Untitled, detail *Delivery*, **2005**. Drawing on paper. Courtesy the artist.

PETER ALWAST AND THE AESTHETICS OF DISINCLINATION | BY MARK PENNINGS |

Peter Alwast is one of Australia's more sophisticated artists, but you would not know it at first glance! His paintings look half-finished, raw pine struts prop up video projections of mundane events, and amateurish drawings hang on DIY plastic sheets. His stuff seems to come straight out of the official neo-slacker handbook, and his anti-aesthetic, non-committal works should exclude his work from international biennials that go for art brands with glossy production values. Alwast's art runs against the grain because it is understated and conceptual, and it is the *process*, not the *product* that mostly interests him. Instead of presenting slick aesthetic packages he is a scavenger who combines imagery in a 'post-production' way. There is no consistent theory or style to his work because he likes to play with the sensibility of construction and the ways in which art can set off meanings.

Since returning from a stint at Parsons College in New York City (courtesy of a Samstag Scholarship and under the tutelage of Richard Tuttle), Alwast has been involved in a number of shows, including *Working Like a Tiger* (2003) at the Farm, Brisbane; 'Prime 2005' at the Queensland Art Gallery; and *Delivery* (2005) at Metro Arts, Brisbane. These exhibitions provide a useful coverage of Alwast's post-medium approach and his experiments with a broad range of themes. Whether using painting or material ensembles in installation pieces, he approaches all of his art in the same way—as a configuration or a set of parameters that generates an endless cycle of possible formulations. This means that the exhibited work is never fully resolved or 'finished', for he believes that art and its reception are necessarily a contingent state.

Alwast included three sparsely illustrated and recondite paintings in the 'Prime' show. In *Boom* he depicted an erupting volcano that discharged a green and red blancmange of gestural splats and blobs. The work's style was schematic rather than descriptive, and suggested that the artist was happier investigating the way illusionism can be made to describe rather than in furnishing the description itself. *Street* presented an elevated view through a window to a taxi on the street below. Turd-shaped clouds of smoke framed the perspective and the surface was decorated with graphic scribbles and a diamond-laced screen that floated in space. There did not seem to be any good reason as to why the doodles or diamond sheet should be there, and they looked like awkward and embarrassed participants in a game of scenic contrivances and painterly illusions. *Lights* was even more rudimentary, with a double humped hill placed against a yellow sky, which was skated by searchlight beams, silicon dribbles and colourless firework explosions.
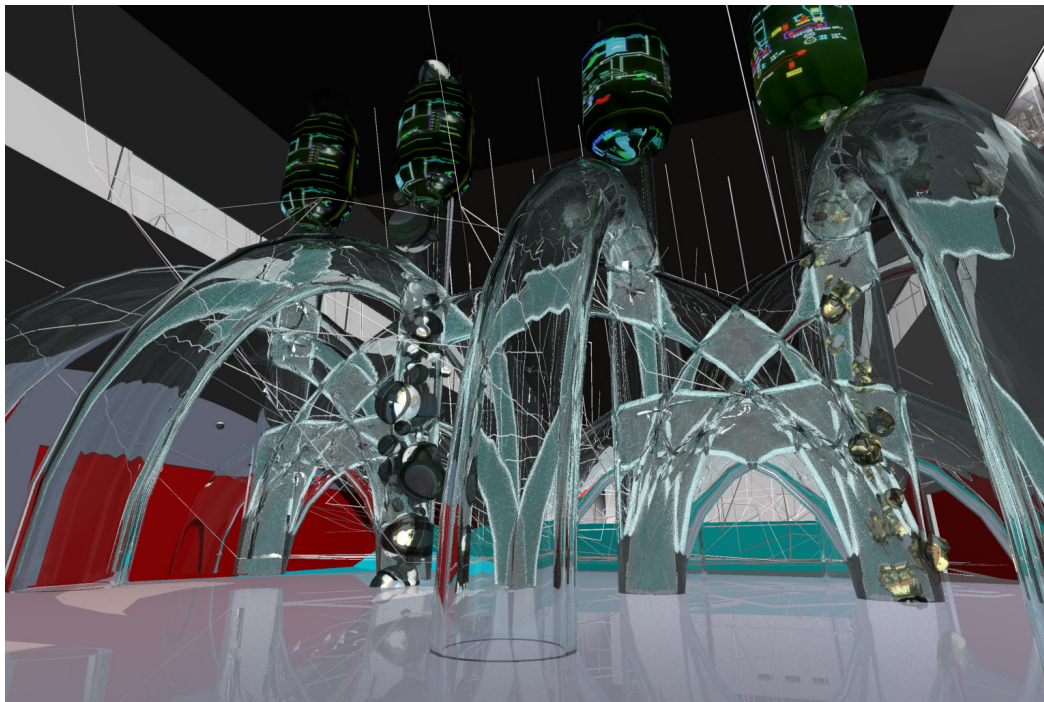
clockwise from top: **detail** *Delivery*, **2005**. Still from *Shwaaa* animation (inside factory); ***Shwaaa*, detail** *Delivery*, **2005;** *Drawing*, **detail** *Delivery*, **2005**. Pencil and marker on paper, 100 x 40cm. Courtesy the artist.

