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TITLE

Ripples in Time – new work from Chris Welsby

PIX

QuickTime file called 'WelsbyLan.mov' is encoded in MPEG-4 (7Mb) is a 60sec loop of the *Changing Light* installation referred to in the text and was shot by Welsby at the Artspace gallery 1 on 15th April 2004.

EXHIBITION

Chris Welsby, (Professor of Film, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, Canada), at Artspace, Sydney, April 2004:

'Changing Light' (2004) DVD, video projector, sound, mirrors, camera, horizontal screen (240cm x 320cm approx) mounted 30cm above floor.

'Waterfall' (2004) DVD, video projector, sound.

Screenings: (at Artspace 8.4.04; at Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 29.4.04) Park Film (1973), Tree (1974), Anemometer (1974), Windmill III (1974), Stream Line (1976), Seven Days (1976).

COPY

Chris Welsby has been observing the physical world and re-presenting its image, its landscapes to audiences for some 30 years. He has imported these images from their setting "out there", bringing them into that cultural domain of consciousness which we term Nature or 'the natural world'. The topography the camera has recorded, with all the complexities of meaning attributed by the processes of technological and artistic intervention, is where the act of representation has affirmed or challenged the usefulness of such concepts. The context of reception, in the gallery or cinema space has provided another frame, for the spectator or the audience to enter and experience the work. In the darkened space of the gallery we collude with the artist in the process of making the world 'natural'.

"...the work is an attempt to define an interface between technology and nature and that interface is different for each circumstance - each unique subject requires a different recording process."¹

From the early part of his career Welsby worked with 16mm film intended for cinema venues and gallery-based multi-screen installations, precise in their making and presentation. A desire to maintain careful control of the technology delayed his engagement with video until the mid-90s when the possibilities offered by high quality video recording, post-production and projection, turned his attention to working with video installation.

"Prior to video being digital I couldn't get the kind of resolution I needed in order to record the kind of changes with which I was interested in the natural world. The other factor is that DVDs open up a lot of possibilities using extended loops which we simply couldn't do with film. It also coincided with a frustration at not being able to get work out in the experimental cinema distribution system and it seemed like a time to try and get work out into a gallery."²

As with many of his films, the installations image water. Water in the context of these observations is about physical properties, physical locations and the transformation of physical materials. In the installational space, water as image becomes the elemental substantiation of light itself.

"*At Sea* is a four-screen projection installation that combines four DVDs containing a one hour with loops within the loop but again if you look at it for a while you will notice repetitions of incidents and shots in different parts of the projected screen space It's piece of cake to repeat images, to flip them over in the digital form - with film it's much more difficult ... this has an effect that is the reverse of mainstream cinema (in the use of memory to construct the cinematic space within which the narrative operates) by reducing the apparent unified space of the seascape to a series of looping and separate screen images."³

Two new works were premiered at Artspace in Sydney during April 2004 - in the central new work, *Changing Light*, Welsby introduced for the first

time in his practice an augmentation of the process of reception, by the direct sensing of the physical presence of the visitor.

“I’ve always seen nature to be interactive because one part interacts with another as part of an ecological process ... what I wanted to do was insert technology into that situation in such a way that it wasn’t separate from that process but within it ... for instance by using the wind to control the running speed of a film camera (*Anemometer* 1974). In the gallery situation there is in addition the possibility of making the work interactive with people. Again there is a central metaphor - if you have agency in the way a lake is represented in a gallery video installation, that sets up a model for the way that human beings can interact with nature, (often disastrously). I didn’t want a lake that was just there, that couldn’t affect you or you affect it ... I like the way water fragments the image, particularly in reflection. I tend to avoid large vistas and tend to point the camera rather closely at things and if you do that, its better if it moves”⁴

Whilst interacting with the physical presence of the visitor is not an original technical innovation in the context of contemporary media art, the way in which this element is introduced needs to be considered. Presence implies at least two bodies in proximity to one another, (only one of which needs to be sensate), the presence of the other being detectable by operation of the sensing tools. Cognition is the process, a call-response pattern, which will eventually determine an outcome – realising absence if the other has departed, otherwise confirming a palpable presence. An awareness of this process is necessary in this context as presence does not imply a represented human presence (as for instance in the work of Gary Hill⁵).

