Anthony Johnson, Eclipse

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Anthony Johnson

Eclipse


Wk 1 24 September, Saturday 2.52pm, departing from the CAST Carpark, 27 Tasma Street, Hobart.

Wk 2 1 October, Saturday 2.59pm, departing from the CAST Carpark, 27 Tasma Street, Hobart.

Wk 3 8 October, Saturday 4.07pm (DST), departing from the CAST Carpark, 27 Tasma Street, Hobart.

Wk 4 15 October, Saturday 4.16pm (DST), departing from the CAST Carpark, 27 Tasma Street, Hobart.

Curator
David Cross

Not a lot seems to happen in Anthony Johnson’s *Eclipse*. The audience were given instructions to turn up to CAST at designated times on four successive Saturday afternoons, with no other information forthcoming. Just before the precise time specified each week, a luxury coach pulled up in front of the gallery and a guide invited the waiting audience to climb on board. The bus then departed creating a distinct expectation that we were being taken somewhere – to an unspecified location, or perhaps even an event of some kind.

The bus pulled out from Tasma Street, North Hobart turned left into Argyle Street, left again into Burnett Street, then left into Elizabeth Street, before once again turning left back into Tasma Street and pulling up where we started less than five minutes before. Nothing of any significance seemed to happen throughout the trip. The guide then thanked the audience who disembarked mostly bemused as to what had just transpired. With what seemed to be precious little to recover from the work, the audience left with the sense or hope that potentially more would be revealed in the coming weeks.

Cut to the following Saturday, and the audience once again are waiting with perhaps a slightly heightened sense of expectation. Seven minutes later than the previous week, the coach once again arrives with the same guide and amiable driver. As before, the audience boards and waits before the driver pulls out and the journey starts again. Any hopes of a different scenario are quickly dashed as the coach turns left and begins to chart exactly the same course ‘round the block’ as the week before. Once again in under five minutes the audience are deposited back at CAST even more nonplussed than the previous week. Is this a work about nothing, a strange amalgam of *Groundhog Day* and *Waiting for Godot* where the audience are locked in a peculiar staging of banal repetition? Is the artist building the tension to a final dénouement, or are we missing something crucial? Curiously, *Eclipse* managed to both excite and bore in equal measure, consistently deferring the audience’s need to ‘get’ the work and thereby allow a certain narrative closure.

Weeks three and four take place in much the same way, the only differences being the incrementally later time of departure of eight and nine minutes respectively. Yet the audiences approach has begun to shift. Less compelled by the onboard conviviality, they are far more attuned to the assorted occurrences taking place on the streets of North Hobart on a Saturday afternoon. ‘Wasn’t that taxi there last week?’, ‘That’s the lady with the dog!’, ‘Did we see that guy washing the same window last week?’ The audience begin to talk to themselves and their fellow travellers simultaneously. Seemingly out of nowhere the audience is alive to the world the bus is moving through. Pushing visual acuity and memory, Johnson interrogates the experience of *déjà vu* by constructing a complex, if meticulously subtle, theatricality of repeated actions, movements and gestures performed by a large, but crucially indeterminate, cast of people.
Critical Response  
Seán Kelly

**A Journey without a Destination**

We know where to meet – CAST car park. We know we are going somewhere. The destination is not provided. We arrive and encounter a huge silver luxury coach parked outside the CAST office. A small group of people gathers. A woman in a nice uniform with a clipboard smiles reassuringly and advises the departure time. It’s a Mystery Tour.

2:42pm is the specified gathering time. This is what we have, expectations, anticipation. A shimmer of contained excitement runs through the group.

2:52pm departure time. I have addressed the passengers with some bonhomie as I make my way to my seat. I am a little excited it seems. Most of us would never have been in a coach like this; it’s the type they reserve for the European tour. It has drop-down monitors and a camera on the front, just like a plane. Foldaway footrests and comfy seats. We are taking photos of the interior of the bus. We are very interested in our new world, like new fish tipped into an aquarium.

We move off and begin to chatter and settle into it. Left into Argyle, (it’s one-way so that makes sense). Then left again into Burnett (a two-way street). Those who already know the artist’s work must now be a little suspicious. Left again into Elizabeth (another two-way street). Left again into Tasma. We arrive again in front of CAST. The bus stops, the door opens, hesitation – we alight.

The fog clears, the dust settles and ultimately John Cage’s ‘4’ 33’’’ comes to mind, a performance of which I call up on YouTube soon after. It has over 7000 ‘Like’ hits and just over 2000 ‘Don’t Like’ hits. The experience is clarified – Mystery – Anticipation – Excitement – Adventure – Dénoument.

The bus is called Isabella. I think of the Queen of Portugal as I take a photograph. I think of Columbus, of his great mistake and how the Chinese were Indians, of how America was still waiting to be discovered anyway. How these famous mistakes became his final prize. I even think of Amerigo Vespucci and can’t remember what he did.

**Déjà Vu**

I saw it quoted in a book I picked up in the bin at the Salvation Army about the making of *Exile on Main Street* – ‘It’s déjà vu all over again’. Technically though I don’t regard that as a tautology.
Departure point – same place, CAST car park. There’s Isabella, our luxury coach parked in exactly the same spot. There’s the nice lady in the uniform with the clipboard. There’s the same driver and here’s the group of travellers, many the same as last week. This week there’s a different departure time 2:59pm. Last week it was 2:52pm. I had checked the two remaining departure times and they were different. Before setting off today I checked the differences in the times. Was the incremental rate the same? No. Did the totals of the gaps reveal a clue? No. The total of the differences? No. The grand total? Still no. This is a mystery but it’s also a game, and a compelling one.

