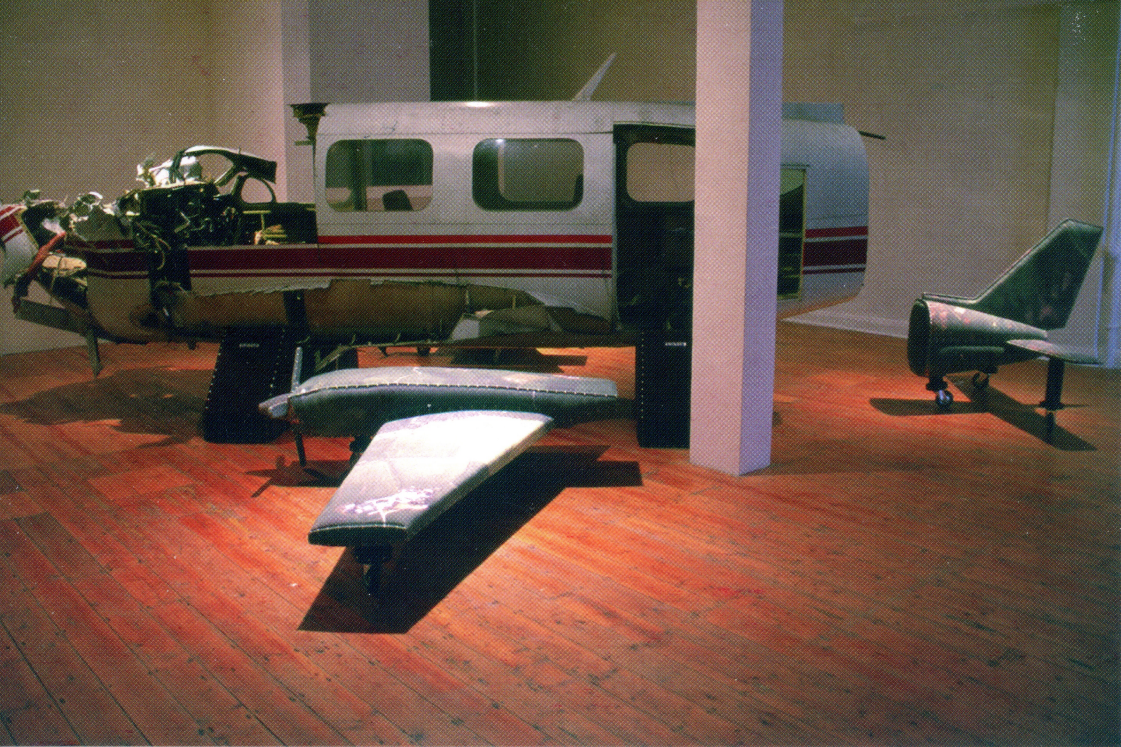




KIT presents

1999

C.O.T.I.S (Cult Of the Inserter seat)

The Tower Of C.O.T.I.S



**Location : 200 Gertrude street
Fitzroy 3065. Australia**

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When the aircraft crashes it creates an arena where scientists, technicians and investigators from various fields become performers, the audience consisting of insurance, legal and manufacturing companies sit and wait on their every word.

Whilst TV reporters are on the spot transmitting statistics and co-ordinates, the process of rationalising the spectacle through 'science' has begun.

The re-construction of the wreckage from the aircraft could be viewed as forensic science's version of the totem pole warding off evil spirits from their territory. As overt displays of physical and psychological territory, totems act as doors through which participants travel. Seeking to defend themselves by entering the symbolic realm cultures physically symbolise their power over what is considered to be the 'enemy'.

In this case, the enemy of science and technology as the accident or the unpredictable.

By publicly re-constructing the crashed aircraft, we can observe a painstaking effort to construct a scientific totem of sorts. This totem serves a number of purposes as it allows science and technology to globally re-assert its epistemological embrace around the crash spectacle.

A rehearsal of control is exercised through the print, satellite and electronic mediums with the re-construction of the aircraft as the centre-piece of the showcase. It also acts as a conduit to the past and the future through which 'technicians' can enter to explain the reason for the spectacle (the past) and into the future to make predictions upon upcoming events. The beliefs of applied trajectory into other worlds through physical objects are ancient ones. The social function of the totem pole serves several purposes which claim analogous signification in respective narratives of travel and religion.

The pieces of wreckage which make up the totem of science and technology are searched for with religious zeal. If the religious power of scientific 'truth' resides in the observable, then the wreckage attains a sacred status, an alchemical mysticism as extensive tests and analyses are undertaken to provide answers. The tests to establish quantities and qualities of residual chemicals, patterns and dimensions of wreckage imbue the objects with a number of transgressive drives. One of these directions is into the world of the forensic laboratory, the others are dependant on what comes out of this world. Hence chemically tested objects propel the crash investigator into an assessment of what happened in the past and into making preventative predictions for the future.

