



intimacy

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This exhibition explores the elusive yet ubiquitous issue of intimacy through the work of nine Australian and international artists. Using video, performance, installation, photography and sculpture these artists create works that are disturbing, moving and humorous. In order to navigate each artist's relationship to intimacy I have identified common themes in the work. By no means definitive interpretations, I have focussed the discussion on the questions of absence, self-revelation and voyeurism.

In the contemporary world the virtual communication of private thoughts and feelings, dreams and fantasies, is not only normal but in many cases even more desired than physical contact. The absence of the body allows direct, open communication that is often awkward if not impossible to undertake face to face. The disembodied nature of online dating, for example, “enables emotions to evolve from a more authentic self”¹ allowing people to overcome their inhibitions. People first connect through the mediated language of the Internet before progressing to meeting in person. Many of the works shown here deal with physical absence in relation to intimate contact or communication between people.

Intimacy is created when we reveal something of ourselves; sharing our innermost thoughts, feelings and fears with someone creates trust and they in turn are able to disclose aspects of their inner self. As this process continues we can build a relationship based on trust and connection. Whether between strangers or in an ongoing relationship, taking the risk of self-disclosure deepens our connection to another and enables moments of vulnerability to be shared. Several of the artists here either use or subvert this idea to create uncanny tableau of strange intimacies.

There is a trend in contemporary photography of seducing the viewer into seeing something that at first appears familiar but on closer inspection is disturbing. We are lured into the role of voyeur, often



Johanna Billing *Magic & Loss* 2005 still from 16mm film transferred to DVD 16 min 52 sec looped
courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London (see list of works for full credits)

without consent. Whether it is the intimacy we feel for the subject of a work or whether we are witness to intimacy between others, several of the artists here draw us in to an act of complicity – creating ambiguous images of innocence, power and dangerous encounters.

In Johanna Billing's *Magic & Loss* 2005 a group of people silently and methodically pack the contents of an apartment into boxes. The unmade bed has obviously been slept in and dishes are stacked unwashed in the sink. The absence of the occupant leaves us wondering whether they have died or left suddenly. The only clue is a sense of melancholy as everything gets packed and shifted onto the street outside. Occasionally someone will pause and look around in a moment of contemplation, then the packing continues. We hear the crackling of paper, scraping of furniture, shuffling of boxes. No one speaks or cries – if they know the (dead?) owner they do not betray their feelings. The tension created between the known and unknown makes this work captivating.

Ruby Chishti's two pairs of stuffed rag dolls are a powerful and confronting portrayal of relationship dynamics. The first pair *Ever After* 2000 sit side by side on an old cardboard box, their straw innards spilling out of their unstitched limbs. They could be a parent and child or perhaps an old couple – there is a sense of great closeness between the two as though they have been through a lot together. The fragility of the materials suggests the tenuous nature of human lives. In *Just a minute!* 2007 two figures lean awkwardly against the wall, covered in the scars of creation; rough stitching, bandaging and patches. Headless they are unable to communicate except through touch.

Anna Davis' DVD *In the house of shouters...* 2005-2007 deals with awkward social moments and the idea of self-revelation as a way of making contact. Ironically the intimacy that can happen in a social situation is overridden by the urgent desire of her three life sized figures to reach out to others.

Astra Howard *Found in Translation* 2007 still from action
research/performance installation dimensions variable
courtesy the artist



Davis emphasizes the nervous gestures of her characters and builds the tension until they are all talking at once. These characters are so lost in their own private thoughts that they are deaf to each other's laments: "I'm always myself", "I always know what I want and it's always the same", "I wanted to show affection to people", "Speak to me". Desperate to be heard they fail to engage in any real communication at all.

