

Joe Felber – Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia

In recent years, we have been confronted with an increasingly paradoxical phenomenon: the simultaneity of a progressive globalisation and a tendency to reclaim national, cultural and religious difference. Globalisation is a process of international economic and cultural integration, fostered by the availability and acceleration of world-wide transportation and communication. Many have written controversially about the chances and threats of globalisation, pointing out its cultural leveling and economic losers, but also its potential for addressing such global issues as climate change and public education. In recent years, however, the downside of a globalised world has become ever more apparent in its dangerous countermovements. Unable to bear a plurality of norms and worldviews, and increasingly worried about the disappearance of their proper traditions, many have sought refuge in a new nationalistic discourse. Against this background, migrants as the most visible and vulnerable constituents of a globalised world, have had to get their bearings within an ever more challenging context of living.

Felber is a Swiss born artist with Italian roots who has been living in Australia since 1980. In his current exhibition, he presents a complex installation tied together by the theme of migration. The migrant [from latin, "migrare", to wander, giving rise to "migrans" the *wandere*] is, first and foremost, a being going from a place to another, leaving behind the customary, the habitual, maybe the conventional to explore new lands, thoughts and experiences. Felber himself has been a wanderer throughout his life, very concretely by emigrating from Switzerland and immigrating into Australia, but also more abstractly as someone who has been seeking to overcome conventional art display and practice. Australia, Felber's adoptive country, builds its identity on a common story of *immigration*, but has recently been struggling to find an attitude towards the settlers, job- or asylum-seekers arriving at its shores these days. Migration is, therefore, a personal, professional as well as political concern in Felber's thinking and work.

The visitor arriving at the Contemporary Art Centre is invited to partake in a process of wandering and exploration. Upon entering the gallery, he will, very probably, be

astonished. Art works are not displayed on the wall, but on the floor; the cotton tarpaulins lying beneath him are covered with multiple layers of ornaments, perspective drawings, text fragments and traces of colour covering the other layers in a seemingly chaotic way. The visual signals are accompanied by distorted sound messages calling for attention, which somehow interact with the visitor's route. What is more, strange objects are suspended from the ceiling and cut the viewer's line of sight. At a closer look, they reveal themselves to be works of art of their own, tied up and nailed together, so that only their bare backs are visible to the baffled spectator.

The result is a paradoxical situation. In a context of art display, the traditional work of art, the canvas on the wall, turns provocatively its back to the spectator. The art work, deprived of its proper function, looks *strange* and unsettling. The visitor is bereft of the usual clues for art reception in a gallery space and must somehow come to terms with the unknown surrounding. Showing art works without revealing them is a provocative act which challenges the common habits of art *consumption* and forces the visitor to find new resources for understanding and experiencing his environs.

The reasons for this provocative act are manifold. First of all, the undisclosed art works state a pungent criticism of a consumerist art reception. The undisclosed image provokes curiosity, tension, perhaps imagination in a way in which the traditional canvas, consumed in one superficial glance or interpreted according to predefined theoretical criteria, has long since stopped to do. The spectator is challenged, for he finds himself unexpectedly impaired in a process of art experience he assumes to be familiar with. Thrown back on himself, he needs to find an alternative way of interacting with and experiencing the works that surround him. Felber's suspended creations exercise an estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in Brecht's classical sense, for they force the spectator to become aware of his very interacting with art works and invite him, therefore, to a more conscious encounter.

In this respect, the installation is reminiscent of Libeskind's *Garden of Exil* in Berlin's Jewish Museum, which invites the visitor to experience the strangeness and bewilderment that Jewish migrants must have felt when arriving in an unfamiliar social and cultural environment. It does so by way of a labyrinth, built from meters high steles standing on an uneven floor. The unevenness of the floor not only destabilises the

natural equilibrium of the wanderer, but makes the surrounding world look tilted and askew from their points of view. Similarly, Felber's suspended canvases undermine the self-assurance of the customary museum goers to prepare them for another kind of artistic experience.

