

# RIDE ON TIME: RECENT WORKS BY MLADEN BIZUMIC

CASSANDRA BARNETT AND GRANT MATHESON

**Ramp is not a gallery of grand entrances. Not a gallery by design or by ostentatious conversion. Certainly, it's not a Guggenheim. On days when the front door is locked it can be tricky to find a way in. And yet the intimate, slow-release experience of this gallery aligns perfectly with *Event.Horizon* by Mladen Bizumic. The installation inhabits a darkened space; it too takes a while to find. But electronic sounds and a splash of flickering light beckon you forward and, once in, it's an arrival in every sense.**

*Event.Horizon* lures the viewer into one of Bizumic's trademark parallel worlds. Spreading out across two walls of the gallery is a doubled video projection on a loop, a self-reflective mirror-land. What's projected is a cool, blue-grey dystopia. The view jumps and pans languidly between giant doubled architectures, shapeless doubled sculptures and desolate doubled gardens. It's navigated occasionally by anonymous passers-by (and their doppelgängers, of course). And most disconcertingly of all, while every film gives the illusion of depth, this one literally enfolds you within its grainy world.

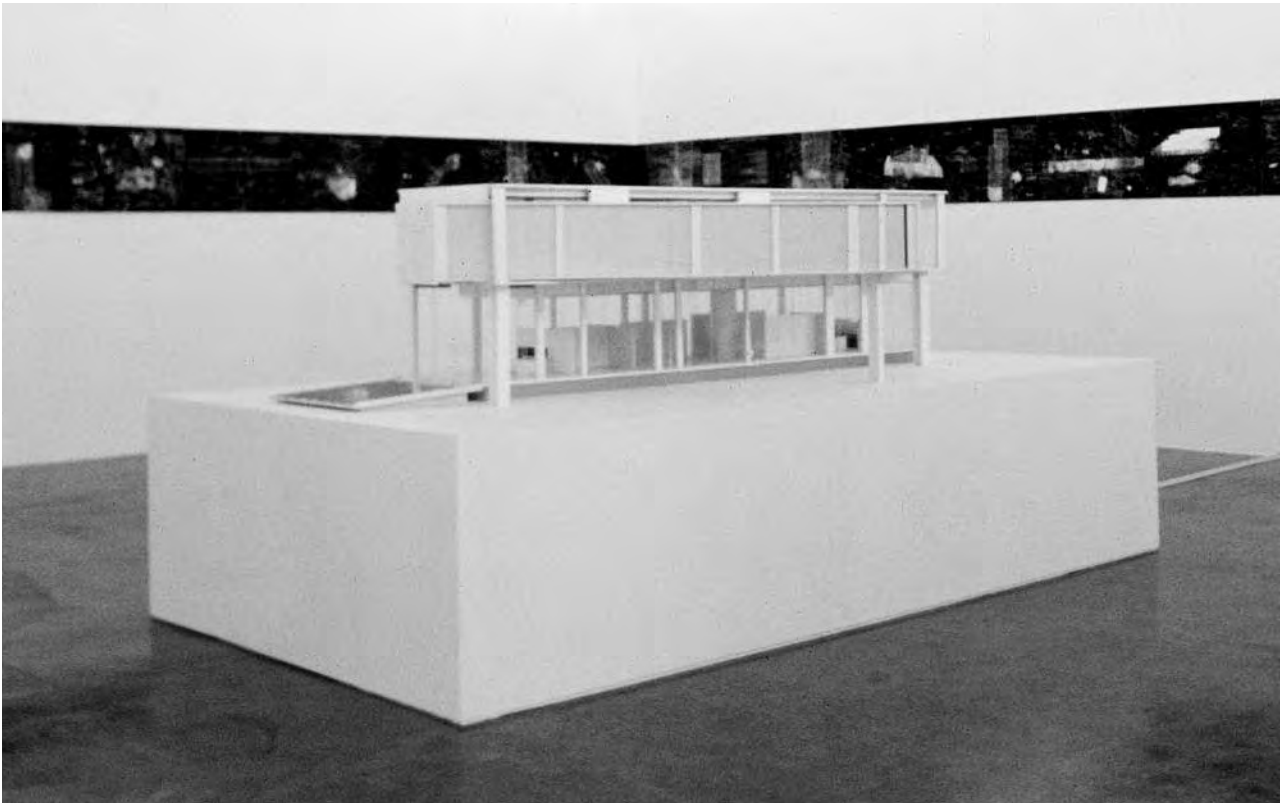
Bizumic reels in his audience in several ways. For one thing, the soundtrack is hypnotic: an eerie, discordant, ambient piece produced in collaboration with sound artist Ivesh. Bizumic is frank about his attachment to soundtracks. He says he likes the way "sound fills the space in a different way, creates a special sort of mood or pitch for a show."<sup>1</sup> He likes sinking viewers into this auditory immersion tank, to produce a more thoroughly altered state. At the same time he's attracted to the idea that "there could be a soundtrack for every day. You can think, 'how would this situation sound? What would the soundtrack

to this moment be?'" It's a nice thought – that our days are thick with perfect, silent soundtracks. And because Bizumic follows it through and actually invents those refrains on his viewers' behalf, you get a chance to perform the equation in reverse. *Event.Horizon* offers subtly layered swells of electronica, underpinned by a slow synchronic bass and interspersed with melancholy raindrops recorded by the artist in Tongariro National Park. These recurring sounds insist in turn upon a singular 'moment' transmitting them.

