

Attention seeker
La Trobe Art Institute
29 March to 3 July 2022

Artists: Colleen Ahern, Rebecca Baumann, Priyageetha Dia,
Eng Kai Er, Lou Hubbard, Michelle Mantsio, Melati Suryodarmo

Guest curator: Amita Kirpalani

The method.

Attention is caught and captured in the wild unpredictability of our interests. Our interests dictate where our senses, and sensuality, follow. In his series of essays, titled *Attention seeking* (2019), British psychoanalyst and writer Adam Phillips suggests that attention-seeking may be quite unlike our other modes of seeking, in that to seek attention is to 'seek out the nature of our seeing.' Attention seeking, he continues, is at its best 'the seeking for something that is not a commodity', or 'a form of sociability, an appeal to others to help us with our wanting.' To over-organise or to narrow our attention is to create phobia or addiction, offers Phillips, and denial of these needs can feed all kinds of inner discord.

One way to understand our own attention-seeking compulsions and needs is through art. The artists in this exhibition grapple with charismatic materials and subjects (including themselves). Or rather, as they might claim, these things won't leave them alone. The charismatic pull is an energetic force that leads these artists in invention, discovery and emotional exploration, and also guides a humour that pierces. Each of the artworks in *Attention seeker* operates with a necessary self-awareness that it is here to capture our attention or risk being entirely overlooked.

Rebecca Baumann's *Untitled cascade* (2012–22) is, as she describes it, a surface. The gold tinsel curtain is in motion and it motions to us. *Untitled cascade* makes us think of stages, performances just completed or about to begin. It is a permanent intermission offering both backdrop and foreground since it is itself the final performance. Gallery lights are projected onto the glittering surface, made to move and glitter because of the most ordinary little white fan. The artwork is an incredibly loud and yet entirely reticent director, and we quietly conjure associations while being forced into association.

From the energetic surface to the energetic screen, Priyageetha Dia's video *Long live the new fles\$ssh* (2020) takes its title and material inspiration from Belgian film-maker Nicolas Provost's 2009 film, *Long live the new flesh*. Referencing the blue screen, video games and animation world-building, Dia's video depicts a golden female avatar in a blue field, a symbol for these times where the interruption becomes the preoccupation. Dia's partial self-portrait sits between zones: human and yet glitching, digital and yet painterly. Where Provost employed a similar filmic technique to depict horror – the images consuming themselves – Dia offers a site for expansiveness in the potential of the brown, female body to be more, less and everywhere at once. In previous performance works, Dia has used gold leaf to cover, dress and shield her body, marking it out simultaneously as object and site for divinity. *Long live the new fles\$ssh* extends this exploration in the digital sphere, where she recentres her brown body stripped back to its golden core.

In theatre, there is a method the French call rehearsing *à l'italienne*. The great French director Jean Vilar (1912–1971) defined it as 'the body at rest and the ass in the chair', where the actors read the lines aloud, without emoting, without physical movement. Starting from the bottom up to build characterisation, this method suggests that the text of the play is tucked deep inside the final work. Layered with multiple readings and re-readings of the text, the actors slowly build the empathic connection between the text and the future audience. Lou Hubbard's work could be couched in these terms too, a practice *à l'italienne*. Her ass is rarely in the chair, however, as she 'fits', measures and considers each angle of the artwork. The readymade is a key player here. It is the essential, nostalgically laden building block with which Hubbard layers characterisation, backstory, intensity, expression and movement. Hubbard's work *Dr O'Hare* (2018) jauntily occupies a corner. *Gather* (2020) treads the boards in one of the La Trobe Art Institute courtyards, watching and being watched. In a previous site-specific installation of *Gather*, the Dino-chairs were clothed or covered with second-hand hats, T-shirts and bras, their eyes concealed or perhaps shielded. In this exhibition, they are uncovered, exposed to the light of day. Situated in the courtyard space, they have been 'released', their eyes seeing and being seen.

In an early edit of the video work *Clouds* (2022), Eng Kai Er toyed with some text overlaid onto and intercut with the first section of the video. The text read: 'Did you see the dancer who forgot everything?' Is it an overheard statement, a self-criticism or a combination of the two? The

work makes light of the mind–body dualism and appears to the trained performer like a joke, a farce of training, repetition and rehearsal. *Clouds* is filmed in the lo-fi style of raw documentation of dance, skateboarding or theatre, and the draft becomes a way for Eng to unpack her relationship to 'Dino', the inflatable dinosaur costume she frequently performs in, made infamous as an internet meme in the mid-2010s. Dino simultaneously frees the artist in disguise and inhibits Eng's movement. *Clouds* is a serious joke and offers a set of performance challenges, a conceptual and physical problem to solve.