Furthermore, these suspended sculptures inscribe Felber's work in a series of art works aiming at a more participatory art practice. Art should be not so much a product of (intellectual) production and consumption, but rather a context for experience. By not revealing the front of his canvases, Felber makes himself disappear and foregrounds the experience of the viewer. While disappearing, the artist is *silenced*, as he should be according to Beuys' famous plea in favour of a more meaningful and viewer-centred artistic practice, evolving around the universal creativity of human beings. Felber's physically present yet undisclosed canvases are a direct reference to the silenced piano of Beuys' *Plight*, which – put in a sound-isolated chamber – loses completely its ability to impress, educate or entertain people. Likewise, the proper function of Felber's canvases, is eliminated in an attempt to engage both artist and spectator in a less coded and more flexible interaction.

There is yet another sense in which Felber's undisclosed canvases underscore the importance of an active and participating beholder. The suspended art works, though exhibited by their very presence in the gallery space, cease to be proper objects of art when deprived of their communicative function. If they are no longer bearers of content, able to trigger a communication process between artist and receiver, they become *mere* objects whose presence cannot be but strange. Felber's silenced canvases make very clear that aesthetic properties and artistic value are always *relational* properties, pertaining to both the art work and the experience of the spectator. They are, then, a very strong statement of the necessity of physical and cognitive inter-action in the process of creating, exposing and receiving art.

When the attention moves from the flying objects to the other visual and auditory inhabitants of the surrounding space, the visitor discovers a concentrated system of messages attesting to the complex living environment of a wanderer. The mural like paintings on the floor are themselves multifaceted objects. In terms of material and style, they are full of references not only to Felber's own early work, with its multiple

connections to both the indigenous Aboriginal culture and European art, but also to archaic symbol systems and signs. The latter, expressed via formal variations on the theme of the circle, stand as words of a universal language. Their universalism stems from the special significance of the circular form in human perception and cognition, going back to our biological bias towards the harmonious and balanced, and stands in stark contrast to universality as a product of global distribution. Thus, they express a common cultural ground onto which various migrants have inscribed their personal, private and localised experiences as handwritten messages. "Expulsé" ("expelled"), is a series of words, loaded by their character of personal testimony, which describe the sometimes harsh and bitter feelings that migrants are faced with when dealing with the loss of the customary and the confrontation with the unknown.

The migrant always incorporates the *other*, the other that constitutes a mirror and challenges our attitudes through a singularity of his own. His presence is uncomfortable, because it forces us to acknowledge alternative possibilities; it is threatening since it obliges us to recognise another norm. The migrant, as the other, is always underprivileged and he does not fully belong to his adoptive place of living (although he may, at times, have the privilege of looking at things from the outside and being simultaneously a participant and an observer). In today's world, migrants are mostly *immigrants*, recognised by the Citizen Services Departments or by the Boarder Control, registered as numbers adding up to explosive statistics. The immigrant is an entity created by convention, by acts of human cognition, which stipulate boundaries and thereby draw clear-cut frontiers of belonging. (Im-)migration has a variety of causes, ranging from the availability of jobs to political, social or economic oppression at the place of origin. It may also, in some cases, be triggered by curiosity and a *Wanderlust* too strong to be satisfied by occasional trips abroad. But immigrants, be they job seekers, refugees or adventurers, are always persons (Max Frisch famously reminded us: "we called for a work force, and there came human beings") bringing with them their memories, ways of doing, customs and longings and exposing them to their new environment in an unprotected way.

The statements of wanderers in Felber's mural painting on cotton tarpaulin are witnesses, then, of their multifaceted experiences of fragility, misunderstanding, encounter and bafflement. As such, they are traces of their living, opened up to the

spectator who may integrate them in his own experiences of interaction with others. They are surrounded by Felber's lone figures inhabiting spaces of geometric clarity and visual illusion, in which finding one's bearings calls for an act of creativity.

