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Daily Exercise (1 to 3)

A conversation with Ann Fuata

Craig Burgess

Ann Fuata is a Melbourne-based artist whose video *Daily Exercise (1 to 3)* was exhibited on the Night Screen at SEVENTH in November 2011. I caught up with Ann at her home to talk about this work, art school and her recent participation in a residency in Réunion.

Craig Burgess: Thinking about the work you made at art school called *Self-Awareness Device* (an ovoid wooden structure with two recesses hollowed out, one for each leg, that the participant is invited to inhabit by placing it over their knees), is that a vehicle for becoming sensitive, for focusing on sensitivity?

Ann Fuata: It's a way of tapping into those other areas that we were once aware of, those invisible things that have been blocked off because of the situation that we're in. We're constantly busy and everything's material. With that work, I wanted to go back, peel away and revisit those other energies that are activated.

CB: The work engages an awareness of the body.

AF: Yes, of the body, of what's around it and of whatever situation that you're in right now. Art school was an interesting time because you were thrown off balance and challenged constantly.

CB: That seems to be the intention of it, to push you out of your comfort zone.

AF: Yes, so that you are forced to develop. I wanted to create a safe haven for myself, and I did that through this particular work. I wanted the audience to experience the chaos that a new environment produces, where it's easy to get sidetracked.

CB: For me, the first year or so of art school was nebulous and vast. Creating a structure in response to that environment, a structure that supports you, makes sense.

AF: In this work I was doing it literally, doing it through object-making, although it was also performative. I came from a strong performance background in dance and theatre, and that naturally came into the early stages of my development at art school. I think that performance is still present in my practice in other ways.

CB: Could you talk about the work at SEVENTH?

AF: The work is a video of me walking up an escalator at a busy station. Most people who will see the video and are from Melbourne will recognise that it's Spencer Street Station or Southern Cross. In this video, there are three escalators and I'm walking up the middle one. Everyone around me is walking backwards. I made this work last year, my last year at art school as an undergraduate. At the time I was doing a series of walks and looking at the works of Bas Jan Ader.

CB: What I get from his work is the way a small gesture becomes a gateway for something else. The work where he rides his bicycle into the canal stands out for me. Another work I love is that one with the stones and the light on the floor. Is he holding it above his head?

AF: It's a concrete slab and he's holding it in his hands. He's in a dark space and there's just one bulb lying on the ground. He's a skinny man and he's holding a massive slab. You know what the outcome is going to be.

CB: So there's a tension and a sense of inevitability.

AF: There is tension and he magnifies this tension and the awkwardness of the situation. This is an element that I would like to play with more in my work. And it's something that Bas Jan Ader embraced in his.

CB: Did you film the other walks you did around Melbourne or were some of them private performative gestures?

AF: I filmed and photographed the other walks and I had people help me document this action. Walking is an everyday gesture and I wanted to use these pedestrian gestures to highlight how the supposedly arbitrary things that we do have a point, they do matter, although sometimes they also don't matter.

CB: They're really important and not important at all at the same time. They can mean everything and nothing.

AF: They also create our everyday world. I want to celebrate that kind of banality. Apart from the escalator walk, there was one that took place in a quiet neighbourhood. In another one I made at that time, I was kicking a can. The escalator and neighbourhood walks were performed in real-time but backwards. I wanted to make a slight shift in what we're used to everyday, and then play with that. David Lynch does a lot of playing in his films. The thing about film is that it affords the space to play tricks, and video does too. I didn't work with a lot of video before I went to art school, but there it happened naturally. Every material is performative but video is especially. The immediacy of it I related instantly to my background in performance.

CB: Now that you've had lots of life in between showing it and the time you made it, does revisiting the work at SEVENTH change the way you feel about it? Does it renew or reinvigorate concerns that you're currently exploring?

AF: Yes definitely. The work was originally displayed in a narrow dark space, and that worked not only with the architecture of the space but the architecture of the escalators. Before showing the escalator work at SEVENTH, which I called *Daily Exercise (1 to 3)*, I was anxious that the street context wouldn't make sense. I think it does though, because the pedestrian language is there. Seeing the work in a shopfront also made me think about health and fitness clubs and how they expose people who are working out.

CB: Do you see this context as a public/private interface?

AF: Absolutely. I think that it syncs well with that idea of how everything that we do is performative. We are constantly on stage. It makes sense with the presentation of other shopfronts. It is interesting to see the work in this light.

CB: Could you talk a little about your recent residency in Réunion?

AF: The residency was thematic. We had to respond to landscape but landscape could mean anything really, not only the natural landscape. I had initially proposed to do a series of actions where I would hang off furniture and urban and rural spaces like light poles, doorways and trees and possibly people. However, when you go over to your destination you naturally have to adapt to the situation there because your proposal is conceptual.

CB: You can't imagine what it's like to be there.

AF: You can only imagine. So naturally my project changed and I ended up generating work that touched on what I proposed. I ended up doing a lot of drawings and revisiting previous nest works. I was inspired by a species of bird over there called the village weaver. They make really beautiful nests that look like eggs. The entry is a small hole. When they're finished they discard the well-crafted nests on the ground. I remember going to Savannah, a suburb, a location in Réunion, one day and seeing a tree full of these birds. At the bottom of the tree there was a sea of nests. I couldn't help but study them. I

also felt that I needed to create an incubator for myself to deal with the different situation I found myself in. I revisited some of the ancestors of contemporary art, Joseph Beuys for example, who was my husband in a lifetime once upon a time. His philosophies offered some mentorship for me to just do and to revisit some things that I hadn't finished with.

CB: What did you feel you had left unfinished?