Bill Henson's *Untitled* 2000-2001 portrays a girl in a moment of contemplation. She is alone surrounded by an ominous darkness – we are compelled to look and continue to look at her. Henson has mastered the ability to capture intimate moments in a way that leaves the viewer feeling they are witnessing a real event. The gaze is palpable and we are made acutely aware of the photographer's, and our own, presence. His subjects appear both at ease and defiant. They boast the rawness and indifference of youth yet their nubile bodies are vulnerable. Henson captures candid moments of raw physical contact between his subjects but more interestingly he forces the viewer into a moment of intimacy with the subject.

Using puppetry and performance Astra Howard retells stories collected from strangers she has met on the street during her action/research activities. *Found in Translation* 2007 gives a voice to unheard and sometimes previously untold stories. It allows an interaction to take place that otherwise gets lost in the speed of daily life. Strangers from all walks of life interact with Howard as she situates herself in a portable theatre on the streets of Sydney and Melbourne. In the gallery setting she uses uniformly grey soft toys to stand in for the owners of the stories. Through the retelling of personal accounts Howard creates an atmosphere of openness and empathy. We become close to the lives of strangers perhaps even sharing a moment of familiarity.



David Rosetzky *Nothing like this* 2007 still from 16mm film transferred to DVD 16:9 colour & sound 24 min 36 sec
courtesy the artist, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

In *Nothing like this* 2007 David Rosetzky has overlaid reflections of unsatisfactory social encounters onto seemingly idyllic scenes of people enjoying each other's company. We hear private, internal thoughts and feelings – things not usually spoken out loud. The contradictions between image and dialogue create an unusual and yet typical scenario. The stories are of miscommunication, failed relationships, irritation and frustration. Rosetzky makes us question the authenticity of the narrative by making different characters repeat the same dialogue, leaving us wondering whose story it is and who we should empathise with.

Bronwyn Thompson's DVD *economia* 2007 is installed inside a small house, giving an appearance of domestic normalcy that belies the claustrophobic reality of the power struggle she portrays. A difficult relationship between mother and daughter is played out in a fraught environment. There are moments of intimate connection during a drama full of tension and conflict. The mother appears to be trying to turn the girl into a version of herself by roughly shoving her wig onto the child. The girl resists this emotional assault by continuing her childish activities of skipping and dancing, leaving the conflict unresolved.

Jim Vivieaere's acutely personal works *I met my birth mother for the first time on my 16th birthday. I must have come of age because the foster parents simply introduced me to a photograph.* 2007 and *I was forty-six years old in a car park and must have looked lost. A person asked if I needed some help. My name must have sat in a crease somewhere near the surface of their mind, because it released a memory that I had lived with them for a year. As proof they sent a headshot, of when I was five.* 2007 raise questions about the formation of identity and sense of self. Working on the assumption that we are moulded by our family environment and learn how to be who we are within our particular family unit, Vivieaere entrusts personal details of his life into our care. He reveals the intimate first meeting with his mother and the connection he feels to a stranger he meets in the street because of a shared childhood.



Eva Weber *The intimacy of strangers* 2005 still from film transferred to DVD 19 min 35 sec courtesy the artist and NFTS UK, photographer Marina Vieira da Silva (see list of works for full credits)

Filmed in London's streets, subways and parks Eva Weber's *The intimacy of strangers* 2005 is compiled entirely of people having personal conversations on their mobile phones. Using these real, overheard phone calls, Weber weaves a contemporary story of love, relationships and soul searching. We are witness to deeply personal and tender exchanges, break-ups, rationalisations, justifications and expectations. Missing from all these encounters is the person being spoken to. The physical distance is bridged by the use of the mobile and yet body language and gesture are invisible. As eavesdroppers, artist and viewer are complicit in the knowledge that these conversations would most likely not be as open and honest if they were held face to face.

Contemporary society, where we are increasingly connected through new technologies, can leave many of us feeling isolated and alone. Ironically a total stranger, whether real or virtual, may be a source of inspiration or kindness. There is a basic human need for emotional and physical contact. It is through these connections that we experience the human condition and create a sense of meaning. Much of the focus of contemporary society is on large events that stir our fascination rather than the small moments that govern our lives. Whether interacting with a loved one or a passing stranger, how we relate to each other on a daily basis demands consideration. *Intimacy* presents work that brings our thoughts back to ourselves and those we share our lives with. It asks that we re-examine the fundamental significance of each encounter and reminds us that our connection with another is the foundation of all other relations.

