

Some come to sit and think : The Art Life

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Who's Afraid of The Avant-Garde? That's the name of a new four part series of installation/performances at the Performance Space during 2005. The title is an open question without an answer, but we can say, honestly, that we aren't afraid of the avant-garde, but rather of the tired and hackneyed quotation of Edward Albee's long lost play-cum-movie Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? For god's sake – why not just call it Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Performance Art (But Were Afraid to Ask) it has about as much contemporary social relevance as this lame quotation and dates from about the same period – the late 1960s.

The first part of this four part extravaganza is by Tony Schwensen and has it's own title: *FATWHITESTRAIGHTBALDGUY: Tony Schwensen: Videoperformance Work 1999-2005*. The show comes with not one, but two texts – an introduction by Blair French and an essay by Adam Geczy. Although both texts are admirable for their readability, one gets the impression going to exhibitions at the Performance Space, that the art becomes a parenthetical aside to the writing. The signatures of the guest curator and the director of the gallery lets you know that the real art project here is a self conscious and frankly tedious creation of "contemporary culture". The world will not end if a show as strong as Schwensen's arrives without so much as a paragraph.

But let's just put that annoying grandstanding aside and look at the art, after all, we came to see the art and not the catalogue. Schwensen has been very busy over the last five years, creating a huge body of performance work that he documents with video and then exhibits in a gallery either with or without some sculptural element. In this extensive Performance Space show you can tell that rather than adding, Schwensen has been subtracting his sculptural additions to the point where it's now the space of the room that's a part of the work. Although all attention tends to go to the TV screens – and there's plenty there to look at – Schwensen has used some very tasty boxes in one room on which to rest four monitors, and in another, what looks like a wooden palette on some silver metal work horses a la Bunnings, to rest three others. The placement of the monitors in relation to the doors as well as a slit cut in a wall through which one can see another video projection, cues you into the sculptural conceits within the installation. If the Performance Space galleries didn't already have polished wood floors, we could well believe that Schwensen was in there scraping back and buffing up just before the opening.

But as we said, attention in this show goes to the TV screens and the titles. Gallery One: New Work has three monitors with three new works, *Straightening Up*, *Thinking About Manipulating A Fluorescent Tube* and *One For You and One For Your Dog*. *Straightening Up* is a shot of Schwensen's arse flank repeatedly banging against a wall while *Thinking...* is just a shot of the

artist's head thinking. *One For You...* is a shot of Schwensen giving the camera the finger, while his left hand does the same, only at a right angle, making a very pleasing shape even if we are getting the double bird.

In Gallery Four, seen through a slit from Gallery One, we see a work called *Lag*, which features Schwensen walking around a gallery space in a blindfold. Gallery 2: Dancing Room is a video projection on to a wall with four works – the shortest of which is 17 minutes, the longest 62 minutes – and has the artist doing a series of pathetic dances to horrible music. Gallery 3: Waiting Room has four monitors with shots of Schwensen in various poses waiting – looking in a mirror, against a brick wall, in a meditation pose with his shirt off and on a bench at a train station – with the titles, *Having A Good Hard Look At Yourself, Be Alert But Not Alarmed, Waiting For Enlightenment, Waiting for A Train*. The final work is in the corridor of the gallery and is called *This Is Where We Live*.

We railed last week against the moribund genre of high concept minimalism, accusing it of mindlessly repeating tropes of past art with nothing new to add. In one respect, our reduction of that kind of art work purposefully overlooked the fact that all art in some way repeats the forms and formulas of the past and Schwensen's show stands on the shoulders of art that has gone before. Indeed, it would be hard to decode his work without some experience or knowledge of performance art and conceptual art practices. But where high concept minimalism does little new, Schwensen's work overflows with an individuality that gives his reordering of tropes a zing that lifts it right out of the ordinary.

Schwensen is unafraid of putting his body on the line. *Straightening Up*, for example, the piece with the arse flank banging against a wall, features the artist dressed in some distressed and threadbare grey shorts, his love handles on display for all to see, a birth mark on his left arse cheek. In the Dancing Room pieces, he's seen in the same shorts, only this time with a pair of black blunnies and black socks. For virtually all the rest of the works in the show he is seen without a shirt, man boobs, beer gut and shiny shaven head to the fore. His titles, his body of work – and his body – are emphatic statements of fact. It's a kind of didactic comedy that's meant to be taken seriously and the disarming honesty of this kind of display is brave, yet matter of fact. This portrayal of the artist's body connects the work across the whole gamut of performance and is the grounding, essential component.