Michelle Mantsio breathes heavily. As the basis for the sound-work *Condor Ave breathing accompaniment* (2022), she created a score not of Elliott Smith's instrumentation or lyrics, but of his breathwork, annotating his intervallic inhalations and exhalations. Perhaps heard as 'non-music' to some, Mantsio heightens, exaggerates and directs our attention to these musical non-spaces or shapes of sound. She describes this work as a 'sidling up' to a well-loved song, a song that has become fabric, a woven-in thing. With the same notes of attention and intimacy, Mantsio has constructed three tapestries, distinct portraits created in part through film-still references in colour, wool and woven pattern. Each tapestry or *Accompaniment* is a performative portrait or – with the help of the visitor who is invited to guide it along the floor tracks – a dancer in the space.

To improve industrial design and make processes economical, *Exergie* is the metric by which engineers assess energy flows. Unnecessary or inadvertent overflows are stemmed by redesign, adjustment and correction. *Exergie* can, in simple terms, be defined as the amount of work a system can perform when brought into equilibrium or balance with its environment; it is a physics which speaks to base drives and human truths. Melati Suryodarmo's *Exergie – butter dance* (2000) is steeped in this 'righting' and course correction, where a determined, felt choreography is at odds with the external environment or set of preconditions. This is choreography that is inherited, built from within and observed in dedication, with deep and abiding connections to the artist's diasporic identity. In this work, Suryodarmo falls repeatedly on a stage covered in sticks of butter. For Suryodarmo, this work is an attempt to train herself out of an existential fear, a fear of failure and falling down in all the ways. The performance concludes when she is exhausted, her energy expended, her will to perform extinguished.

Colleen Ahern, too, is feeling it all. In this new series of paintings she rehearses a familiar methodology: the album-subject of the painting doubles as the soundtrack, as well as her time commitment to the painting; the painting as a painting and also a conceptual project. Ahern does the complex double-work of feeling and transmission, where each painting is a record of the artist's mood and on-the-spot music-driven commitment to each portrait. She 'brings it all', she breaks a leg, she leaves it all out on the (painted) field. She makes mistakes, abandons and edits. She is rarely satisfied. Each painting reveals its process of creation, and Ahern's self-portraiture is embedded as energetic feeling. She pays double attention, and so must we, to the sound and vision and to how the unbidden, unrehearsed action or utterance in the heat and intensity of performance can be revealed in the paint.

Where there is love, there is truth, and to reveal the truth of the matter is to break the matter. In acting, on screen and on the stage, a break appears as a spontaneous mistake made feelingly or an in-the-moment adjustment that is off-script. A break creates a rupture, it is a rule-breaking act, the break propels things in another energetic direction. A subtle gesture or word spoken out of order, a bung note, an actual wink or nod, can collapse a world built by suggestion and the suspension of disbelief. A break can cut and repair simultaneously. It can catapult a text from a different world and century into your Friday night, subjecting it to the morals, standards and ethics of our current moment. A break can make us reassess everything or it can get the biggest laughs, if that's your game. The artists in *Attention seeker* commit to a layered portraiture. They break performances to reveal themselves in the shadows, in disguise and, by implication, in the conceptual project – the artwork.

Amita Kirpalani

Short artists' biographies

Colleen Ahern

Colleen Ahern's work is motivated by musical fandom and an interest in portraiture and cultural iconography. Since 2010 she has participated in numerous solo and curated group exhibitions, as well as collaborative projects in museums, commercial galleries and artist-run initiatives, locally and interstate. Ahern lives and works in Melbourne and teaches in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music at the VCA. She is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne.

Rebecca Baumann

Rebecca Baumann examines colour, light and time through a range of media, including installation, kinetic sculpture and performance. She is interested in colour theory and frequently interrogates how colour can affect our emotions and behaviours in her practice. Most recently she has presented major commissions at Carriageworks (2021) and the National Gallery of Victoria (2018). She has undertaken international residencies at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York, and the Helsinki International Artist Programme (HIAP). Baumann lives and works in Perth.

Priyageetha Dia

Priyageetha Dia works across moving image, sculpture and installation. Through constructions of alternate futures and speculative imaginaries, her research delves into the complexities of identity politics and spatial relations of the Tamizh diasporic experience in Southeast Asia. She has exhibited in group exhibitions in Singapore at Art Porters Gallery, ArtScience Museum and the National Gallery Singapore. She has held two solo exhibitions at Art Porters Gallery and has an upcoming exhibition at Yeo Workshop, Singapore.

