

# Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Art & Australia Emerging Writers Program: Susan Cohn



OUR EXPERIENCE OF ART is generated primarily by short-lived temporal exhibitions – solo and group shows, art fairs, surveys and large-scale international spectacles such as the biennial and blockbuster. The competition for public attention is hungrily sought through a proliferation of media lures. Words such as ‘masterpieces’, ‘highlights’ and ‘permanent collection’ suggest the credibility of an established public institution and respectable curatorship. The National Gallery of Victoria, for instance, recently opened its seventh ‘Melbourne Winter Masterpieces’, presenting works from the Städel Museum in Frankfurt.

Melbourne curator Mark Feary sought to critique the nature of such blockbusters in his ‘Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection’ at Melbourne’s Centre for Contemporary Photography. The curatorial premise, as outlined in the ‘gold’ leaflet accompanying the exhibition, was twofold: to draw attention to the media-focused popular formula of the blockbuster; and (more interestingly) to explore ideas about the photographic image and its display.

The obvious irony in ‘Autumn Masterpieces’ was expressed in its installation, with works displayed in a cordoned-off space, accompanied by italicised gold signage, moody lighting and classical music. As a collection the photographic images were not explicitly ‘works of art’, but rather a compilation of images from the personal archive of twenty-five contemporary artists including Paul Knight, Nat & Ali and Martin Parr. Each image was casually presented in an inexpensive domestic frame on plinths of varying heights and conditions arranged randomly through the gallery space. A formal gold label stating ‘From the collection of ...’ reinforced the presentation as a deliberate tactic.

The exhibition concluded with a video work, *Museum highlights: A gallery talk*, 1989, by New York-based artist Andrea Fraser. Posing as a museum tour guide at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the artist employs performative ‘art-speak’ as

satire to highlight a general misunderstanding of the value and ethics inherent in art, and how easily these are adopted by an indiscriminating public. This underpinned Feary’s approach which was indicative of what Paul O’Neill calls ‘the changing perception of the curator as carer to a curator who has a more creative and active part to play within the production of art itself’. The rhetoric in ‘Autumn Masterpieces’ critiqued the institutional blockbuster, yet it also seemed to undermine Feary’s premise, as transgression itself became a form of marketing and product differentiation.

Questions about the status of the photograph had more resonance in this exhibition. The photograph on a plinth did not have the gravity or representational function of the framed photograph on the wall, but instead became an object in the real world. This strategic move emphasised the experience of the photograph in a phenomenological and sociological sense, albeit institutionally determined.

Feary’s approach cogently considered strategies of exhibition, but perhaps less so the critique of the curator as primary producer of signification. While the exhibition invited reflection on how media culture is ritualised by institutions in large-scale exhibitions, and articulated the interdependent relationship between the photograph and its display, it was inevitably subject to the selfsame logic of capital and spectacle which elevates critique to the status of masterpiece or trademark exhibition.

*Susan Cohn was mentored by Max Delany, Director, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne; Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 19 March – 18 May 2010.*



Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection  
Installation view  
Courtesy Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne  
Photograph Oliver Parzer