

Dismantling the pedestal art is placed on ... Astra Howard's *The Other (Inside II)*, 2003, left, challenges taboos about touch and strangers, and Richard Goodwin's *Taxi Dermis Pod*, 2001, begs to be occupied and revved up.

Don't be afraid to touch them, they won't bite

VISUAL ARTS
Bruce James

In 1968 the Austrian performance artist Valie Export appeared in public wearing a box-like apparatus fitted with curtained holes through which passers-by were invited to fondle her breasts.

She called this work *Tap & Touch Cinema*. It turned the viewing experience into a tactile one, forcing "filmgoers" to enact their darkest desires in the cold light of day. Export risked physical abuse, not to mention arrest, to produce one of the most provocative, if still little-known, performances in postwar art. The original styrofoam box hasn't survived, but photographs show the discomforting moment when the hands of strangers made contact with the flesh within.

This contact represented a breach of many things: public morality; personal safety; conventional gender roles; as well as distinctions between genres such as sculpture, theatre and film. Most of all, it represented a breach of the embargo against touch, the time-honoured, critically sanctioned *noli me tangere*, that puts art on an unapproachable pedestal and viewers at a distance.

Export's ideas hover over a new show at Ivan Dougherty Gallery, although nowhere is she cited in the catalogue essay or supporting texts. The exhibition comprises works by UNSW College of Fine Arts Faculty members and PhD candidates. It's called *Outside In*, a reference to the dismantling of the walls between

gallery precinct and wider space, and to the human body's capacity to contain whole worlds of meaning - whole geometries, whole architectures, whole social systems. Carol Longbottom's otherwise uneventful grid of symbolic objects, *Six Moments*, 2003, bears an instruction which spells it out: "Please Touch." Richard Goodwin's *Taxi-Dermis Pod*, 2001, begs to be opened, occupied and revved up. Its sexy motorbike seat is an incitement to straddling. In similar

WHAT, WHERE

Outside In
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Selwyn Street, Paddington. 9385 0726.
Mon-Sat, 10am to 5pm.

fashion, the zips on Gwenda Maude's *Birthing Pods*, 2003, crave to be loosened, liberating the squishy biomatter detectable through viewing slots.

In Mari Velonaki's and Gary Zebington's *Unstill Life*, 2000-03, an apple must be lifted from a stoup in order to activate, and nourish, a digital woman resting in ebony-framed, Old Masterly grandeur in an enclosed chamber. And while the massed hairpins in Bonita Ely's *Infrastructure 2620BR*, 2003, snake beyond our reach in the ceiling, we seek their familiar shapes with our eyes, looking for every characteristic bump and bend. In doing

so, we take part in the normally inactive space above the line of sight, extending our experiential realm as well as that of the art object.

Maureen Burns, Katherine Moline and Michele Barker and Anna Munster offer fewer opportunities for touch, leastways not in the concrete sense, but again their exhibits spark questions about viewer involvement in art. Moline's *Lightwell for Gray*, 2003, and *Complex Pleasures for Mendieta*, 2003, respectively invoke the 1930s designer Eileen Gray and the early-'70s performer Ana Mendieta, the latter an exponent of the body art pioneered by Export a few years before. Mendieta's famous silhouette series resulted from impressions made by her anatomy in the landscape, an almost textbook demonstration of art's environmental repercussions.

It is Astra Howard's work, however, which comes closest to the spirit of Export. *The Other (Inside II)*, 2003, is a public action captured on video and replicated as a live performance during the exhibition. In a severe wooden box - echoing the "white cube" space of a contemporary gallery - Howard sits with a bare arm and leg protruding from separate holes. Nothing else of her body is revealed. Small, largely inadvertent movements indicate living tissue, enough to dispel any thought that the limbs are another example of the realist sculpture so modish at present.

At Ivan Dougherty, the box is fixed quite high on the wall, elevated in the

manner of a venerated statue. But during the public action the box simply stood on a suburban footpath, exposed to the gaze and touch of passers-by.

Curiously, not one among the hurrying citizens seen in the video seems shocked by the body in a box. Some pause momentarily, just to get their bearings on this latest instance of pavement impedimenta. A few smile. One or two suppress what could be a sinister temptation. But that's it. Heaven knows what Howard was expecting, but if it included some sort of sudden, dramatic dialogue with her audience, some sort of physical interaction, she must have been disappointed. If anything, her work proves that we urban dwellers have an exaggerated tolerance for the unusual.

Howard performed a version of *The Other (Inside)* in Delhi earlier this year. Judging by a photograph, the box was larger and more concealing, conditions

around it were more crowded, and viewers less inhibited in their reactions.

Respecting local proprieties, the artist did not offer her naked leg for scrutiny. This sensitivity to the values of Indian society stands in contrast to Howard's willingness to offend, or at least challenge, Australian values. Trouble is, we have so few values left for artists, or anyone else, to offend. We're jaded, defensive, stitched-up and numb.

Breaching the walls of a gallery is nothing. Getting through to ordinary people in the workaday world is a tougher proposition. Each of the artists in this pleasing show dreams of achieving that. Goodwin has come closer than most via his activities as a much-commissioned creator of large-scale public sculptures in Sydney. But the truth about *Outside In* is that, while making a song and dance about accessibility, it stays inside playing safe.


Home screen for Cannes winner

FILM

Two days after taking out the top short-film honour at the Cannes Film Festival, Australian-made *Cracker Bag* opened the 20th St Kilda Film Festival in Melbourne last night.

The 15-minute film by the Melbourne filmmaker Glendyn Ivin beat nine finalists from around the world to win the Golden Palm

The festival director, Paul Harris, said organisers loved the film when Ivin entered it several months ago and wanted to show it on opening night. But it was finished on video, so Melbourne's Palais Theatre couldn't accommodate it. "They [the filmmakers] begged and borrowed and got a print of it on film so we could show it on opening night, and in the meantime he won the award at



DRAFT NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION (AIR TOXICS) MEASURE

The National Environment Protection Council (NEPC) makes National Environment Protection Measures (Measures) which are designed to ensure all Australians enjoy the benefit of equivalent environmental protection.

The NEPC has released a draft National Environment Protection (Air Toxics) Measure and Impact Statement for public comment.

The goal of the draft Measure is to improve the information base regarding ambient air toxics within the Australian environment. The air toxics covered by the draft Measure are

TRANSPORTNSW

MINISTERIAL INQUIRY INTO NSW PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Call for Submissions

The Minister for Transport Services, the Hon Michael Costa, has requested Dr Tom Parry, Chairman of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal, to conduct a Ministerial Inquiry into Public Transport in New South Wales. The Inquiry will focus on funding requirements and options to meet community transport needs for the State's public passenger transport services.

Specifically, the Inquiry will consider:

- The likely future needs of CityRail and STA Bus and Ferry operations, with regard to efficient operating and capital costs;
- Funding options to meet these revenue needs, as well as funding options for any future expansion of the public passenger transport system;
- Options for enhancing the optimum use of public passenger transport relative to other transport modes;
- Possible arrangements for incentive mechanisms which better link fares and service standards, including safety; and
- Options for better targeting the funding and delivery of transport services to meet the needs of different groups in the metropolitan and non-metropolitan communities, including rural community and health transport needs.

See over 80 galleries in one visit