

another day in
a constructed world

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In the work of A Constructed World, one finds oneself to be part of a large group, one discusses a great deal, becomes bored, sometimes runs nude in the forest, sings badly, dines well, dances, acts foolish, encounters strange beasts, creates things there. Rarely has an oeuvre such as that of the Australian duo better put into practice that precept which Allan Kapprow already formulated forty-five years ago with regard to the happening: the transforming of art into a permanent event, a space which is open to contingency, to encounters and to experimentation. With ACW one is never sure when the work begins and whether it has finished, and those who approach it take the risk of finding themselves to be an integral part of the creative process. Videos, paintings, texts, installations, collaborations and performances are the heteroclitic indications of an activity whose contours are constantly changing. To construct open situations where the artwork occurs as a mode of fixing experience – this is the wager they undertake against seemingly impossible odds. The workshops which are frequently organized by the two artists of ACW, Jacqueline Riva and Geoff Lowe, function as an ideal terrain for the putting into practice of their *poiesis*. Bringing together individuals from highly diverse experiential horizons – students from a failing high school in New York's lower east side, entrepreneurial staff coexisting with artworks collected by a financial company, patients of a psychiatric hospital or lovers of art – the workshops establish an encounter in which the reception of the artwork reveals itself to be an integral part of the creative process. The assertion perhaps has nothing new about it ever since Duchamp uttered his maxim concerning “the viewer who creates the work,” but its “practical” application, in the case of these workshops, nonetheless remains radical. “Doing something together”: if the program

announced at the beginning of the sessions may possibly seem anodyne, it sets in motion interminable discussions in which the notion of creation is negotiated in what is from time to time a turbulent manner. The final outcomes of the experience may be a video, sketches or even an entire exhibition, all realized in a communal effort.

This attentiveness to the “viewer” may be found right from the start of the collaboration between Jacqueline Riva and Geoff Lowe at the beginning of the 1990s. *Artfan*, the magazine of which they have published some ten issues, where amateurs and professionals find themselves on an equal footing when talking about art, initiates their undertaking of undermining aesthetic conventions. “*One of the things about art is that [...] people supposedly respond to it by looking at it or by buying it; by consuming it in some kind of way. Capitalist culture makes it seem like it's a fairly straightforward way, but [...] that process is a lot more mysterious than one thinks to know.*”²¹ Thus it is not a matter here of some product already formatted and ready to be consumed, nor of a genius imposing his vision upon the world, but on the contrary of a defiant stance with regard to the conventional criteria of production and evaluation. The position which they take up has its origin in that particular and paradoxical context of Australian art which has always grasped hold of the aesthetic dictates of a history of western art from which it is, on the other hand, totally excluded. The Australian situation of provincial conformity maintained in a sort of shame, conjugated in the reflex of withdrawal occasioned by a secular fear of infection penetrating from outside, has contributed to radicalizing the discourse of A Constructed World. What may be observed here is the discomfiture imposed upon the sacrosanct concept of the “author” through their multiple and incessant collaborative efforts with others – artists, amateurs,

acquaintances, etc. – and the reduction to utter nothingness of those no less eminent criteria of “savoir faire” and “style” in their works. Their videos, their paintings and their performances have in common a handling of such aesthetic principles as non-control, low-tech, fun, multiplicity, and narrative fragmentation, all of which are unremittingly perilous and which as a result engender in their audience such problematic emotions as embarrassment, amusement or boredom. Thus in the video *scenes from the Whipstick Forest...* (1998), the spectator is led to view during thirty-seven long minutes sequences presenting the successive groundworks of an apartment interior, a strange concert occurring in a forest in the middle of nowhere, a self-mutilation with a knife, and the appearance of doubles of Uncle Fester, a character from the television series *The Addams Family*. If *scenes from the Whipstick Forest...* at first proves to be disconcerting through its apparent lack of formal rigor and of narrative logic, through its interludes of absolute boredom and of sudden laughter, it in fact sketches the portrait of that utterly Australian sentiment of always feeling oneself to be in a precarious situation mirroring the plight of Fester, the disgraceful and blundering relative. These scenes from the “forest of the whip” thus open themselves to interpretation as a testimony sent out to the rest of the world about the resentful isolation, the useless self-flagellation and the marginalization of creation endured under the authority of a conservative country. Hence the oeuvre of Riva and Lowe pursues its play along two fronts: for the spectator, that of being suspended in a state of uncertainty which compels one to take oneself into account during the process of interpreting the artwork; and for the two artists, that of creating a space of questioning, of opening and of interacting. Geoff Lowe: *“I’ve always had a great faith in location, rather than nation or state, which is the*

*opposition to dominance of world culture, because locality comes from your own repeated experiences. You construct a sense of place by what happens to you.”*ⁱⁱ

