

Fêted

How is memory like an archive? They are where traces of experience go. Not the real things, but something like it. Those traces seem to find us as much as we look for them. Andy Warhol, for example, made striking use of that aspect of our memories that is so arbitrary and compelling in an unusual archive. He would deliberately change his cologne regularly and keep the last drops of each bottle so that months or years later the smell would instantly recall a time and place in the past so vividly it was as though he was transported directly there.

I have recently been transported like this by a photograph taken by Richard Holt, that Laura Carthew uncovered in the Platform archive. The image of the monument of King Edward VII in St Kilda Rd was one of a number the two of us gathered of equestrian statues – ‘heroes on horses’ – in order to compare with the type of temporary, ephemeral and ‘site-specific’ public art in which we were then immersed and fascinated by.

Looking at the photograph with Laura earlier this year I felt I was suddenly sitting on the balcony of the huge, stale, dusty studio at the front of the Commercial Travellers building (now the ‘Heritage Hotel’) in Flinders Street, that for a year or so was the Platform office. Richard and I are there writing an introduction to an exhibition that was part of the 1996 Next Wave Festival. We are making the point that despite the conservatism of this type of public art at least you could argue it stood for something beyond just itself; that it’s purpose was serious and ethical and hardly just decorative, whimsical or self-important, as we thought so much public art of our time was. The writing of our polemic was going well until we got to:

*Even as children looking up at each warrior, aristocrat or man-of-the-people, we could recognise and bear witness to the ideals these fated individuals embodied. The hero on the horse does more than commemorate, he is there to instruct us about history, culture and the imperfect ways of the world.**

I have a vivid memory of being stuck on the word ‘fated’ for a long time. Richard wanted to use the correct word ‘fêted’ but I was insisting on the more portentous-sounding ‘fated’. The truth was that I didn’t know how to use the ‘insert-symbol’ command in Word and that I was getting carried away with the excitement of the writing. I wish I could have admitted that to Richard and to myself at the time. In the end, Richard, knowing me, understanding the situation better, generously let me have ‘fated’ and let it go...

Laura’s self-portrait as a ‘hero-on-a-horse’ is a gentle parody of the loftiness of the genre. I suspect, given that the referent is Richard’s photograph, it’s also a parody of the loftiness of the critique and ultimately even a sort of parody of itself. However, there is enough beauty in this image (a perfect sky, a gorgeous rider in a well-pressed uniform and decorations, a magnificent steed on solid ground), to make me smile and take me, as good art does, to somewhere else. Not back to the theory and the debate, which is now settled or long forgotten, but to the character of a strong friendship, turning around the meanings of images and words. I don’t think Laura could have predicted the Proustian ‘madeline’ effect of her image on me; but then, I could never have imagined the way she would take that image and see it the way she has.

Andrew Seward – October 2012

*Richard Holt and Andrew Seward ‘Address’ in Samantha Comte (ed.) *Next Wave 1996 Visual Arts Program*, Next Wave Festival Inc., Fitzroy, p.18