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Resisting walls and shrinking spaces

June 12, 2013

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Robert Nelson

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Leverage by Jacqui Shelton and Hind Habib suggests a frustrated defiance in architecture.

LEVERAGE Jacqui Shelton & Hind Habib

FORMWORK Ben Millar Both at **Blindside**, level 7, 37 Swanston Street, until June 15
PERFORMANCE ARCHITECTURE Rose Nolan, Anna Schwartz Gallery, 185 Flinders Lane, until July 6

DISQUIETR Rebecca Hastings, Flinders Lane Gallery, 137 Flinders Lane, until June 15

A woman pushes a wall; another forces herself into a corner; a further tries to mount the skirting board. These futile struggles must have been filmed in the gallery and are projected back in situ at Blindside.

With the title *Leverage*, the authors of this frustrated defiance of architecture are Jacqui Shelton and Hind Habib.

They ask the question "Can we influence physical space?" Judging by the videos, it seems an unlikely prospect, especially if influence amounts to shifting walls. But while we might not have the leverage of a crowbar, we influence space simply by being in it.

Space is physical but also social. Watching the travails of reshaping the solid stuff reminds us how easily we condition the soft stuff. The moment we enter a room, we bring a mood. Our presence influences anyone else coming in.

In the other gallery at Blindside, Ben Millar has created a beautiful wooden screen on an armature called *Formwork*. It seems a recognisable shape; it's just that I don't know exactly what it is. Writing in a catalogue essay, the architect Alex Selenitsch explains how constructions reveal their influences, either through their production or precedents. We read objects and space - no matter how abstract - through whatever we imagine influenced them.

Formwork is a screen in space, a wall without support from below.

It's too big to be a model but too small to be a hoarding, too homespun to be a computer and too slick to be a scaffold. You wonder if something should be written on the board, like the inscription spread out on triangular flags by Rose Nolan at Anna Schwartz Gallery.

Called *Performance architecture*, Nolan's line of pennants zigzag overhead, as if the gallery has turned into a street decked out for a victory parade. A fine catalogue essay by Michael Graf reproduces the broken text in the flags. It's an impassioned definition of public space by the American artist-turned-architect Vito Acconci.

The words declare that public space has to be usable: you have to be able to walk over it; its meanings need to be accessible and it ends up exercising an influence over people, as if calling us to order. Public space, the flags chant, "becomes an occasion for discussion, which might lead to an argument, which might become a revolution".

You can see why public space is so limited in Melbourne. Those attributes are somewhat heretical. Because public space in Australia is either a street or a garden, you aren't at liberty to walk all over it. You'd either get killed by a car or upbraided by a ranger for squashing the ground cover.

Nolan celebrates architecture as a processional backdrop for the performance of life in the street, something that few contemporary architects get.

Acconci's text that Nolan pays homage to in a kind of AFL language was called *Public space in a private time*. Since its publication in 1995, the times have become less public and more private when it comes to physical space; but in cyberspace, it's the reverse: we're promiscuously public with our privacy. Nowadays we might write "Private space in a public time".

The anxieties of public access to our private selves have a worrying impact upon the traditional expression of the personal in art. When a mother makes paintings of her children, like Rebecca Hastings at Flinders Lane Gallery, it's confessional, a statement of unease in which the children look tense or silenced.

The painting technique itself shows no sign of insecurity: it's wrought with perceptive modelling of skin and textiles in warm and cool colours that spell out the planes. Nevertheless, the exhibition is called *Disquiet*. It exposes the mother's discomfort and puts a private scruple to the public eye.

Fortunately, and despite so many current fears, the public is neither an alien nor a monster, but a community still capable of reasoned discussion and moral behaviour. What a pity that we



Rebecca Hastings' *Disquiet* puts a private scruple on the public.

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