Whilst the presence of a viewer is assumed by the artist, strategies for direct address will vary from the unconcerned to the wholly manipulative. The painter may make adjustments for the viewer, with decisions about colour, luminosity and mass, maybe even conventions related to representational issues like perspective, narrative content etc. These make the act of viewing the surface anything from a flaccid to a dynamic experience. Notwithstanding the cheesy joke about ‘the

portrait's eyes following the viewer's eyes as they move around the room', the two-dimensional artwork which actively responds to the viewer's changing physical position is a relatively recent phenomena emergent from electronic media.⁶ How does this affect our understanding, our feeling of presence, of proximity to and participation with(in) the artwork?

Plato, at the cusp of the wider adoption of the technology of literacy, was concerned to protect the oral tradition of the School of Athens and developed an argument questioning the real value of the new media of the time, reading and writing. As an 'early adopter' of the technology, in the *Phaedrus* he lumps painting and the new technology of writing together, querying them with the observation: "...but if you question them, they maintain a solemn silence."⁷

The presence of the creator of the work in an oral context is of concern for presence allows the academic pursuit of verification, disputation and debate. In the *Phaedrus* Plato used the new technology, writing, to preserve the old technology, oratory and *ars memoria*, by reproducing the dialogues of Socrates in a hybrid form, 'the book'. A hermeneutic space where an interrogation of the text by the reader could occur was thus created. As with any new device, performing tests and trials, comparing the efficacy of its use with the familiarity and pervasiveness of the old methods was a part of a gradual adoption (and continuing adaptation) process. The new method remained suspect, as the interpretive space opening between sender and receiver of the text diminished the authority of the speaker, less through the polemicists physical absence but more because of the sharing of the text with others, (fellow readers), who were inhabiting the same (distributed) mediated space. Literacy, then as now, is as much about remote networking as about coding.

Does the computer-mediated installation in the gallery space develop further opportunities for the expansion of dialogue between the maker and the receiver(s)? Or is the true contemporary hybrid form multivalent in where it is found, who makes it and how it is experienced?

The notion of Socratic dialogue and dialectics has been central to the late-modernist movement within the Eurocentric realm. Much of the work made by artist film-makers like Welsby during the 1970s in particular, enabled such discourse to occur, stimulated and prompted by the screening of the (hybrid) film. Very often the film-makers themselves would accompany the scarce and expensive 16mm prints to screenings to supervise projection and to respond to questions and discussion. This dialogue would debate the many complexities surrounding the 20th Century's dominant art form, film, and the comparatively scarce investigation of its structure and function outside the narrative form. Discussion would range between cinematic and art practice and their theoretical basis, questions about technical and content minutia, or the political and social contexts for the work. On occasions these sessions would have a duration longer than a screening of the films themselves, and the tendency of bringing the audience and the artists together in this way was actively supported, in Britain, with state subsidy.⁸

In the contemporary gallery setting, quite differently, the audience is more distant, the direct dialogue with the artist more remote. The role of interlocutors to respond to the work is the accepted custom, creating the hybrid, like this, which will be read in gallery, in pamphlet and book, on website and, as a measure of its reading, in forums and on listservs. The 'floor talk' during an exhibition's run is probably the only opportunity to develop a dialogue arising from the artwork with the artist or curator. It is that presence and proximity in the real physical space of the darkened room with the work which serves to generate and sustain, like a Socratic oration, areas of our consciousness, informing and strengthening our engagement with the world.

*"Park Film (1972 – 3) used people to determine the point at which an exposure was made on the camera so 'using' people to determine activity in the projection space is related - maybe at some point in the future it would be interesting to combine both approaches."*⁹

In *Changing Light* Welsby outlines his vision:

'... as the viewer enters the gallery, the perspective of the water surface and the reflected trees will make sense spatially since the viewing angle and distance from the water surface will be very similar to that of the recording camera. As the viewer moves around the projected image however, the spatial coherence will be disrupted as the reflection will remain stationary - the water will reflect only the image of the trees and rocks which surround it and not the image of the gallery. The interactive presence of the visitor will cause the apparatus to sample different aspects of the original recording made at the lake. These will sample the complex variation in the water surface caused by a mixture of wind and human intervention. In some parts the surface will be still, reflecting a perfect mirror image of the sky and lakeshore. In others the surface will be more ruffled causing the reflection to be fragmented, rather like an impressionist painting. In the more choppy sequences the reflected image breaks up completely becoming a complex pattern of colour, light and shade. As the water surface becomes more agitated the illusion of pictorial space gives way to a complex dance of enlarged pixels foregrounding the technology and shifting attention to the here and now of the gallery space.'" ¹⁰

"The software for *Changing Light* has a threshold level that means the more people who come into the room, the less sensitive to change it is ... with a large crowd the changes to the image would actually slow down ... if just one person comes into the room the machine stays very sensitive to their motion ... the more contemplative the relationship, the more subtle the perceptual activity becomes - this piece favours small numbers of people moving quietly around and looking carefully..." ¹¹

