



# Focus

## Until You Find You Are Beginning to Lose Focus

### JOEL STERN

One of the *Fresh Cut 2013* invitation cards reproduced an image of Caitlin Franzmann's performance-sculpture *Focus*, a collaboration with Courtney Coombs.<sup>1</sup> It shows two women wearing black helmets that are bolted together by a metal rod, locking them in a mutual face-off. From outside, their relationship seems symmetrical and balanced, their positions mirrored. However, from inside their helmets, each participant can only see the eyes of the other staring back. Further, what can't be seen is equally important. Embedded in each helmet is a different audio track, 'one directs attention to the act of looking, the other heightens the awareness of being looked at'. What comes into focus, then, is the fluctuating dynamic of simultaneously looking and being seen, the imbalance and asymmetry of social interaction.

It was an interesting choice of image for the card, because, in many ways, Franzmann's *Fresh Cut* project, *Dissolve*, is the antithesis of *Focus*, while nevertheless including many aspects from it. To dissolve is to break up a solid, to transform a concrete structure into a form more abstract or diffuse. It is also to terminate, to bring to an end. So, what is being dissolved in this work? And, into what does it dissolve?

*Dissolve* includes six helmets. The black design used in *Focus* has been upgraded to a more 'futuristic' stark-white look. The six streamlined orbs are displayed on a glowing platform. They are not joined, but separate, relaxing the enforced eye contact of *Focus*. Participants are free to put on a helmet, to move independently through the gallery spaces, to look at and not look at other participants. As in *Focus*, speakers embedded in the helmets play back audio compositions, collaging original and found material. Three different compositions each play in two of the helmets. The compositions sample hypnotherapeutic recordings that directly address the listener. One begins in monotone: 'Picture a point in the room. Concentrate on the point. Focus until you find you are beginning to lose focus.' This message elucidates the manner in which *Dissolve* both dissolves and extends the binary relational focus of *Focus*. The 'point in the room' no longer points to another helmet-wearer but to the space, in this case the essentially empty gallery. Deliberately bereft of distinguishing features, the space resists focusing—there's nothing to focus on. In the light of this, we inevitably return to the voices in (on) our heads. One such voice instructs us: 'Feel the wave of relaxation gently flowing over your scalp, across your forehead.'

In audio terminology, a 'dissolve' is a gradual transition or cross-fade between two sounds. More specifically, it is the in-between moment in which prior and successive states are simultaneously present. The in-between is a recurring motif for Franzmann, suggested in the titles of previous works: *Focus* being the moment of concentration preceded and followed by distraction and *Hold*<sup>2</sup> being the action between picking up and letting go. In *Dissolve*, this in-between-ness involves the experience of being at once in the isolating bubble of the helmet and in the shared social space of the gallery, an odd interpenetration of public and private realms.

This 'isolation within a social space' recalls Austrian artist Peter Kubelka's seminal *Invisible Cinema Theatre* installed at Anthology Film Archive, New York, in 1970, which visually separated film-viewers from each other, focusing their attention entirely towards the screen. In *Invisible Cinema Theatre*, the viewer's pod is a refuge free of distraction, with the site of communion being the screen where all the action occurs. By contrast, *Dissolve*'s communal

public space—the gallery—is strikingly empty and quiet, while the interior private spaces, the participants' heads, are activated and full of noise.

Although we can move through the room, our heads remain fixed in a protective 'housing'—the helmet. In this sense, the work also produces, within the expansive architecture of the gallery, a second, massively 'compressed' architecture—reduced in scale, immutably enclosing the head, shielding it from the outside world. This extreme reduction of space into circumscribed 'spaces within the space' found expression in previous Franzmann works; for instance, *Space of a Moment*,<sup>3</sup> in which a gallery hallway—another in-between space—was narrowed by half its width and height to create a smaller passage, inside the existing one. Such architectural interventions serve a dual purpose; obviously, they construct a protective barrier separating us from outside elements (helmets safeguard heads from accident), but, more importantly, Tardis-like, they seek to massively expand and metaphorically unlock the smaller interior space. Another message from the inner voice: 'Air at my back, air at my skin, an aeon of ocean, roaring within.'

*Dissolve* reveals its essential proposition in its second room, also free of objects, but illuminated by a light-box, installed flush in the wall. The pure-white luminescent rectangle, a classic 'image of nothing', but full of art-historical antecedents (notably Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*, 1964), draws together the most significant and complex aspects of the work. Its bare geometry brings to mind a compressed, secondary, two-dimensional reiteration of the gallery; it reflects the image of the gallery back on itself (a mirror). It reminds us that Franzmann's project is, partly, to ask how people move and interrelate in the space and light of a gallery. However, as a transcendental image (a window), its radiant light transfigures the space, expanding and unlocking its dimensions in the manner of a portal. This back-and-forth, between the body and the gallery, the concrete and the cosmic, is both mesmerising and disorienting. We stand in our helmets in the dissolve between these two spaces.

1. Backdoor Gallery at Room 60, Brisbane, 2013. 2. Level, Brisbane, 2012. 3. A-CH Gallery, Brisbane, 2013.

Joel Stern is an artist and curator based in Melbourne. He founded the curatorial agencies OtherFilm and Disembraining and has been responsible for festivals, exhibitions, screenings, concerts, recordings, and publications in Australia and beyond. He and Danni Zuvella are Artistic Directors of *Liquid Architecture*.

IMAGE INSIDE Caitlin Franzmann and Courtney Coombs *Focus* 2012.  
IMAGE OUTSIDE Caitlin Franzmann *Dissolve* 2013. Photo: Richard Stringer.

**IMA**  
Institute of  
Modern Art

Director Robert Leonard  
General Manager Hamish Sawyer  
Gallery Manager Dhana Merritt  
Exhibitions Officer Ross Manning  
Bookkeeper Jewel Mackenzie  
Editor Evie Franzidis  
Communications Karika Ashworth

420 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley  
PO Box 2176, Fortitude Valley BC, QLD 4006  
p: 07 3252 5750 f: 07 3252 5072  
e: ima@ima.org.au www.ima.org.au

© 2013, IMA, the author, and artist. *Fresh Cut 2013* was supported by a Creative Sparks grant from Brisbane City Council and Arts Queensland.



IMA receives financial assistance from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland (Major Sponsor), from the Visual Arts and Craft Board of the Australia Council (the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body), and through the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy (an initiative of the Australian Federal, State, and Territory Governments). IMA is a member of CAOs, Contemporary Arts Organisations Australia.