The proposition of going back in time via the technologies of forensic science define technology as being an omnipresent force. Thus the narrative constituted through reconstruction is one where no physical presence can escape its chemical identity and time coding via forensic science technologies.

Upon initial viewing, the air crash and its subsequent reconstruction appear to be antithetical to an ideology which promises speed, efficiency and a collapsing of distance.

This appearance is paradoxical in several ways: when our somatic thresholds are threatened so directly, our fears and doubts about travel technology are articulated in a way which surpasses economic, ethical or ecological criteria. The body safe from harm is a concept which demands to travel business class. The crash may also spell economic or research/development instability or even closure for companies dealing with aviation engineering technologies, yet ultimately it feeds into a wider belief system which proposes scientific rationalism as a definitive way of perceiving the world.

This advocacy of science and technology per se occurs after a wound has been dealt to the narrative of science and technology.

All this happens within the media suture of the spectacle. The project : to re-cover control from the initial chaos of the spectacle via the threads of the most contemporary interwoven technologies. More specifically, the investigation which introduces and demonstrates the latest location and recovery technologies, virtual reality simulations of events based on 'black box recordings', forensic testing apparatus etc. This parade of cutting edge technology is bought to us via news programmes hours after the crash and is the triumph of mediated knowledge, science and rationality over the doubt, ambiguity and loss of control brought about by the accident. Thus the crash investigation and reconstruction is an integral tool in the aviation industry's public relations campaign. The cold neutral hands of scientific rationalism will not rest until every piece of wreckage has been found and tested. Ironically pieces of the aircraft are worth more when they are fragmented and wrecked than when they were complete and part of a functioning aircraft. The outcomes of the testing deliver results that have far reaching judicial, economical, social and engineering implications, and it is these systems which bestow it with worth. In turn the wreckage becomes precious, reverential, almost fetishistic.

C.O.T.I.S (Cult Of The Inserter Seat) reconstructs through a fetishistic impulse.

This entails the production of a stage where the props of reconstruction - the wreckage pieces - are reduced in size. The wreckage pieces miniaturised here are what navigates and keeps the body in the air - the wing and tail sections.

In the world of C.O.T.I.S they become fetishized prosthetics. Parodying the fetishization of wreckage through scientific testing, the wreckage is still treated as reverential, but takes on a whole new dynamic which grounds the object in a celebration of its current stasis. This is not a reconstruction that empirically searches for the reason for the crash, rather it is one that re-employs the implied fetishism from the sci/tech world.

C.O.T.I.S suggest celebratory agency in the production of a disabled reconstruction.

The miniaturised wings and tails are upholstered with a material which is digitally printed with aerially photographed landscapes. Here the wreckage pieces become domesticated (via the suggestion of furniture design), modelled and are transformed into soft evidences. They are fetishized in a fashion which re-relates the body to the crash and thus to the object in a humorous way.

Whereas the crash investigation distances the story of the body from the wreckage through its reterritorializing of the objects into the arena of residues, (the laboratory), C.O.T.I.S seek to re-insert the body into the heart of the spectacular.

By upholstering the wreckage, a fusion of somatic relations, ergonomics and fetishization takes place to signify an alternative and seductive relationship to the symbology of the accident. A black humour from the scripts of the black box.

C.O.T.I.S seek to re-route the attempt to regain technological control in the event of the spectacle by fetishizing the fragments of the aircraft. The upholstering is akin to the mummification (a process practised to protect the body on its journey to another world) of obsolete technology, a service which reflects C.O.T.I.S' re-covered beliefs in 'the future'.

Ever since we were children we were taught to cover our mouths. It seemed that the chance of contagion was a form of magic - it became clear that we were part of a human continuum and could infect others (or become infected by others) if we weren't careful. This could also be a form of power. The common cold and chicken pox were early encounters with a mysterious process of exposure to an invisible element with painful consequences: the virus. In these millennial years the mystique of the virus is ironically increased by the scientific scrutiny which diagnoses and typologizes the bug. In medieval times the plague was a scourge interpreted as the vengeful hand of god, and in the early days of AIDS it was common to hear similar sentiments.

From Wells' *deus ex biologia* in *War of the Worlds* to the "invisible bullets" of colonialist sneezes, the virus is the evil trickster which delineates the unstable cultural category of "illness" (and consequently, "health"). Ebola, Marburg, Sabia, etc. are all semi-sacred names which elicit dread and respect. But why the fascination with the virus? Jean Baudrillard suggests that it represents a kind of metaphysical safeguard against pure circulation - an existential abomination equivalent to the vacuum. He thus offers the controversial assertion that AIDS was a quasi-poetic response to the promiscuity of the 1960s, an "emergence" which has its analogues in any network, including the media. The virus, in its microscopic, transmissible capacity, exposes the individual to the group, thereby undermining any humanistic legacy based on autonomy or sovereignty of self.

