

CONTEMPORARY  
AUSTRALIA

Optimism

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*Tim 2006*  
Aluminium / 225 x 60 x 60cm / Purchased 2008.  
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant /  
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / Photograph:  
Adrian Lambert, Acorn Photo Agency

# Christian de Vietri

## How many statues does it take to change an archetype?

Have you ever tried to explain a joke to someone? It's never funny when you explain it — only in the telling. Art's a lot like that. *Tim*, *Simon* and *Raph* are statues of 'archetypal' street performers — the kind that attempt to convince their audience that they really are statues. There is an elegant visual pun inherent in a statue of a person pretending to be a statue.

Being from Brisbane I'm inclined to blame Expo '88 but, as Christian de Vietri discovered, the human statue performer is ubiquitous throughout the world. Go to any major tourist destination and there they are. The costumes for the three sculptures in this exhibition were created following the artist's survey of human statue busker 'types' while travelling. Despite the familiarity of the subject matter, it is still disconcerting to discover them in the public spaces of the Gallery of Modern Art with its bustle and flow of human traffic. Yet, the strange sense of dislocation experienced when these works are displayed in a gallery is an example of the multi-faceted conceptual layering in this work. Because, of course, the works *aren't* performers and the metaphorical 'street' is a gallery space. Uncovering these layers of representational meaning is one of the delights of the work. And they're very fertile, these three — they accumulate meanings.

The lineage of the human statue performer derives from the notion of the *tableau vivant*, or living picture, and if we judge the quality of the human statue by how statue-like they can be, then these works represent the apogee of the genre. So is their nature that of performers or sculptures? Or, as the artist intended, do they rest in a state somewhere between the two?<sup>1</sup>

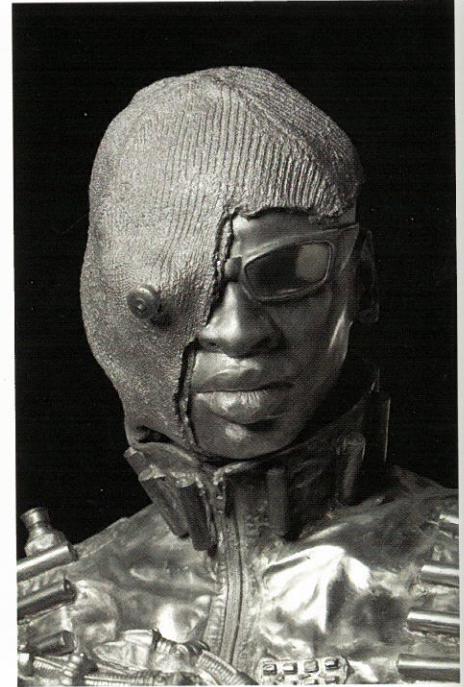
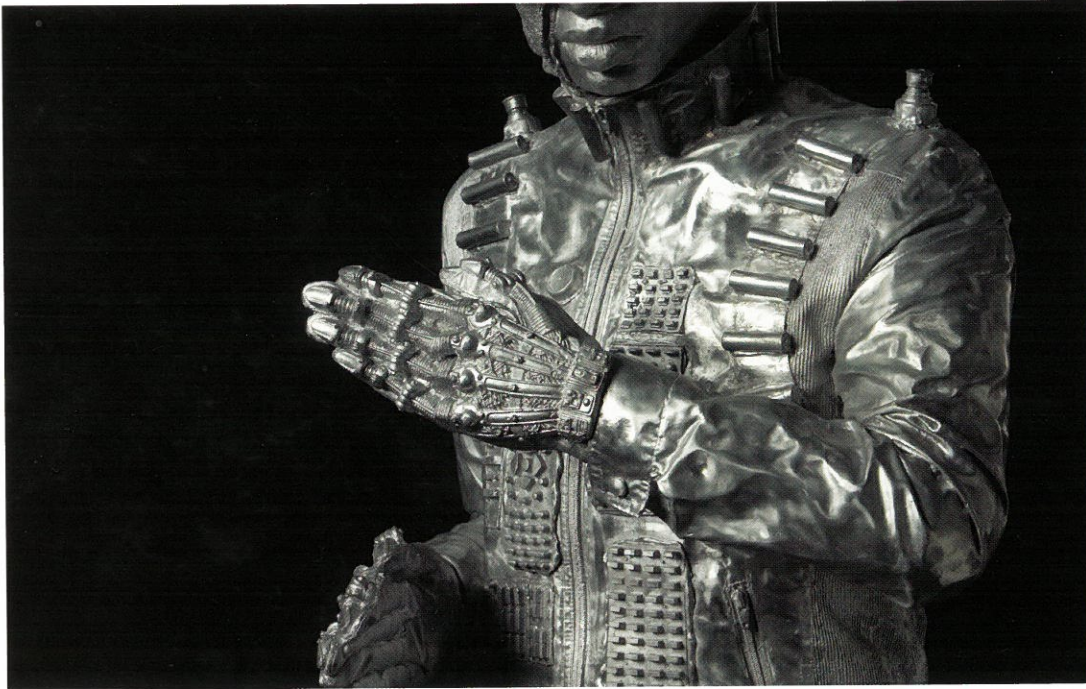
One of the prominent prototypes for *Tim* is the 'Terminator' — the cyborg assassin from the future. The sunglasses, the eyepiece, the metallic silver of aluminium all point unmistakably to this pop culture reference. *Raph's* persona, on the other hand, is derived from Tutankhamen's burial mask — the

