



Christian Capurro, *Agatha Gothe-Shape*, Debra Phillips, installation view, BREENSPACE, Sydney, 2011. Image courtesy the artists and BREENSPACE, Sydney



Christian Capurro, *Gorgonia* (detail), 1999/2011, correction fluid on magazine page, 30 x 22.2cm, image courtesy the artist and BREENSPACE, Sydney

The Spectacle of Deconstruction: *Christian Capurro, Agatha Gothe-Snape, Debra Phillips*

ALTAIR ROELANTS

BREENSPACE's new Sydney gallery sits quietly on the third floor of a building in the hinterland between Surry Hills and the CBD.¹ Well suited to this minimal space, their 2011 end-of-year show – *Christian Capurro, Agatha Gothe-Snape, Debra Phillips* – was similarly understated yet well conceived. The exhibition matched three Australian artists who deconstruct image-making, challenging our perceptions of, and relationship to, imbedded systems in mass media and visual culture by constructing something anew. Such an exhibition thread reminded me of Guy Debord's seminal text *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images ... a global social praxis that has split into reality on the one hand and image on the other'; and where any investigation means adopting 'its language'.²

Christian Capurro's mixed-media displacement projects³ combine time-consuming acts of over-painting, re-inscription, compression, re-representation and erasure – an aesthetically pleasing form of destruction and subsequent recreation. For the BREENSPACE show Capurro presented two new pieces: *Gorgonia* (2011)⁴, and *Young man against the white curtain* (2011). *Gorgonia* is a series of five works on paper, simply pinned to the wall. Pages torn from 'dated' (1998-2002) fashion magazines illustrating the archetypal male are obscured with layers of correction fluid, their silhouettes just visible to the eye and more so to our imagination. In contrast to the world these images herald from, the material and chemical effect of the liquid paper creates a thick, mottled, almost organic texture – reminiscent of coral formations, mould or rusted painted metals. As well as being visually striking, what is intelligent about Capurro's work is the conflicting response this masking creates – that of familiarity as we search our memories for similar images, and in turn a total unfamiliarity as the strange heightened surface makes visible the mythology that such media images celebrate and normalise.⁵

Capurro's *Young man against the white curtain* (2011) incorporates a tripod and black tabletop displaying a partially erased

magazine page of a naked male torso, alongside a large mound of white rubber erasings. The visual symmetry of these two components is both a balancing act and a dance of separation; the shadow of the male nude pressed up against the midden of rubber shards – the white curtain. As with the *Gorgonia* series, defacing the image is explicit through Capurro's ritualistic and laborious gestures that rub away the image's surface and safe-keep the remnants of this erasure. The work's physicality along with the washed-out magazine page again objectifies the ideologies ingrained in such images and becomes a visual metaphor for 'present-day society's generalised abstraction'⁶, and the absence such images convey.

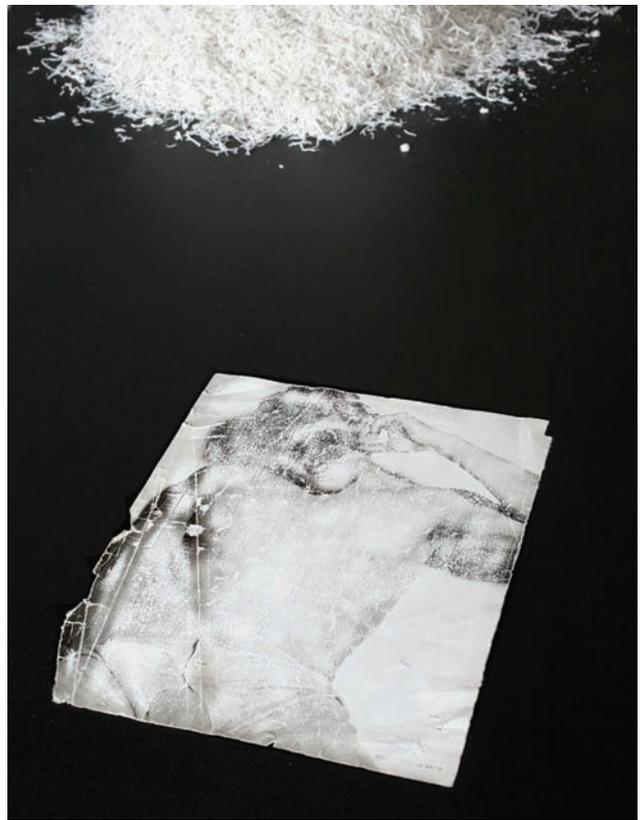
Linking photomedia artist Debra Phillips⁷ to Capurro was effective; while their practices vary drastically, Phillips's multifaceted work also deconstructs the photographic image by exploring how we make, use and read photographs, in relation to a specific temporal and geographic location. In Phillips's *On this day* (2011)⁸, a pile of plain-covered tabloid size papers are stacked on the gallery floor. The un-limited edition, text-free publication contains 365 photographs taken by Phillips over six weeks in 2006⁹ that capture the streams of people exiting the doors of Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral daily. The front-cover of each publication is date-stamped with the location in which the work was exhibited: firstly on 5 May 2011 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, and now in Sydney.¹⁰ Instead of the 'types' of photographs we'd expect to see at such a monumental location, and within a newspaper, there are no posed figures and few gazes that meet the camera's lens. Rather, there are frowns on the faces of anonymous people as they pass from darkness to sunlight, or they appear lost in thought, adjusting their clothes or deep in conversation. Consequently, *On this day* becomes an interesting photographic enquiry into a moment that would normally be captured as the destination but is now merely a point of transience. Within which, Phillips captures the theatre of the everyday, the human, the real – '... the repeated practices that