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These roughly formulated works could only be described as aesthetically nondescript. There were also allusions to explosions, spectacles and impending danger, but no underlying symbolic structure that pulled the works together into a cohesive thematic. A more fruitful way to consider the works was as conceptual hybrids or cross-fertilisations between pictorial approaches such as figuration, abstraction and illusionism. More importantly, viewers were given carte blanche to evaluate them according to their own criteria because Alwast does not like to dictate ultimate meanings. This arcane approach to 'the problem of painting' echoes the sensibility seen in work by artists like Wilhelm Sasnal, Martin Kippenberger, Julie Mehretu and Laura Owens.

The sparseness in the paintings tended to resist straightforward interpretations, but the works were about the pleasure of investigation, not about providing a neat set of answers. The paintings also came across as compositionally clumsy, but they were about intellectual discretion not aesthetic refinement. For Alwast, art is a system of management and it acts like a workstation that processes numerous visual regimes and their conceptual parameters. Works are rebuses and are treated as a patchwork of pictorial styles, subject matter and narrative fragments. They also include contingent cultural codes that can be disposed and combined in transitory and arbitrary ways. Alwast is thus an art pragmatist who applies a range of strategies to the quantum mechanics of various image systems. It is these processes in art, and how they work, that consumes his attention. His works may be resistant to easy interpretation, but the meanings are there—they are just slow to develop.

The artist likes to test the epistemological viability of the creative act and explore the type of visual literacy that emerges from the glut of image production in a New Media era. His approach to image construction and manufacture is commensurate with Nicolas Bourriaud's post-production artists who sample pictures from a range of media. Alwast uses images from Photoshop Illustration, 3D Studio, the Internet, MRI body images, as well as traditional visual media. He deploys these according to a principle he refers to as the 'processing of information', which involves an eclectic sampling of digital art history, materials, art styles and visual regimes. The art is not postmodern in a tactical sense, because it is appropriation without a conscience. Instead, one of art's primary functions is to act as a record of the artist's relationship to the image-sphere and the kind of visual proliferation and instability that accosts us everyday in a multi-media environment. As his images are arbitrarily sourced he makes no special or ambit claims about the creative artist. There is no master artist

deal, no metaphysical truths and no absolutes. Instead, there is the image-manager who orders the pictures he sees as a temporary arrangement suiting a specific intention at a particular time, and with little interest in establishing a brand or signature style.

Most of Alwast's work is installation-based. After returning to Brisbane he did the installation *Working Like a Tiger* for the independent art space The Farm. The title of the show had nothing to do with its content, but referred to rhetorical strategies as they relate to titles and how they inform and influence the way in which work is viewed and interpreted. Such tactics are not overtly signposted, but are revealed in a range of metaphorical possibilities with which the curious viewer can play.

