

Clear and Present Danger

The politics of fear runs on paradoxes.

Amateur cultures of confession continue to thrive across an array of media outlets such as blogs, reality television shows, YouTube, and other “instant” upload platforms. The concerned tone of the Federal Government’s latest national security campaign taps into this culture. In a cross-promotion of civic vigilance and fear, the push to “demystify” the transfer of information between private citizens and public officials has become a prominent feature in the Government’s advertising agenda on national security.ⁱ Disclosure is billed as the citizen’s first safety net when feeling afraid. The whispered testimony of a perceived threat, from an individual to a government agency, is where confession meets protection. This call for intimate confessions conveys an underlying desire for transparency. Or rather, what is really desired is the *appearance* of transparency. So far, however, the construction of transparency has worked to ensure a greater opacity.ⁱⁱ

The early days of alert looking have been replaced with the present drive for alarmist scrutiny. With each of the Government’s National Security Public Information campaigns, from the initial “Let’s look out for Australia” (2002); to “Every piece of information helps” (2004); and the newest “Every detail helps” (August 2007), the focus has been on getting closer. The current campaign on “details” promotes the idea of empirical transparency as a way of defining and hence controlling terrorist threats. At a local level, this means getting closer to your surroundings, more in touch with your suspicions, and ultimately closer to fear itself.

Vision, however, is no longer the citizen’s primary tool for assessing and reporting localised risk. It is now a matter of whether or not things “feel right”, according to the background blurb underpinning the latest National Security advertisements.ⁱⁱⁱ The Government’s call for greater transparency has paradoxically led to a de-emphasising of vision. Vigilance has shifted from surveillance at a distance to the internalisation of fear registered at a somatic level. An instinctive shudder, dodgy feeling, or slight twinge now places the burden of proof within the individual’s body. The self-surveillance of bodily sensations now corroborates evidence of a threat. Subsequent pressure by the Government to translate these sensations into threats operates as a type of control mechanism on the body. Thus, it provokes a feedback circuit of anxiety which simultaneously perpetuates and allays public fear in regards to terrorism. The philosopher Brian Masumi has argued that this kind of feedback creates a habitual “anticipatory affective response to signs of fear even in contexts where one is clearly in no present danger”.^{iv} In effect, the logic of this behaviour is symptomatic of a ‘since 9/11’ culture and fear has become an a priori condition.

Timing has always been crucial.

Over the years Marilyn Fairskye’s practice has responded to the way bodies travel through and inhabit the increasingly conservative socio-political landscape and the mapping of its physical geography. Through painting, photography and video, her work has mapped the gradual shifts of the body’s psyche and its place within communities under the changing pressures of late capitalism. From the early 1990s to the present, she has primarily traced the gradual dematerialisation of the body through ‘real’ and virtual architectures of transit. More specifically, during this period her focus has been on the durational experience of memory and subjectivity using two primary representational processes: time-lapse exposures and anamorphic perspective.

Large-scale lightboxes designed by Fairskye for site-specific works such as *Material World* (1999), Railway Square, Sydney and *Sea (Kurnell)* (2000), Sydney International Terminal, Mascot, are emblematic of these concerns. These works are deliberately located in passages of transit to act as visual currents that map the flow of pedestrian traffic. Abstract streams of colour camouflage anamorphic imagery that lays distorted on the surface of these works. The ‘truth’ or subtext of Fairskye’s work is only revealed when the viewer or pedestrian is in motion and vanishing points are mobilised. The hurried instant of a peripheral glance sees the stretching of time and space snap into a brief and legible unity, revealing the works’ anamorphic secrets. In this environment, speed is the primary tool of vision and knowledge. What follows is a strange inversion of durational logic reminiscent of the filmmaker Raúl Ruiz’s thoughts on movement and time in photography and cinema.

For Ruiz, the dialectical interplay of these two mediums opens up the “dwelling-place of involuntary signs”.^v A slippage of vision transgresses the logic of signs, manifesting itself in terms of physical sensation. Here, the pushing and pulling of the body against the grain of time generates a perceptual space where “a kind of fixity or immobility [is] rendered present to itself through an image in movement”.^{vi}

In Fairskye’s other works, such as *Afterimage* (1995), *Double Exposure* (1997) and *Connected* (2002-03), single and multiple layered photographic transparencies hover on a cinematic threshold of movement. Shadows cast by light falling through the transparencies makes them appear as if they are still in the process of developing, not yet fixed to their photographic support. To move around these works is to set in motion a further breakdown and subsequent interpolation of duration, with several points of time appearing to unfold within a single frame. The effect sustains a sense of narrative time which seems to ghost an invisible event.

An invisible event, or ellipsis, is also at the centre of Fairskye’s work *Stati D’Animo* (2006-07). Occupying a state in-between the moving and still image, its three-channel video installation applies a similar sleight of hand to temporal perspectives found in previous works. It creates what Paul Virilio might have defined as a “perpetual anamorphosis in cinematic metamorphosis”.^{vii} With its syncopated sequences of movements the work captures bodies in transition, between countries and between times. The delayed loop of visuals presented across each screen projection show imaginary lines of flight taken by travellers within international airports, but no one ends up going anywhere. Each figure appears trapped amidst the circular potential of arrivals and departures. As bodies move within the confines of terminals, they are stalled and jerked through endless cycles of anticipation and resignation. Their murmuring gestures animate the space of airports in tandem with those who are left waiting in a slump of time. And perhaps more menacingly, they are caught within the undertow of fear in response to a potential threat.

