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Night moves: Ann Fuata's *Daily Exercise* (1 to 3)

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Placing your artwork in an unmanned public space can be a little like abandoning a bundle at the hospital door. In the best of all worlds, a passerby would find and embrace it, take it inside and give it loving attention. But of course, there is always the possibility it will be left out in the dark and cold, unnoticed, failing to thrive.

Morbid analogies aside, there is something both hopeful and fatalistic about public art spaces like the Night Screen at SEVENTH. Although often instituted out of an altruistic desire to make art more accessible, what they mostly do is exchange one extremely niche audience for another – the predictability, and privilege, of the art crowd, for the tantalising unknowability of the passerby.

Melbourne boasts a diverse selection of shop-window art spaces. From veteran Platform¹, with its endless glass boxes to fill, to the diminutive TwentyByThirty², attached to a café in an aromatic alley behind Swanston Street, these repurposed retail sites are a strange combination of high and low profile. Located centrally, they are technically accessible to all, but would not be available to artists in the first place if they were exploitable, itself implying inaccessibility.

The audience for such hidden public spaces is often conceived as some kind of amorphous 'general public'. As Din Heagney, former director of Platform, put it: '[Platform] wasn't just for the elite or people in the know, it was art for everyone, anyone, no-one ...'³ But while it's true that plenty of people rush past those windows on a daily basis, who are the people who

regularly stop? Who is the audience beyond the commuters who flood the subway at tidal intervals each day?

At least speculatively, you can drill down further into the ‘counter-public’⁴, and identify this very ungeneric audience as: people at a loose end during the day, university students, buskers, retirees, the homeless, teenage delinquents, scammers and vandals. The Night Screen audience is potentially an even broader church, especially during the daylight savings hours of 9 pm–12 am⁵, when it is likely encountered by shift workers, bar staff, chefs on break, drifters, stumbling alcoholics, revelers tipping out of night spots and house parties, middle-class gourmands tipping out of foodie meccas, and perhaps only the most hardcore of actual art fans. How do curators and artists address this audience? And how does the audience receive what is being offered?

When I visited on a quiet Tuesday night, I found myself wondering. Spectatorship breeds spectatorship, and as I stood watching the video, a woman with a slightly shaky, glazed countenance wavered in my peripheral vision, joining me in a sort of awkward, co-locational camaraderie of public art appreciation. ‘How’s she done it?’ my fellow audient suddenly asked, referring to the illusion created in Ann Fuata’s video *Daily Exercise (1 to 3)*. An impromptu conversation ensued as we tried to nut out the mechanics of it together. Depicting three adjacent escalators, moving in alternate directions, it centres on the figure of Fuata, calmly stepping, one riser at a time, up the ‘down’ escalator. Timing her steps perfectly with its pace, she makes no progress and holds her position throughout the video. A sweet trick in itself, recalling childhood fascinations with shopping centre architecture, it becomes mind-boggling when you realise the whole video is being played in reverse.

Just as easily as it had begun, the conversation dropped, and we went our separate ways. Unlike a gallery space, whose structure invites sustained and isolated attention to a work, a public screen creates these temporary, ephemeral opportunities for engagement: lighter moments in which people can encounter art and each other minus the potentially off-putting barriers attendant to the White Cube.

The metaphor of the window as a semi-permeable membrane between the gallery (the art world) and the street (everything else) is extended by Fuata's depiction of escalators. Windows and escalators are both liminal space – always between two places. They are also both conveyances – this window conveying ideas and artwork to the public, the escalators conveying shoppers to products, workers to transport. The Night Screen acts as an insertion and an interruption to the highly monetised and merchandised retail-scape of Gertrude Street, and Fuata's performance as an insertion into the wider capitalist landscape – an interruption to its insistent flow. She creates a moment of calm, defiantly refusing to advance in the on-rush of progress (a 'progress' which is ironically depicted playing in reverse).

There is a playfulness to Fuata's video too, which brings to mind Jeroen Offerman's *Stairway at St Paul's*⁶, in which the performance artist sings Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' backwards, then reverses the footage, invoking and inverting the urban myth of rock albums hiding subliminal satanic messages. In both videos, part of the pleasure is watching the public react to the performance with curiosity or disdain, either trying to avoid, or openly gawking at the camera. Both tread a fine line between tight conceptual and formal structure and an embracing of random inputs.

Of course it is nearly impossible to measure the relationship between the window, the work and its potential audience, and unwise to generalise from specific experience. But my sense is that its fabric is constructed from many random, isolated moments of encounter – between the work, the individual, and between individuals and each other – on the street. Fuata's work, both public and intimate, engaging and detached, perfectly addresses this accumulation of potential moments and potential audiences.

1 Platform Public Contemporary Art Spaces, <<http://platformartistsgroup.blogspot.com>>.

2 TwentyByThirty Gallery, <<http://www.twentybythirtygallery.com>>.

3 Angela Brophy. 'Platform – In The Words Of Former Directors.' *What Art, Which Public: Platform Artists Group 1990-2010*, ed. Angela Brophy. Melbourne: Platform Artists Group, 2010, p. 65.

- 4 Zara Stanhope. 'Something Strange in the Subway.' *What Art, Which Public: Platform Artists Group 1990-2010*, ed. Angela Brophy. Melbourne: Platform Artists Group, 2010, p. 9.
Zara Stanhope uses Michael Warner's concept of the 'counter-public': 'self-initiated alternatives to the reigning cultural and political hegemony of the conception of the public as the market, and thereby authors of an alternative perspective.'
- 5 The regular hours for the Night Screen are the slightly more social 6 pm-12 am.
- 6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlS3j-9Y18s>