise to a sense of awe, even horror and persecution, intensely claustrophobic, exhaustively oppressive.

Gillies here works like Stephen Harrop, well known for his work in Super 8 film work in which he fuses together, through precise editing, various melodramatic 'moments' in the cinema, amplifying small gestures into grandiose narratives of human facial expressions, discarding the contextualisation of dialogue and mise-en-scene and replacing it with a finely honed drama of pleasure and pain. In *Techno/Dumb/Show*,

while the crowd scenes are reminiscent of old Hollywood masters of expressive melodrama (in particular the Jacques Toumeur / Val Lewton films of the 40s and 50s) the feel is more in line with the melodrama of the early Russian silent directors such as Pudovkin and Vertov, and it is this aura which pervades much of *Techno/Dumb/Show* itself as an emotive rendering of how, in the present day the individual can be erased as a protagonist in his/her own reality. On this level the video is 'about' what author Don de Lillo describes as 'living in a time of the masses.' The soundtrack further comments on this barrage of pressures on the individual to 'perform' in all situations, taking a silent film soundtrack approach to what are, basically, visceral images. Sounds of cacophonous laughter, applause and hysteria mingle and punctuate within a soundscape of treated noise, bells, drums, backwards tapes and various other industrial generated sound, as well as weaving a music-concrete symphony of more classical dimensions. As the video progresses, the sense of oppression and isolation intensifies. A man moves painfully along a prison-like corridor, haggard faces writhe in delirium while red, flaming specks of ash filter across the screen. There is a sex scene which harks back to Genet's *Chant d'Amour*. The final scene is of a conductor addressing invisible/off screen or nonexistent performers; his movements repeated in stop motion, arms flailing about in mid-air, his face a contortion of elation, disappointment, shock, a portrait of madness evoking Murnau's work, the actor, Nigel Kellaway, himself resembling Max Schreck in all his confused, driven anxiety states. It is this last scene, which you hope will never end, which seems to articulate the video's ultimate power, the unstoppable emotions externalised in performance, their unexpected capacity for true, anarchic vision, the untapped pain and tension which can be unleashed at any given moment. For it is the dynamism of dislocating these unkempt gestures from their (natural) narrative order which gives new meaning and orientation to the tired, overspent debate of the politics of the body.

*Techno/Dumb/Show* was shown this year at 'Perspecta' at the Art Gallery of NSW, and also at the London Film Festival.

The Sydney Front group includes Andrea Aloise, John Baylis, Clare Grant, Nigel Kellaway and Christopher Ryan. Elise Ahamnos also performs in *Techno/Dumb/Show*.

Sydney Front's work includes:

**Waltz**, 70 minute theatre work, Sydney, 1987.

**John Laws/Sade**, 80 minute theatre work, Sydney, 1987.

**The Pornography of Performance**, 100 minute performance work, Adelaide, Sydney, 1988; Denmark, Amsterdam, Salzburg, Düsseldorf, London, 1989.

**The Burnt Wedding**, 60 minute street performance, Brisbane, 1988; Sydney and European tour, 1989.

**Photocopies of God**, 60 minute theatre work, Sydney, 1989.

**The Nuremberg Recital**, 60 minute solo theatre work by Nigel Kellaway, Sydney Perth, 1989.

**Prescripts**, 30 minute theatre work, Sydney 1990.

**Woman in the Wall**, 50 minutes solo theatre work by Clare Grant, Sydney 1990.

**Don Juan**, 85 minute theatre work, Sydney 1991.

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Adrian Martin's essay on Vikki Riley:

<http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/12/vola-x-introduction/>