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Explosion (Peony) 2010, *Duratrans C-Type photographic print on acrylic, lightbox, 1535 x 1895mm*

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Future spaces in contemporary Australian art: Overexposure and the City

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Contemporary popular culture is strewn with visions of the urban spaces of the alternative today / near tomorrow. In cinema, the rise of graphic-novel derived films set in alternative or futuristic cities, such as the Gotham of Batman, or Bregna of Aeon Flux, as well as invasion/disaster movies such as The Day after Tomorrow, I am Legend and Independence Day, nudge popular imaginings towards 'new' urban forms and narratives. Similarly computer gaming, perhaps the preeminent pop-cultural force of today, frequently depict virtual realities based on varying degrees of fiction, such as the Halo and Grand Theft Auto, which featured the semi-fictional metropolises of Liberty City, San Andreas, and Vice City. Contemporary artists share this visual cultural territory and attempt to navigate within its terrain – but to what end? How is the future city represented in contemporary Australian art?

This paper will draw upon Paul Virilio's notion of the 'overexposed city', in order to investigate the current cultural imagining of the 'future spaces' of the city, as found in contemporary Australian art. In one sense updating the cliché that a painting offers a 'window on the world', this paper substitutes recent art works by Australian artists for Virilio's 'door without a city'. In researching this paper, the following artists were considered: Stephen Haley; Darren Wardle; Jon Cattapan; Arlo Mountford; Simon Terrill; Daniel Crooks; David Rosetzky; Shaun Gladwell; Philip Brophy; Callum Morton and myself. Reference will be made to some of these artists in addressing points raised by Virilio's text.

The Overexposed City was first published in 1984 in L'espace critique in Paris, just prior to Virilio's seminal War and Cinema (also 1984). It was republished in 1986 as the first article in Zone, a short-lived journal based in New York, edited by Jonathan Carary, Michel Feher, Hal Foster and Stanford Kwinter, that addressed the relationship of architecture to new forms of spatial practice and analysis. In this resonant, prophetic text, Virilio first described what he was to later refer to as a 'law of proximity' in his understanding of constructed (urban) space, where 'the city of the future is the pleasure of the interval'.

To provide a context for this observation, the phrase was actually borrowed by Virilio from an interview with the late Japanese architect Kazuo Shinohara, published in D: Columbia Documents of Architecture and Theory in 1991. One of the leading visionaries in the rebuilding of post-war Tokyo, Shinohara is perhaps most famous for the Centennial Hall of Tokyo Institute of Technology, where he also taught. For the purposes of this essay and in the context of this conference, it is worth noting that via Shinohara, and like Ridley Scott's Bladerunner, Virilio's paradigm of the contemporary city has its genesis in the futuristic cityscape of post-war Tokyo – described as the embodiment of 'the future's future' by William Gibson. Virilio's text is eerily prescient. He foresees the global epidemic of terrorism and its effect on the social psyche in his account of the increased security protocols and surveillance of airports in the 1970s; describes global information and mapping systems before the advent of the internet and Google Earth; and even presages the current global financial collapse. In the tradition of the best science-fiction writers however, some imaginings remain unrealised (the 'future's future') such as his discussion of the massive de-population of the metropoli of developed countries and cities in orbit – at least for now.

To return to Virilio's statement, 'the city of the future is the pleasure of the interval': Virilio's notion of the city's 'interval' equates to the unit of time, as increasingly measured through systems of light, rather than the unit of space: such that the desire-driven temporal sequencing of spaces through visual systems such as film, television and the internet come to replace our usual topological understanding of space, in a what he describes as an 'aesthetics of the disappearance':

From the aesthetics of the appearance of stable images, present precisely because of their static nature, to the aesthetics of the disappearance of unstable images, present because of their motion (cinematic, cinemagraphic), a transmutation of representations has taken place.

Over the course of his essay, Virilio evolves a family of light or lense-based allegories that together chart such transmutations. In the same order as they occur in the essay, and with some simplification, these are:

- the city-gate;
- the interface or boundary-surface;
- the screen;
- the microscope;
- the movie-camera.

These motifs are carefully deployed as he explores the condition of the contemporary city, unified by the concept of 'overexposure', understood by Virilio as a condition that compresses or supersedes optical phenomena, from which we interpret topological space. What is significant is the strategy apparent in this analysis of light as the structuring device of the city. The sequencing of the motifs he identifies - gate-surface-screen-camera - corresponds to an increasing density or dimensionality of luminosity: from a void, to a permeable surface or semi-void, to a solid surface, to a lense or 'surface-less' solid (embodied light), to a lense-in-time. The term 'overexposure' that he chooses as the nomenclature for his text similarly suggests a super-visibility, rather than an in-visibility: such that matter is not negated, but rather, is made 'light'. Light itself becomes a four-dimensional medium; rather than space-time being dissolved into its absence as light.