chisel their way into being established flows', these 'spatial forms', according to Doreen Massey's *For Space* (2005), that 'mirror the necessary fixings of communication and identity'.¹¹ Like Capurro's work, these images arouse a self-conscious response, particularly in relation to our expectations of tourism and monuments, in which photographs become a 'way of certifying experience', and alternately: 'taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir'.¹² Instead Phillips rejects such token imagery – the spectacle – revealing this capacity to be a 'faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers'.¹³ Also integral to the work is that audience members can take the publication away, reminiscent of early conceptual artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his stacks of papers and sweets. Similarly, this act, and its seriality, make a literal un-making of the physical work – a total devaluing of the art object which engenders a myriad of unknown and spontaneous meanings, and uses, once the publication leaves its gallery origin.

Also working within the realms of conceptualism is Agatha Gothe-Snape¹⁴ whose subtle piece *End of Time (Continuous Loop)* (2011) strips away the layers of image-making through a practice that draws upon intuition and an 'economy of means'.¹⁵ Gothe-Snape combines a vintage projector, its empty reel slowly clipping over as it cast a square of light onto the gallery wall; our gaze directed by a bold yellow line painted on the wall, that cuts the frame of light horizontally. The spool's rotation, and gentle flickering of the projector's beam, imbues the work with a subtle movement suggestive of live-feeds or experimental cinema. Ultimately Gothe-Snape refuses to fetishise the object by removing the film, and in the temporary nature of the work which exists only when the power is turned on. In this piece, the painted yellow line¹⁶ deconstructs the picture plane by drawing our attention to its surface, referencing how we orientate ourselves within the gallery space. Visually it's evocative of modernist painters such as Piet Mondrian, and of theories of deconstruction. In alluding to space and time, a beginning and an end, Gothe-Snape's line hints at the gallery's role in 'the death' of the art object.

Capurro, Phillips and Gothe-Snape deconstruct image-making by asking the viewer to think through visual processes, how we look at things; how our gaze might be engineered away from the 'Spectacle'. The Spectacle's essential character, to finish with Debord, is a 'visible negation of life', one which has 'invented a visual form for itself (as the works' various materialities suggest) – and is not to be met with a blind, or blinded, eye.

1. In May 2011 BREENSPACE moved to their new location: Level 3, 17–19 Alberta Street, Sydney NSW 2000.
2. G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, first published 1967, France; Zone Books, New York, 2006; pp. 12–18.
3. Christian Capurro is a Melbourne-based artist: www.christiancapurro.com
4. *The Gorgonia Series* is part of a broader project of the same name initiated in 1997 which has also been exhibited at Gertrude Contemporary Art Space,



Christian Capurro, *Young man against the white curtain*, 2011, partially erased magazine page, erasings pile, tabletop and tripod 90 x 80 x 140cm; image courtesy the artist and BREENSPACE, Sydney

Melbourne between 7 February and 1 March 2003.

5. Debord, 2006: p. 38.
6. Debord, 2006: p. 17.
7. Phillips is a Sydney-based artist and Senior Lecturer in Photomedia, School of Media Arts, College of Fine Arts (COFA), Sydney.
8. The project is discussed in depth in the essay by Bruce Barber, 'A Day Like No Other' in the accompanying publication, *Debra Phillips, On this Day*, COFA, University of NSW Sydney, Australia/NSCAD University, Halifax, Canada, 2011.
9. Taken during the months of November and December in 2006.
10. *On this Day* was first exhibited at Anna Leonowens Gallery, Nova Scotia College of Art & Design University, Halifax, Canada (2011). The BREENSPACE exhibition opened 17 November 2011, which is the Sydney date that appears on the front of the publication.
11. D. Massey, *For Space*, Sage, London, 2005, p. 175.
12. S. Sontag, *On Photography*, The Noonday Press, New York, 1989, p. 9.
13. Debord, 2006: p. 12.
14. Agatha Gothe-Snape is a Sydney-based artist: www.agathagothesnape.com
15. Quote taken during a discussion with the artist in February 2012.
16. The yellow is an exploration of colour and subjectivity, and is a recurrent thread through Gothe-Snape's practice. In BREENSPACE's adjoining Work Space, the artist also exhibited a series six mixed-media works on paper – that include shapes, letters, parts of letters and sentences, and lines, rendered in the same yellow tone of paint and pencil.

Christian Capurro, Agatha Gothe-Snape, Debra Phillips was shown at BREENSPACE, Sydney, 18 November to 23 December 2011: www.breenspace.com

Altair Roelants is a Sydney-based writer.

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