Working Like a Tiger looked like something out of Allan Kaprow's 1950s installations for his Happenings. Alwast constructed two large L-shaped cubicles that were separated by a corridor and were covered by stretched plastic walls. The installation had three discrete interior areas, but the plastic sheeting divided more than it separated and thus generated a sense of spatial ambiguity. Being able to see through the semi-transparent walls also disrupted the intimacy and privacy of each viewing space. The sheeting again staged the artist's fascination with blankness and

openness as the translucent plastic opened up the confined spaces. In relation to this Alwast has said that 'I am interested in conflating the realms of real and imaginary space, in the painting work and the installations. The blankness could be seen as a screen or site of play between these qualities. I am not interested in resolving any polarities, but rather putting them together and questioning them'. In addition, a set of images was hung on the plastic walls and amplified the artist's love of indeterminacy, for he messed with conceptual, material and media boundaries. Some of the works were plastic-covered paper and others were photographs of gestural paintings. By placing the photographed works next to originals a readymade image was placed next to a 'made' image, so the display also became an operation that scrambled accepted notions about authenticity.

His most recent installation *Delivery* at Metro Arts included video and digital projections, home made pine benches, supporting struts that were attached to viewing screens, and a row of drawings on wooden boards behind a plastic screen (as in *Working Like a Tiger*). As is typical of Alwast's work, the central themes of the installation were downplayed and a little obscure. Most of the material for the installation came from a recording the artist did of a community event he organised in the Gold Coast suburb of Arundel. The show was a little like Pierre Huyghe's *Streamside Day Follies* (2003), but whereas Huyghe focused on undermining conventional narrative structures and the documentary genre, Alwast set up a subtle and fluid exploration of the meaning of democracy.

Speakers were invited to deliver speeches in a rotunda in Arundel's community park. The Colgate-Palmolive Corporation made the park as part of a deal to build a factory in the suburb. The park is a recreational space for employees and the community and also provides this multi-national enterprise with a marketing opportunity that expresses its commitment to the 'community'. It is not Alwast's style to launch a crude political attack on the operations of corporations in Queensland. However, he does generate a number of subtle displacements and comparisons around the concept of 'democracy', as it functioned in Ancient Greece, and how it operates today in the everyday world of suburbia and the corporation.

The speakers at the event included Colgate-Palmolive's PR manager, local MP Peter Lawlor and a performance troupe called 'Spirit of the Plains'. All spoke in the rotunda that functioned as an iconic conductor, for it resembled a Greek amphitheatre and was a 'community stage' for contemporary public discourse. Lawlor, as the people's democratic representative, was asked to deliver Pericles' famous funeral oration, which glorified and propagandised the democratic power of Athens. Lawlor also took time to lament the loss of good public speakers in a world of mediated politicians with their advertising spiels. Although free food and drink was offered there was a poor community turnout. This perhaps explained the difference between the ideal of 'participatory democracy' as it allegedly occurred in Ancient Greece, and the kind of spectacle of inclusive democracy that we all now understand as a form of passive 'entertainment'. Whatever, as usual, the viewer had to respond to a series of vague intimations rather easily consume a diatribe about the nature of democracy.

clockwise from top: **Lights**, **2005**. Painting; **Working Like a Tiger**, **installation view**, **The Farm**, **2003**; **Delivery**, **installation view**, **Metro Arts**, **2005**. Courtesy the artist.

The marketing representative pushed Colgate-Palmolive's PR themes. This included the claim that the corporation was a good corporate citizen *and* a leading global consumer products company. Colgate-Palmolive was also part of the community because, 'We've all grown up with our products'. Not only had the corporation made the park for the community, it was in fact *the* community that the rest of the suburb was invited to embrace. The corporation was also making an active contribution to a community health program to improve dental hygiene, and the sales of their products. This part of *Delivery* might have been read as a political treatise on the way that communities are duped by corporate ideology that distorts the ideal of 'participatory democracy'. Alwast however is more interested in art than politics and set up the project as a conceptual crucible in which meanings were allowed to grow in subtle and complex ways.