This distinction, between a materiality of light, and an immateriality of matter, is crucial in understanding the trajectory of his argument in relation to contemporary art practice. For example, the 'super-visible' or overexposure of material as light can be identified in the work of Stephen Haley. Inspired by residencies undertaken in Toyko and Los Angeles, Haley depicts the city as a hyperreal event. Digital media such as CAD programs, vector-based animations (akin to Virilio's 'vectors of a momentary and instantaneous expression') and data projections are used to model cities in light – both literally and figuratively – where the graphic languages of web-building, game-playing and surveillance culture are prioritized over the perceptual and the phenomenological.

In these realms, the vector-based digital imaging tools of 'wallpaper', 'clone' and 'wireframe' come to supplant the analogue-derived, haptic 'rasta' digital modes of 'cut & paste', 'crop' and 'blur'. Haley uses a formal language that is infinitely, seamlessly reproducible, predicated on the mirror as the defining paradigm for the Western construction of space (as first found in Brunelleschi's investigations of perspective using a mirror/lense to depict the Baptistery in Florence) such that the perfect, luminous field represented in the (now computer-generated) mirror of reality, has come to supplant that reality itself. Significantly for this paper, Haley's adoption of the mirror modality to describe the hyperreal encapsulates Virilio's notion of the 'overexposed city' as embodied light: in that, for the viewer, the mirror image is precisely a material space that has been 'constructed' as light.

Elsewhere, Virilio asks: 'Where does the city without gates begin? [...] Where is the door without a city located?' The system gate-surface-screen-camera demonstrates a possible answer to this question, representing the ever more accessible, permeable or transparent, 'super-luminous' ontology of the evolving city. To turn to my own work: the cityspace images are often constructed at a quasi-architectural scale, such as large format free-standing screens or modular wall-mounted light boxes. Engulfing or circumnavigating the gallery walls, the work creates panoramic vistas of synthesised cityscapes that seem to 'replace' the space or vista of the gallery. By disassembling the viewer's perceptual encounter with the space of the gallery (reminiscent of the great trompe-l'oeil and accelerated perspective quadratura systems of the Baroque, as typified by the work of Andrea Pozzo and Gianbattista Tiepolo) the work evinces an optical 'door without a city': a visual portal-lense-screen that negates the space of its site.

Incorporating frontal video projection, rear illumination and, like Haley, mirrored sections, the art works are a composite representational system that formally bring together the individual elements of the 'gate-surface-screen-camera' genealogy Virilio identifies, all at once. The work is not purely cinematic, but draws upon the many 'degrees' of cinematism that Virilio articulates. As a consequence, instead of representing the culmination of Virilio's vision of a homogenous virtuality where light is medium, the work suggests a heterogenous, lumpy, variable opacity as at least the current condition of the overexposed city.

In addition, Virilio's first uses the term 'overexposure' in the context: 'replacing the old distinction between public and private and "habitation" and "circulation" is an overexposure in which the gap between "near" and "far" ceases to exist.' My studio work has a comparable interest in the uncertain experience or parameters of location in contemporary culture. The work draws upon theories of appropriation and

‘mashup’ digital practices to present composite scenes. A combination of photographs taken by myself, tourists, amateur photographers and municipality commissioned publicity shots, the components of the cityscape images are predominantly downloaded from the internet, bringing together international urban centres with the local and parochial and condensing them into a whole. The seamless flow of public to private, corporate to communal, concrete to virtual and ordered to intuitive spaces can be compared to Virilio’s ‘overexposure in which the gap between “near” and “far” ceases to exist.’

However this representation of the transcultural ‘ideal’ city is problematic, as it remains predicated upon Colonialism as well as increasingly influenced by Globalization. In my work, the ‘ideal city’ is used as a motif to explore such cityscapes as found in contemporary visual culture, often associated with paradise. These models of utopia represent the matrix of desire for the exotic Other. Virilio’s account of the collapse of ‘near and far’ does not provide an account of the residue of colonialism in the popular imagination; akin to the continued commodification of the Other that, as Homi Bhaba points out, continues to be ‘one of the most significant discursive and psychological strategies of discriminatory power’.