Eng Kai Er

Eng Kai Er is a choreographer and performer interested in sport, intimacy and touch. In Singapore, she was associate artist at Theatre Works from 2015 to 2017 and founder of the experimental performance studio Make It Share It in 2017. In 2022, she will be resident choreographer at K3 – Zentrum für Choreographie | Tanzplan Hamburg. Eng currently lives and works in Giessen, central Germany.

Lou Hubbard

Lou Hubbard makes assemblage sculptures, site-specific installations, videos, drawings and performances in various forms. She has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions across Australia and internationally since 2000. Hubbard has been awarded Australia Council residencies in Paris at the Cité internationale des arts (2013) and in Barcelona (2010), and at Artists' International Residency (AIR), Antwerp (2013). Hubbard lives and works in Melbourne and teaches in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music at the VCA. She is represented by Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne.

Michelle Mantsio

Michelle Mantsio is an artist, designer and writer. Through video, performance and installation, she explores how we situate ourselves and respond to our environment, spatially and temporally. From 2010 to 2020 Mantsio was visual arts coordinator and lecturer at LCI Melbourne, and she currently teaches at RMIT in the Department of Interior Design. She has participated in several international residencies with exhibition outcomes, including two thematic residencies at the Banff Centre, Canada (2013 and 2017). Mantsio lives and works in Melbourne.

Melati Suryodarmo

Melati Suryodarmo's durational performance work is informed by her training in Butoh dance. Through video, photography, choreography and live performance, she explores alienation and catharsis in the movements of the body. Suryodarmo has performed across the world for 20 years, in art festivals, biennials and major museums. Her works have been collected by many renowned institutions including Tate Modern, National Gallery of Australia, Singapore Art Museum and Museum MACAN. Suryodarmo lives and works in Solo (Surakarta), Indonesia.

List of works in the exhibition

Dimensions are given as height preceding width (followed, where applicable) by depth

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| <p>1. Michelle Mantsio <i>Movement drawing</i> 2022 adhesive vinyl on floor and wall 21 parts: installation dimensions variable Courtesy of the artist</p> | <p>11. 33.17 min (<i>Milestones</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> |
| <p>2. Priyageetha Dia <i>Long live the new fles\$ssh</i> 2020 single-channel video, sound 4 min 30 sec Courtesy of the artist</p> | <p>12. 27.03 min (<i>Stay awhile</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> |
| <p>3. Lou Hubbard <i>Dr O'Hare</i> 2018 whiteboard, Patrick Cox Wannabe court shoes, stretch strap, plastic party apron, spectacle frames, audio earbuds, frisbee, plasticine, plastic toy arms, wall-mounted paper towel dispenser installation dimensions variable Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne</p> | <p>13. 66.33 min (<i>Jacksons live</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> <p>14. 42.08 min (<i>Quatro</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> |
| <p>4. Michelle Mantsio <i>Accompaniment I</i> 2022 handwoven wool and cotton fabric on stainless steel frame 181 x 128 x 56 cm</p> | <p>15. 38.45 min (<i>Let's stick together</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> <p>16. 36.29 min (<i>New values</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> <p>17. 37.21 min (<i>I say a little prayer</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> |
| <p>5. <i>Accompaniment II</i> 2022 handwoven wool and cotton fabric on stainless steel frame 181 x 128 x 56 cm</p> | <p>18. Eng Kai Er <i>Clouds</i> 2022 single-channel video, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour, sound 22 min 10 sec Courtesy of the artist</p> |
| <p>6. <i>Accompaniment III</i> 2022 handwoven wool and cotton fabric on stainless steel frame 181 x 128 x 56 cm</p> | <p>19. Rebecca Baumann <i>Untitled cascade</i> 2012–22 tinsel curtain, electric fan installation dimensions variable Courtesy of the artist</p> |
| <p>7. <i>Condor Ave breathing accompaniment</i> 2022 sound 3 min 35 sec Courtesy of the artist</p> | <p>20. Lou Hubbard <i>Gather</i> 2020 36 Dino-chairs installation dimensions variable Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne</p> |
| <p>8. 39.44 min (<i>Easter</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> | <p>21. Melati Suryodarmo <i>Exergie – butter dance</i> 2000 single-channel standard- definition digital video installation, 4:3 aspect ratio, colour, sound 6 min 29 sec Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai, Beijing and Singapore</p> |
| <p>9. 25.44 min (<i>Almost in love</i>) 2022 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> | |
| <p>10. 39.26 min (<i>Odetta at Town Hall</i>) 2016 oil on board 30 x 30 cm</p> | |

Not to scale