pharaoh being an iconic image of everything Egyptian and ironically bearing a name that means 'living image of Amun'. There is a reason these models are popular choices for street buskers: while the 'living statue' can be regarded with fascination and enjoyment, it can also be unnerving. While ostensibly life-sized, the built-in plinths allow the works to tower over most viewers, creating a sense of apprehension and invoking existential anxiety: does the statue that I observe watch me in the same way that I watch it? That is, diminishing me to an object?

On one hand de Vietri's busker works are uncomplicated. They are statues in the classical sense — figurative and vertical, they have pedestals and they memorialise the buskers that the artist encountered on his travels. Yet, at the same time they are intensely problematic objects: examples of what scientist Douglas Hofstadter calls a 'strange loop' — two frames of reference colliding.<sup>2</sup> Strange loops can be seen most obviously in the work of the Swiss artist MC Escher, where category confusion in his images between illusionistic three-dimensional space and the two-dimensionality of the surface creates 'impossible' structures.

Take *Simon* for instance — he has all the markers of classical sculpture, but also displays elements that identify him as a busker who is attempting to represent himself as a sculpture. The plinth is an upturned garbage bin evoking a fluted column, and the billowing folds of fabric allow a glimpse of his sneakers. When rendered as sculpture the shoddy quality of the costume paradoxically adds to the work's veracity.

The very idea of memorialising generic street performers — an ideal representation of a simulacrum — is a move reminiscent of Robert Smithson's documentation of the 'monuments' of Passaic, New Jersey.<sup>3</sup> Just as Smithson recast the ruins of industry as monumental, in *Simon* de Vietri highlights the



*Tim (details) 2006*  
Aluminium / 225 x 60 x 60cm / Purchased 2008.  
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant /  
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / Photograph:  
Adrian Lambert, Acorn Photo Agency

Opposite:  
*Simon 2005*  
Resin, marble / 235 x 60 x 60cm / The Date/Lyon  
Collection, Perth

*Raph 2006*  
Resin, gold leaf / 230 x 60 x 60cm / Collection:  
The artist / Images courtesy: The artist and  
Goddard De Fiddes Gallery, Perth / Photographs:  
Adrian Lambert, Acorn Photo Agency

mechanics of the simulacrum, calling into question the relationship between the strata of references that comprise these conceptually dense works. It is as if the entire lineage of the work is made visible. At the risk of being overly pedantic, we can see not only the object itself, but also the artist's brother and friends (who modelled for the sculptures which now bear their names as titles); the archetype of the generic human statue performer; the many particular performers that went into the creation of the archetype; the archetype of 'statue' that they all drew on to create their costumes; the many particular statues that created that archetype; the memory of the people who were immortalised with a statue and the individual people themselves. At this point I'm reminded of a quote attributed to Jasper Johns on making art: 'It's simple, you just take something and do something to it, and then do something else to it. If you keep doing this . . . pretty soon you've got something'. What's even better is when history does this for you.

What is obvious in these works is that the procession through an endless 'chain of signifiers' characteristic of Postmodernism is not a pristine process with crisp images leading cleanly one into another, but rather a fluid state. The threads of meaning snarl an otherwise smooth concept of time, and meaning itself starts to dissolve. Here, as in the *Terminator* movies, the future can contaminate and change the past.

And what do we do when we realise the only meaning in the world is what we choose to give it — when we see the absurdity of it all? To quote the artist, these buskers exist at 'the ass end of the grand narratives'.<sup>4</sup> However, even here there is dignity, humour and a certain lightness. Every destruction creates space and the hope of a new beginning.