The final performers were the Spirit of the Plains who gave a series of speeches from Aristotle's dialogues. These were 'Of Voice and Sound in Fish, Birds and Certain Other Animals', 'The Sleeping Habits of Fish', 'The Flying Cycles of Eagles' and 'The Habits of Bees'. This was a curious inclusion in the event as the actors talked about how birds and their sounds differed from each other. But there was method in the madness as all discourses formed part of a cyclical paean to the 'plains of nature'. The name of the troupe was also

clockwise from left: **Spirit of the Plains, performing in the Rotunda, Arundel, 2005**. Performance event for *Delivery*; **Peter Lawler, speaking in the Rotunda, Arundel, 2005**. Performance event for *Delivery*; **Spirit of the Plains, performing in the Rotunda, Arundel, 2005**. Performance event for *Delivery*. Courtesy the artist.

Fundamental systems and conventions for understanding the world and constructing reality are re-formed as a rampantly colonising universalism.

derived from a Sidney Long painting, which celebrates youthful and romantic ideals and the pristine spirit of nature. The group thus symbolised the hopeful idealism of youth, yet also struck an absurd note and seemed to act as a cipher of interruption to the community and its meeting. It was from such disruptions that the viewers were encouraged to keep their interpretations of the event open and fluid.

There was a second video projection in the installation that showed a mix of digital and animated scenes of Arundel that made the suburb seem unfamiliar and alien. The soundtrack reinforced this sense of estrangement, as it was the haunting harmonica tune from Sergio Leone's film *Once Upon a Time in the West*. This uncanny turn supported Alwast's desire to use the digital and animated video format to draw attention to the problematic nature of images. The animation showed interior and exterior shots of the Colgate-Palmolive factory, which was symbolised by a tower that had the corporate logo 'ShwAAA' on it. This edifice dominated scenes of Arundel for it actually stands right behind the park and rotunda and sits smack in the middle of the suburb. In this footage it seemed like a Blakean behemoth that combusted raw materials and regurgitated them as great swathes of the suburban fabric. Towards the end of the video the members of Spirit of the Plains reappeared for a group portrait. They stared intently into the camera for a while and then burst into laughter. This unusual dénouement reinserted the element of surprise and undercut the spectator's desire to 'naturalise' and resolve the material in the installation. Time and again Alwast paraded the constructed nature of the art and the exhibition, so that the viewer could never really relax and settle on easy interpretations.

In the final part of the installation a series of drawing/paintings were placed on drawing boards that were separated from the rest of the fixtures by a plastic divider. These naïve and distracted doodlings, seemed preoccupied with the process of formation rather than in offering fully formed compositions. As incomplete fragments they were misfits, like the Spirit of the Plains, and eluded 'naming' and easy categorisation. They were also isolated from the rest of the installation yet the plastic divider meant that one could not view the videos without being aware of the continual presence of this section. The drawings as paintings also blurred conventional demarcations between these mediums. This state of irresolution thus resisted aesthetic and conceptual closure, and perhaps hinted at the show's larger message that democracy is itself at a point of irresolution in this era of power politics. More importantly, the artist's strategy was to keep the questions coming and the meanings open, and this was the 'delivery' of the show, the promise that some things get delivered and others might fail to arrive in the form you would like. This is linked to the fact that Alwast's art is often about an 'aesthetics of disinclination', which means that the viewer is refused a predictable set of meanings to interpret. Instead, he establishes processes and parameters whose contents are free to develop in a matrix of constantly shifting arrangements and alignments, and the viewer must 'go with the flow'.

Alwast is a difficult artist in many respects because he does not rest on anything for too long. His ideas are elusive as they stubbornly cling to the concept of a determined contingency. Like a classic conceptualist he sees art as a set of propositions and elaborates these as intellectual exercises. This is typical of those in his artistic generation who understand avant-gardism as a kind of unstable specialisation. That is to say, he distrusts the self-assured legacy of the avant-garde, and like any post-production artist he denies the acquisition of mastery and rejects the notion of creative autonomy. By abrogating this path he finds another that gives himself greater freedom to pursue his interests. ■

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