Virilio is careful to define his notion of the material becoming ‘virtual’:

Two procedures confront each other here: one is material, made up of physical elements, precisely situated walls, thresholds and levels; the other is immaterial, its representations, images and messages possessing neither locale nor stability, since they exist only as vectors of a momentary and instantaneous expression, with all the misinterpretations and manipulations of meanings that this implies. [Emphasis added] Importantly, Virilio does not see the opposition as a simple, physical / metaphysical binary system. He suggests that the opposition is one of semiotic value, as well as material value – precision versus misinterpretation – deliberately engaging a Structuralist reading, where the ‘super-visible’ city of light is also a city of Saussurian parole or un-tethered utterances: language itself is also ‘overexposed’. While a detailed Structuralist analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, the collapse of language as an aspect of the ‘aesthetics of the disappearance’ identified by Virilio can be considered through the work of Shaun Gladwell.

As Daniel Palmer observes, Gladwell’s now famous imagery (he was selected by Robert Storr for inclusion in the Italian Pavilion of the 2007 Venice Biennale and most recently by Tracey Emin for presentation at the Royal Academy) depicts ‘various subcultural stylings and street stunts such as skateboarding, BMX biking, break-dancing and other anti-gravitational manoeuvres.’ Most feature simple forms of inversion of subversion of the image: slowing the footage of a skateboarder to balletic proportions; reversing the image so that figures appear to float in space; or constructing mirrored scenes of approximate-symmetry. Each poetic, detached gesture is contextualized in an anonymous, generic urban space. These simple inversions of familiar filmic events ‘detach’ the subject matter from their usual alignments: the images could be said to be mis-quoted, displaced or inflected by one degree of difference from the norm. As such, they correlate almost exactly to Virilio’s ‘images and messages possessing neither locale nor stability, since they exist only as vectors of a momentary and instantaneous expression’: fleeting repositionings of urban phenomena.

In attempting to discern the status of urban architecture in relation to the confrontation between the material and the immaterial, Virilio identifies ‘a transmutation of representation’ that he discusses near the end of his essay specifically in terms of film: ‘Here, more than anywhere, advanced technologies have converged to create a synthetic space-time... [where] the living and the living dead merge to the point of delirium.’ Elsewhere, ‘cinematism’ is the term he uses to describe the ‘last appearance or urbanism’; and his text is scattered with references to the evolution of and possibilities of cinema and the cinematic (often in parallel to references to the development of mankind’s capacity to fly - also a process whereby matter becomes ‘weightlessly’ immaterial). Film – also the conclusion of the gate-surface-screen-camera system – is both the proof and modus operandi of Virilio’s notion of overexposure.

However, as Daniel Crooks indicates, the current condition of film as a digital event complicates Virilio’s cinematism as the ‘last appearance or urbanism’. As Emma Macrae describes: ‘Crooks creates polyocular visions of the world in which perspective vanishes and we watch objects as though through the laser-point vision of multiple eyes.’ Eschewing the conventional, monocular perspective systems of the traditional movie-camera (already deemed problematic, as we know that mathematicians are unable to devise a formula for a perfect 360-degree perspectival model), Crooks works with layered slices or samples of time to re-visualise urban spaces. An Edward Muybridge of the digital age, his images represent the use of light (as digital image) to re-structure time; creating multiple ‘intervals’ at will. Crooks’ most famous work, *Time Slice*, uses the potential of digital video in particular to isolate and re-choreograph temporal sequences that unlock the usual figure-ground-viewer relationship. Extending Virilio’s idea of cinematism, time is more than the horizontally-sequenced montage of conventional cinematic narrative, contained within the frame. Crooks suggests an instability of the moment itself, over and above the flexible sequencing of moments that cinema has traditionally presented through the jump-cut, flash-back and sub-plot.

Terrill investigates time in almost the reverse of this process. His ongoing *Crowd Theory* series involve coordinating large groups of people in their local community settings, in what Urszula Dawkins describes as ‘hour-long moments... an exploration of the physical space... and a kind of documentary fiction based around the responses of participants to the location.’ Like Crooks, the figure-ground relationship, here

between the individual, the metropolitan crowd and the city is significant; but unlike Crooks, this is explored by dwelling upon the transient correlation of these three things. Instances are prolonged, extended rather than dissected. Terrill often uses the so-called 'golden hour' just prior to sunset, beloved of photographers and film-makers and itself a liminal zone between day and night. This, as well as the carefully managed theatrical lighting, creates an uncertain duration of time, at an ambiguous point in the day: our temporal perceptions are folded upon themselves and made plastic. The subtle blurring of movement of parts of the crowd creates a curious ghosting effect; suggesting that zombie-like state that Virilio sees as when 'the living and the living dead', the present and the past, 'merge in delirium'. Terril's haunting work draws out the fantastical, super-natural aspect of Virilio's strongly worded observation, that goes unremarked in his essay.