Emma Cain

- 1 Christian de Vietri, email conversation with Francis Parker, Queensland Art Gallery, 16 December 2007.
- 2 See Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Penguin Books, London, 1980, p.684.
- 3 See Robert Smithson, 'The monuments of Passaic: Has Passaic replaced Rome as the eternal city?', in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.
- 4 De Vietri, 2007.





2005 'Store 5 is . . .', Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne  
 'Recent Acquisitions: City of Port Phillip', St Kilda Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne  
 'DMZ', Seoul, South Korea

2004 'Eureka Revisited: The Contest of Memories', Ballarat Fine Art Gallery  
 'International 04 Liverpool Biennial', Liverpool, United Kingdom  
 'MCA Unpacked II', University of South Australia Art Museum, Adelaide  
 'This Was the Future . . . Australian Sculpture of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and Today', Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne  
 Journey to Now (John Kaldor Art Projects and Collection), Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide  
 'Experimenta: House of Tomorrow', Melbourne  
 'Re Collection', Gitte Weise Gallery, Sydney  
 'Songs of Australia: Volume 15: The House that John and Wendy Built (another STOLEN generation mix-up)', Clemenger Award of Contemporary Art, Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

2003 'MCA Unpacked II', Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

2002 'Songs of Australia Volume 13: Wide Lawns and Narrow Minds', (the John and Wendy Headache Mix), Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
 'Fieldwork - Australian Art 1968-2002', Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
 'People Places and Ideas', Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne  
 'Suburban Echo', McClelland Gallery, Melbourne  
 'Australian Art in the National Gallery of Australia', National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
 'A History of Happiness', Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne  
 'National Works on Paper', Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Mornington  
 'Tenth Anniversary Exhibition of Kunst and Gitte Weise Gallery', Gitte Weise Gallery, Sydney

2001 'Orbit', University of South Australia Art Museum, Adelaide  
 'A Century of Collecting 1901 - 2001', Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney

2000 'Microcosmos', PB Gallery, Swinburne University, Melbourne  
 'Sydney Suburb', Museum of Sydney  
 'Celebrating the Exquisite Corpse', Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo  
 'Project 2/2000', (an affiliated exhibition of the Sydney Biennale

2000), Sir Hermann Black Gallery, University of Sydney  
 'Something for above the Couch!', Gitte Weise Gallery, Sydney  
 '(Word)', Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
 'Australian Perspecta 99 - Living Here Now, Art and Politics', Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
 'One Hour Photo 99', First Floor, Melbourne

#### Collections

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
 Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide  
 Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth  
 Artbank, Sydney  
 Australian Film Commission, Sydney  
 Australian National Gallery, Canberra  
 Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat  
 Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo  
 BHP Billiton, Melbourne  
 City of Port Phillip, Melbourne  
 Equity Link Insurance Collection, Melbourne  
 Flinders University Collection (Visual Arts Department), Adelaide  
 Geelong Art Gallery  
 John Kaldor Art Projects, Botany, New South Wales  
 Mildura Arts Centre, Mildura  
 Monash University Collection, Melbourne  
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
 National Film Library, Canberra  
 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
 Newcastle Regional Art Gallery  
 Parliament House, Canberra  
 Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston  
 Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane  
 Shepparton Art Gallery  
 South Australian School of Art, Adelaide  
 Tasmanian School of Art at Hobart, University of Tasmania, Hobart  
 Transfield Art Collection, Sydney  
 University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane  
 Wollongong Art Gallery, Wollongong

#### Rolf De Heer

b.1951, Heemskerk, Netherlands  
 Lives and works in Adelaide

#### Filmography

2007 *Dr. Plonk*, Director, Producer, Writer  
 2006 *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes (The Making of the Ten Canoes)*, Director  
*Ten Canoes*, Director, Producer, Writer  
 2003 *Alexandra's Project*, Director, Producer, Writer  
 2002 *The Tracker*, Director, Producer, Writer, Composer  
*Tre per sempre*, Executive Producer  
 2001 *The Old Man Who Loved Stories*, Director, Writer  
*Serenades*, Script Editor

1999 *Spank*, Executive Producer  
 1998 *Dance Me to My Song*, Director, Producer, Writer  
*The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, Producer  
 1997 *Epsilon*, Director, Producer, Writer  
 1996 *The Quiet Room*, Director, Producer, Writer  
 1993 *Bad Boy Bubby*, Director, Producer, Writer  
 1991 *Dingo*, Director, Producer  
 1988 *Encounter at Raven's Gate*, Director, Producer, Writer  
 1984 *Tale or a Tiger*, Director, Writer  
 1978 *Cass*, Third Assistant Director

