

## Confusion is Vexed

From the outset it is perhaps useful that I state a position. Or rather, lack thereof. For it seems to take a position is to imply a singularity of approach that is, at the very least, contradictory to the spirit of Johannes Klabber's *a limited catalogue of endless things*. Rather than subscribing to a static point of departure it is I believe, more fruitful that we examine other ways of engaging with the potentially bewildering array of images, sounds, texts, moving footage, interactive computer works and sculptural elements that constitute this manifestation of the work. Ways that at once recognise the multifaceted and fluid nature of the "catalogue" while allowing its uneasy (il)logic to hold sway. This approach can be seen as a type process that calls for us to adopt positions rather than a single position, and to think through the work rather than simply think about it. That such a speculative model of engagement stands in opposition to the methodologies of empirical observation is hardly surprising as *a limited catalogue of endless things* is nothing if does not problematise our relationship with the way we understand the world.

To a certain degree it becomes a matter of approach dictated by the work itself :

With any large survey style exhibition of artworks the viewer is at once placed in the position of having to deal with the individual works and groupings, and the often perplexing question of their relationship to each other. The immediate temptation is to try to uncover, or construct a totalising "vision" that the constituent works can be placed into as a way of making sense of the potentially confusing array of contradictory aesthetic approaches and conceptual impulses employed by the artist(s). Indeed, much art criticism of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. can be viewed in terms of this often subtle process of totalisation that seeks to take inventory of artistic oeuvres. An inventory taken by way of a type of forced concentration of attention on one aspect of the artwork, to the exclusion of other equally valid avenues of engagement.

This, for want of a better word, "problem" of relations is especially acute within *a limited catalogue of endless things*. The work at once refuses to coalesce around any easy notions of style, branching across a range of forms and mediums while simultaneously embracing and rejecting a range of aesthetic approaches from 17thC. painting to 20thC. advertising. This question of relations is further problematised by the co-existence of different authors/artists contained under the rubric of the solo show. The survey show activity of identifying who made what is complicated and ultimately levelled by the more vexing proposition of who is what?

To be sure the strategy of accumulation of often mismatched and divergent elements within the exhibition space is not especially new. A range of historical precedents can be identified from the dynamic Merz project of Kurt Schwitters to the fevered installations of contemporary artists as disparate as Jessica Stockholder and Paul McCarthy. Indeed the seemingly contradictory drives to at once integrate and interrogate the exhibition space that can be seen to operate within such an approach can be read as an impulse of the age. If the gallery space is to be thought of as type of architecture for looking, such

an approach ensures that the processes of looking can never be separated from that of thinking.

If there is a “vision” to be uncovered within *a limited catalogue of endless things* it is one that is both fragmented and shifting. While the work employs an expansive array of aesthetic and formal approaches it also operates dynamically with content being constantly updated during the period of its existence as a gallery installation. To extend the visual metaphor, the model of the Kaleidoscope comes to mind. Both in the sense that it provides us with a “vision” that is diffracted and made multiple and that it implicates a sense of playfulness, the importance of which should not be overlooked when considering the work itself. That our notion of artistic vision has come to rest on a technology of sight is in itself telling, for if we are to identify a unifying strand to the constituent parts of *a limited catalogue of endless things* it would lie in the overtly mediated nature of the works. Almost without exception media technology is used as either a tool for creation and/or dissemination of the works. However, it would be counterproductive to try and focus on this aspect of the work without engaging with the inextricable conceptual processes that inform the use of technology. As Klabbers himself notes in an entry of the online component of the work, by way of a quote lifted from the liner notes of a Soft Machine LP, “Men need machines but machines need men AND ideas to produce meaningful experience.”<sup>ii</sup>

### **Assessing the Damage**

How then does the use of technology operate conceptually within the work of Johannes Klabbers and more specifically within *a limited catalogue of endless things*? To answer these questions we must consider these operations both in individual works and in the scheme of the “catalogue” itself.