Rilka Oakley

¹ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK & Malden, USA, 2007, p. 75.

JOHANNA BILLING

b. 1973 Jönköping, Sweden

Video artist Johanna Billing lives and works in Stockholm. Her films generally capture situations of societal change. In her multilayered interpretations of places and circumstances that oscillate between documentary and fiction music is often a vehicle for articulating certain struggles – personal, social and political. Recent exhibitions include *This is how we walk on the moon* 2007 Collective Gallery, Edinburgh; *Documenta 12* 2007 Kassel; *Another Album* 2007 Hollybush Gardens, London; *Magical World* 2006 P.S.1-MoMa, New York; *9th Istanbul Biennale* 2005 Istanbul.

Magic & Loss was filmed in Amsterdam in 2005, and shows a group of people packing and removing the contents of a seemingly pleasant apartment. The methodical movements of people packing boxes, carrying the apartment's contents to the street, and hoisting the furniture to the ground with ropes and pulleys, silently creates a choreographed mysterious narrative. The owner of the flat is not present, and the unemotional detachment of the movers emphasizes the question of what has happened to the person or persons who once lived there. The title references an album by Lou Reed, recorded at a time when he was dealing with the loss of several people around him. Johanna Billing

Magic & Loss 2005 still from 16mm film transferred to DVD 16 min 52 sec looped courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London (see list of works for full credits)



RUBY CHISHTI

b. 1963 Jhang, Pakistan

Ruby Chishti works in ephemeral materials referring to the transitory constituent of life. Her work in fabric and straw offers the link between the traditions of doll making and contemporary sculpture of India and Pakistan. She graduated from the National College of Arts, Lahore Pakistan in 1988 and has been exhibiting internationally since 2000. Exhibitions include *Nawai Sarosh* (voice of an Angel) 2000 Rohtas, Lahore; *The eye still seeks: contemporary art from Pakistan* 2001 Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney; *Affiliations* 2003 Walsh Gallery, Chicago; *Feats of clay* 2005 Gladding McBean, Lincoln, California and *Intensity of space and substance* 2007 National Art Gallery, Islamabad. She has held residencies in England and Karachi and in 2006 she received the *Fellowship Award* at Vermont studio center. Her work is held in international collections and is featured in books and magazines including *Unveiling the Visible* by Salima Hashmi. Ruby Chishti now lives and works in the USA and Pakistan.

Each year when autumn uncovers the secretly woven bird's nests, it reminds me of a journey of time, how the passage of time brings enormous changes in the world and one's life. Things appear or disappear, vanish or transform but the desire remains constant to rebuild and repair those scars that time leaves behind. My hands desire to feel the world with its touch as if it is a living being, a fearless, tireless being... at times defenceless against the forces of minds that attempt to control, capture and conquer. Ruby Chishti

Ever After 2000 fabric, straw, cardboard box 76 x 56 x 43 cm courtesy the artist, photographer Khalil Chishtee

Just a minute! 2007 fabric, polyester, bandage, gauze 110 x 30 x 17 cm each courtesy the artist, photographer Khalil Chishtee



b. 1974 Sydney, Australia

Anna Davis is a media artist who has been exhibiting her screen-based installations since 1998. Her most recent work focuses on people's intimate experiences of social interaction and explores the contagious bodily movements underlying emotion and social exchange. Her artworks have been exhibited previously at venues including; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, The NTT Inter Communication Centre (ICC), Tokyo and The Ujazdowski Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, as well as at numerous media art festivals worldwide. Anna is currently a PhD candidate at the iCinema Centre for Interactive Cinema Research at the University of NSW, and publishes articles frequently on video and new media art.

