

Anne Zahalka's Leisureland

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In 1999 Australian photo media artist Anne Zahalka produced the first in an ongoing series of images to be collected under the heading 'Leisureland,' a name rich with association but devoid of specific referent. Suggestive of apt comforts rather than slothful abundance, Leisureland's cognates were not to be found in Cockaigne's roast pigs plashing through beery creeks but in Victorian dreams of just-around-the-corner toil-free futures. More immediately Leisureland resembles, and is partly composed of, familiar locales; the assorted parks and coastal zones themed and un-themed, real, and on further inspection, not quite so real after all. In her choice of topic, Zahalka enters uneasily into a visual tradition of imagining Australian ease that has not strayed far from the beach. Our foundational shoreline has offered a range of experiences both solitary and social; from the taut self-absorption of Max Dupain's 'The Bather' (1937) through to the heroic bonhomie of Charles Meere's 'Australian Beach Pattern' (1940) – both in their way sun-soaked, eugenic arguments. Zahalka's initial response, *The Bathers* (1989, fig.1), forced Meere's radiantly white bodies to re-present themselves in the archly cosmopolitan terms of Marrickville-*sur-Mer*, where previously sculpted athletes return in softened and ethnically diverse forms. Dupain's bather is transformed into *The Sunbather #2* (1989, fig.2), an excruciatingly vulnerable red-headed, pale-skinned boy frying under the

Australian sun – a case study in melanoma development that unsettles some relaxed settler body postures. Like all parodies, these images concede the right of the original to set the terms of an argument that is effectively end-stopped by telling resemblance.

Zahalka's new series moves away from queering canonical instances of Australians at play, and towards mapping modern leisure in images that occupy a vantage point between the production and consumption of down-time. Her conceit – that these apparently diverse experiences coalesce into one dreamy state called Leisureland - is, of course, entirely self-fulfilling but no less persuasive for that. Her play with the documentary mode offers a coolly ironic ethnography of the stuff we do: the myriad forms of gambling, sightseeing and simulation as well hyperventilated variations on old themes like 'Aqua Golf'. The latter is promoted, reasonably enough I suppose, as 'Golf, with a difference.' In Zahalka's image players tee off onto a vast sheet of periodically disturbed water.

While Aqua Golf is arguably no more or less idiotic than its land-lubber equivalent, the desperate attempt to cut ties with the habitual that it reveals marks a distinguishing feature of leisure as Zahalka finds it. In the general loosening of the bounds of gravity and propriety, in the goofy, freely associative nature of its enactments, Leisureland – though buttressed by the inevitable technicalities of state-specific tort and liability laws – weakens our particular and historically dense attachment to the local. No

nation, city, or proud suburb would ever knowingly re-enact its mythic origins on the lapping shores of a driving range.

Zahalka's images are the preliminary entries in an impossible compendium of leisure spaces. This encyclopaedic enterprise is appropriate to the comprehensive nature of the attractions themselves, especially in their shrill determination to provide a total and totalising leisure experience. The resulting images though are neither breathless nor hyperbolic; rather they are calm and canny surveys of the mechanics of leisure; the 'how' of the thing, if not the 'why' – although that question hangs over the whole like a perverse cloud. Collectively, they invite the viewer to collate and cross-reference by volume of visual noise, techniques of immersion, and levels of risk. Of these, the last opens consideration of the quantum of perceived peril relative to the possibilities of reward, in a system that frankly resembles – indeed, shades into - what most of us would acknowledge as work. This indeterminacy might find its source in the vaunted replacement of 'careers' by newly flexible employment conditions. In this uncertain market, leisure is something we work hard at, calibrating our pleasures to cardio-vascular health and the management of stress, to self-improving spectacles in the service of improved spectacles of the self. In *Rock Climbing Gym* (1999, fig.3) Zahalka shows us a small group tackling a stagey diorama; taut, harnessed bodies ascending dusky pre-fab walls studded with knobby plastic holds in yellow, blue green and pink. Scattered on the floor, preparing to ascend or anchoring climbers already aloft, are spectators to a tableau excerpted from the triumphalist