Central to the exhibited form of “a limited catalogue of endless things” is a bank of some 26 monitors displaying a range of video, sound and interactive works. Some of these machines are networked (to each other and beyond) while others stand alone. Viewed on its own terms this conglomeration of techno debris echoes through the past decade, each piece of hardware carrying with it its own history and circumstance. Rather than presenting us with the gleaming seductive surfaces we have come to expect from “new” media work, Klabber’s presents us with a less than utopian version of the technological present. Nothing ages as fast as the past’s present. At once, the viewer is forced to reassess their conception of new media and consider its rarely problematised relation with commodity culture.

However, it would be somewhat remiss to view Klabber’s employment of supposedly redundant technology as a conceptual end in itself. As the artist recently wrote it is a strategy borne as much by necessity as artistic intent. “...when I was working at the so called cutting edge it was always problematic getting access to gear....I also like to allow the limitations of technology to affect the look of my work.”<sup>iii</sup> As such, each hardware platform is approached on its own terms to create works that often employ outdated or superseded software applications and programming techniques. In this sense the use of

this technology becomes an artistic strategy , as the just- adequate display technologies of the recent past are employed to play and transmit a range of works whose manifestation is inextricably linked to the platform on which they are displayed.

The recent video piece “Postcard to Will Johnson” is a case in point. The work, a linear QuickTime video movie was created in response to a request voiced by the underground musician Will Johnson during a net broadcast, for people to send him a letter. Conceived as an extended snapshot of the artist’s immediate surrounds the video simultaneously acts as a reminder of both the pleasures of representation and the ability of messages, however obtuse, to find a recipient. In this sense the work uses the internet as means to establish a network defined as much by its recognition of the domestic as by its casual internationalism.

Within the gallery context the work takes on yet another dimension as it is displayed on an antiquated Mac computer barely able to play the video at the prescribed frame rate. This processor strain is brought to bear on the moving image as the staccato visuality of the piece is further undermined by the machine itself. The presentation of the work in this form represents a shift away from our understanding of how video and more generally filmic experience operates. One generally expects that video (and film) playback technologies provide us with a consistent experience - that each time we view the footage it will be the same and that its method of transmission will remain transparent or at the least subjugated to the image. Klabbert’s use of barely adequate technologies to play video destabilises these expectations. While things never reach the point of breakdown, video is presented as a more negotiable form, its final manifestation the product of an inextricable bind of image – movement - machine.

### **Endless Summer**

Finality is hardly an option within such a system, with a state of uneasy fluidity replacing the certainties of the embedded time track. Indeed, when viewed on its own terms much of the work that constitutes “a limited catalogue of endless things” can be seen to exist in a state of flux, from the evolving web based work to the continually updated computer works that occupy centre stage in the gallery exhibition. Technology is employed not only as means of creation and dissemination but also as way of avoiding closure. For Klabbert’s conceptual resolution and formal closure are clearly not the same thing,. In contrast to the overriding paradigm of western art practice, ideas within *a limited catalogue of endless things* are not believed to be more resolved if they are seen to reside in a final form. It was a point that Dan Zero was keen to make in an interview with the author in 1997 when he claimed“...a more resolved art is possible because of the digital medium and the internet...It allows artists and writers and musicians to work more dynamically and contrary to popular belief retain more control of their work in that they are able to change it at any time.”<sup>iiii</sup>

Approached from this perspective the sound work of minus 11 error can be thought of as an endless audio reversioning machine. In a recent statement prepared for the ABC’s Listening Room programme the artist wrote: “I see the role of linear media like radio and

audio cd as affording a snapshot of a dynamic work which continues to shift and change”<sup>iv</sup>. As such to simply view the recordings of minus 11 error in terms of contemporary remix culture would be to miss the point. The remix is ultimately concerned with the deployment of a recombinative strategy to create another finished work. In contrast, the use of such an approach within the work of minus eleven error is driven by a desire to avoid finality, and in doing so create a situation where meaning is deferred or at the least deflected. A remit rather than remix. The seemingly endless versions of works titled lovekill bears testament to this strategy. These works are essentially explorations of the soundtracks to *A Short Film About Love* and *A Short Film About Killing* by the late Polish filmmaker Kzysztof Kieslowski. The soundtrack material is reframed within a new context, with simple repetitive sound loops and musical motifs creating an aural tension with the mostly indecipherable film dialogue. While the meaning of the words spoken, for the most part, escapes the listener a certain graveness is imparted via a kind of audio residue. This residue carries from the films a sense of the moral quandaries and implications played out within them. One has no option but to think of each version not as a final statement but as a fleeting utterance. An utterance inflected as much by its own instability as by the syntax it enters into with the other versions of the lovekill series.