In the house of shouters... is a study of social anxiety, exploring both its private, inner-voice and external, gestural rhythms. The three characters in the work embody the syncopated physicality of this uneasy emotional state, seemingly uncomfortable in their own skin and easily flustered by the others. Standing alongside one another, their stilted, self-conscious monologues are punctuated by uncomfortable silences, nervous interruptions and furtive, sidelong glances. The performers' awkward timing and misplaced gestures are further amplified through digital processes in an attempt to reflect the experience of social anxiety, which often manifests in a distortion and fragmentation of movement, speech and gesture into a much more volatile, micro-kinetic rhythm. Anna Davis

In the house of shouters... 2005-2007 still from digital video projection 20 min looped courtesy the artist



BILL HENSON

b. 1955 Melbourne, Australia

Bill Henson is one of Australia's most distinguished artists. He has exhibited extensively both locally and internationally over a period of three decades. In 1995 Henson represented Australia at the Venice Biennale. In 2005 a comprehensive survey of his work was held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Victoria. His work is to be found in every major public collection in Australia and many collections outside Australia including the Auckland Art Gallery, the Bibliotheque Nationale de Paris, the Houston Museum of Fine Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, the Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, the Sammlung Volpinum, Vienna, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Two major monographs; *Mnemosyne* 2005 and *Lux et Nox* 2002 have been published by Scalo, Switzerland. Bill Henson is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

Photography to me is about finding that intensely intimate element without any presumption of familiarity. That really is about distance or, if you like, the gap between yourself and the subject; and how you charge and electrify that gap. I suppose it has to be at once an unbridgeable gulf and, at the same time, something which has such a tender, proximate breathing presence, that it almost feels as though it's not separate from oneself. Bill Henson¹

¹ Dominic Sidhu, 'Nocturne: The Photographs of Bill Henson', Interview with Bill Henson, *EGO Magazine*, August 29, 2005, http://www.egomagemag.com/archives/2005/0/bill_henson.htm

Untitled 2000-2001 type c colour photograph 135 x 183 cm courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney



ASTRA HOWARD

b. 1978 Sydney, Australia

Astra Howard is an artist and designer working in modes of performance and action research within public spaces as well as in gallery contexts. She has produced over one hundred works as part of her doctoral research in China, India, France and the USA as well as in Australia. Her most recent solo works have been commissioned by the City of Melbourne and Frankston Council as well as the Queensland Department of Communities, Office for Seniors. As catalysts for interaction between individuals, often strangers within the city, Howard's action research/performance projects develop a heightened sense of awareness to the local environment and a greater sensitivity to all of those individuals who interact with it.

Over recent years, I have accumulated many moving stories from people living close to the streets of Sydney and Melbourne. These tales have ranged in topic and intensity depending upon the circumstances and personality of the storyteller and the scenario in which the conversations were held. Found in Translation includes uniform, grey painted soft toy characters who perform these stories via animation and dialogue. Each character has a nametag so that audience members can select a tale, a life story, they would like to hear, which in turn will be amplified into the localised public space. During my work with the homeless, marginalised and disadvantaged community I have found that having a character speak on behalf of someone has been an effective way of sympathetic communication for story owner, story-teller and audience. Astra Howard

Found in Translation 2007 still from action research/performance installation dimensions variable courtesy the artist



DAVID ROSETZKY

b. 1970 Melbourne, Australia

David Rosetzky's work investigates the possibilities of contemporary portraiture using the moving image, sound and objects in space. His work combines documentary and fictional styles of video making and is influenced by cinema and popular screen culture such as television and advertising. Rosetzky was the inaugural winner of the Anne Landa Art Award for moving image and new media art 2005 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney for his work *Untouchable* 2003. He has been included in numerous prestigious national and international exhibitions and biennales. Rosetzky is a lecturer in the Photography Department at the Victorian College of the Arts and was the founding director of 1st Floor artists and writers space, Melbourne 1994-2002. He is currently undertaking a Masters of Fine Art at Monash University, Caulfield. He is represented by Kaliman Gallery, Sydney and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

