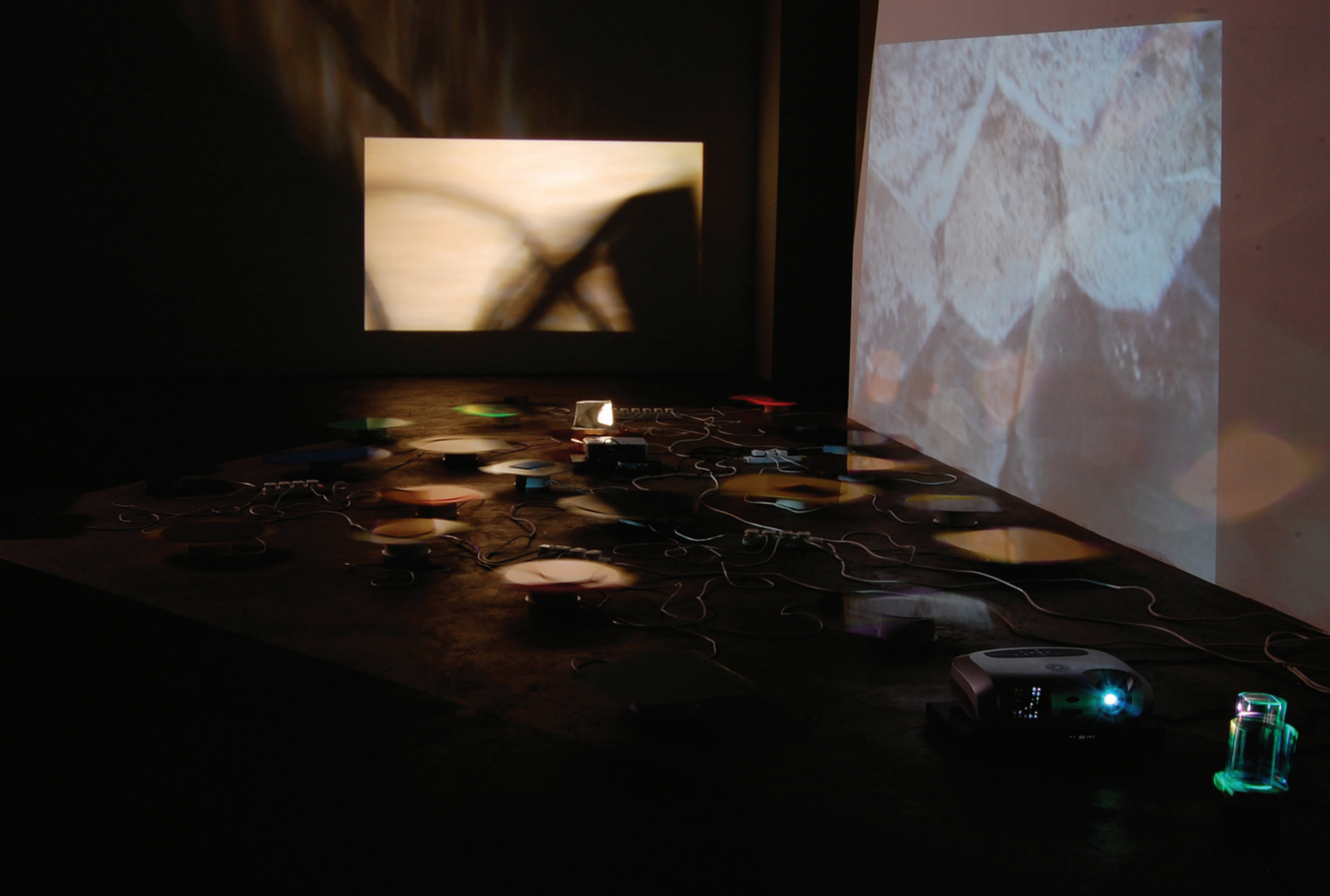


LAURA BUCKLEY
WATERLILIES
NOVEMBER - DECEMBER



Waterlilies Installation view, mother's tankstation



Waterlilies Installation view, mother's tankstation

ABOUT OURSELVES: LAURA BUCKLEY’S CONTEMPORARY PHANTASMAGORIA

‘In the way that the most of the wind
Happens where there are trees
Most of the world is centered
About ourselves.’
– Paul Muldoon

