



MUSCULAR MEMORY

AN INTERVIEW WITH SIMON TERRILL

During 2005, Kirsten Rann, then a founding member of the Melbourne artist collective and exhibition space Ocular Lab, invited artist Simon Terrill to do a project in the space. This culminated in his exhibition *4Hz*.

4Hz comprised three basic components: a large 'aerial' photograph of a crowd of people, titled *Swarm*, pinned to a thick purpose-built wall Terrill had constructed in-situ. At close to ceiling height and a width that extended almost right across, the wall not only dominated the space but divided it into two distinct halves, forcing the audience to squeeze from one side of the gallery to the other, whence they could experience the third component - a large speaker diaphragm embedded in the wall that visibly pulsed to a somewhat silent soundtrack titled *Simple Harmonic Motion#2*.

Swarm has since become a part of the McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park collection, along with a work from the *Crowd Theory* series, titled *Crowd Theory - Southbank 2007*, which both featured in the exhibition *FX in Contemporary Photography* at the McClelland Gallery in 2008. Terrill also exhibited a new series of new works titled *Closer* at the Sutton Gallery Project Space and *Crowd Theory - Port of Melbourne*, the latest

work in the series, which was exhibited with four previous *Crowd Theory* works at the Mission to Seafarers, in 2008.

With a knowledge of certain aspects of Terrill's work before he completed *4Hz*, Rann conducted the following interview to discuss the many layers that inform the development of his work up to his ongoing project, *Crowd Theory*.

KR: Do you want to talk about your theatre background and whether that feeds into your current art practice?

ST: My theatre background has influenced everything, I think... something within that experience brought me to an event-based practice, which over the last couple of years has shifted towards my new work...

I was a co-founder of Snuff Puppets, with whom I performed and travelled around Australia with for about three years. I think the 'event' aspect of this part of my life made the early stages of my sculpture career, and exhibiting in galleries, quite difficult. But now, especially through photography, instead of the event being the art



Clockwise from left:
Crowd Theory
 - Port of Melbourne, 2008
 type C print
 180 x 245 cm
Crowd Theory
 - Southbank, 2007
 type C print
 180 x 245 cm

experience, I'm finding solutions about how to represent the event, which is what my crowd theory photographs do; the event makes a photograph and the photograph was the making of the event - they fold in on each other.

One could say that my interest lies in the making of these events before photographing them. There was a frustration in a life of making events; once the event is over its gone and I'm left all bereft. But now my crowd theory works are a way for me to make traces of those events... the photographs are 'trace documents'.

One of the works that I thought was an interesting shift in your oeuvre was the Bucket of Blood Hotel in the 1998 Next Wave Festival - can you talk about that work a little, and what you were doing with that building?

That was my first show after finishing my sculpture degree, so I see that as a defining shift from theatre into visual art.

Set in an abandoned office building in Flinders Lane - which was great because I had license to do anything - it was very much an event-based work as everything I did focused on the experience of the viewer's body while moving through the six rooms I constructed with dark spaces,

shifting floors, kinetic sculptures, installations, and so on. I also included three transitional spaces - some doorways had tilting floors and some had wardrobes bolted to the walls that you had to enter to reach the next room.

There are two aspects of this work that seem to fit between my event-based practice and my visual arts practice; when the performers were absent the rooms continued the performance, and then, it was a descent into an abject kind of architecture, with spaces that had quite a lost, dark feeling about them, a very J. G. Ballardish archeology of the future.

You speak about the body of the viewer in this work; I think that comes from your performance background, and though you may have moved on it seems that 4Hz had some sort of resonance to the physical impact on the viewer. Is that right?

Yes. But the phenomenological experience of entering a gallery - the physical encounter - was the main motivation in my past work. This has since developed into the crowd theory works: instead of creating an actual event, I'm investigating the event of bodies in space - both individuals and collections of bodies - and how bodies navigate their world.

"WHILE REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGERY – LIKE A PHOTOGRAPH – GENERALLY ENGAGES VOLUNTARY MEMORY, INVOLUNTARY MEMORY WORKS VIA OUR PSYCHIC RESPONSE TO OBJECTS OR SPACES – A KIND OF PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY" SIMON TERRILL

Previous page:
Swarm, 2005
type C photograph
120 x 250 cm
This page:
Cluster, 2007
Type C print
120 x 150 cm

Orbit - an exhibition at Westspace comprising a rotating wall that just fitted into what was Gallery 2 - demonstrates that idea quite simply and poetically, as does the work titled Simple Harmonic Motion in 4Hz... But apart from the phenomenological - or physical - experience of the viewer you discuss, what about the psychological aspect of your work?

I'm interested in the idea of a muscular memory and a molecular consciousness, which are different forms of memory to an intellectually based recall: voluntary as opposed to involuntary. While representational imagery - like a photograph - generally engages voluntary memory, involuntary memory works via our psychic response to objects or spaces - a kind of psychogeography. So I guess *Orbit* is more playful; its more of an absurdist, or Dada take on architecture - its completely useless and absurd - if you don't move out of the way it'll push you over...

So what about the Crowd Theory photographs exhibited at the Footscray Community Arts Centre in 2005 - one is a Spielberg-like sci-fi scenario with people digging and searching for something under the steaming gallery grounds on the banks of the Maribyrnong River... the other is of people standing, or moving, in groups spread across a local football oval... There is something going on in both photographs, and then in your talk about them at the Footscray Community Arts Centre you said that by the sixth shot something 'worked' but by the eighth shot it had disappeared...