Welsby's extensive oeuvre, working with film, video and now digital technology follows within a long tradition of artists who stand before the physical world of botany and topography. They present to us outcomes which engage with the processes, technology and materials describing the artefact's making and its reception and more specifically help us define for ourselves the significance of the natural phenomena represented. Peter Wollen in an introduction to a monograph on Welsby reminded us that at the end of the 19th Century the technology of photography was having a

considerable impact on painting. In 1878, “the year in which Muybridge’s famous photographs of Leland Stanford’s horses were published in the *Scientific American*, was also the year in which Monet moved to Verheuil, where he began to paint in series, mooring his boat on the Seine opposite the island of Saint-Martin to record the scene at every hour of the day and each season of the year. He had a slotted box made to hold a number of canvases, changing from one to the next, as the light changes throughout the day he would have as many as one hundred canvases under way of a single subject. Muybridge’s analytic photography provided a method of capturing the very sequence of instantaneities which came at the time to obsess Monet.”¹²

In the second installation at Artspace in April 2004 was *Waterfall* :
“Thousands of tons of falling water displace a huge air mass which billows out towards the camera causing spray from the waterfall to be deposited on the camera lens. Over a period of five minutes this process obliterates the vast three dimensional image of the waterfall transforming it into a two dimensional surface of shimmering water droplets...”¹³

The piece develops from some of the earlier ‘single screen’ work for cinema placed into the context of the gallery and a temporal state of continuous reproduction. Besides ‘plunging’ us into one of the great spectacles of the physical world, it challenges us to decode from the projection and the darkened but open space, the relationships between spatiality and material (screen/image/sound) and our ability to assimilate the two moments - the actual moment and the recorded moment:

Here is a manifestation of the sublime – “awesome” in the vernacular – in which the five-minute cycles that repeat before us and the shifting of the image plane from Euclidian camera perspective to the flat surface of the screen, maintain the presence of the apparatus of (re)presentation, thereby foregrounding time and duration as material elements within the installation and within a concept that enables past, present and future time (before an image of the timeless), to operate in memory as within the

space of projection - the presence of the visitor 'fixes' the actual moment in the darkness of the gallery space.

"A very central theme in all of my work is 'How much of this is done by machine and how much is done by some phenomena in nature?'"

In the case of the film *Stream Line* (1976), the camera follows the straight line of the taut wire and tracks along the bed of the stream with the flowing water along it.

"The mechanism of the camera operation meets the aleatoric aspect of the geology and the water observed. It's not entirely chance that the stream bed is that way. There are factors that have made it that shape over time - and that's my film script, not what I bring to it... I think its a really central point to all of my work."¹⁴

The darkened room has been likened to the sub-conscious, the place of in which imagination and the retrieval of memory collide. To enter such a place is, for a fleeting moment, to re-live childhood's terror of the night. Revelation peels back these and other fears - the line of light beneath the door, the glimmer of light through the keyhole. The room, a gallery, contains a moving image within the darkness. It is an image as familiar to the modern urban dweller as the sight of plains and mountains are to the nomad. In many ways we are the urban nomads less concerned with finding food for ourselves and others but struggling to differentiate from the contemporary plethora, those images that are meaningful, fertile and sustaining.

REFERENCES

¹ Chris Welsby – interview with author, April 2004

² op cit

³ op cit

⁴ op cit

⁵ Specifically, as projection video installations, ‘Tall Ships’, that changes the appearance of the human specimens at the approach of a visitor, and ‘Viewer’ (1996) that maintains a line of slightly moving men who do not appear to change at the approach of the spectator.

⁶ Experiments pursued by predominantly painters, exploring retinal response to optical patterning produced at different viewing distances, are acknowledged in this context.

⁷ Gregory L. Ulmer explores this territory extensively in ‘Reality Tables: Virtual Furniture’, Pre-figuring Cyberculture, ed Darren Tofts, Power Pubs / MIT Press 2002

⁸ Film-makers on Tour operated in Britain from 1976 – 1986 with funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) and subsidised venues to present artists’ films with the artist or curators present.

⁹ Chris Welsby – interview with author, April 2004.

¹⁰ Chris Welsby – notes, October 2003

¹¹ Chris Welsby – interview with author, April 2004.

¹² Peter Wollen, Introduction, ‘Chris Welsby – Film/Photographs/Writings’, ACGB 1980

¹³ Chris Welsby – notes, October 2003

¹⁴ Chris Welsby – interview with author, April 2004.