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Michael Goldberg, *Toward a New World Order*, 31 August to 2 October 2011, off-site project, 56–58 Nicholson Street, Woolloomooloo

After the End: Michael Goldberg's Post-apocalypse

Today, notions of apocalypse may seem impossibly distant or hopelessly quaint to those not subscribing to religious narratives. Nonetheless, there are many in contemporary society who believe, religiously or otherwise, that an apocalypse is coming. For those with no religion convictions, the coming apocalypse will be of an environmental rather than metaphysical sort. Certainly, contemporary media is full of reports of natural disasters, dramatic alterations to the earth's climate and, more politically, of proposed taxes aimed at staving off ecological collapse. Equally numerous are those prosaically labelled 'climate change skeptics' who argue that current changes to the earth's weather patterns are merely cyclical and part of a naturally occurring process of climatic peaks and troughs. Of course, those who argue along such lines argue equally against a barrage of scientific and statistical data supporting the contrary. At the same time, the skeptics more selfishly find a way of morally exempting themselves from pressure to contribute taxes designed, albeit conservatively, to curb dependency on atmosphere-damaging fossil fuels. Concerns of this inclination, linked to the socio-political considerations typical of his past practice, fuelled the recent work of artist and academic Michael Goldberg. His installation *Toward a New World Order* was situated in a vacant lot directly behind Artspace in Woolloomooloo. Appropriately, this patch of disused urban terrain was once the site of an industrial mechanic until an explosion closed it down. Looking both forwards and backwards, Goldberg's work was predicated on an archaeological narrative. In this case, traces of ostensible archeological significance conjured a post-apocalyptic future. The presence of such traces forced viewers/participants to consider what is truly at stake in a contemporary globalised culture composed in equal parts of excessive consumption and maximum denial.

Such a background might seem overwhelming from the perspective of contemporary art. Without doubt, artists who approach the otherwise grand-narrative of ecological destruction transparently, often produce work that appears unpromisingly inadequate for being basically descriptive. Thus, the challenge of dealing with today's big issues through art raises further concerns regarding art's wider contemporary role. Now such a role is riven more than ever. On the one hand, there are those who support contemporary art's abdication from social address for the sake of an essentially aestheticist lubrication of the art market. On the other hand, there is a rising trend in the deployment of contemporary art as a type of supplementary social work.[1] The latter tendency, usually well intentioned, serves however to present art only as a utilitarian means to a positivist end. Such an approach conveniently ignores as well, the fundamental split that defines all representation. This is a split between imitation and the 'real', neither of which can ever be thought whole in its self. As part of its broader scope, Goldberg's outdoor installation took such fundamental problematics on board. Here, the artist did not in any way attempt to merely illustrate a thesis through art though (as if this were actually possible). Instead, Goldberg's installation deliberately provoked the viewer/participant to actively make associations and to simultaneously experience and analyse the field of possibilities he established.

For those wandering in from the street and not versed in the simulacral tropes of much contemporary art, difficult questions were posed from the start about whether or not the situation being presented was 'real'. Or, the question might more accurately have related to considerations of the precise *extent* to which the situation was real. Indeed, the material aspects of the installation were so familiar as to render them practically invisible. The layout of Goldberg's work is worth describing briefly, as it was likewise suggestive and strategically composed. An industrial storm fence circumscribed the entire installation. Immediately inside the fence to one side was a rudimentary site-office housing an attendant with whom the public may or may not have felt inclined to speak. To the right of the office was a large area enclosed by an industrial marquee. Inside the marquee was a similarly industrial-looking platform raised above ground level. The platform was flanked by grey steel lockers and fenced off at its furthest point. Beyond and below this temporary barrier were two practically identical depressions hollowed out of slabs of what appeared like rock embedded in the ground. Outside and next to this roofed archaeological 'excavation' were freshly cut eucalypt branches piled up and seemingly awaiting use, perhaps as firewood or as components for the construction of a shelter. Adjacent to the pile of branches and attached to an existing tree, was a yard-stick with incremental measurements inscribed upon it. Finally, turning to leave the site, a large bell apparently cast in bronze stood securely isolated behind more fencing. Each of these elements while thematically linked, probed the viewer/participant to actively imagine what their connections might be. Actually, the textual openness of the work contributed overall to its subtle undermining of audience expectation and comfort. In doing so, it generally refigured an urban terrain that was otherwise exceedingly familiar as something uncanny and vaguely sinister.