There are two things I'd like to mention here...

The Maribyrnong River shot was very much concerned with the crowd's relationship to place; while its now the landscaped grounds of an art centre - for leisure and entertainment - it used to be an industrial site, the soil is toxic. I wanted to excavate some of the psychogeography and history of that site and play with the idea that lurking under the grass is a kind of 'other'. So when the shovel hit the ground in the photograph, having smoke and steam bubbling up through the soil simply implied that there was another layer underneath...

The other point - about the sixth shot working - is the defining point of the whole project, because this is what defines a 'crowd' as opposed to there just being a collection of people. There are clear definitions about the moment a collection of people becomes a 'crowd' - a psychological shift occurs when everyone feels a kind of equality in the mass.

So you're creating and experimenting with dynamics - you're exploring that moment and capturing that moment in a photograph?

Yes. When making my crowd photos I don't want to direct like a film director, I just want to control the stimulants and the mood of the situation and then, in a sense, inhabit it with people, and see what happens.

How does that relate - does it relate? - to the speaker work titled Simple Harmonic Motion that was embedded in the wall at Ocular Lab - what were you looking at in terms of the crowd theory idea - or is it a separate thing altogether?

I've been doing this body of work on crowd theory, which is literally about people. But there is also the whole idea of invisible crowds and mass. And in that expanded definition of crowds I'm also thinking about a 'crowd' of molecules, in space. Because speakers basically push air, I isolated that mechanism so the speaker diaphragm worked below audible sound - so it just pushed air, or molecules. That's one aspect of the work. The other aspect I was interested in was the effect of the moving speaker diaphragm - being around 4Hz, below hearing, it apparently affects your insides - so it became a physical and psychological experience.

I wanted to form a relationship between that almost invisible vibration and the crowd/audience.

The photograph *Swarm*, on the other hand is of a group of people that are quite atomized - from where that photograph was taken it shows stillness and motion - some people are moving and others are standing still - it's a sort of rhizomatic structure of how people are occupied.

How many photos did you take for Swarm, and why did you choose that one?

I took a lot of photos. I spent 10 hours on top of that tower but I guess I chose that photograph because it seemed to reveal more of that atomized or rhizomatic structure of a group of people - like being at a party when everyone's standing and drinking and talking to one person which leads to the next conversation and the next - it's the way those dynamics unfold - I hope that photograph speaks of those sort of relationships between people.

So what about the series of works you exhibited in 'Closer' at Sutton Gallery Project space... are you working with found or constructed crowds here, and why?

That exhibition was of found crowd situations. The concern there was to make a taxonomy of crowd rhythms. I was interested in simply the elements of rhythm and color, a compositional arrangement and what that may reveal.

Lets go back to the performance you did at Devonport in 2000 that involved creating an event that relied on the tide coming in at a certain time - were you taking photos relating to Crowd Theory then?

That was crowd theory before it was born as an idea, but it was, definitely. I was the art director of a huge team of people, about 250 'locals', all from different groups... It was about putting them next to each other to do different activities, making up this big kind of Bruegel-esque scene - that was what I wanted, to make a construction of a crowd scene...

Can you just go back to the 19th century ideas of crowds and talk about that in terms of scientific thought at the time...?

Well, 19th century science was the era of empiricism, a reductionist paradigm where the method was to isolate elements and examine them



individually. So they reduced a crowd by dividing it simply in terms of the one and the many - the leader and the mass. A simple solution was considered the most elegant solution. But now we're in a new paradigm, post-chaos theory, which recognises complexity and its no longer sufficient to reduce things to their parts - things have to be seen with their interactions.

But when crowds were thought of as a system in the pre-Fascist era, which you have spoken of, it actually worked, didn't it? It also makes me think of religion, with the notion of a God and His followers... its like some people are willing to hand over their responsibility in accordance to some greater power...?

It's interesting you bring that up because Elias Canetti distinguishes between an open crowd and a closed crowd; the spontaneous gathering of a crowd around a cause is an open crowd, whereas a church or an army are closed crowds. Freud describes these entities as being in a libidinal relationship with their leader - with a priest or God... What's interesting in Freud's writing on those relationships, which I think is correct, is that in an army each individual soldier has a libidinal relationship with 'the general' and, by virtue of that - because each soldier has that relationship - they are all 'connected' - they've got this shared kind of love...

Why do you think some people want leaders and are afraid to be on their own? Well, that was Wilhelm Reich's main question. Its interesting because Reich's books got burned in the 50s in America - but his basic question was that. And this question is always interesting where does this come from, this desire to be lead?

So how does this fit into the events you create for your Crowd Theory photographs... what are you exploring, or demonstrating, in relation to this?

In terms of the literature on crowds, there are two main streams of thought: the leader and the lead version, and then something far more interesting, and closer to my experience, what Canetti describes as an ultimate equality, a version of events where the differences between people dissolve for those fleeting moments when a group of people can be called a crowd. There is my utopian version of events, about as utopian as I can get.

FX @ McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park, Langwarrin, Melbourne 18 May - 10 August 2008

Closer @ Sutton Gallery Projects, Fitzroy, Melbourne 8 - 31 May 2008

Crowd Theory, Mission to Seafarers, Docklands, Melbourne 29 August - 21 September 2008

Kirsten Rann is an independent curator and writer based in Melbourne