Nothing like this consists of a series of stylised scenarios of young people at their leisure – seemingly at ease. However, voice-over monologues disrupt the idyllic scenes by presenting the subjects' internal musings that reflect prevalent emotional states of insecurity and paranoia. Things are divulged about relationships that would ordinarily not be voiced out loud – evoking a sense of intimacy and empathy for the on screen protagonists. With this intimacy a certain distance is also maintained as an acute awareness that the images are carefully constructed is obviously apparent. Also some of the same stories are repeated by different voices that make one question the authenticity of these very personal accounts. David Rosetzky

Nothing like this 2007 still from 16mm film transferred to DVD 16:9 colour & sound 24 min 36 sec courtesy the artist, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne



BRONWYN THOMPSON

b. 1964 Geelong, Australia

Bronwyn Thompson's practice explores the relationship that exists between image, identity, language and power, and encompasses photography, video and sound installation. By examining the complex relationship that exists within the intimate and familial domain it becomes possible to question the power of culture itself and the inherent violence that constitutes an identity. Thompson's video installation *I'll be your Girl* 2006, was exhibited in the prestigious *Hatched* exhibition at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts 2007, it has been shown at MOP Projects Sydney 2007 and the Queensland Centre of Photography 2007.

*Moments that appear tender and private to the public gaze have connotations that are dark and powerful. In *economia* I attempt to place the viewer in a position that investigates voyeurism not only from the perspective of the public eye but also from within the domestic and private domain. I question the authority and effect of one gaze and identity to another, within the confines of the close and ambiguous relationship that exists between mother, daughter, and the home. Ultimately, the viewer and the mother are revealed as the voyeur. The audio accompanying *economia* is familiar, unfamiliar, comforting and unsettling. Sounds that are familiar create a sense of knowing and comfort whilst other sounds create discomfort and foreboding in the attempt to reach the audience on a more visceral level that moves beyond the interpretation of language. Bronwyn Thompson*

economia 2007 still from single channel video with audio 4 min 27 sec looped courtesy the artist



JIM VIVIEAERE

b. 1947 Waipawa, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand

Jim Vivieaere's visibility can be attributed in full, to being politicised as a Polynesian/Pacific Islander. His role as an artist and curator has enabled him to work with his own community as well as establish partnerships with other indigenous artists. In 2004 he collaborated with Sydney artist Jonathan Jones on *Travelling Light* at the Museum of Sydney, and again more recently at the University of Technology Sydney in the group exhibition *The Trouble with the Weather 2007*. He is currently working on a joint project with First Nations artist, Stephen Foster at the MIC Toi Rerehiko Gallery in Auckland *Negate/Disclose 2007*. He lives and works in Auckland as a consultant and food stylist.

My work deals with disclosure, managed within the safe co-ordinates of time and space. Providence delivers the flat evidence of a past, that raises issues of identity and nostalgia.
Jim Vivieaere

I met my birth mother for the first time on my 16th birthday. I must have come of age because the foster parents simply introduced me to a photograph. 2007 Giclee print, Hahnemule photo rag matt 84 x 59 cm courtesy the artist

I was forty-six years old in a car park and must have looked lost. A person asked if I needed some help. My name must have sat in a crease somewhere near the surface of their mind, because it released a memory that I had lived with them for a year. As proof they sent a headshot, of when I was five. 2007 Giclee print, Hahnemule photo rag matt 84 x 59 cm courtesy the artist



EVA WEBER

b. 1969 Darmstadt, Germany

Eva Weber is a London based independent filmmaker and artist. She began her career making several award-winning short fiction films before joining the BBC. Whilst working as an in-house director for BBC Broadcast, she directed numerous promotions and commercials for the BBC and other television and advertising companies. Her documentary *The intimacy of strangers* was premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival and screened at over 50 film festivals worldwide. Amongst others, the film has won the President's Award at Full Frame Documentary Film Festival and the Grand Jury Prize at Platforma Video6. Films include *The Solitary Life of Cranes* 2007, *City of Cranes* 2007, *Makings of a Queen* 2000, *Dyke Blend* 1996, *Disgraceful Conduct* 1995 and *Stealing Desire* 1994.