Underlying this sense of altered familiarity, emphasised by the installation's overtly excavational dimension, were further suggestions of the site-specific history of the location housing it. Central to such questions were issues of indigenous habitation. And while

Aboriginal histories are symbolically acknowledged more frequently these days, there is comparatively scant evidence of the actual presence of indigenous people in this area. Thus, where the effects of future ecological disaster are site-specifically invoked, as they were here, then such disaster must take into account preceding socio-political disasters as well. For, disasters of this nature are also class based. Woolloomooloo, originally an indigenous settlement, later became a working class neighbourhood populated by low-income families and naval workers. Now, the area represents a literal fault-line separating the remaining indigenous population and the working-poor from some of Sydney's wealthiest residential suburbs. Situated at the centre of this divide is Artspace. Taking such geopolitics into account, Goldberg's installation literally exteriorised the gallery while interiorising traces of these deep-rooted rifts. Evidence of such division was consciously apparent in the work's details also. For example, a pronounced fissure physically separated the two practically identical tomb-like depressions covered by the marquee. This divisive crack suggested that while death awaits us all and is therefore communal, it is simultaneously a lone fate – particularly in an age and culture that venerates individualism above all else – that removes us from any possibility of communion.

Naturally, fear of apocalypse simultaneously represents the more basic fear of death. When death is projected as absolute, implying the final annihilation of the species, then the otherwise normal fear of death is exacerbated. For Goldberg this lead to ruminations on the contemporary rise of fringe groups that may or may not be supported by mainstream beliefs. Most notable of these in the context of Goldberg's work, are the various survivalist groups who build underground shelters, hoard food and water in anticipation of an imminent end, hoping ultimately to survive it. Such groups may be individual families, usually of religious inclination, or mass cults with their own hierarchies and collective beliefs. Of course, the latter have many precedents. The most notable usually become infamous after incidents of murder and mass suicide.[2] As for the survivalist activities of family groups, they have been promoted numerously at various historical junctures most commonly for political purposes. During WWII British families on the 'home-front' were encouraged, not so foolishly, to construct personal bomb shelters containing food and supplies in the event that they could not make it to a group shelter. During the Cold War on the other hand, families were regularly exposed to televised advertisements on how to construct shelters to escape radiation fallout in case of nuclear detonation. These obviously served base propagandistic ends as the effects of radiation cannot be realistically contained by any amount of home-building.

The survivalism of today differs conversely in many specific ways from similar trends in the past. Now survivalism is often associated less overtly with militarism and more frequently with everyday situations that are still no less threateningly concrete. Instances of survivalism in the United States for example – where the survivalist trend has always been strongest – dramatically increased, unsurprisingly, after the subprime mortgage-lending crisis of 2007. This phenomenon resulted in many families losing their life's possessions to the opportunistically de-regulated real estate market. Otherwise, negative occurrences as disparate as the September 11 attack on New York's World Trade Center (2001), the H5N1 'Bird Flu' 'pandemic' (2006), H1N1 'Swine Flu' (2009), the BP oil spill (2010) and the Japanese earthquake and tsunami (2011) have all contributed greatly to the rise of a globalising survivalist mentality. For Goldberg though, the issue raised via the propositional post-apocalyptic scenario he constructed, relates more to interrogating the effectiveness of such methods when faced with something that could genuinely be defined an apocalypse. That is because an apocalypse, by definition, spares no one. It is totalising like Hegel's conception of history. Yet unlike Hegel's philosophy, apocalypse is completely outside history and is absolutely negative. Taking heed of this, Goldberg's installation deliberately posed a paradoxical question: who, after the apocalypse, will record it? This question signifies the absolute limit of history and of civilization.