The artist’s engagement with these particular films is of no small consequence. As extended versions of two of Kieslowski’s Decalogue series the “Short Films..” exist as resonant meditations on a perceived moral crisis of the age. Indeed the series direct structural relation to the biblical Ten Commandments and its exploration of the loss of absolute values can be read in not only in terms of a moral crisis but just importantly as a crisis of meaning.<sup>v</sup> Indeed, Klabbbers is acutely aware of this crisis as his strategies of intertextuality and avoidance of closure undermine the authority and relationships of image/sound/text. As I have alluded to earlier, *a limited catalogue of endless things*, can be thought of a system. A system that constantly forces meaning to be renegotiated by way of the shifting relations of its constituent parts.

### **Slanted and Enchanted**

But like Kieslowski, Klabbbers recognises the need for absolutes. There are two key works in the *a limited catalogue of endless things* that exist outside the ceaseless shift of signifiers and destabilised relationships. The words Truth and Beauty etched in neon and burning bright, defiantly stand as testaments to an undiminishable 19<sup>th</sup>C romantic ideal. It is as if Klabbber’s recognises the need for a footing, however shaky it may be. It is perhaps no co-incidence that the material form that truth and beauty take, neon display lighting, is notoriously fragile. While these words, in a sense, stand outside the “catalogue” and can be read as meta titles to the work itself it is worth remembering that if we cut the power, the lights go out.

How then are we to approach *a limited catalogue of endless things*, A collection of works that by design, simultaneously embraces and rejects systems of knowing and looking? Perhaps the answer lies in the experience of approach itself. Rather than trying to uncover

a ways of delimiting and stabilising the system we should seek to immerse ourself within its slippages and mutability. To go with the flow.

Somewhere between confusion and recognition lays a never world of reverie that the artistic experience opens the door too. A way in, that is in a sense, only possible by going way out.

In a recently published interview theorist & psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva spoke of the “twilight states of the mind”<sup>vi</sup> that contemporary art has the power to conjure.

If we are to identify a by-product of Klabber’s system it must surely be its ability to draw us into such states. In a sense there is nothing to get but the getting itself. As Kristeva further elucidates on what she terms the “profitability” of this experience one cannot help but feel that her words hold more than a small amount of resonance for those delving into *a limited catalogue of endless things*:

“...Through contemporary art we feel a recognition, a division of these states and these new forms of sacredness”

Like the signs say - truth and beauty.

Ryszard Dabek  
October 2002

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<sup>i</sup> from the soft machine first album liner notes (1968) as quoted in entry 00000053 : the soft machine. of the online component of *a limited catalogue of endless things*.

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<sup>ii</sup> Jonannes Klabbers, artist statement *(sic) but true* catalogue p20, group exhibition, Sydney College of the Arts Gallery, Sydney, 2002

<sup>iii</sup> Dan Zero in a roundtable discussion with Ryszard Dabek, i.j.oog and I K Bonset, Dialogue #5 p30, West Space publications, Melbourne, 1997

<sup>iv</sup> minus eleven error, entry 00000045 : artist statement for the listening room/abc radio 2002 from the online component of *a limited catalogue of endless things*.

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<sup>v</sup> In this essay “Why Kieslowski?” Paul Coates identifies, via the words of Kieslowski’s co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz “the attempt to grapple with post-modern crisis of meaning” as central to both the Decalogue and Three Colours films.

published in Yvonne Tasker ed, *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers* (p215), Routledge, London , 2002.

<sup>vi</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolt and Revolution*, an interview by Reiner Ganahl p115 in *Revolt She Said*, Semiotexte, New York 2002