

The view out my window: Ayşe Erkmen

Sally Ann McIntyre

It takes a lot of time to be a genius. You have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing. – Gertrude Stein

To be on the move as an active, flexible, thinking subject, somewhat paradoxically, requires the capacity for pottering, dreaming and dawdling, walking at a clip which may look distinctly sluggish in the kind of world Paul Virilio has described as undergoing a crisis of representation due to its increasing speed, and whose velocity Baudrillard connects to the desire to return to stasis which marks the Freudian death drive, writing thus: “Speed is simply the rite that initiates us into emptiness: a nostalgic desire for forms to revert to immobility, concealed beneath the very intensification of their mobility”. Speaking on the exhibition *Slowness*, which after its initial showing in New York was invited (along with its curator, who is now the gallery’s Curator of Contemporary Art) to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in late 2004, then-director Greg Burke suggested, “*Slowness* has come to represent something negative and down-time is under threat. The artists in *Slowness* produce works that slow time down, set the viewer a durational challenge, or simply reveal the destructive effects of acceleration.” The contemporary-artist-as-nomad, wandering the world executing projects, can be seen to have a unique opportunity to address pressing issues in contemporary culture relating to speed and attention, their ability to stop to smell the aesthetic, social and political flowers enhanced in particular through the developmental percolation of an artists residency, which balances the heightened focus on one’s environment that travel can bring with the window of time which makes authentic experience and communication possible.

In early April, the Istanbul-born, German-residing artist Ayşe Erkmen, temporarily living and conducting research in Christchurch as The Physics Room’s inaugural artist in residence, gave a succinct and illuminating lecture detailing the history of her practice. Among the many works discussed was the particular intervention into a community, which led to the work *Warm Benches*, in which the artist redirected the surplus energy from a power plant crucial to the economic life of the region to heat a series of curvaceous, welcoming public benches. Working in with localised cycles of labour and season, Erkmen ensured the benches were warm during the winter and cold when the plant was non-operational over the summer, a strategy which satisfies the artist’s formal requirements by ensuring the work’s graceful conceptual

impermanence, while also guaranteeing its very real impact on the community, becoming, in this, distinctly agreeable to the local homeless population. Requisite reading for students of mid-1990s U.S. cultural postmodernity, the chapter entitled Fortress LA in Mike Davis' classic text *City of Quartz* unpacks the extent to which Los Angeles has embedded its class-segregation into the very structure of the built environment, with inner city places exhibiting what the author calls a "spatial apartheid". Alongside this discussion sits a particularly austere image: one of what Davis refers to as the city's 'bum proof bus benches'. This skilfully designed minimal circular pew, the result of planning strategies to render the 'homeless problem' less visible in public space, is perfect for 9 to 5 lunchbreak downtime while being utterly impossible to exploit as a temporary sleeping place. As a counter-image to Davis' starkly castigatory bum-proof bus bench, which has lingered somewhere in the back of my mind, its moral impasse unrequited, for more than a decade, *Warm Benches* spoke vividly to me of Erkmen's particular investigative sensitivity to the nuances of locality and community, her disinclination to separate the formal properties of objects from both their potential removal and their wider social context and usage, and art's real potential to productively engage with, rather than simply reflect or decorate, the lives of its viewers.

Such issues, the artist showed us during her stay in Christchurch, can be productively elaborated via the strategy of the artist residency itself, which in Erkmen's hands became a strategic block of time which gave experiential substance, in the form of local knowledge, to shore up against expedient readings of place, reinforcing the value of experiences, as opposed to images and words, as tools with which to conduct expansive cultural readings. For an artist who proceeds on the premise that a successful work for a gallery is one whereby she "doesn't feel she's brought anything from outside", Erkmen's notion of what constitutes an 'inside', along with how she strategises around her own status as 'outsider', is worth careful investigation. As an intensely site-responsive practitioner, her de-mythologising and reworking of received imagery of Christchurch during the course of her residency at The Physics Room necessitated infiltration into the community's local knowledge via the development of social networks, a task which she proceeded to conduct, by all accounts, with much pleasure, verve and charm. So: the streets walked, the conversations had, the coffee bought: all feed into the work, breaking through the reductive membrane of the received image, toward a more complex, experiential notion of place. One result of her tireless investigations into the social fabric of the Physics Room's immediate community of High Street was the distinct feeling that the opening of her show, *Awesome*, was a form of social sculpture – by bringing the High Street community into the gallery, Erkmen was both celebrating and performing the results of her time in the city.

Punning on the austerity of minimalism and the notion of the gallery as reverential space, Erkmen's blinds, which filled the Physics Room's windows for *Awesome's*

duration, are secular stained glass in a space that is 'all window', which in a deft mediumistic alchemy nod to the sublimity of colour field painting while simultaneously pointing to the gallery's history as one of exhibiting installation work which is not wall-based. The blinds render transparent Erkmen's intervention into the socio-economic life of the area, being sourced from a local company, and they also speak to the notion of the picturesque, conflating the idealised image of New Zealand with the gallery window's framing of its contemporary day-to-day existence. An insight into which might be found in previous work, *Scenic Overlooks*, it's bifurcated title implying both vistas and the blind spots that accrue with repeated viewing. Erkmen pointed out that the one blind you could actually see through was the greyish one, which rendered the city vaguely filmic. Sure enough, looking through this blind's fine, near-transparent weave one saw it as an image, but one which inevitably recalled the grainy, pixellated materiality of 35mm film, an effect which rendered the city below drenched in a nostalgic New Zealand-ness of painted wood summer houses and beetling Humber 80s, a relation to the photographic which remained nevertheless resolutely anti-idealistic. It also reminded us that we are sandwiched here between the encyclopaedic film libraries of *Alice in Videoland* below and a long history of site specific work in this location which includes Nathan Coley's *Black Maria* above, and the streetside *Glitched* film festival in the early 1990s. Erkmen's candy pink blind, on the other hand, was not transparent, becoming the grounds of much thinking around the relationship of 'blind spots' to 'looking through rose coloured glasses'. (Well, at least you couldn't see the Corgies anymore).

Virilio suggests that the contemporary situation is one whereby we treat the world as mediated by screens, the ultimate symbol of which being the car window, through which we not only frame but 'edit' the world as a stream of scenes which flash by us before we can catch their nuances. This drive-by imaginary is also embedded in the moving window of the television screen and the computer browser. But, as the Italian founders of the Slow Food movement understand so well, there is no reason why Globalisation necessarily equals expedience on the level of hamburgers in spongiform white buns for everyone, if we could instead be educated in the value of treating our increasing mobility with an amount of slowness, as an opportunity to stop to sample difference while working to preserve it, if in fact we simply spend more time in the places where we go, and more thought and effort in exploring, understanding, and respecting what happens there. The title of another of Erkmen's previous works, *Shipped Ships*, which involves a small boat being taken on a journey on a larger boat, uses a short etymological chain to demonstrate the transformative circulation between noun and verb, stasis and movement. Participating in Erkmen's installation as a viewer felt a little bit like being that little ship: being treated to a kind of travel that is playful and compassionate, while simultaneously being gently coerced to arrive more fully in the place where one is.

This article reviewing awesome by Ayşe Erkmen at The Physics Room, 1 April – 29 April 2006 also appeared in *Presto*, May 2006