Blanchot tells us that "the basis of communication is not necessarily speech, or even the silence that is its foundation and punctuation, but the exposure to death." Beneath this morbid statement is the delirious understanding that in the age of electronic communication, contagion is a parallel mode of connection.

The globalist planetary shrinkage which accompanies the information age is thus a trojan vector for viral vengeance, simultaneously creating its own blockages in a system designed for maximum circulation. According to this logic, for every new fax machine there is a new computer virus, and for every new antibiotic there is a new super-bug strain - and so it goes in a mutant Darwinian spiral.

And yet it is the ghostly, *doppelganger* character of the virus which enthralls and horrifies. The virus traces an absence, not only of the "patient" in Foucault's sense of control and surveillance, but of itself. The detection of HIV for instance, is not through positive identification of the virus, but via the presence of its antagonist, antibodies. Much of today's technologically informed art is acutely aware of the uncanny paradoxes of viral tropes - finitude, exposure, communication, contagion, presence, absence, death and life (for if a virus is *too* virulent, it too shall die).

1998's *Viruses and Mutations* exhibition was a collective meditation on the *fin-de-siècle* fascination of the virus. As in Neal Stephenson's symptomatic science-fiction novel, *Snow Crash*, the computer virus is seen as yet another mode of transmission between self and other, subject and object, human and hardware, so that the millennium bug is potentially a threat to the software of the flesh.

Appropriately enough this exhibition was held in one of Melbourne's major hospitals, St Vincents. Indeed many of the exhibits began with the premise that The Hospital is not a building as such, but an unconscious vortex; its tentacular circumference covering the globe, while the building itself becomes merely the emanating centre of "hospitalness." In such a scenario the healthy hiker enjoying the view from the top of a mountain is still treading on the periphery of the hospital.

One installation dominated the show in terms of location, size, noise and sheer perverse nastiness. Sitting in the middle of the room and spitting out Dantesque shrieks was the new work by KIT: the international collective with the ironic over-fondness for acronyms. Resembling Darth Vader's banana-lounge-cum-home-entertainment-centre, this intimidating installation beckoned the unsuspecting gallery patron to sit in an aeroplane seat (scavenged by the artist from a crashed plane found in an aviator's wrecking yard). Pressure pads beneath the seat initiate a computer program on the terminal in front of them, and the screen announced the fact that they are about to be scanned. After a series of ominous sounds - a combination of technical airport devices and authentic black-box recordings - stir the patron into a state of anxiety and anticipation, the screen flashes a set of temporal and geographical co-ordinates. These represent the place and moment of death.

While especially disturbing for the superstitious, this work highlights the thin line between medical prognosis and old-fashioned premonition. Prediction and prolepsis merge in a work which highlights the affinity between doctor and prophet, both undertaking (and the pun is intended) of interpreting signs of "the end." What makes the C.O.T.I.S (Cult Of The Insertor Seat) machine even more perplexing, is the sinister punch-line, "you have been implanted." The suggestion here is that the machine has found an immunity weakness and uploaded the co-ordinates of your own death into your system, rather than merely guessing it. The patron's/patient's final hour has thus been coded into their DNA, and their demise has changed status from being inevitable to pre-programmed: a subtle but decisive shift. As with William Gibson's *Case*, time suddenly acquires a keener edge, prompted by a rude reminder of time-bound mortality.

While it has been decades since Warhol's work on car-crashes, and Burroughs' assertion concerning the viral properties of language, the convergence between the two modes of fatal communication have perhaps finally broken out of their asymptotic trajectory and crossed the line into our everyday lives. The macro-spectacular moment of the crash in the twentieth century is giving way to the micro-millennial meltdown of the snow crash. And people, unfortunately, don't come equipped with their own boot-disc in case of systems failure.

In the age of catscans and ultrasound, KIT have exposed the paranoid subtext of the scanner as one particular site of anxieties concerning diagnostic surveillance and penetration: the biopolitical legacy of the X-ray. This installation both celebrates and deconstructs the clinical probing of the social body, underscoring the irony that we have internalized technology the very moment that these technologies have questioned the notion of inside and outside. In this highly mediated sense, human physiognomy has evolved past the stage of epidermal integrity into the cyborgian moebius strip.

Whether you laugh it off or not, KIT have zoomed in on the hysterical symptoms of the postmodern condition - less the apocalyptic crash, than the intolerable suspension of that crash. In an age where even fluffy Euro-pop bands such as *The Cardigans* have a video-clip climaxing with a pornographic car crash, it is quite an achievement to restore the symbolic shock of the virus. Namely, the creeping knowledge of an accelerated mortality, the flip-side of a culture with the longest life-spans in history.

Dominic Pettman