John Vella: Monkey business

John Vella must be one of Tasmania's, if not Australia's, most anarchic contemporary artists. *HANGBANG(nightshift)* presented the work to date of Vella at CAST, Hobart, but was no ordinary mid-career survey show. Vella took his entire artistic output of the last sixteen years (since moving from Sydney to Hobart), minus that held in public and private collections, and rammed the gallery with several hundred objects. Artworks new and old, damaged and dismantled, as well as raw materials and maquettes were numbered and assembled as his own *Merzbau*: a colossal, sprawling archive of his practice.[i]

The numbering of objects was a crucial aspect of his methodology as, like a game of *I-Ching*, their accounting was combined with numerical data collected according to the daily functioning of the gallery space and associated offices, to mathematically generate random interactions. Thus interest in the exhibition affected the numbers; and consequently more visitors, emails or cups of coffee meant more intercourse between elements in the archive. The automated and often violent mechanised acts of collaboration between elements were enacted at night, when the unfolding narrative could be viewed live through a slot window inserted into the external brick wall of the gallery.[ii] The gallery and arts offices became a self-reflexive machine for directing what seemed to be an Absurdist performance: a kind of Dadaist supercomputer.

Things go bump in the night. The viewers of Vella's nocturnal activities found themselves peering through an aperture, like David Attenborough looking on as the wild beasts perform their most intimate activities. They were not disappointed. Vella's career has long involved the concept of *frottage*, the quasi-sexualised application of friction and here, paintings would be thrown against each other, sculptures dragged over storage shelves or dropped from great heights, video screens covered with studio detritus: what Vella describes as 'rape by context'.[iii] No caged gorilla masturbating, but not far off.

Vella's archive-zoo-machine was replete with not just biological, but also psychological experimentation.
As Vella commented:

> the archive of artworks — good and bad — and materials collected are present like omens and friends. … Like bringing all your ex and current partners, entire immediate and extended family, together into one space and subjecting them to a collective, physical and visceral experience …[iv]

Each night, the factual and material histories of Vella's oeuvre, as well as any hierarchy of value in the assembled art works themselves, were literally destroyed to be made anew.

How then are we to understand this compacted space of Vella's psychologised, biologised archive? Giorgio Agamben notes that in Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the archive is situated between *langue* and *corpus*, the system of speech and the body of 'speeches' that have been said or written.[v] The archive is consequently neither of these things; but rather, everything that could have been said, as a possibility of enunciation: 'it is the dark margin encircling and limiting every concrete speech act'.[vi] As such, it refers to the past, the sum of all possible past speech acts, but not what was said — hence, the 'outside' of language. Vella's incoherent, warehouse presentation of the history of his practice approaches this position, of seeking the 'outside' of his own discourse.

Agamben's conception of archive can also be related to Lev Manovich's description of the digital database. Manovich describes the database as 'a new symbolic form of the computer age'.[vii] He develops this idea to describe a tension between the logic of narrative and the logic of the database, such that for computer software, 'a narrative is just a set of links; the elements themselves remain stored in the database. Thus narrative is virtual while the database exists materially.'[viii] The database represents a digital manifestation of Agamben's archive as 'systematic matrix', a generative mechanism, and we find Vella's project similarly prioritizing the elements of his narrative, at the expense of the narrative itself.[ix]

HANGBANG then approximates the 'dark margin' of the unsaid: a haptic, visceral database capable of generating new narratives from the history of Vella's *oeuvre*, both supercomputer and supernature. While eschewing new media, Vella's practice is of the 'computer age' in its aspiration and complexity: it borrows the symbolism of the database if not it's medium. In this, it knowingly challenges our definitions of the narrative of practice by substituting the art institution as a random (rather than reflective) output generator, as an alternative system for the genealogy of art works. Vella's monkey business follows in the footsteps of Able, the first primate to survive space travel and to live to tell the tale: his work goes to the outside of language, narrative and history, beyond the art stratosphere, but returns to speak of

strange new worlds.[x]

[i] For information on Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*, see: http://www.stunned.org/mz1.htm

[ii] The artist slept in the gallery each night, but could be woken and summoned by viewers at the window anytime from 9pm-5am, to set the installation in motion via ropes and pulleys (while the artist remained out of sight).

[iii] 'The show changed daily - works nominated by each of the previous day's individual activities (eg. number of the exhibition officer's emails in) were 'hung' - placed in the CAST offices where the actions occurred, whilst works selected by various collective actions (eg. the number of all emails in) were 'swung' - tethered to ropes to be smashed together when approached from the window by a nocturnal visitor….'. John Vella, artist's notes

[iv] ibid.

[v] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, World of Man (London ; New York: Routledge, 1989).

[vi] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz : The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 144.

[vii] 'Following art historian Ervin Panofsky's analysis of linear perspective as a "symbolic form" of the modern age, we may even call database a new symbolic system of the computer age (or, as Jean-francois Lyotard called it in his famous 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition*, "computerised society"'.' Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, ed. Roger F. Malina, Leonardo (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2001), p. 219.

[viii] Ibid., p. 231.

[ix] Leland De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben : A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 287.

[x] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monkeys_in_space

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Caption:

John Vella
HANGBANG (nightshift) 2010
all artworks made by the artist from1996-2010 not held in public or private collections

Image courtesy the artist and Criterion Gallery Photo credit: Peter Angus Robinson

Image: