

**SYMPATHIES
AND
ANTAGONISMS:
ON BIANCA
HESTER'S
PLEASE
LEAVE THESE
WINDOWS OPEN
OVER NIGHT
TO ENABLE THE
FANS TO DRAW
IN COOL AIR
DURING THE
EARLY HOURS
OF THE
MORNING**

LIANG LUSCOMBE
& PATRICE SHARKEY

Please leave these windows open over night to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning, Bianca Hester's 2010 solo exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne was an ambitious project that demonstrated the complex and often over-lapping multitude of ways to approach the artist's sculptural practice, as well as to abstracted spatial tendencies in contemporary art more broadly. The exhibition highlighted a significant change in the circumstances for Hester's work—particularly in terms of the transposition from a small ARI-like space (CLUBS project or The Narrows, for instance) to a large institution like ACCA. In contrast to previous spaces utilised by Hester (all primarily small-scale and often improvised), ACCA boasts a more generous project budget (coupled with the Helen McPherson Smith Commission in this instance), a larger staff and exhibition hall, as well as a full-time crew of interactive 'ASK ME ABOUT THE ART' invigilators and a much larger and variegated audience. Hester seemed to very consciously interrogate the expectations and performativity of the viewer's engagement with such institutions in this exhibition. Architecturally speaking, the cavernous first hall of ACCA functioned like a stage for Hester's project and appeared to be a more theatrical context for the work than, say, her 2009 solo exhibition *Only from the perspective of the viewer situated upon the surface of the earth does day and night occur* at The Narrows, which was comparatively homely.

Given that Hester's practice does not fit neatly into common thematic structures or physical boundaries, and instead pivots around a conversational relationship between the artwork and its audience, it seems important to respond to the work along similarly indefinite lines.

Liang Luscombe: Drawing upon—and extending—previous installations which adopted the language of construction, Hester's *Please leave these windows open ...* presented a series of complex and open-ended architectural interventions in ACCA's cavernous gallery space. Besser bricks lined the gallery's edge to form informal seating, and a small wall was installed so as to invite gallery-goers to participate in a game of ball. Platforms and mounds of dirt formed the basis of open-ended spatial installations constructed out of beams, rocks, chains and makeshift walls that filled the gallery. By bringing such material inside the gallery, Hester mixed exteriors and interiors; an interest reinforced by the work's title, which was taken from a sign pinned to an open window above a photocopy machine in the Melbourne University architecture library.¹

Given that these constructions were provisional at best, Hester's display could have easily been mistaken as the initial stage of an installation process rather than a completed artwork. In fact, the installation's 'in-progress' status provided a platform for a series of intercessional gestures to take place. Firstly, invited performers and gallery invigilators acted out a number of set actions. These ranged from the mundane—lying in the gallery and on the artwork, turning the lights off intermittently and running tape along the walls of the gallery—to the unexpected, such as a live horse being paraded through the gallery and a car being driven into the space.

Secondly, audience members were given the opportunity to interact with the artwork. During my own visit I experienced an acute sense of physical disorientation. This occurred through a combination of theatrical and subtle gestures: upon picking up what appeared to be a rock, I immediately realised that, no, I was mistaken, and that the object was in fact a cast imitation. I looked across at a video recording of two people playing ball against a wall (the same wall installed in ACCA). It was then that I began to notice the number of video cameras recording my own actions. I also found that my own experience of Hester's exhibition very much depended on whom I visited the gallery with and who else was in the space at the time. These factors seemed to highlight the human element that Hester was attempting to bring to the forefront of the exhibition.

Patrice Sharkey: The personal experience you describe is interesting since I had quite a different encounter. In contrast to your willingness to play with and investigate the material on hand, I was apprehensive regarding the rules that underpinned the installation; could I touch, climb or draw in this space? Sadly, my most adventurous action was to sit on the Besser bricks that lined the gallery's edge since I felt 'conditioned' by 'conventional' gallery protocol that only permits audience members to participate as onlookers. This sense of behavioural uncertainty seemed to be an intentional act on Hester's part; making explicit the context of the institutional space and the forms—even regimes—of visitor behaviour encoded within.²

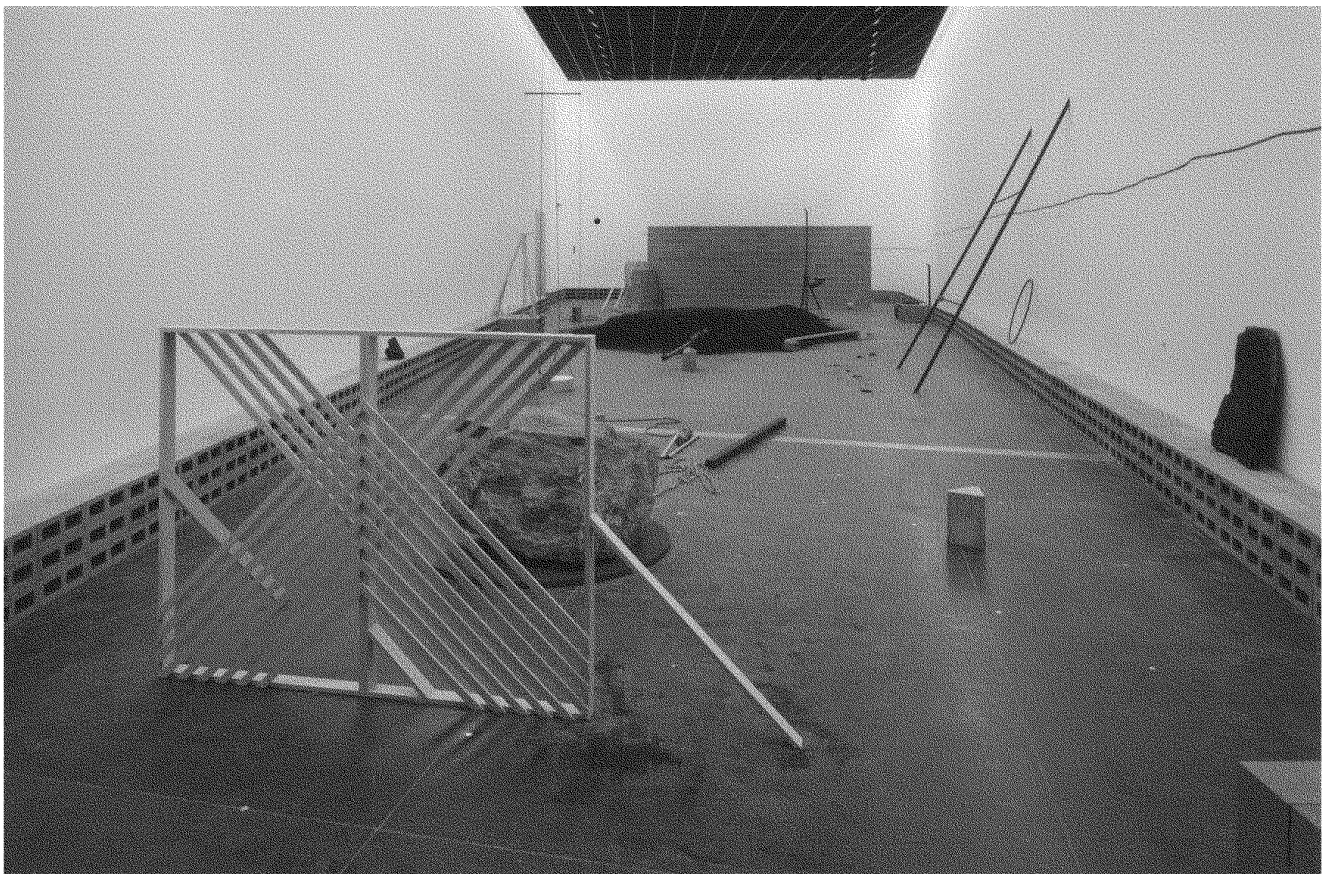
In this respect, Hester's installation reminded me of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's institutional 'Offerings', where viewers are invited to take a piece of the work with them—usually a sheet from a printed paper stack or a packaged candy from a pile in the corner of an exhibition space. Here, the usual behavioural expectations are overturned, with the viewer literally gaining control of the art object. In turn, this act of accessibility and direct engagement makes visible the standard, remote codes of museum patronage.

The installation also appeared to draw upon the legacy of Minimalism and its theoretical focus upon an object's relationship to its environment. I'm thinking here of the 'performative' dimension assigned to the sculptural object; what Michael Fried maligned as Minimalism's 'theatricality'.³ By expanding the art object's field of inquiry beyond its physical borders, Minimalist works like Donald Judd's cubes or Robert Morris's beams aimed to present a self-reflexive awareness of the countless situational contingencies that present themselves when viewing art. Here, the art object does not stand alone: it is entirely reliant upon the audience's perception at any given moment to grant it meaning. Certainly, there was a level of authorial denouncement in the ACCA installation, with Hester relinquishing absolute and fixed meanings in favour of a conversational art form that was purely exploratory and guided by audience experience and engagement.

Liang Luscombe: Yes, Hester's emphasis on openness and lack of usual gallery conventions results in the audience developing their own very specific meaning and experience from the work. There is also a temporal element to the audiences' changing experience—the viewer's encounter was dependent on what particular actions were taking place when they entered the exhibition. This leads one to question the nature of the triangular relationship between the artwork, the viewer and the institution that is created by Hester's work.

Your personal experience of alienation seems to arise from the kind of negotiation that Hester attempts to facilitate in her work. I'm not saying that this is a negative response, but that it highlights the kinds of institutional assumptions and tensions that Hester brings to bear through open-ended participation. Fayen d'Evie in her critical article about official Australian war art, 'Let's Go To Iraq' of 2008, suggests that Hester's installations would make for appropriate war art.⁴ The viewer is in constant negotiation of space and of other bodies, or in a state of uncertainty similar to zones of conflict.⁵ While I would hesitate to go as far as positioning Hester's work as war art, d'Evie does highlight a similar kind of fluctuating relationship between viewer and artwork. Your apprehension upon entering the space underlines your awareness that you were in fact already engaging with the work in a particular way—for me it was the use of video cameras that drew attention to this fact; all interactions between the viewer and the work were being recorded, which created a visible feedback loop.

For me, Hester's encouragement of audience participation—in particular the installation of the wall, against which we were encouraged to play ball—has proven to be the most difficult to come to terms with critically. These installation elements encouraged a kind of free-formed play. Claire Bishop raised concerns in her 2006 essay 'The Social Turn and its Discontents' that collaborative and socially engaged art that privileges authorial denouncement and 'good intentions' prioritises the moral aspect of the work over critical engagement as an art form.⁶ Bishop casts doubt over the emphasis of 'relational' practices that provide generous models for collaboration.⁷ Yet Hester's work, with all of its openness and uncertainty, importantly does not suggest a romantic model for interaction. The sheer numbers of actions that were carried out in ACCA by gallery invigilators, performers and patrons over the course of the exhibition actually suggest that Hester's focus was on experimentation with modes of sensation, perception and negotiation within this particular gallery context.⁸



Bianca Hester *Please leave these windows open overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning*, 2010 installation detail: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne courtesy the artist and Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne photo: Andrew Curtis

Patrice Sharkey: I think Claire Bishop's critique of relational aesthetics is particularly interesting in response to Hester's practice. As you mentioned, neither Bishop nor Hester promote romantic ideals for audience-artwork interactivity. Rather, suspicion of art as a 'social form' capable of producing positive human relationships seems to pervade the works of the writer and artist alike. Bishop fundamentally problematises Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics by acknowledging that the interactions proposed in such works are not fluid and unconstrained; they are, in fact, overwhelmed by social and legal exclusions.⁹ Hester's installations can, in turn, be seen as an (intentional) example of this pitfall, given that her participatory works—acting, as you via d'Evie say, as 'zones of conflict'—emphasise a potential uneasiness over forging a sense of community amongst gallery visitors.

'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' from 2004—another article by Bishop—further develops the British writer's position on the participatory exhibitions of recent years and, I would argue, outlines a place for Hester within the realm of relational art. Using Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra as exemplars, Bishop argues for what she considers to be the best—or at least a better—form of 'relational art'. Through assessing the quality of audience relations produced in works like Rirkrit Tiravanija's communal dinners compared with Hirschhorn's public monuments, Bishop supports 'a more complicated imbrication of the social and the aesthetic'.¹⁰ Described as 'relational antagonism', this type of work is not based on social harmony but instead exposes that which is concealed when attempting to sustain the semblance of this harmony. In such instances, the viewer is not forced into completing the artist's interactive requirements. They are instead welcomed as a subject of independent thought. My earlier description of the anxiety and hesitancy I felt upon entering the gallery space seems relevant here since it is this type of unfriendliness, or awkwardness, that Bishop applauds. Hester does not idealistically anticipate that her audience will generate a cooperative spirit. She takes up a more pragmatic position, creating an environment that allows us to rethink our relationship to the environments we inhabit, and the world around us.