And if the uncanny music transports us somewhere, so too do the projections. Their folded geometry embraces the room, which is suffused with their wintry light. At the same time the symmetry imposed on the roaming footage causes the image to keep disappearing on itself. All in all, it feels as though Ramp is being swallowed up by *Event.Horizon*. Enter the gallery and you enter the unstable space of the artwork. Choose not to cross the threshold and your gaze is still sucked into that mobile crevice where the two projections meet.

So the gallery becomes cuboid Moebius strip, a kind of transformation space with viewers entering at one corner and laws of physics departing at the other. Buildings and landscapes morph endlessly around the dividing line, and we all hang suspended in this long, loopy moment, on the horizon between two worlds.

Such is the immediate, poetic experience of *Event.Horizon*. But then there's the realisation that the subject of this footage is the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, in midwinter. Bizumic's beautiful, futuristic dystopia is in fact a fading utopia, its decayed modernist architecture as outdated as the principles it houses. And Tongariro National Park (source of the distorted soundtrack) is a UNESCO World Heritage site: the closest to Ramp in Hamilton but one of the farthest from



**Top:** Mladen Bizumic, *Tauranga Guggenheim (Model and Drawings)*, Artspace, 2002.

**Bottom:** Mladen Bizumic, *Tauranga Guggenheim – A 1:1 Reconstruction of the Second Story Window*, Artspace, 2002.

Paris. So perhaps this 'old idea turned in on itself' is a straightforward critique of UNESCO – of the hubristic, futile optimism it represents, and of its refusal to give up the ghost.

But Bizumic has something else in mind. One of the things he's most emphatic about is his desire not to judge: "Although on one level I'm obviously critical of issues such as globalisation or commercialisation, I have to ask whether I'm in a position to be critical. I would be stupid to say 'I've got nothing to do with this, I'm outside it'; I can't say that. So I think what I really want to do is make work about bigger issues, underlying structures. Structures that you probably can't change."

As he discusses his art practice to date, it's this less tangible element that rears its head again and again, causing reactionary, politicised readings to give way to something more profound. Take *Tauranga Guggenheim*, a piece first shown at Auckland's Artspace in 2002. What are the chances of a Guggenheim in New Zealand, let alone Tauranga? Is Bizumic suggesting that the global-but-not-local art world might benefit from this unlikely development? His installation features an attractive, if architecturally unsound, model Guggenheim, designed and built by Bizumic himself, along with plan drawings, an architect's animated video tour and a soundtrack (slowed-down Kenny G this time, sounding for all the world like formulaic Brian Eno). And the gaps in the credibility of the project – the oddly pristine model, the mad blueprints and mind maps, the implausibility of the site, not to mention the perverted strains of Kenny G – ultimately crack the ice. It's an extended gag. As Bizumic himself acknowledges, a working Tauranga Guggenheim wouldn't be different or new, it would be just like any other. But *his* Tauranga Guggenheim is, precisely, a novelty.

In one room of the Artspace exhibition there's a 'window' framing a view of the water in Tauranga. The experience produced by this photographic mockery is one of multiple displacements. As you stare out of the window you find yourself in Tauranga, in a grand space inside a fictional Guggenheim. Yet you're nowhere. The ground has simply shifted beneath you, and suddenly your own position is what it's all about. As Bizumic puts it, "it's about activity and the viewer. Artists perform specific activities to produce something – and then there's the way that's received and picked up. I can't separate the viewer from the work... So it's also about the viewer's desire to be a part of something. Some people are really critical of the whole global culture thing, others say 'we don't want to be separate, we want to be a part of that.' These are problems that relate to the

periphery and what it is in terms of culture. Do you want to be a viewer or a participant? Do you want to be up there or down here?" Such location-oriented questions are something Bizumic keeps returning to as he mines the workings of our desires and the systems they participate in, with an almost scientific curiosity.