AF: Uncooked energies waiting to manifest. I'm slowly moving the focus away from my physical self but I can't help but be intimate with the materials I work with. A previous photographic series was a rendition of a work by Robert Kinmont in which, as in his photographic series, I am holding everyday objects. I realised the objects I was holding that I photographed were things I use everyday. They were the utilitarian things that make up life. In Réunion, I revisited this work. I work a lot with instructions, and in Réunion I gave myself a series of instructions up and down the mountain. It was dangerous to walk down the mountain because the roads were very narrow and people speed.

CB: Was one of the instructions to take a photo of your bag?

AF: Yes. There were thirty instructions and I performed them over a two-hour period, so one hour up the mountain and one hour down the mountain. I realised that I didn't allow myself to have a break, so I gave myself an instruction to stop for ten minutes and photograph wherever I ended up. I had a rest at a bus stop and put the bag down there. I took the photograph to signify that I had a break. It was a beautiful walk. I noticed there were a lot of deflated balloons the further you go up the mountain. There was a sad, deflated balloon with a smiley face and I guess it summed up how I was feeling at that time! A sad, deflated, smiley balloon. In one instruction I told myself to pick up the heaviest looking object. My research for this task, actually for the whole excursion, the residency, was to look at the inevitability of things, mainly defeat. Specifically for this instruction-action-activity, I instructed myself to pay attention to weight, so to various weights and to various surfaces. I instructed myself to hold a discarded VHS

player and walk with it for ten minutes. After ten minutes, I placed it in whatever location I was in. It was very mundane.

CB: There's a strong sense of intimacy with the object that is developed in the work. I'm engaging with it as an image, but you have a tactile, physical, bodily memory of that object. What other objects did you work with?

AF: In one instruction, after a twenty-minute walk of just observing, I instructed myself to find the closest materials to make the Pillars of Hercules. So I found two containers and made the two Pillars of Hercules. The pillars are from the story in Greek mythology about Atlas. In one version of the Atlas story, the Gods relieved him by exchanging his place for that of the pillars.

CB: To hold up the world.

AF: Yes, but the world is meant to be symbolic of our cosmology. I am interested to know what our current cosmology is. We seem to be very lost. I was playing a lot with those ideas. I brought in this occidental story to the island because everything is imported and because everything there is occidental; the people, even the stories are carried from other cultures. I was an occident there. It didn't feel right to respond immediately to the cultural, political, social situation because I felt like an anthropologist in a way and I don't like it when artists do that.

CB: It's voyeuristic.

AF: Yes. I have colleagues who do that, and it comes from a good place, but it's as Adorno says, it's not right to sum up what happened with the Shoah, or as some would say 'the holocaust', in one sentence. It's barbaric to sum up someone's horrific experience in one word. I carried that on my shoulders when I was there. The aim was to have a relationship, a dialogue with the context I was working with, but I was wary that there was only so much I could respond to.

CB: You're only really able to talk about what's yours. It seems there was a sense of caution around commenting on something that didn't correspond with your experience. It was something that you couldn't know.

AF: If I was there for longer, it would make more sense, but I felt a bit wary of that. I read up on the history of the situation in Réunion but it's very tricky to find many negative things about it. It's painted as a happy, rosy, postcard, tourist destination. When you go there it says otherwise. You talk to the people and learn about the people. You see so many stray dogs, and that actually does say a lot. There's a strong history of slavery, racism and classism. The island is similar to Australia in the way that it was a penal colony. As part of the trade route, the French wanted people to build the infrastructure, and so wanted slaves from Africa and Madagascar. The Indian and Chinese cultures were involved in the trading process. There's a real sense of rebellion.

CB: It strangely suits the idea of defeat. Did you find that there was a connection?

AF: It was a deliberate connection. I had a really tough year last year, and the information from last year naturally carried into my working process and practice. When I heard about the opportunity in Réunion I read up on the history. It made sense to respond to it from a personal place and build up a relationship with the people there. So that was a deliberate move. When I went there I learnt that the reality of the program was pretty messed up, and I decided to use instructions as a way of working that I'm familiar with. But I struggled with it. I felt there was something more I wanted to be. I felt I wasn't strong enough or that the work I was doing wasn't really dealing with the situation there.

CB: Did you feel that it was superficial, that it was just scratching the surface?

AF: Yes. We were excluded from the town because we were placed in the mountains. As a result, we couldn't have that social dialogue as much as we wanted to. I did these instructions and decided that the

work didn't fit and that I needed to be in town more often. I tried to be, and I think the strongest, most social relationship I had with the people over there was on the bus. They blasted up the music on the bus, so I had to guess what the people were saying. I created my own mythology in a way, and that was interesting, being on the bus.

CB: Sharing that space.

AF: Sharing that space. I also frequented the local mall called Jumbo. It was bizarre. It was a hyper world and everything was clearly imported from Europe.

CB: An island within an island! It sounds like there were moments of connectivity but you were still at a bit of a distance. It's interesting with the bus that the opportunity to overhear people's conversations was made impossible by the music.

AF: It was the Top 40. It'd be the same song when you went down to the city and the same song on the way back. Towards the end of the trip I felt defeated and that was really interesting. I think it was the amount of pressure that I put on myself to stay there as long as I could. It was the inevitability of the situation; you couldn't help but feel helpless and that your art couldn't save the people there, and that even if you tried it would be a self-righteous move. But if you didn't try then what did you contribute? There was a push and pull, a conflict that I had with myself.

CB: And a sense of entrapment as well.

AF: There was a strong sense of entrapment physically, psychologically. Being in the mountains was a form of entrapment. You were really forced to be ultra super resourceful. Some of the artists there shared similar feelings, frustrations but excitement too. You had to take each day as it came.