It is important to acknowledge that for Virilio, the 'delirium' of film or cinematism is both spatial and temporal ('a synthetic space-time'): the representation of both space and time is questioned by cinematic media. As a specific example of this, the destabilization of time as history is addressed near the end of his essay, where Lyotard's critique of the crisis of modernity and the collapse of its 'grand narratives' is discussed. This is prefigured earlier in the text, when Virilio states that 'the debate surrounding the notion of modernity seems to belong to a phenomenon of "derealization" which at once affects means of expression, modes of representation and information'. In both instances, Virilio argues that the essentially humanist trajectories of modernism cannot be furthered, due to the failure ('derealization') of language itself, rather than a lack of engagement with the debates in question. At this point, Virilio equates the collapse of time and historic narrative, with the collapse of language. His implicit assertion is that the rise of the 'immaterial... with all the misinterpretations and manipulations of meanings that this implies' coincides with the rise of the city of infinite, unfixed semiosis.

Rosetzky acts out a comparable derealisation upon the grammar of film, as well as photography, in his work. Drawing upon received notions of identity, especially happiness as structured through advertising and the media, his work approximates a visualization of the lifestyle values of Generation Y. Like flicking through a copy of Vogue or watching a health-food advert, his arresting images of young, beautiful people doing young, beautiful things are somehow askew, off-key. Perhaps most obviously in his use of cropped forms, literally cardboard cut-outs, Rosetzky distills signifiers of aspirational contemporary life and represents them with subtle inflection in modulated relations. In a manner perhaps more dexterous and less romantic than Gladwell, Rosetzky reconfigures the grammar of the contemporary urban imaginary in a semiotic investigation of style; gently amplifying 'the misinterpretations and manipulations of meanings' that Virilio sees in the rise of the immaterial, derealised languages of the city. However Rosetzky is acutely aware of the political dimension of this manipulation: where the spectacle of pleasure that he re-articulates is understood, after Debord, as the language of capitalism – a synecdoche for the machinations of consumerism and the perpetuation of societies' systems of power.

To summarise: Virilio's discussion of the overexposed city brings us to a point where 'the crisis of the dimension thus appears as the crisis of the whole'. Three aspects or degrees of crisis are identified, extrapolated from the quantification of the city – where 'the city of the future is the pleasure of the interval' – to describe a similarly pleasure-structured condition of time as a plastic, cinematic event; and to the comparable immateriality or 'derealization' of language.

These three facets could be described as:

1. Super-visible: the overexposure of material/space 'as' light
2. Temporal plasticity: the cinematic collapse of time
3. Linguistic derealisation: the collapse of language (and consequently also modernism)

A comparable 'transmutation' in the representation of the city, can be found in contemporary Australian art. However, the artists identified in this paper extend and refine Virilio's notion of overexposure – principally:

- by raising the issues of the post-Colonial condition in relation to the collapse of near and far;
- by acknowledging the essentially capitalist systems that continue to structure the supposed 'derealisation' of language in contemporary culture
- by drawing attention to the further ambiguity of time apparent in digital film, characterized by an instability and even metaphysicality greater than that evidenced by Virilio's implicit understanding of cinema as an analogue medium,
- and by questioning the quality of 'overexposure' that Virilio identifies, suggesting that it is more complex, opaque and heterogenous than he describes

In conclusion: Scott Bukatman refers to Virilio in his essay 'There's Always Tomorrowland: Disney and the Hypercinematic Experience'. 'Paul Virilio, confronted with the hypercinematic experience of Omnimax, notes that "we can no longer separate film from auditorium."' The artists identified in this paper adopt primarily filmic or otherwise lense-based strategies to create similarly uncertain relationships between their work and the world in which it is located. These are deliberate, and serve to question that world – here, specified as an urban environment – recognizing in it the overexposed field Virilio identifies: but one that is both more materially fantastic, and more politically imperfect, than he imagines. As such, it is clear that the overexposed city is not an impossible utopia of the future: but rather, the clearly flawed, if ever more

fabulous space of today.

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