In *Night Shift* (Sue Crockford Gallery, 2003) he pushes the gag even further, and undertakes the Herculean task of dismantling Little Barrier Island and moving it piece by piece to the harbour of Venice. The usual suspects are all here: the political tease, the appropriation of commercial display methodologies, the joy in absurd juxtapositions, the parallax shift imposed on the viewer. Bizumic began developing the work while staying on Waiheke Island. From his house, Little Barrier seemed to vanish and reappear at the whim of the thick morning cloud. Since he had returned recently from Paris, questions of national identity were also on his mind. He couldn't help noticing certain parallels between Venice (long dead in spirit but kept alive by a touristic preserving zeal), New Zealand (a relatively preserved country in terms of its late encounter with the rest of the world), and Little Barrier (a reserve for endangered native birds). "I find this idea of the place that is preserved really interesting," he says. "New Zealand has been changed by the arrival of Europeans, who brought a whole set of ideas about the meaning of the place and started building it in a European way. And you can see how absurd it was for them to take this place they had come from and just plonk it in the middle of an ancient land in the Pacific."

So Bizumic turns the tables, and plonks Little Barrier in the middle of Europe's most anachronistic city. It's a juxtaposition that allows the bizarre, irrational qualities of each place – and of the very notion of location – to reveal themselves. But that's not all. In addition to various maps and animations documenting the deconstruction and reconstruction of the island, the installation features a series of photographs taken on the island by the artist, using a blue filter. Day thus appears as night. By synchronising the light of Venice and Little Barrier Bizumic dissolves the twelve-hour time lag, brings his crazy idea to life, and once again magics the viewer onto a parallel island that's neither here nor there.

Clearly, this isn't science. Bizumic's installations reek of irony, ambivalence and paradox, and have far too much in the way of humour to be mistaken for anything so rigid. The illogical structures he lays bare also lack the pre-emptive theory, the hypothesis, the sense of something needing to be proved or



Mladen Bizumic, *A Beautiful Afterlife*, 2001-2002.

explained. And he readily suggests the works might fail, adding, “I’m at the beginning of my career, and I need to challenge what I’m doing. These wide, wide concepts are what I’m really interested in. I would hope that the art I make comes across as questions I can’t quite answer for myself, and can’t get out of my mind. I like it when art is dreamlike or hypnotic in a challenging, intellectual way – when I don’t really know why I like it but it stays in my head.”

In the book *The Parasite*, Michel Serres examines many of the same ideas as Bizumic. Ideas about reason and unreason, meaning and non-meaning (or noise), and how the two are often the same thing – it just depends where you’re positioned in space and time. Serres writes:

The only instances or systems are black boxes. When we do not understand, when we defer our knowledge to a later date, when the thing is too complex for the means at hand, when we put everything in a temporary black box, we prejudge the existence of a system. When we can finally open the box, we see that it works like a space of transformation. The only systems, instances, and substances come from our lack of knowledge. The system is nonknowledge. The other side of nonknowledge. One side of nonknowledge is chaos; the other, system. Knowledge forms a bridge between the two banks. Knowledge as such is a space of transformation.<sup>2</sup>

Those systems Serres is describing have something in common with UNESCO, the Guggenheims, biennales (the subject of Bizumic’s most recent exhibition, *Fiji Biennale Pavilions*, at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery) and even with the colonisation of New Zealand. Each of these things assumes knowledge right where knowledge is lacking. The proliferating biennales and Guggenheims purport to be intelligible systems of the modern art world, delivering on their audience’s

and their artists’ desires. But as Bizumic points out, “the Venice Biennale has been strongly criticised for its confusion. There are 260 artists now, and audiences don’t know where to start, there’s no frame. I don’t have anything against biennales but I do against any ‘dictatorship’ ruling what they should look like.”

Despite their aspirations, none of these institutions have lasting meaning. They are the products of highly specific and volatile conditions; as soon as they’re set in motion they start to change, and eventually new conditions will ground their demise. That’s why the Guggenheims, or imperialism, aren’t working systems so much as ‘black boxes’ containing a mix of stuff whose usefulness depends entirely on your own location in time. As for UNESCO, constructed at a chaotic juncture when almost nothing was understood – how could it ever have expected its relevance to last?

Which is where Bizumic comes in, his installations showing us we’re not in control, we don’t know what’s going to happen, but that’s okay – it’s even beautiful. He leads us ever so slightly out of time, displaces us to a not-yet place where the systems aren’t working, opens the black box and renders all our best institutions and endeavours absurd. Here, in the enduring moment of these spaces of transformation, we’re powerless but anything is possible. It’s here that the world keeps changing, twisting us away from our past ideals, while UNESCO stays the same.

In *Event.Horizon*, Bizumic’s filming of UNESCO stops (and his video loop restarts) precisely when the reluctant sun finally appears. And this humble, untameable moment feels sublime. “The sun comes up, you see the sun and you see the snow, and it’s melting... the work is really about this event of waiting for the sun. It’s not just about UNESCO, it’s about showing the place, being in the place, and waiting in the middle of winter for the sun to come out.”

#### NOTES:

1. All Mladen Bizumic quotations from a conversation between Bizumic, Cassandra Barnett and Grant Matheson on 21 January 2004.
2. Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.73.