



:: heaven :: himmel ::

Henriette Kayser-Schuster and Hermione Merry

29 March - 1 April 2011

:: h e a v e n :: h i m m e l :: is a screen-based collaborative performance installation piece informed by concepts of foreign body, memory and death. Boris Groys describes the performer on screen as post mortem. Conflating the live body with its mediated counterpart, the overlapping images oscillate between the afterworld and the here and now. The viewer will interact with this three-dimensional cinematic world.

Review of *:: heaven :: himmel ::*
By Tim Alves & Anna Newbold
Posted by Inkblot

':: h e a v e n :: h i m m e l ::' is a collaborative project that has components in both Melbourne and Berlin—Melbourne's is realised with Henriette Kassay-Schuster as its subject—Berlin will be Hermione Merry. Live performance and video projection run simultaneously. Places are connected to languages and dislocation is integrated with a lack of specific local vernacular and untranslatable lexis. It is like the feeling of trying to put powerful emotions into words. This installation takes shape within a series of projected images and lights on the walls. The videos show a woman (Kassay-Schuster) in a blue dress making a series of vaguely distinguishable hand movements—the gestures of an airline hostess, a totalitarian dictator, a sprite or St Francis. She is in a forest. It is night. While the video is lit from a single point, two simultaneous projections of the same image build a scene imagined as lit by car headlights.

The metaphysical is central to this work. It seems as though the woman in the blue dress is a visitor like a ghost to this scene and is either warning us or reminding us of an event we cannot yet know or have forgotten. Unlike the archetypal red coated innocent in the forest of fairytales, the blue dress gives her a serenity and celestial quality that makes us not fear for her but more for ourselves because we can't quite understand her message to us, but know it's important.

A structural network of steel scaffold holds a car's windscreen with rear-view mirror and a rear window—a metonymic car a metaphoric drive. The formation evokes a set for a driving scene in an old movie. It is like those familiar sequences, obviously shot in a studio, with a point of view from somewhere on the bonnet—where Cary Grant discusses his relationship with Grace Kelly. Behind them an unrealistic Monte Carlo background winds away. In ':: h e a v e n :: h i m m e l ::' a crash is implied in the car's gestalt fragmentation. Through the rear window is another projection of the blue dressed woman with her back turned—an eerie ghost on the highway. The evocation of these familiar tropes is dislocated in a way similar to the experience of reading subtitles while watching a foreign film when, absorbed by the action, the visual English of the subtitles seems subjectively to be heard in the audible other language. Dialogue is said in a strange sign language. These artworks make contact with a pre-conscious set of messages, gestures and sighs which seem to ruminate rather than speak directly.

Arm and hand movements, waves, salutes and such gestures have specific connotative meanings. More abstract forms of gestures, gesticulation, scratching ones nose, etc can convey specific meanings though often unintentionally. These gestures are performed by Kassay-Schuster in the same space as video images. What is demonstrated by Kassay-Schuster's performance is the integration of language and a subject. Her performance is mediated by the surrounding video images that seem to direct her. Yet, there is a conspicuous difference between the live performance and the video performance. This artwork emphasises the powerful symbolism of the medium of video. Hand gestures that seem abstract live, contain a hidden code in reproduction. The difference between two languages could be one way to describe the effect but it could also be like different sets of skills—the gestures of workmen on a building site, coaches and football players, semaphore code or subtle signs passed around a poker table. Language like this where gestures are woven into a physical jargon often are much more likely to represent their subject than their spoken equivalent—a finger pointing up replaces the word 'up'; a word which has only an abstract relation to its meaning. The artists' abstract gestures conflate language and body language.

Any squeamishness one feels at the possibility of a returned gaze from a performer in that strange performance/audience relationship can be alleviated by allowing the video's direct gaze to take over. However, the very questioning of reality and unreality, simulacra or systems of language and knowledge, is made to feel removed—as if the structures themselves are in the driver's seat. The hands gestures, in isolation, constitute a pre-linguistic consciousness. The work gives an insight into the power of language. What is imbedded in its text is its very own enunciation. Language breathes life into meaning. The blue dressed woman's serpentine movement poetically offers the viewer this knowledge. Yet, it is the persistence of the drive (embodied in the car) of an aesthetic will to find out what shouldn't be known that is tragic. The hand gestures are warning you not to understand them because if you do you will understand your own mortality.