#### Christian De Vietri

b.1981, Kalgoorlie, Western Australia  
 Lives and works in New York

#### Selected solo exhibitions

2007 'Being and Becoming', Goddard de Fiddes Gallery, Perth  
 'New Work', Thirty Seven Degrees Gallery, Sydney  
 2005 'New Work', Goddard de Fiddes Gallery, Perth  
 2004 'The Nature of Things', Goddard de Fiddes Gallery, Perth  
 2002 'Photographs 1999-2002', Berlin/Paris Project Room, Berlin, Germany

#### Selected group exhibitions

2006 'Baroqueism', Goddard de Fiddes Gallery, Perth  
 'Primavera', Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
 2005 'Melbourne International Art Fair', Melbourne  
 'National Sculpture Exhibition and Award' (travelling exhibition), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
 'College Invisible Session 4 Exhibition', Galerie Montgrand, Marseille, France  
 2003 'Wild Frontier', Down Town Contemporary Art Space, Adelaide  
 2002 'HOTEL 6151', Rhodes Hotel, Perth  
 'Transit Narratives' (travelling exhibition), Centre for Culture & Visual Arts, Le Venezie, Italy; Queensland College of Art Gallery, Brisbane; Victorian College of Art Gallery, Melbourne; Tasmanian School of Art Gallery, Hobart  
 'Biennale of Electronic Arts', John Curtin Gallery, Perth  
 2001 'Tactical Intervention Strategies (T.I.S.)', Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts' Perth

#### Collections

Artbank, Sydney  
 Curtin University of Technology Art Collection  
 International Art Collection of Rodney Glick  
 John Curtin Gallery Art

#### Gabrielle De Vietri

b.1983, Kalgoorlie, Western Australia  
 Lives and works in Melbourne

#### Selected exhibitions

2008 'The Dating Show', Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane  
 'NEW08', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

2007 'Rules of Engagement', West Space Gallery, Melbourne  
 'The One and the Many', Dell Gallery, Brisbane  
 'I Need You as You Need Me', BMW Edge, Federation Square, Melbourne

2006 'Ideas Catalogue: Issue Two Launch', Sacha Design Showroom, Melbourne  
 'Text Me', Spacement Gallery, Melbourne  
 'Mind Games', Conical Inc, Melbourne  
 '+Plus Factors', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne  
 'Dangerous Intersections', Spacement Gallery, Melbourne

2005 'Make it Modern', Deloitte Headquarters, Melbourne  
 'Conditions of Love', MARS Gallery, Melbourne  
 'Weapons of Mass Creation', The Foundry, Melbourne  
 'Gang Festival', Ruang Rupa, Jakarta; IF Venue, Bandung; Taring Padi Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
 'What if', The Wedding Circle, Sydney

2004 'A Molecular History of Everything\*(well not everything)', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

2003 'A la Manière de . . .', Galerie de l'Ecole Supérieure d'Art d'Aix, Aix-en-Provence, France

2002 'Archi-nuit', Ilotopie, Port St Louis, France

*The I don't know show: Philosophy for kids* 2008 / Presenters: Michelle Baginski, Kathryn Sutherland, Margaret Paul, Trent Griffiths / Written and directed by: Gabrielle de Vietri / With assistance from: Raphael de Vietri, Michelle Baginski, Jess Wasikowska, Christian Ghezzi, Leo Greenfield / Opening theme song composed by Michelle Baginski / Additional lyrics and music: Trent Griffiths, Kathryn Sutherland, Margaret Paul, Matt Cornell / Sound and music: Jared Davis / Costumes: Angela Pye / Gaffer: Samuel Barnes / Backgrounds: Leo Greenfield / Illustrations and animations: Michelle Baginski, Christian Ghezzi, Jess Wasikowska

CONTEMPORARY  
AUSTRALIA

# Optimism



More than 60 Australian artists feature in this publication produced for 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism', the first in a national triennial series of thematic exhibitions. Exploring the rich and complex territory of the possible in Australian life and culture, the artists in 'Optimism' respond with energy, passion, colour, humour and irreverence. This publication includes many facets of Australian visual art and culture — painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, installation, video, cinema, animation, music and comedy — with engaging essays by John Birmingham, Elissa Down, Melissa Lucashenko and more.

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