practices of European alpinism, yet one deprived of a summit. I suspect this particular psychodrama finds its pleasures elsewhere. The rocky complexity of the out-of-doors cliff face is re-cast in the naggingly familiar multi-coloured coding of powerpoint, highlighters, and post-it notes; sourcing its aesthetics in the office and its metaphors in corporate climbing. Zahalka recognises the climbing gym as the revenge of motivational rhetoric upon a landscape indifferent to the life-goals of the aspirational body. At leisure, we favour immersion in simulated landscapes that stay focussed on us.

The Blue Mountains too are experienced as an artificial landscape in *Scenic Skyway* (1999), in which a lone suspended carriage scrolls across the horizon. Although the image doesn't dwell on the abysmal gorge, we know too well what yawns beneath. Zahalka shows us the machine at work, extracting spectacle from a landscape whose exhaustion is announced by the very mechanism that value-adds its topography through the production of vertigo. The trip activates the aesthetic sweep of the vista along with the sense of mastery that implies but precludes its proper operation through unrelated thrills. In its seven minute transit through a terminated sublime, the skyway resembles nothing so much as a heritage plaque, so valued in leisure for its ability to condense and privatise history to the dimensions of the viewer's body. On this spot, it announces in the past tense, you occupied the visual field of wonder.

Zahalka's series asserts connections between the works, establishing generative likenesses based on degrees of simulation.

She shows us how leisure works out the same idea in radically different locales. The skyway has a matching entry in *Imax* (1999, fig.4), a location that suggests a related form of spectacle along the lines of the cartographer's fantasy: a map on the scale of 1:1. Seen from the side, the image divides between a large and steeply ranked audience and a vast screen caught in a moment of transition between pyramids and the desert sky (from the 1998 *Imax* release, *The Mysteries of Egypt*). Like much in Leisureland, the experiential charge lies in the selective re-vivification of outmoded perceptual regimes. *Imax*'s eye-shocking screen returns cinema to its beginnings as spectacular attraction, and landscape to its enchantment in the cult of immensity. *Imax*, the name blurring monstrous egotism with physical distortion, is a game played on and with the histories of visual culture. But there is another game here as well. *Zahalka* shows us rapt viewers staring at images projected onto a screen which, if it were to magically disappear, would reveal the real-time spectacle of Sydney's Darling Harbour. This building shaped like an eye and sited on expensive foreshore land reveals an audacious blindness to its own splendid view; something of a testament to the premium we place on simulations that allow us to inhabit multiple places at once: *Imax*, Sydney, The Valley of the Kings, and so on. But perhaps the delight experienced in those projected landscapes is curiously dependent upon the unseen harbour beyond the walls? Watching Egypt on *Imax*'s horizon-re-setting screens unmakes the familiar geography of the harbour, its architecture and division into titled lots. In leisure, the city is returned to a dream of pure potential.

If Imax draws a notional line between its spectacle and the audiences who consume it, *Star City Casino* (1999, fig.5) mixes it up. This is a crowd picture, a witty paraphrase of Breughel, but drained of his genial sociality. Zahalka shoots from the vault, the airy domain of the visitor's initial gasp and thus too distant to invest in the hoary dramas we associate with gambling. Instead, she shows us flow patterns and intensities of light and space. We are held tensely in that moment of first impression, longer than any gambler could reasonably sustain, forcing us to parse the room. The usual features are in evidence (the casino equivalent of the Palladian order): the absence of mechanical clocks and the distraction of organic equivalents; discreet surveillance orbs; and tables laid out labyrinth-style. In the centre of this space of climate-controlled anxiety, a really big rock, a mesa in fact, rises somewhat unexpectedly from the industrial carpet. I assume it is supposed to be reassuringly solid amidst the shifting fortunes.

