

Action #1: Rebecca Baumann

Gemma Weston

4pm Saturday June 19, 2010

Perth Cultural Centre

Artists in Response to City Spaces curated by Consuelo Cavaniglia

While the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts did not officially endorse the event, its location in a secluded grove adjacent to the institution suggested an implicit complicity. In addition to this, it was the first in a series of public interventions that had developed from Consuelo Cavaniglia's recent 'curatorial residency' with PICA. Cavaniglia conceived the program as an antidote to a creeping tide of local frustration with the lack of opportunities for artists to both exhibit their work and engage in a critical dialogue with their city, spending her residency connecting creative practitioners with CBD sites that could be used as spontaneous and stealthy galleries or performance spaces for actions lasting for at most an hour. The aim was to do something memorable yet ephemeral that bypassed the usually painful, extended and often futile process of gaining council approval.

For the inauguration of the project, recent SOYA winner Rebecca Baumann and her pyrotechnician wore protective glasses as they arranged a series of twelve small metallic canisters. At a safe distance, spectators extended their necks and their cameras in anticipation of the detonation. Once activated, the line of canisters poured a pastel rainbow of smoke, which frothed and billowed into an atmospheric cloud that could be seen, apparently, from over 300 meters away.

Baumann's work is equal parts whimsy and satire, a colourful and effecting investigation into the spectacular, volatile and deceptive nature of contemporary celebration. Her poetic and kinetic sculptures are frequently site specific. They are temporary monuments to indefinite victories. She shares a material vocabulary with the supermarket or the Party Planner, although despite this shiny, happy palette, an insidious anxiety always hovers nearby, waiting.

In spite of the clandestine use of gunpowder, this entrancing smoke signal to a sleepy city was one of Baumann's more gentle installations, not only because the tinted plume was comparatively more nebulous than the artist's earlier clusters of writhing streamers and confetti swarms. Its object seemed to be transformation, rather than exposure, although the transformative experience varied dramatically depending on proximity to and knowledge of it. Standing nearby, in the position of advantage granted by either inside information or chance, the smoke spoke of cotton candy Sofia Coppola nostalgia - elegant, dreamlike, hopeful. Out of view of its source it elicited the same concern that anything would, exploding unexpectedly in a city.

The canisters bloomed for only a few minutes before the smoke set off not only PICA's fire alarms, but also the evacuation systems for the nearby Art Gallery of Western Australia and the City Library. Action became theatre as sirens appeared on the hazy breeze and groups of evicted patrons loitered anxiously on the crowded pavement in a dramatic conclusion that hadn't arisen during testing.

Whether the official fallout from this faux emergency will prove to be bad publicity for the artist, for the curator or for PICA - who, like most arts bodies funded both publicly and privately, undertakes the necessary juggling act of supporting progressive content whilst justifying its undertakings to its benefactors - is at this point unclear. Once the panic subsided it seemed absurd yet somehow apt that the first of these small-scale events had caused such widespread institutional alarm; Baumann had manufactured both the dream and the wake-up call. In spite, and possibly because of the drama that followed, the feedback received - from art regulars and passers by, who included a large and rowdy gaggle of teenage parkour practitioners - was generous and enthusiastic. What will hopefully survive is the memory of something vital, something with beauty at its heart.

After being long neglected, the Perth 'Cultural Centre', home of PICA, the larger Art Gallery of Western Australia and various other cultural establishments, is one of a few central areas currently undergoing a council approved program of 'Revitalization' - although what this often manifests itself as is a fresh veneer and the encouragement of commerce, rather than culture. While it is unavoidable that art should need money, vitality is and *should be* unpredictable, a muddle of love and force that is necessary for community survival.

The chief of the many firemen who arrived, and who appeared amused rather than annoyed, was overheard looking for "whoever was responsible, to possibly talk about not doing it again." One can only hope that Cavaniglia and her artists do not heed this very responsible advice.