When did we become so suspicious of pleasure in art? It would be a good time to find out as we approach Laura Buckley’s *Waterlilies*, an extraordinary phenomeno-technic roomful of acid colours, gliding images and spinning shapes that is experiential in such a way as seemingly to negate critical approaches which try to do other than point out what any eye can clearly see. To engage with this light-sculpting artist’s work on another front might indeed seem rather like directing our discussion of a baroque fountain to an examination of its plumbing: we might be missing not just something, but everything. But that again would be a near impossibility, so carefully installed at the centre of Buckley’s work is the audience, their eyes and ears. For Buckley is part of a small but significant number of contemporary practitioners who produce art that functions at a level at once more basic than their contemporaries, and presumably because of that, more complex and far-reaching in its import.

What we see in *Waterlilies* is on some levels entirely simple and improvised in a way that calls to mind Lynne Cooke’s contrarian intent with her 1996 Sydney Biennale titled *Jurassic Technologies Revenant*. The question there – at the height of millennial-inspired technophilia, of a moment of coming-into-register between the industrial military complex and the art world that hadn’t been so snug since at least the heyday of abstract expressionism – concerned the possibility of making art at the dawning age of digital and network culture that eschewed the use of the very technologies that were midwife to that age. If digital tools were not actually infected, they were certainly carriers of a contagion, a retrovirus which promised to splice itself into the DNA of art production, redirecting, misdirecting all those who used them. And so there, spinning about, were turntables, lamps, cups of coloured water, printing presses (and of course, the obligatory swimming pool-sized tank filled with gold-wrapped toffees) offering a neo-Luddite riposte to the coming tide. It was an extreme position, but a prescient one. For who since then thought that art might usefully follow the lead of *Osmose*¹, a piece of semi-industrial light and magic that promised to make Softimage computer graphic modelling a basic tool of the artist, not simply by offering a racy example of how it might be used, but by doing so in a way that announced its importance to the wider world, that offered up art as pleasure, phantasmagoria. Any resistance to that had to be useful, didn’t it?

But now the need for a hard, neo-Luddite line to be held seems less pressing. It is possible that this is due, in part, to the technologies both delivering less social and cultural transformation than they at first promised (or at least, delivering them less rapidly) but also of those very same technologies becoming embedded to such a degree that foregrounding them provided little purchase. It is into such a moment that *Waterlilies* enters, when the bricolage of formal means need not take pains to avoid any technology that proves useful, need not be afraid that the presence of mobile phone captured digital video (how that might have shocked those sepia-tinted gentlefolk in the quaint daguerreotypes of the 1990s!) would

bring an entire project to the point of collapse in an over-determined technological puddle. With this apparent new freedom Buckley edges into the digital domain when necessary, though this is only ever, it seems, when it comes time to withdraw optical or sonic artefacts best stored there. The network is not of interest, at least not unless it provides a metaphor for physical and physiological processes. At certain times it clearly does. The constitution by our senses of discrete objects and sensations into apparently continuous experience, crucial in both the technologies of cinematic reproduction and the transmission of digital data, also (and hardly coincidentally) offers up a central image of the self, the lump on which everything out there, we allow ourselves – require ourselves, even – to believe, is focused. And this happens in a way we like to call “quite naturally” which is simply to say, with little conscious effort on our behalf. Everything is bits and pieces, whole and complete in their singularity, which we unwittingly reassemble, conjoin, throw an interpretive grid over, and in that process make ourselves. It’s a doubly disheartening exchange: not only does the outside world only exist through work which we perform in ignorance, but crucially we too fail to arrive in advance of the exchange. If on occasion we try to fashion an image of that process, it is, essentially, a malfunction, a glitch, which we honour, even if the glitch turns out to be a productive break in the seamless, ever-ness of the process. And this is where the most forceful art of the present day operates; and where Buckley’s work operates.

Buckley is involved with the operation of the senses (primarily the eyes but also the ears, and their complex co-dependent interaction). Her work relentlessly seeks out moments when things fail to resolve themselves as they should, as expected, as indeed we had already half begun, through cognitive processes, to make them appear. It asserts regularly the centrality of our own role in creating the experience we might casually assume is delivered to us from elsewhere, not least in the persistent manner in which peripheral vision is (if not incorporated into the work) deployed by it, as well as the manner in which the strict categories of what is sound and what is vision are placed under suspicion.² At such moments, we begin to realise that the activity that we have conceptualised as seeing is a deal more complex than we had allowed. In these moments of malfunction, we find ourselves confronting some of the most challenging aspects of our subjective constitution. Because a concentration on the phenomena of light and sound, on the patterns of maths and physics, always fails to fully elaborate experiences of sensing, just as the McGurk effect suggests that part of the activity of hearing is resident in seeing.

