

On Looking at Looking

E-catalogue essay by Rebecca Coates for 'The space between us: Anne Landa Award for Video and New Media Art' curated by Charlotte Day, Art Gallery of NSW, 2013.

In many Latin countries the early evening *passegiata* is an established part of life. Participants in this well-dressed ambulatory stroll are both objects of a collective gaze and viewers looking on; as much as one is there to check out the scene, one also becomes part of a larger system of object and gaze. This cultural practice has its parallels in the act of viewing art in art museums.

Both the *passegiata* and art museums have an inherent aspect of spectacle involved. In both the movement, method and intent are consciously and unconsciously choreographed. Like the social tradition of the *passegiata*, gallery visits are bound by their own set of procedures and rules – both written and unsaid. While the art museum of old was often governed by a set of don'ts – don't run, don't touch the art, don't yell – behaviours today are less clearly defined, largely due to the changing role of the art museum and its audiences.

Laresa Kosloff's video made for the Anne Landa Prize, *Eternal situation* 2013, offers a new perspective on the age-old tradition of looking, and looking at art. How do people look at art, what do they see, how do they behave in the gallery, and why do they go? She humorously engages with the broader questions inherent in a form of institutional critique. A much-used term, institutional critique has evolved since the 1990s to describe an analysis of the role and function of the gallery and art museum in contemporary art.

Over a period of days Kosloff observed and filmed visitors to permanent collections of the colonial and 19th-century Australian works and European old masters in the Grand Courts galleries of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Using an SLR camera, and indistinguishable from many visitors similarly kitted out, Kosloff became part of the museum frame, virtually invisible to fellow users of the gallery space. She captured both the pathos and the ordinariness with which visitors look at art. Against a background of masterpiece paintings, Victorian narratives, scenes laden with sentiment, ponderous sculptures and landscapes of *sturm und drang* (storm and stress), the actions of visitors can appear poignant, amusing, pedestrian or simply absurd. It is not a cruel gaze, however. Kosloff set the repeating footage of visitors looking – and not looking – at works of art to the musical refrains of Whitney Houston's 1990s classic love ballad 'I have nothing'. Houston exhorts, 'Don't walk away from me ... Don't you dare walk away from me-e-eeee! ... I have nothing, nothing, nothing, if I don't have youoooooo ... you-oooo-oooo- ooo-ooooo!' The sentiments are appropriate, not only for the newly animated works on the AGNSW walls, but also perhaps for the artist herself.

Kosloff brings the very business of looking at art to the fore. Visitors' studied and unconscious gestures and actions, from posing in front of sculptures to the act of simply walking away from works of art, are all captured through her lens. Similarities of form and shape, action and gaze are emphasised and brought into sharper relief

through the editing and framing processes that create narrative emphasis and momentum.

Storytelling has always been part of our lives. Kosloff's weaving of digital images through the editorial process acknowledges our contemporary obsession with narrating our subjective days through social media, capturing the minutiae of experience on cameras, smart phones and other hand-held devices. Collaged images accompanied by music are a well-established format for both amateur and professional videos of weddings, birthdays and other significant personal events. Kosloff acknowledges these recent filmic histories, and creates a video 'performance' of life in the museum that questions the provisional nature of the video medium itself.

YouTube, image-sharing websites and online social networks have all given amateur and non-professional reflections about art and other subjects newfound prominence and weight. But how much time is spent actually looking? One recent Tate Gallery survey revealed that the average viewer looks at a painting for less than two seconds, spends another ten seconds on the wall text, looks briefly at the painting again and then moves to the next. New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art established that their visitors' average was a little longer, at 23 seconds. A similar survey at the Louvre found that people look at the Mona Lisa 1503–06 for an average of 15 seconds. In all, time spent looking is distressingly brief.

Looking at art still matters, though the motivations are not always pure. A recent Tate Gallery survey found that the experience of viewing great works of art, including paintings by 18th-century English landscape artists JMW Turner and John Constable, or the 15th-century Florentine Sandro Botticelli, could give viewers the same pleasure as being in love; but it's not always so. Beyond the experience of viewing art, visitor surveys reveal that art museums and galleries also have social functions – they are ideal places to catch up with friends, to spend time as a family or even to conduct a first date.