Seeking out signifiers of past and potential disaster, *Stati D’Animo* literally and symbolically translates to “states of mind” linked to the threat of violence. The work takes its namesake and symbolic cue from Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni’s 1911 series of paintings. In light of the catch-cries of the Futurist Manifesto, such as “Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed. We will glorify war – the world’s only hygiene”, Fairskye’s work critically considers the interrelationship between war and speed that informs today’s political rhetoric of fear and its bodily transmission.^{viii}

Alluding to the events of September 11, 2001, the chimed airport announcements that generally regulate the ambience of the scenes are interspersed by a broken audio exchange between passengers and airport staff in response to an aircraft highjacking. The dialogue surrounding this unseen event is patchy, words are misheard, repeated and cut-off in the anxiety of the moment. The audio sequences represent a breakdown of communication and another frustrated attempt at resolution. The accompanying visuals, however, continue to display the hermetic world of the airport and its preoccupied inhabitants, moving in their own loop of regulated panic.

Walk and don’t look back.

In both his books, *Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* and *Oblivion*, Marc Augé discusses the idea of airports and travel in relation to the delocalisation of subjectivity and an economy of speed. In *Supermodernity* he states,

“Airports and aircraft, big stores and railway stations have always been a favoured target for attacks (to say nothing of car bombs); doubtless for reasons of efficiency, if that is the right word. But another reason might be that, in a more or less confused way, those pursuing new socialisation and localisations can see non-places only as a negation of their ideal”.^{ix}

Echoing the words of the Futurist Manifesto, Augé draws attention to the efficient targeting of travel terminals and vehicles as sites of mass and indifferent transit, rather than idiosyncratic ritual. What he appears to suggest is that these otherwise timeless and anonymous spaces of travel have the potential to be localised through the collusion of speed and destruction in the event of a disaster.^x In *Oblivion*, a similar “illusion of warding off the flow of time, by moving around in [air]space” can be understood as

the 'real' destination or motivation behind leisure travel.^{xi} This is travel for the sake of travelling, with the deferral of arrival or departure at the empty centre of the goal. Moreover, Augé sees this form of travel operating in an eternal present accompanied by subjectivity that has been set in a holding pattern. As time lags somewhere off the radar, speed becomes the tool of oblivion. It puts the cumulative psychological and physical effects of memory theoretically 'up in the air' and thus maintains the illusion of time standing still.

In *Stati D'Animo*, however, bodies appear to walk in the debris of time, stretched to the point of transparency, and haunted by a resonance of duration which builds their corporeal frame through an unbroken stutter of transitional movements. They reveal everything to the point of showing nothing. The deferral of subjectivity is presented as an imperative under the globalised threat of terrorism. In a sense, the body as a 'state of mind' becomes almost photographic, providing a continuous registration of itself. Like a self-surveilling machine, it is made to walk a line of fear towards itself with each step it takes. The alternate depictions of passengers and jets idling against non-descript backdrops, serve merely to confirm the lethargic autonomy of a space dominated by the promise of speed and accompanied by the threat of destruction. In this space of anxiety, bodies become attuned to the affects of their own aberrations. Fairsky's work shows us that what was once all around us is now inside us. And at the Government's urging, it is only a matter of time until we build a history out of fear and begin to desire someone with whom to share its future.

- Tanya Peterson

ⁱ Australian Government, "Australian National Security: Information for Individuals – National Security Public Information Campaign"
<http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/agd/WWW/NationalSecurity.nsf/Page/National_Security_Public_Information_Campaign>, accessed 10/10/2007.

ⁱⁱ For an in-depth discussion on the gradual and deliberate erosion of civil liberties, and the obfuscation and censorship of information under the Howard Government see: David Marr, "His Master's Voice: The Corruption of Public Debate under Howard" in *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 26, 2007, pp. 1–84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Press Advertisement for the Australian Government's "National Security Public Information Campaign", launched in August 2007.

^{iv} Brian Masumi, "Fear (The Spectrum Said)" in *positions*, 13:1, 2005, pp. 40–41.

^v Raúl Ruiz, "The Photographic Unconscious" in *Poetics of Cinema* (trans. Brian Holmes), Paris: Dis Voir, 1995, p. 64. In the early 1900s, influenced by the images and mechanics of time-lapse photography and cinema, philosopher Henri Bergson made a similar observation in regards to time and movement. He stated, "As every point of space necessarily appears to me fixed, I find it extremely difficult not to attribute to the moving body itself the immobility of the point with which, for a moment, I make it coincide; it seems to me, then, when I reconstitute the total movement, that the moving body has stayed an infinitely short time at every point of its trajectory." See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, (trans. N.M. Paul & W.S. Palmer), New York: Zone Books, 1996 (1908), p. 189.

^{vi} Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, p. 64.

^{vii} Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, (trans. Philip Beitchman), New York/Paris: Semiotext(e), 1991, p. 17.

^{viii} F.T. Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism" (1908) in U. Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestoes*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, p. 22.

^{ix} Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, (trans. John Howe), London/New York, 1995, p. 111.

^x For a counter argument to the idea of localised accidents see Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, (trans. Julie Rose), London/New York: Verso, 1997, especially pp. 69–86 (passim).

^{xi} Marc Augé, *Oblivion*, (trans. Marjolijn de Jager), Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 61.