The parallel histories Goldberg's installation conjured were not by any measure solely socio-political however. In fact, underscoring the work, as an ensemble of cumulative semiotic cues, were a range of art-historical references. Rather than reverential and rarefied these served instead to multiply the work's conceptual frames of reference. And unlike much socially conscious art of the 1980s and 1990s Goldberg's references were by no means quotational or appropriationist either. On the contrary, most of these art historical references operated subconsciously, which was fitting as they pertained mainly to the psychographic space of cinema. The foremost of these references connected with Goldberg's use of the bell, as a heavily encoded historical and cultural object. In no other film has the bell been more powerfully cast, literally and figuratively, than in Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's iconic medieval parable *Andrei Rublev*. The film produced between 1966 and 1969, is structured episodically as a series of extended poetic vignettes. Arguably the most unforgettable of these is the episode in which the bell maker's son, the only remaining member of his family recently wiped out by the plague, feigns knowledge of his father's art in an effort to survive destitution. Granted the project of casting a new bell for the city of Vladimir, the youth sets about hiring the innumerable tradesmen and labourers needed to realise this challenging task, under the sceptical eyes of the aristocratic authorities. The bell, once released from its constraining mold, ultimately emerges as a symbol of the triumph of creative faith.

Beyond this though, Goldberg's subtle invocation of Tarkovsky's masterful piece of cinema goes further. Indeed, the title of his installation *Toward a New World Order* hinted at the global order in which we live and for which, he implied, we must find an alternative. This is because the existing 'new world order' effectively medievalises the modern globe, in spite of its technological trappings. Regardless of its triumphalist economic rhetoric, the so-called 'new world order' succeeds everywhere in feudally dividing societies into 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The bell, historically a key means of communicating community bonds, appeared in Goldberg's work silenced and discarded. In this state, the bell suggested that the traditional ties of community have long been ruptured and dispersed. Of course, the fragmented medieval era that the film *Andrei Rublev* so convincingly portrays, was one in which a dominant ordering religion was simultaneously laced with terrifying threats for the illiterate masses. Graphic images of the apocalypse were endlessly repeated on the walls of churches as Christianity's means of ensuring total control over the earthly rabble. For the common folk, apocalypse and the demonic hordes that came with it were as real as material reality. Whereas for many living today, the threat of

Armageddon has waned, it has nevertheless been substituted by other more scientifically quantifiable fears. The fact that such fears correspond to scientific coordinates does not make them any less frightening though. It does not guarantee either that people will behave any less superstitiously.

Uncannily prescient to the ecological and apocalyptic themes of Goldberg's installation is another film by Tarkovsky. *Stalker* released in 1979, is particularly pertinent to Goldberg's work as both film and installation share many parallel preoccupations. *Stalker* depicts an unspecified place where a not-so-distant, yet entirely undisclosed, large-scale disaster has taken place.[3] At the heart of this post-disaster scenario, is a semi-secret region heavily guarded by the military and nicknamed 'the Zone'. The Zone is primarily attractive to survivors as it is rumoured to contain a room that will grant individuals their most private wishes. The Stalker – a reworking of the preeminent character of the Fool in Russian culture – guides those hoping to have their desires realised through the Zone's supposedly perilous terrain. Physically the Zone is an unspectacular wasteland of overgrown weeds, industrial, military and domestic ruins.[4] Metaphorically it stands, among other things, for the agency of collective memory abandoned under radically altered contemporary conditions. Curiously, in *Toward a New World Order* Goldberg created his own Zone, similarly overgrown and seemingly abandoned, containing equally loaded signifiers of a forgotten past. The Zone created by the artist, insistently encompassed by its fence, deliberately provoked curiosity by invoking the typically limited access of urban work sites. Furthermore, Goldberg's work intentionally deployed ambiguity as a critical means of thinking about the past and future.

In *Stalker*, ambiguity is a central device also: the Stalker's promise to facilitate access to the impossible is never convincingly ratified by example. Neither are his claims to special knowledge ever really proven. The Stalker therefore exists principally as a figure of hope rather than as a bankable interlocutor guaranteeing materialist (or other) gratification. The gratification Goldberg's work invited was likewise uncertain: was it the gratification of solving the work as though it were a self-contained puzzle, was it the experience of the work itself, or was it the knowledge the viewer/participant gleaned from being encouraged to realistically imagine a future end? If the latter was the case, then the promise was seriously double-edged. For Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, facing the dual scepticism of contemporary Art and Science (respectively signified by the bickering figures of 'the Writer' and 'the Scientist'),[5] the solution would seem to be a permanent retreat to the Zone, to the realm of memory and endless hypotheses. Goldberg's installation though, offered no such opportunity for withdrawal.