We head off, into Argyle, left into Burnett, left into Elizabeth and left into Tasma, just like last week. It’s only approaching the intersection of Argyle and Burnett that the penny drops. This time I really look; I mean vulture eyes. I don’t know what I’m looking for; I think it must be difference, the unfamiliar. Yes, he’s doing to my eyes what Cage did to my ears. I’m staring holes into the familiar streetscape. We are high up – is it high? Is it a message, resembling a band poster in the pub window? Is it an altered sign? Is it some juxtaposition? Is it semiotic? Semioptic?

We arrive and a clue has appeared. I re-run the trip and I think I have it; I’m sure I have it but I won’t know until next week and I can’t reveal it anyway. If you have not been on this trip there is no point going on the last one but maybe, if you are sharper than me, you will get it in two. That is of course assuming that I am right. I’m still not sure myself and it will take the third trip to know.

Where I had perhaps been hoping that each trip would be different I now need them to be exactly the same. Then I’ll know. If I’m wrong I’ll still have the artist to thank for the Augenblick that ate North Hobart but I know there’s more.

**Shadowing**

I’d arrived early, about 20 minutes before the 4.07 departure time. I noticed Anthony Johnson getting into his car. Then I watched from the side street as he pulled away. The temptation to follow him was overwhelming. I watched him drive around the corner. What to do? I could follow and I might learn something, but I might learn something I really wanted to find out the hard way. I gave in to the impulse, pulled my hat low, donned my sunglasses (although it was raining), and pulled out into the traffic. He was about four cars ahead; I was in the middle lane. He turned right into Burnett Street and then the better me killed off the gumshoe me, so I turned left instead. Those few seconds of tailing were sweet and seductive but this was no way to learn. Which satisfaction is greater: the demystification or the deconstruction? I chose the latter. Olivia (again), the nice lady (sans clipboard, apparently insignificant). People boarding. I put my earphones on, turned Josh Ritter up high, took my seat alone at the front of the bus. Spoke to no one and off we went.
Route the same, all exactly as before. Then I saw it, then I saw another and another. Three confirmed sightings – unequivocal. I knew, there was no doubt, this layer was revealed. Had there been more of them? Were there other layers? Both of these questions will hold till next week but I knew that the riddle was solved. And then finally that one, just as before. Case closed?

On the bus I'd got to thinking about how we construct the world, how all relations, all collaborative conceits, originate in the imagination. We can orchestrate the world; we do it all the time. The artist constructs a conceit, it is articulated, and from that point a series of implications follow. We conceive and that idea alters lives. This idea could have stayed inside the artist’s mind but no, it is out in the world and constructing action in the lives of others. We are all implicated, David had an idea, gave that to Anthony who had an idea which he gave to me and now I’m sitting on a bus in the rain and the better part of my brain is playing this game. We all act out of the brains of others.

The Reveal

Now I can tell you. Anthony Johnson created a work which, on first experiencing it, seemed to be almost nothing at all. Imagine this – a four-minute ride around the block and return to the point of departure. Most of my focus was inside the bus at times but no matter how hard I'd been looking I still would have seen nothing out of the ordinary. Life just went on and we just circled the block. For me it played straight back into Johnson's offbeat, wry humour and I was kept scrambling for any other thing to hang this experience on. Like many writers I thought I had to fill a vacuum with some small shred of associative meaning, which I did, and which was correct. But I could not escape the feeling of having been a little short changed. I thought of other things I'd seen which were just as slight or less, and put it down to a gesture. (Don't even go near the value of the taxpayer’s money.)

The second iteration would, I hoped, be different. It wasn't; in fact it was identical – perhaps too identical. The same Maxi Cab stood on the bus parking area as last week. Then I remembered that the window cleaner had been cleaning the lighting shop windows last week and was again this week – odd, but hardly implausible, even given the shift forward in the departure time. I also seemed to recall that older lady with the dog who crossed in front of the bus at Tasma Street, and wasn’t there a young woman with a baby at Burnett Street and what about that guy on the scooter who turned into Tasma Street as we were pulling out?

The third iteration was conclusive. The cab was there, scooter guy came around the corner, the woman and the baby were crossing, and the man was cleaning the windows, the older lady and her dog all were in the same places doing the same things. I had noted others but needed to wait a week to confirm. The guy looking
at the car in the car yard, the girl with the bike, the girl texting as she walked up the street, the guy in the hoodie and so on, the girl with the movie camera, and there were more.

At the fourth iteration some of these characters reappeared but some did not. I wondered how many there could be but this game was over.

Nikos Papastergiadis made the point that contemporary art used to use the everyday as a source, an influence; now, he asserts, it uses the everyday *constitutively*. The sheer elegance of the complex choreography and meticulous crafting of this work are crucial to its success. The concept expressed in the most artless way. By that I mean lacking artifice. All drama, spectacle or any overt intervention have been eschewed and that is the reason why it is an enormously satisfying work – slow to unfold but rich in its rewards. My whole second journey was spent looking for the ‘intervention’ but it was too subtle, to embedded to show itself in any overt way.

That this work was produced without anything identifying it as art also assists in proving that entering public space and public time and not only creating an intervention or insertion that on the face of it is ‘real’ and ‘natural’ is the sweetest form of subversion, and entirely seductive in its manner of worming itself into one’s consciousness.

Finally, all the subtexts are still relevant – John Cage in particular. The artist told me that when the bus movies were edited down the mean average time was 4 minutes and 33 seconds – what an unforeseen elegant and entirely appropriate symmetry.