Figures, texts and ornaments are crossed by colourful, yet somehow arbitrary strokes, caused by the coloured wheels of a bicycle. As has become part of his signature, Felber lessens the heaviness of his artworks by giving them a touch of irony. The intricate system of visual and textual messages covering the floor finds itself underneath the traces of a playful mind. It does not lose the depth of its message for this reason, but reveals itself as the product of a creative actor who, while being earnest in his engaging with the world, recognises his doing as an ultimately vain attempt to grasp (too much) meaning and sense.

A similar mix of earnestness and gimmickery is manifest in the auditory dimension of Felber's installation. As the astounded visitor will soon find out, he himself triggers the acoustic element by moving around in the art space, thereby becoming a *creative* player in the most literal possible sense. The music itself is distorted, calling for particular attention and an act of decoding. However, ensconced beneath these unfamiliar sound patterns, hide the sincere works of Luigi Nono [precision:Title?]. The intellectual kinship between Felber and Nono should not come as a surprise at this point. Although Felber, unlike Nono, doesn't seek the outright political, the two artists share their desire to go beyond artistic expression as an end in itself and to create works that are essentially *about* something. For both Nono and Felber, the receiver, listener or spectator, is the ultimate element by which their works need to be gauged. Both are marked by their awareness of the social, emotional, perhaps political ramifications of the artist's work and stand themselves up against a meaningless art because of its potentially collaborationist character. And both choose, for this reason, to put the experience of their audience at the centre of their work. And so the visitor of Felber's installation is called upon not only by Felber's own messages of universality and loneliness, but also by the voids and depths of Nono's sharp-edged and yet tender pieces of music.

Overall, Felber has created an art work which modulates the theme of migration in at least three different ways. Migration is, first of all, the subject matter of this installation, and constitutes the most prominent theme dealt with in the floor paintings. Yet migration

is present also as an artistic act of abandoning conventional rules of art display and practice. Felber undermines elements constitutive of the contemporary art business by being radically participatory, experience-oriented and pleasantly unpretentious. Finally, Felber's installation creates an environment of multiple sensory and cognitive dimensions which calls for careful and thoughtful exploration. The visitor is invited to *wander* himself through an assemblage of unfamiliar elements and to thereby make an experience of going beyond the well known.

It is not surprising that Felber chose the installation format for his work on migration. Installations are systems of art works living not only from the art works themselves, but also from the relations in which they stand. Multiple layers and meanings of the installation unfold only when the display of various works is integrated as a *whole*. Part of the work of the visitor is, therefore, to appreciate the systemic character of the various intertwined constituents and to discern their meaning in the context of a complex surrounding.

"Migration", "migrant", "migrating" are dynamic words, expressing movement and change (of place, habits, thought). As it happens, movement always occurs with respect to a reference system, and migration is no exception to this rule. As a result, Felber's installation, when talking about or reflecting upon migration, is also about that with respect to which migration occurs. No expression seems more adequate than the word '*Heimat*' (in Felber's native tongue) for expressing the reference point from which the migrant comes away, comes back and leaves. Neither 'home', 'homeland', 'native country' nor such words as 'haven' or 'resort' can adequately express the various emotional, cultural and familial references that come together in the German word. '*Heimat*' describes an ultimate – geographical, cultural, relational and emotional – reference point with respect to which we think, conceive and develop ourselves. Different things can mean *Heimat* to different people, and, of course, wanderers like Felber may have different reference points they may want to call their *Heimat*. In Felber's current installation on the theme of migration, at least one sense of the term is directly comprehensible: *Heimat* as a reservoir of memories, a sum of sensations, sensory experiences, which constitute the psychological depth of the persons we become. Intellectual as it may be, Felber's work on migration takes its effectiveness from fostering a common ground for experience for the various participants in his work.

It remains unpolitical in that it doesn't suggest solutions to the complex economical, social or psychological problems it deals with. But it is marked by a profound concern with human beings, and by the idea that common experience, if anything, may lay ground for further reaching mutual understanding.