

## AT ODDS

BY JUSTIN PATON

## OPENING REMARKS ON KRAFT BY STUART RINGHOLT, 15 FEBRUARY 2014

I've met Stuart Ringholt exactly once before, in the back room of a dealer gallery in Sydney in mid-2010, where Stuart showed me a selection of the 'Star Trek' videos that you see in the last room of this exhibition. Whittled from full-length television episodes down to strange wordless sequences of one minute or so, the videos cast William Shatner/Captain Kirk as 'the curator' -- a solemn, faintly gormless seeker after answers in a universe of mysterious objects and resistant surfaces. I remember the meeting as an unusual one, partly because Ringholt's demeanour was so un-promotional. But especially because the videos seemed to offer a strange, miniaturised summary of the very encounter I was having -- the museum professional dropping in for an hour and trying to make sense of problems that the artist may have been wrangling with for months.

I feel a bit Kirk-like again today, asked to stand in front of you and deliver some opening remarks about Stuart's exhibition *Kraft*. I have myself only recently touched down in Australia, and I encountered many of the works in the exhibition for the first time yesterday. And I'm all too conscious of the headmasterly tone you can find yourself adopting on these occasions. There's a terrible temptation to turn into a reassurer, telling the crowd and benefactors that everything is okay, that it's *fine*. But I want to avoid that if I can. What I want to acknowledge and salute instead, in my position as a Kirk-like visitor to planet Ringholt, is the alien quality of this art, its subtle but persistent air of disagreement. It is odd. And it is at odds.

'At odds' meaning that it does not run evenly, does not submit to the common understanding. To say that Stuart is a collage artist doesn't sound like saying much, given the fact that collage is now the favourite mode of nine out of ten kindergarten art classes. But collage is the favourite method of artists who want to argue with reality, and Stuart returns the technique to its old and agitating role as a way of operating on appearances. Hence, perhaps, the title word *Kraft*, with that heavy, Germanic K, which has me thinking of collage artist Hannah Hoch and her wonderfully aggressive title 'Cut with the kitchen knife'. Cutting books to pieces and rebinding them or slicing down through the pages of magazines or carving all that footage out of Star Trek episodes, Stuart is looking for the secret logic, the hidden alliances: the unacknowledged connection between, say, Tracey Emin and male porn stars, or between speedboats and terrorists.

We have, in all the rooms of the gallery, the sorts of things we have seen before in contemporary art galleries. We have seen dance floors and discos. We have seen books on tables. We have seen scatter pieces, timepieces, video pieces. But what strikes me, walking through the show, is the surprising strength of feeling that rises from Ringholt's variations, the way he freights up and agitates the contemporary art language with sharp and specific emotions. The strange comedy of shame and thwarting that pulls one through the collages in the first room. Or the menace and melancholy that drifts like a low mist through the scatter of sculptures in the second space.

This is nowhere more apparent than in *Club Purple*, the nude daytime disco that is arguably the beating heart of this exhibition. Participatory artworks are to the 2010s what stripes were to the 1960s: everybody's doing them. From its disreputable origins four decades ago, when shaggy young artists got up to risky things in small rooms, participation has become the modern art museum's new favourite thing, its preferred method, as the marketing departments say, for 'growing new audiences'. But here in *Club Purple* is a participatory work that turns this logic inside out. Instead of bringing people into the museum for family-friendly fun, it effectively blocks the museum out, creating a peculiar inner space for consenting adults that makes outsiders out of insiders like me -- unless, of course, between now and 5:30, I work up the courage to enter. Even if you don't enter, perhaps *especially* if you don't enter, you may find this artwork occupying a surprisingly large space in your mind.

I leave till last the major work in the exhibition, the *Untitled* clock that Stuart has realised as a Katherine Hannay visual arts commission. With its massive sculptural weight, its wheezing industrial mechanism, and its second hand sweeping round its face every 45 seconds rather than every 60, this stately sculpture is also a very anxious object, filling me with a panicky sense of time running by too fast. And, setting aside the issue of what this work means or for whom it tolls, I'm amazed above all by its sheer *thereness*, the way a 'what if?' proposition has been dragged, cog by cog and nut by nut, out of the realm of speculation and into the world of things. Here we approach one working definition of what a good artwork can be: an object that, prior to its creation, no one but the artist needed to see; but which, once it has been created, you can't imagine ever not existing.

Ringholt's art is not, however, about making something big that impresses us with its weirdness. It is about the small adjustments and shifts of perspective that show how weird things were in the first place. What happens in a good Ringholt reminds me, in fact, of what happens when you look at someone's face upside down and mask the rest of their face with your hands. Suddenly the eyes are exposed as something strange and reptilian, arbitrary interruptions in the face. And you realise in a snap how fickle are the rules we live by, the conventions that anchor and console us. We could have turned out like that. What if we had? What if time ran faster? What if we danced in the daytime, naked? What if the real story really lies on the page underneath, and requires you to cut through to find it? Questions like these might drift across our minds occasionally in the course of daily life. But they are the very stuff of Ringholt's universe. What we should do now is visit it.