I also think the temporal element of Hester's work that you mention warrants further discussion. The viewer's encounter was entirely dependent on the specific actions being performed during their visit, which changed from day to day—even moment to moment. To borrow a phrase applied to Tino Sehgal's work: 'if you happen to miss the performance, then it never had anything to do with you'.¹¹ This type of shifting landscape of experience feeds into long-standing issues related to documenting and discussing performance art. Writing in 'The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction' of 1993, American photographic theorist Peggy Phelan describes the intrinsic ephemerality of performance-based artwork, which inevitably 'disappear[s] into memory' after the performance event itself.¹² Attempts to capture and preserve such works with words or photographic documentation are thus seen to fundamentally alter the events since writing and visual records void the inherent tracelessness of the performative promise. This notion makes me wonder what effect our conversation has on the nature of Hester's installation? If nothing else, it is possible to say that the constant interventions and mutable nature of the work led to a host of unexpected encounters at the gallery site that diverted cultural expectations.

Liang Luscombe: The work of Cuban artist Tania Bruguera could also be brought into the conversation regarding 'relational antagonism', in particular a 2008 piece she created for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Here, Bruguera invited two mounted police onto the bridge and into the Turbine Hall, where they proceeded to herd Tate patrons, demonstrating crowd control techniques. The audiences participated in a kind of misplaced, authorial negotiation of the space whereby power relations were obviously lopsided. The actions performed were often associated with political resistance, yet, because the events took place in the gallery context the audience did not see the mounted police as a threat but as an artistic event.¹³ Similarly Hester's exhibition took on aspects of the external world—i.e. turning the lights off and on again or lying down on the Besser bricks—and rendered them unfamiliar within the context of the institution. For both Bruguera and Hester's exhibitions, the redefinition of spatial awareness highlights that the context of viewing an artwork is completely contingent on the specifics of our situation. While I was quite 'active' in my engagement,



an element of awkwardness or self-consciousness permeated my encounter with Hester's work. Thus, the work itself becomes an investigation into the relations that affect our engagement.¹⁴

Furthermore, in the 2009 essay 'The Future of the Image: Ranciere's Road Not Taken', the eminent American image theorist WJT Mitchell suggests that the audience sees or understands Bruguera's action as an image or a representation because of its institutional setting.¹⁵ It is this shift in behavioural codes and engagement that means that the audience does not engage with artwork directly as a political protest—instead we transfer the action to a space of contemplation.¹⁶ In this same way, Hester's work offers examination and reflection on prescribed ways in which we occupy space—and how this could be opened up. For example, Hester's arrangement of the Besser bricks around the perimeter of the gallery first struck me as a very direct diversion of space that would direct patrons. Yet over the course of the exhibition, performers and patrons changed this formation; one visitor in fact moved the bricks to fill the back wall. In this way, Hester's actions are useful for making common concepts of public space available to be experienced in a new way.¹⁷

While Bruguera's work offered a single encounter, albeit one that was impressive in form, Hester set up multiple relations and encounters, interjecting at random points of the exhibition. Within Hester's expansive installation, there was no ideal viewing point. Instead the audience encountered the exhibition through visual fragments. This variety of relations is an important aspect of her approach, with Hester referring to this method as working from 'the middle'.¹⁸ This method embraces the complexities of working within a situation—a progressive activity that has no end point, or 'a practice which works experimentally (and in turn experientially) within a field of given relations to produce something unexpected'.¹⁹ It is this set of working concerns in Hester's practice that very much affects how we contemplate the work: not as an end point in which we pin things down, but as a proposition which has built into it the potential for alteration.

Patrice Sharkey: I really like the concept of 'the middle'. I first encountered Deleuze and Guattari's term via Hester while researching a recent output of Melbourne-based sculptural practitioners and it seemed an entirely appropriate framework for thinking about certain threads of emerging local art. I think it's possible to go as far as calling this approach a political way of making art; though, as you infer, this type of protest occurs indirectly rather than openly. When applied specifically to the issue of production, working through an 'ever-thickening middle' allows for the redistribution of cultural material or, as Alex Baker has suggested, for creating 'noise in the system'.²⁰ For example, the inaugural exhibition at the Melbourne gallery Y3K, *Too much of everything* (2009), proposed an alternate economy of meaning and exchange. Curated by the collaborative art and design project fIXXed, the group show breached familiar divisions between art and consumption. Sculpture, installation and drawing were fused with fashion and architecture, producing a series of hybridised objects that did not rest comfortably in the camp of any these disciplines. For example, Pat Foster and Jen Berean subsumed the traditional, self-supporting art object by producing a hinged display system to exhibit other contributors' work, while fIXXed used coloured lengths of rope with a clasp at one end to construct essentially pointless 'book-hangers'. These multi-dimensional works challenge consumer passivity through a culture of use; subversively and intelligently re-working various objects' social functioning in the face of mass production.