In leisure, we enjoy the familiar in unfamiliar circumstances and vice versa. The *trottoir roulant*, a mechanised footpath composed of 3.5 kilometers of variable speed track, made its debut at the Paris Exposition of 1900. The dream expressed here of fatigue-free urban mobility never really achieves escape velocity from the gravitation pull of Leisureland. In *Oceanworld* (1999) the (now defunct) glazed pedway enables a form of underwater *flaneurie* as riders stroll through a plausible enough ocean scene. Beneath the surface, men, women and children encounter sharks as well as peculiar anamorphic effects that disperse their reflections along the skin of the transparent tube and into the water itself. Although

this is a tourism of impossible space, the multiple distorting effects, the gaze directed at more colourful, more powerful doubles, place us in a reassuringly habitual domain. We shop like this too (even the arched shape of the tube pays its debt to the arcade, those nineteenth-century test labs of the mesmerising effects of commodities under glass) mirrored beyond recognition and encouraged to identify with improbable representations. This casually claimed affinity with the apex of the feeding chain raises a recurring preoccupation of Leisureland: celebrity in all its conjugations. At first glance Zahalka's images make a weak claim to take celebrity as their subject, at least in its klieg-lit, hypertrophic forms. Their visual scope is so much broader than the fixated gaze of the fan. But Zahalka's survey of our behaviour at play has turned up something surprising about the reticulated nature of celebrity: the way we observe its rules and honour its pageants in any way we can and with whatever materials come to hand. Her photographs of Armidale's Miss Motor Extravaganza Entrants (*Parade*, 2001, fig.6) and of the Miss Jacaranda *Crowning Ceremony* (2000, fig.7), show how the slightest of premises – seasonal flowering, automobile restoration – can generate intense, if somewhat provisional spectacles where the gift of fame is bestowed. Because celebrity demands attentiveness, it learns its forms from other more coercive measures. Thus, the shows that produce or 'crown' celebrity in a perpetual Judgment of Paris draw their grammar from the courts and the spectacle of military display. The first because it adds gravity to our frankly sexual desire to adjudicate upon the fairest, the second because our

attention is secured by the trace memory of force. These disciplined bodies that parade, turn or stand erect, basking in our attention do so over the body forms of less agreeable moments when we have been alternately awed, terrorised or reassured by the soldier's syncopated march.

Zahalka's account of the leisurely pleasures of celebrity is the more convincing because her interest extends beyond the camp pleasures of regional passion plays to the heart of apparent urbanity. The fans – what else to call them? - that jammed the Sydney Town Hall for a public lecture by the late Jacques Derrida (*Derrida Lecture* 1999, fig.8), whose amplified features loom from a video screen, are not unlike the much smaller group who pose with a waxen Schwarzenegger in *Madame Tussaud's* (1999, fig.9) . Both test the outer limits of auratic celebrity as we attempt to satisfy our rapacious desire for proximity even in its most attenuated forms. At Tussaud's we claim the acquaintance of the famous as well as measure the capacity of wax to conduct charismatic presence. We mingle among mannequins who are in a bind: ideally they hold us in a thrall, yet we cannot resist an improper caress. Zahalka's image contains within it a family posed for another photographer whose composition records longing and dis-inhibition; slightly nervous group portrait with star. Their nerves are understandable, like the corpse, the waxen star does not cease to be powerful, but its power becomes fixed in one mode, here the representation of renown. Tussaud's began by overcoming the obstacle of death, in the super-realistic masks of the murdered

Marat and the guillotined Marie Antoinette. Now it allows us to overcome the related obstacle of our own obscurity.