Space is necessarily the site of the initial skirmishes, rather than the final frontier. Buckley’s projected installations, in which scattering light and images (and of course their equally important interplay with sound, which offers acoustic clues to the shape of the space) describe apparently familiar spaces in ways that reboot, reconfigure and rebuild restlessly the facts as witnessed by our changing perceptions. It’s a potent strategy, for if the familiar sensations of Cartesian space allow our selves to come into being, the malleability of space is our own, too. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard makes particular reference to this possibility.

By changing space, by leaving the space of one’s usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating. For we do not change place, we change our nature.³

His reference is, of course, to what “nature” might have to offer to urban humans, but the point is as valid of work which attempts to reconfigure space from moment to moment.

The environment that Buckley creates is one in which, like the background in a digital animation, the

rendering is done with as much economy as possible. Here, whatever is invisible does not exist for that moment, since there is no need for it. It's not like God is looking. But then, suddenly and simultaneously, there appears an image racing across a wall, and by extension, a wall has appeared. And it is not just this materialisation / dematerialisation that has been taken under control. It would be enough to make the point if patches of colour simply appeared, but increasingly there is image within image, an overlap that proposes fleetingly a description of an exterior world. The reach of this idea, its leap out of the experience of the art world into the experience of the life world, account in part for the pleasure and for the reach of Buckley's work (and indeed others that one might associate with it, such as Olafur Eliasson, James Turrell, or Anthony McCall, artists whose practices span a large period of time, and which have [and presumably will again] move in and out of fashion) beyond the elites who might like to read them with key phenomenological texts in hand.

Anthony McCall, an artist with whom Buckley herself suggests a certain kinship, possesses an idiosyncratic biography that traces a line from experimental filmmaker to fine artist, without an attendant change of material. His best-known works enlisted the "Jurassic" technology of film and projector to conjure apparently three-dimensional light objects in a darkened room. McCall has regularly deprecated any apparent need to focus on the question of whether his work is sculpture or filmmaking. Like other categories in art, these were, he suggested, placeholder terms, as each area of practice would always carry elements, moves, strategies and forms of the other just as, finally, it is not possible to separate entirely what we are hearing from what we are seeing (something that Buckley's work apparently often addresses).

The terms become even less fixed in reference to Buckley's work, which moves beyond using simply light itself, towards presenting domestic scenes and sounds, drips of water and chunks of rock, landscapes and people, leaving her practice closer to cinema than McCall's minimalist prestidigitations, which determinedly refused film's capability even to reference an 'elsewhere'. Significantly, though Buckley's work offers glimpses of these elsewheres, we are never permitted to dissolve into them, but rather encouraged to maintain a useful distance from them, from the familiar experience of the screen audience with its neutralised bodies.

Indeed, when she directs our attention 'elsewhere' (away from what we assume to be our immediate surroundings) that elsewhere apparently suffers (or benefits) from the same degree of instability and deferral that the artist is busy creating in our immediate surroundings. At such junctures, it also comes to our attention also that these "elsewheres" are, fleetingly, deliriously, no less present than our immediate surroundings. For Buckley is a sculptor of light, as McCall envisaged, certainly. But she is also, crucially, primarily, a sculptor of attention, that most precious commodity. To deal in this, is to deal in what matters now, because the extreme mobility, the precious instability that Buckley's work produces through its manipulation of attention, offers equally a preparation for entering a space our evolving senses have yet to create, and an essay of a radically reconstituted sensorium.

Luke Clancy

¹ Char Davies' *Osmose* (1995) was VR environment/installation using a head-mounted display and motion tracking which now seems like a very dull thing indeed.

² This process of breaking down, of arresting as much as possible, the viewer's attempts to read as solid both the work itself, and the space in which it occurred, is evident in *Stage Fright* (2009) a series of projection and motorised sculpture pieces operating to a tightly edited soundtrack, which Buckley created in collaboration with Dave MacLean and Haroon Mirza.

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*



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