In the end, Goldberg's installation *Toward a New World Order* utilised multiple means to suggest a future in question. The future as essentially contested was further echoed through the overriding hollowness of the forms he chose – the bell, the lockers, the graves, the marquee and the site office. These repeatedly reiterated the hollowness of an age predicated on the vagaries of an econometrics based on the endless addition or subtraction of zeros. Such emphasis on emptiness further contradicted contemporary Western culture's unerring faith in accumulation as an unassailable value. The survivalist tendencies the work engaged as a sustaining reference were additionally revealing for the way Goldberg approached them. Rather than conveniently and automatically satirised, the artist was prepared to consider them plausible, at least in principle. Goldberg refused to view such groups as mere incontrovertible evidence of contemporary irrationality, paranoia and unbidden ignorance. This is because the root of survivalist behaviour is supported, at least partially, by scientific evidence. Before science, in medieval times, society's belief in the reality of apocalyptic demons was counter-posed by an extreme religious faith fixated on an awareness of inescapable (usually, early) extinction. Suitably, in certain parts of Europe, monks contemporaneously undertook the arduous task of chiseling from solid stone over many years, their own resting places; they literally dug their own graves.[6] Avoiding the pitfalls of moralism entirely, Goldberg nonetheless suggested that we too, as an 'advanced' culture, are slowly digging our own graves. By refusing to seriously acknowledge the ever-accelerating depletion of natural resources and the attendant ethical denuding of communal values this provokes, the artist indicated the reality of a future end that traditionally can have no end. As the 'superior' species on the planet, humans by default imagine themselves living forever. In doing so, we evade the inevitable spectre of death. Once more, personally eliding consciousness of this inevitability is a natural defense. Denying absolutely the possibility of the absolute end of the species, regardless of verifiable proof of such a possibility, is alternatively arrogant and deluded. Without hammering out such themes in a literalist manner, Goldberg's work gathered and distributed a constellation of related references. In fact, the work's structural openness discounted the absolutism of end-ism while continuing to maintain it as entirely possible, even probable. In this sense, rather than fundamentally 'negative', Goldberg's *Toward a New World Order* succeeded paradoxically in preempting the potential for genuine, far-reaching and foundational change.[7]

NOTES

1. Much work of this kind is executed under the 'relational' rubric. Most of it attempts to dissolve the productive tension between aesthetics and the potential social impact that propels art. Entirely dismissing the role of aesthetics, many projects of this ilk seek a monocular valorisation of 'life' *over* art (at the same time ignoring the contestability of the term 'life'). See Claire Bishop's essay 'The Social Turn; Collaborations and its Discontents', in *Right About Now; Art & Theory Since the 1990s*, Margriet Schavemaker and Mischa Rakier (eds), Valiz, Amsterdam, 2007.

2. Two of the most notable examples were the 'Jonestown' massacre and mass suicide of 1978 and the mass suicide of 'Heaven's Gate' believers in 1997. The latter was a Californian UFO survivalist 'religion' whose adherents believed that after death they would be united with a UFO trailing the Hale-Bopp Comet.

3. It evinces 'a general state of post-industrial and ecological collapse'. Sean Martin, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, Kamera Books, Hertfordshire, 2011, p. 62

4. Interestingly, there is a fleeting scene in *Stalker* where, as the camera pans to a darkened, overgrown corner of a wrecked building, we glimpse the skeletal remains of an embracing couple. The scene shares with Goldberg's pair of 'rock' tombs laid side by side an uncanny emphasis on intimate absence.

5. Suitably, at one point in the film, 'the Writer', sardonically played by Anatoly Solonitsyn, bemoans the excessively rationalist tedium of modern industrial capitalist culture, saying that 'to live in the Middle Ages was interesting. Every home had its house spirit and every church had its God'. See Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker* (1979), Artificial Eye (DVD), London, 2002.

6. Goldberg's tombs actually referenced the fourteenth-century hand-dug rock tombs of the Abbey of Montmajour in Provence, Southern France. From a conversation with the artist, September 2011.

7. 'The end of the world is a theme closely linked to the idea of the establishment of a new world, or a world redeemed.' Martin, op. cit., p. 63