You used to have to make an effort to overhear other people's conversations, now you have to make an effort not to. The intimacy of strangers is a story of life, love, loss and hope – entirely constructed out of real, overheard mobile phone conversations of random strangers. From the lover dumped outside Euston Station to the whispered exchange of sweet nothings sitting on a bench in Leicester Square, nowadays we conduct whole relationships through our mobile phones. The film weaves these seemingly random exchanges into a modern-day love story: from first attraction to the bitter end. At once absurd and tender, it reflects on whether these conversations can say something deeper about the way we interact with each other in our modern society, and the role of the mobile phone in this.
Eva Weber

The intimacy of strangers 2005 still from film transferred to DVD 19 min 35 sec courtesy the artist and NFTS UK, photographer Marina Vieira da Silva (see list of works for full credits)



LIST OF WORKS

Johanna Billing

Magic & Loss 2005

16mm transferred to DVD, 16 min 52 sec looped

Cinematographer: Nina da Costa

Camera Assistant: Bas Tiele

Sound: Marjo Postma

Music: Karl-Jonas Winqvist

Participants: Pia Sandström, Audrey Weeren,
Seon-Ja Seo, Jan Mech, Remco Kwik, Chris van
Zyl, Par Strömberg, Magnus Monfeldt, Liesbeth
Sijzling, Karina Bakker

Co-produced by Smart Project Space

(production assistants: Astrid Schumacher and
Mutaleni Nadimi-Mbumba) with support from the
Arts Grants Committee, Sweden
courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

Ruby Chishti

Ever After 2000

fabric, straw, cardboard box

76 x 56 x 43 cm

courtesy the artist

Just a minute! 2007

fabric, polyester, bandage, gauze

110 x 30 x 17 cm each

courtesy the artist

Anna Davis

In the house of shouters... 2005-2007

digital video projection

20 min looped

courtesy the artist

Bill Henson

Untitled 2000-2001

(JPC SH101 N14 gallery ref 130)

type c colour photograph

135 x 183 cm

courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9
Gallery, Sydney

Astra Howard

Found in Translation 2007

action research/performance

installation dimensions variable

courtesy the artist

David Rosetzky

Nothing like this 2007

16mm film transferred to DVD, 16:9, colour
& sound

24 min 36 sec

courtesy the artist, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney
and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Bronwyn Thompson

economia 2007

single channel video with audio

4 min 27 sec looped

courtesy the artist

Jim Vivieaere

*I met my birth mother for the first time on
my 16th birthday. I must have come of age
because the foster parents simply introduced
me to a photograph.* 2007

Giclee print, Hahnemule photo rag matt

84 x 59 cm

courtesy the artist

*I was forty-six years old in a car park and
must have looked lost. A person asked if I
needed some help. My name must have sat
in a crease somewhere near the surface of
their mind, because it released a memory
that I had lived with them for a year. As
proof they sent a headshot, of when I was
five.* 2007

Giclee print, Hahnemule photo rag matt

84 x 59 cm

courtesy the artist

Eva Weber

The intimacy of strangers 2005

film transferred to DVD

19 min 35 sec

Producer: Samantha Zarzosa

Editor: Emiliano Battista

Camera: Per Tingleff/Catherine Derry

Music: David Schweitzer

Sound: Dan Johnson

courtesy the artist and NFTS (UK)

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All images courtesy and © the artists

(COVER IMAGE) **Bronwyn Thompson** *economia* 2007
single channel video with audio 4 min 27 sec looped
courtesy the artist

Intimacy

Curator Rilka Oakley

Ivan Dougherty Gallery COFA UNSW
Selwyn Street, Paddington, NSW
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