

17 August – 3 September 2011

## **Adrift in the void**

Anna Zammit

Can meaning be constructed inside a void? Jon Oldmeadow's video, *Adrift in the void*, is set inside a fold in space and time. The artist provides field notes from an exploration of a space 'in between'. Armed with a small camera hidden inside his sunglasses, he films his surroundings, narrating the footage in the first person. Oldmeadow forces unsuspecting members of the public to become actors in a disorientating fragmented narrative. Using cinematic tools typical of sci-fi time-travel films, he breaks down the constructs of the traditional linear narrative, questioning its role in establishing understanding.

Playing with our sense of time, the work jumps forwards and backwards with ambiguity. The deconstructed narrative parallels the non-linear nature of everyday experiences. For example, when meeting someone for the first time we don't tell them who we are in a linear format, starting with when we were born and continuing in chronological order. Non-linear narratives mimic human nature and memory recall, and have been the focus of much film and literature.

The opening shots of a sweeping view over the tip of an aeroplane wing are accompanied by a description of the beginning of the end: 'I was reduced to a pure concept. My flesh had dissolved; my form dissipated. I floated in space liberated from my corporeal being but without dispensation to go anywhere else. I was adrift in the void.' This quote from Haruki Murakami is the first of three from novels the artist read during his travels. Oldmeadow references that the sentiments of these texts resonated with the way he felt while he was spying on people through

the hidden sunglasses camera. The philosophical sentiments juxtaposed with scenes of poverty and political unrest make apparent a shared social consciousness.

Slowly transitioning through relatively unconnected scenes, the work is held in a numinous weightless state. Set adrift in limbo we hear resonating strains of a choir singing. From the back seat of a taxi, the artist provides few clues to his unknown location, taking in glimpses of the surrounding neighbourhood and the back of the taxi driver's head. The driver, Carlos Garcia Fernandez, is busy planning out his future as he negotiates the chaos of the city streets. Haunted by the sounds of gunshots and fireworks, he is trying to slow down his view of the world in order to predict what will happen. This fragmented view of Carlos's life begs us to question what our own destination might be.

Fast forward and we enter a street festival with locals celebrating and dancing. Two short women carrying babies wrapped in slings shop for belts. Oldmeadow explains that sisters Marta and Martina have travelled a long way to get to the city, taking three buses, two trains and the metrocable. 'Marta had planned to name her baby Jorge, but kept it a secret as the gender was unknown. And miscommunication led to a small argument resulting in both babies being named Jorge, the same name as their father.' The women wander through the markets in identical dresses. Unimpressed with the selection of accessories, they leave empty-handed. Through the development of these unnecessarily detailed characters, their backgrounds having little context to the story, Oldmeadow creates an uneasy tension between the viewer and the work. This sense of alienation and distance is further heightened by the restless and discontented nature of the characters.

From a train carriage window, the size of the city, surrounded by mountains and an expansive shantytown, becomes apparent. Oldmeadow introduces a man standing on his porch in the rain, giving his actions meaning: 'As Ramon Andres swept his porch he also swept away large gaping holes in his reality.' Last night, we hear, Ramon placed his medicine near the bathroom sink, but this morning it had been moved to the centre of the kitchen table. He did not move it; he lives alone. Ramon continues

sweeping, as if trying to fill the holes in his porch. A quote from Philip K. Dick allows Oldmeadow to avoid providing a real reason for these happenings: 'we all have leaks in our reality ... a drop here, a couple of drops there and a moist spot forming on the ceiling.' Oldmeadow blurs the distinction between the real and the unreal, loosening our grasp on our experience of the work.

Looking across the hillside scattered with the tops of dishevelled buildings, the desolation of the city is evident. From the vantage point of a cable car we spy down on soldiers standing on an embankment, surveying the area, guns strapped over their shoulders. Below, a mural depicts optimistic scenes of rebellion and athletics. As the shot fades out, the artist surmises with a quote from Paul Auster, 'when a person is lucky enough to live inside a story, to live inside an imaginary world, the pains of this world disappear. For as long as the story goes on, reality no longer exists.' The quotes provide structure to the loose architecture of the video, lending much weight and meaning to this work.

Presenting fiction as non-fiction, Oldmeadow utilises the gallery space to position the video as pseudo-documentary. The disparate scenes in the video are linked by the strategic insertion of the quotes throughout, affecting a semi-fictional, diarised account of an explorer. It's an obscure take on sci-fi, reminiscent of the narrated vacillating photomontages of Chris Marker and Tamar Guimaraes. Oldmeadow takes much pleasure in the magic of low-fi aesthetics, employing technology that has the capacity to transport us through space and time. The carefully measured contents of the work results in a blurry, but readable, road map to the abyss.