

Louise Menzies

World, Business, Lifestyle, Sport

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The Physics Room

World, Business, Lifestyle, Sport Hamish Win

Louise Menzies isolates the mastheads of a seemingly random assortment of global newspapers. There's a serial repetition at play: 'El Universal', 'The Times', 'The Sun', 'Herald', 'Wall Street Journal'. It's like cauterising a wound. 'J'accuse' as polemical occupation of object. But let's look closer at the methodology.

These empty mastheads are printed on mimicry format newsprint and then presented in a street level window space in the post-quake landscape of Sydenham, Christchurch.¹ Looking outward, hoisted as they are upon temporary fencing, they're in a position to be both reflective of the situation as much as they might be absorbing the atmosphere. Which is to say, this isn't just a straight exposure to the light so that we might observe the record in order to pick up the traces.

To get a better bearing on what I mean by this it's worth reading Menzies' *Local Edition* alongside Hans-Peter Feldman's *9/12 Front-Page* (2001) (a collection of 100 global newspapers all carrying the collapse of the world trade centre) which exposes the coercive dimensions of spectacle. The serialism of Feldman's *9/12* returns in Menzies' *Local Edition*, only here it's the absence of content that becomes provocative. For just as Feldman isolates the medium through which the image runs, Menzies also isolates the surface through which content flows. After all, these mastheads both record and absorb the moment of rupture, literally announcing the ground moving movement and yet continue to reflect back its on-going story. Which is to say, in a peculiar perversion, that in the context of post-spectacle Christchurch, earthquake realism takes its best hold in empty newspapers. Not that nothing is happening but that this absence of content best reflects the reality of an on-going story, one that mutates through many mastheads. Which is also to say, that there is no need of sensationalist headlines, when in fact we can, if we are pressed, prove more than capable of writing this content ourselves. Which is not to say that this content becomes generic, but it is to admit that we do suffer the surfeit of detail, that so many stories of loss and redemption become in due course entirely predictable. Which is also not to say that such testimonies become merely threadbare and time-worn, but it is to point to the constitutive reality of this informatic flow, so that what *Local Edition* brings us into contact with, is indeed the very medium through which a story must run its course.

Elsewhere I have written of the way Christchurch's stories do get put to work, manipulated and politicised by so many different actors.² Here is not the place to repeat such scenarios, for I wish not to place blame on one storyteller only to praise another. No what I want to focus on here, is the very medium through which it all occurs. Which is, I think, the underlying function of *Local Edition*, in that it shows how a story might travel through the global media apparatus, so that these empty mastheads become a place holder for the medium itself. That is, what *Local Edition* best sets to work is not the content that transforms these empty pages, nor even the event that sets it in play, but the very idea of information being a kind of artery, a substance that gives form to larger mechanisms at work.

If we can read Menzies' *Local Edition* against Feldman's *9/12* then we ought to also consider Fiona Connor's *Notes On Half The Page* (2009–11). After all, all three artists zoom in on the constitutive flex of information. This is acute in *Notes On Half The Page*, in which the abandoned mechanisms of a newspaper's distribution are claustrophobically threaded through a room. These mechanisms or apparatus have not simply been abandoned in as much as they have been rendered dormant. So much so, that with this work, we have the notion that information itself is a transforming entity. It passes through the newspaper, not just momentarily appearing, but changing the shape of that which it comes into contact with. We need only look at the daily schedule of paper's editions in which the morning's newspaper is superseded by the afternoon's, the city edition is held back from the printers to capture some last minute news, whilst the regional edition is sent out anyway, somewhat forlornly. Which is to say, there is a movement to this cycle of news, one that only settles onto the newspaper. Hence, Menzies exhibits empty newspapers. Just mastheads. Such logic returns with force in *World, Business, Lifestyle, Sport*.

The centrepiece, at least to me, of *World, Business, Lifestyle, Sport* is the short film that was made of the printing press of Christchurch's largest daily newspaper. Portrayed as a lumbering presence, this press becomes a mesmerizing spectacle in itself. So that what we bear witness to is the slow daily routine in which this monolithic, weighty and impregnated machine constantly comes into being. Which is also to say that this press comes to be seen not just through these adjectival metaphors, but also less as a machine moved by technicians, by typesetters and programmers, even by cogs and levers, but rather as a lumbering mechanism of the populace, of the city even. After all, everywhere there are banners for TV3 declaring that it is about the story. They show the intrepid reporter in situ, following the story. Such marketing trumpets the sheer redundancy of the author, turning the journalist less into an adept reporter with a nose for the story, than a dogged bloodhound. At worst, the reporter becomes a kind of automatic mimeograph, even a sheet of carbon paper, recording the story for the mechanism to print, to author, later. Which is to say that this film brings to light just how much the newspaper does conglomerate and churn through a city's story, so much so that it exposes just how much we might consider this informatic flow to be one of the major arteries of a city's populace. Which is why the page work

Menzies inserts into *The Press*, later displayed in the gallery, ostensibly recasts the mastheads she once exposed in *Local Edition*, so that now these international papers are poeticised in translation: *Le Monde* becomes The World, Turkey's *Radikal* becomes Radical, and Poland's *Fakt* becomes Fact. Which is to say that in this translation we have a pertinent reminder of the commotion of daily life, of the thrum that passes through the newspaper so that we might accommodate, even if temporarily, such commotion, in various poses, like lifestyle, business, or sport. If so, then we are also reminded of just how remarkable a feat it is, for the newspaper to play host to such an agglomeration, to the sheer surfeit of information that it deigns to organise. Perhaps, but that's precisely the point. The newspaper is like a city's artery. It is about the story, but, and we are at least forewarned, this realism is also constituted by a story.

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¹ *Local Edition*: 25.07.12 exhibition and publication launch at The Physics Room's temporary exhibition space in Sydenham, 2012

² Writing about Paul Johns' Adam exhibition *Mum* (2013) I had this to say: 'There is a very real affront generated by images that circulate through our media apparatus. Think of the quantifying scenes that proliferated around last winter's storm cycle, in which we found images of fish thrown up onto the southern shoreline of Wellington, or buildings tumbling over into landslips, or homes with no power connection. All of these are just momentary piercings that always seem *suddenly* important and then what. The houses in the Wellington suburb of Kingston are still poised precariously over their slip. These actual physical objects remain and yet those sensational images have slipped back into the stream through which they once functioned. It is though they are designed to fade away, to vanish into the ether not of a forgetting but of a perpetuating cycle. Which is to say that it is not that we no longer care about such imagery, but that we remain indifferent to such images, that they are after all mere representations, representations we almost expect to encounter. Which of course is the power of images, to nullify themselves, to slip into banality as merely images, when in fact they are entirely transitive; that is they generate content. How easily we might say this of the images that follow in the wake of Christchurch's earthquakes, in which this putting-to-work of the image turns this event into an appellation, not just of the quake itself, but it is also the 'killer-quake' (to use one example), which like the recent hysteria in Wellington following the Seddon earthquakes generates a secondary shock, so that what we really experience are two earthquakes, one a physical-kinetic event and the second its mediation. Both are no less real. Their repercussions are equally felt. In fact the psychological damage of the second, mediated quake is perhaps more disturbing, for, like Derrida's comments on 9/11, they pose the problem of much more terrible events to come, a deliberation that filters through into our real world fears, into our dreams and apprehensions. Which is to say that this putting-to-work of the image, this dissemination of the mediated quake is a discursive strand that permeates our world, making of the immaterial, something all too tangibly real'. For more see *John Dory* 56, 2013.