Hester's installation at ACCA was not driven by issues of commodity culture, where *Too much of everything* used such free market concerns as its point of departure. Nevertheless, there was certainly a great amount of play in 'the middle'. To put this another way, Hester's work acted as an adventurous experimentation in the limits of artistic activity; simultaneously producing and de-producing things and opening out possible forms of thinking, making and acting.

Liang Luscombe: The ACCA exhibition also represented part of Hester's continued investigation into sculpture as an event or progressive activity. In this approach, sculpture is no longer a finished or discrete object. Instead it becomes a set of engagements with materiality. Through the integration of object and action, movement and activity became the substance of Hester's art and sculpture takes on a performative aspect. In turn, these actions were recorded within the exhibition through a series of traces left behind. This process of action and resulting residue was most apparent in the act of rolling a hoop along the bricks, which resulted in a blue line marking the wall. This initial mark then became a diagram for future interactions, precipitating a chain of further actions undertaken by the audience.

An interest in this residual trace points toward similarities between the material sensibilities of Hester's work and Richard Serra's *Splashing* (1968), in which Serra tossed molten lead at the junction of a wall and floor, then allowing it to solidify.²¹ *Splashing* became a marker for Serra's action and created no real image. In this particular action, Serra also acknowledges and then obscures an architectural marker by which we orient ourselves in interior space.²² Similarly, the effect of gravity and balance so central to Serra's piece can be seen in Hester's assemblage of materials. Stacked, flopped, cast or joined, the objects within the installation also bear evidence of a continual spatial conversation with each other. Integral to both artworks is the reliance on external factors, which Serra describes as an 'interest in the experience of sculpture in the place where it resides'.²³ Within Hester's practice we cannot only trace the experience of sculpture where it resides but also how it is changed and transformed through interactions; human or environmental, internal or external.

Notes

- 1 Charlotte Day and Bianca Hester, 'Five Points of View', in Bianca Hester, *Please leave these windows open Overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning*, exh. cat., Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2011, p. 74.
- 2 Bianca Hester, email correspondence with Liang Luscombe, 11 February 2011.
- 3 See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1967] 1998.
- 4 Fayen d'Evie, 'Lets go to Iraq', *un Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2008, p. 47.
- 5 d'Evie, 'Lets go to Iraq', p. 48.
- 6 Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, Vol. 44, No. 6, February 2006, pp. 178–83.
- 7 Bishop, 'The Social Turn', p. 183.
- 8 Bianca Hester, 'Enabling Restraints', in Kate Daw and Vikki McInnes (eds), *Bureau*, Melbourne: VCA School of Art, The University of Melbourne, 2008, p. 18.
- 9 See Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, No. 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51–79.
- 10 Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', p. 78.
- 11 Nadja Saye, 'Terms and Conditions: Selling Tino Sehgal', *artUS*, October–November 2006, p. 21.
- 12 Peggy Phelan, 'The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction', in *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, London: New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 148.
- 13 WJT Mitchell, 'The Future of the Image: Ranciere's Road Not Taken', in *Culture, Theory and Critique*, London: Routledge, Vol. 50, No. 2, July 2009, p. 140.
- 14 Hester, 'Enabling Restraints', p. 20.
- 15 Mitchell, 'The Future of the Image', p. 140.
- 16 Mitchell, 'The Future of the Image', p. 141.
- 17 Mitchell, 'The Future of the Image', p. 141.
- 18 Hester, 'Enabling Restraints', p. 18.
- 19 Hester, 'Enabling Restraints', p. 18.
- 20 Alex Baker in Rhada Davenport, 'Don't get Depressed, get Rad!': Roundtable with Alex Baker, Matthew Griffin, Rachel Kent and Reuben Peterson', *Art & Australia*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Summer 2008, pp. 257–65.
- 21 Guse Ernst-Gerhard, *Richard Serra*, New York: Rizzoli, 1988, p. 26.
- 22 Ernst-Gerhard, *Richard Serra*, p. 26.
- 23 Ernst-Gerhard, *Richard Serra*, p. 32.