Of the modes of leisure surveyed by Zahalka, each subtly revealed as more a related variant than a distinct type, surely the strangest is the spectatorship of labour itself. I'll close with a consideration of two of these images, both drawn from the Royal Easter Show in Sydney. As a seasonal event with links to much older traditions of carnival and harvest festivals, the Royal Easter Show features modern industries – forestry, precision agriculture, factory farming - cast as audience-friendly nostalgic curiosities, returning them to coherent, if slightly elegiac spectacle. Extracting enjoyment from the display of superseded technology is oddly appropriate for agricultural fairs, which in reality are more about export initiatives, genetic manipulation and the mysterious chemistry of freshness-effects than the battler ruralism of Australia's bush tradition. In *Wood Chopping* (1998, fig.10), bearish hyper-masculine bodies of a type excluded from contemporary athleticism practise an extinct form of labour as sport. Staged in a horseshoe-shaped amphitheatre, these men in white, arranged in a sober line, attack their stumps with vigour. The image prompts the corresponding sound, the satisfying thwack of metal hacking into eucalypt; an obsolete sound that registers like the plod of Clydesdales on cobblestones, or the thin recorded voice of Nellie Melba as Gilda. As they chop, we retrieve data from the archive of bygone industrial ambiences, a reassuring frame in which tree-felling is translated back into the limited organic power of the axe-wielder, and away from the inexhaustible power of modern tree

harvesting machines. These men work in a simulated, even ideal landscape, chopping uniform logs under acoustically-enhanced and dramatically narrated conditions. This is nothing short of hallucinatory.

At the show, as elsewhere, technology transforms itself into pleasurable analogies or, as it is often the same thing, Jurassic dinosaurs. Robosaurus, a fire-breathing robot dinosaur literalises the transformation of technology achieved by outsourcing leisure to an adolescent imaginary. Zahalka relentlessly pursues this line of inquiry through images of a video game parlour, laser tag arenas and the garish set of Big Brother's post-eviction studio. But let's stay with *Robosaurus* (1999, fig.11). Pictured in the main arena of the Homebush showground, the sweetly ridiculous robot raises a car body to its metal jaws while a large crowd looks on. Touted as the world's first 'Car-Niverous' monster, Robosaurus wreaks havoc on automobiles, chomping, then burning the wrecks; although, it must be acknowledged, never actually eating – it sort of nibbles at cars, then casts them down like rejected *biscotti*. The untold joke here is that this big boy packs down to a demure, street-legal trailer, travelling the highways between bouts of acting out at agricultural fairs. Even though the metal dinosaur is a machine-age nightmare, this is not technology's vengeance on itself. As Zahalka's image reveals, this is an entertainment extrapolated from the oral consumption patterns of the nuclear family. The bills posted on the hoardings that ring the oval set the tone with their regressive pitch; milk for the kids, something soft for the ladies, beer for the blokes.

Robosaurus performs before orderly, terror-free families, put through its paces by the combined efforts of an unseen pilot strapped into the cranium, and a lone woman who appears to the right and in the background. Her solitary and rather fearless appearance in the same space as the robot is telling. Armed with a large remote control pad, and strangely, if mercifully, exempt from the predations of the beast, she offers clues to its evolution. It is after all just a prosthetic device for picking things up, placing the robot with those often outlandish labour saving technologies that fill the home, whose solemn promise was always the creation of more leisure time. And here the promise is fulfilled, the machine returns to put on a show for the kids, before neatly packing away until next required.

Zahalka's images are the preliminary entries in an impossible compendium of leisure spaces. Her encyclopaedic impulse is mirrored in the comprehensive nature of the attractions themselves, their determination to be a total leisure experience. She organises the images by degrees of simulation, levels of risk, volume of visual noise, and techniques of immersion. The last, the repeatedly encountered effort to immerse us in leisure, has its own compelling logic. But the immersive impulse is also found in the scale of the images themselves; their exaggerated size situating us in the domain of totalising entertainment with its own manufactured landscapes, artificial horizons, and its own temporality that dilates to include, or at least invite, the inevitable return visit. Finally, these photographs establish a fluid exchange of properties between the leisure they document and the activity

of viewing them. As observation slides seamlessly into participation, we find ourselves in *Leisureland*.