This investigation into a “place” will lead the two artists to travel more and more frequently towards “the center,” to live in New York, then in Milan, right up to their installation in Turin at the beginning of 2004. “There where the map cuts out, the narrative traverses,” stated Michel de Certeau, inasmuch as narrative is the “founder of place.”ⁱⁱⁱ Once again videos record the experience of their wanderings: *Scenes from the Center* (2001), where doubles of Fidel Castro question the validity of paternal authority; *Ciao* (2001) and the worldwide use of a word which once meant “slave” and stated the identity of the persons who encountered each other; *Schiavo* (“Slave”) (2003), where there is a traversal of the Red Sea in an image of synthesis, a symbol of deliverance and of the march towards a virtual Promised Land; finally *Ecstatic Torino* (2004), a strange ritual which celebrates the installation of the two artists at Turin against a background of Sephardic dance music with the eloquent title “The world belong to the happy ones.” In a parallel development, the series of the *Fresh History Paintings* (2000-2002) again takes up, in flat-tinted acrylic paint, certain figures and events from the videos. It is the case of immanent immediacy in the medium of the video being transferred onto canvas so that History, even if lived out in a personal mode, may be written in real time. Deliberately painted with a touch of naïveté, even while remaining seductive through their acidulous colors, these canvasses, hung side by side like common wall paper, seem to suspend any possibility of judgment concerning their relevance with regard to the history of painting. Their discourse is in other respects, as is suggested by their installation, in accordance with the videos

from which they draw their motifs. The spectator invited to view the videos while lying upon a mattress is plunged into this all-over environment of both filmed and painted images. The “sense of place” is accordingly that of the repetition and transformation of these images, of the establishment of a space-time that is inherent to lived-through time and to the exercise of memory.

The change of place by the two artists from the periphery towards the center, motivated by a desire to enter into contact with a culture more open to their aesthetic of confrontation and of displacement, soon proves to be illusory. Even if the two artists are invited to prestigious exhibitions such as the Bienal de São Paulo in 1998, Arte all’Arte at San Gimignano in 2000, and to organize workshops with important institutions such as the Serpentine Gallery in London (2002), they become progressively and mournfully aware of their “powerlessness to change the world.”^{iv} Geoff Lowe has commented, “*One similarity for psychoanalysis and contemporary culture is that no one really wants it. No one wants their paradigms of boundaries changed and most people only enter the domain when the alternatives are insufferable.*”^v At the center, just as at the periphery, ACW experiences a world that is very little disposed to let go of its certainties where “*the institution of education often creates and maintains a gap by wanting to author an exclusive and valuable sign of knowledge.*”^{vi} The repetitive journeys, the same passages via subway in cities which ultimately come to resemble each other, the too-brief appearances in the video *Big Dirty Love* (2004) of people whom they have met give testimony to the difficulties experienced by these artists in their search for this “sense of place.” There where others would certainly have attempted a sleight of hand in

order to rid themselves of this state of crisis, Riva and Lowe, on the contrary, accept it and transform it into narrative. “Art – for the one who creates it – becomes an experience that is more and more disquieting,” reminds Giorgio Agamben in discussing the nihilist postulate of Nietzsche, because “*the promise of happiness made by art becomes the poison which contaminates and destroys its experience.*”^{vii} Unremittingly faithful to the principle of uncertainty as a vector of emancipation which is the basis for their artistic practice, the duo of ACW acknowledges the experimental value of this crisis. Ultimately there remains one sole certitude – namely that their salvation lies in a state of openness and exchange, for “*what we don’t know yet may be the best thing we have (together).*”^{viii}

Translated from the French by George Frederick Takis

ⁱ Geoff Lowe interviewed by Sofia Hernandez Chong Chuy in “Excerpts from a Conversation,” *Log Illustrated*, No. 13, Winter 2001.

ⁱⁱ Geoff Lowe quoted by Louise Neri, “Oceania: Exploring, Not Knowing,” *XXIV São Paulo Biennale*, São Paulo, 1997.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michel de Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire* (“The Invention of the Everyday. 1st Arts of Doing”), Ed. Gallimard, Paris, 1990, p. 182 *et passim*.

^{iv} Jacqueline Riva in a conversation with the author, September 2004.

^v Geoff Lowe, *Not-Knowing as a Shared Space*, manuscript text, 2004.

^{vi} A Constructed World, in answer to the questionnaire *The Artist and the Public*, ARCO, Madrid, 2004.

^{vii} Giorgio Agamben, *L’Homme sans contenu* (“The Man with no Contents”), Editions Circé, Paris, 1966, pp. 11-12.

^{viii} Geoff Lowe, *Not-Knowing as a Shared Space*, *op.cit.*