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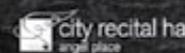
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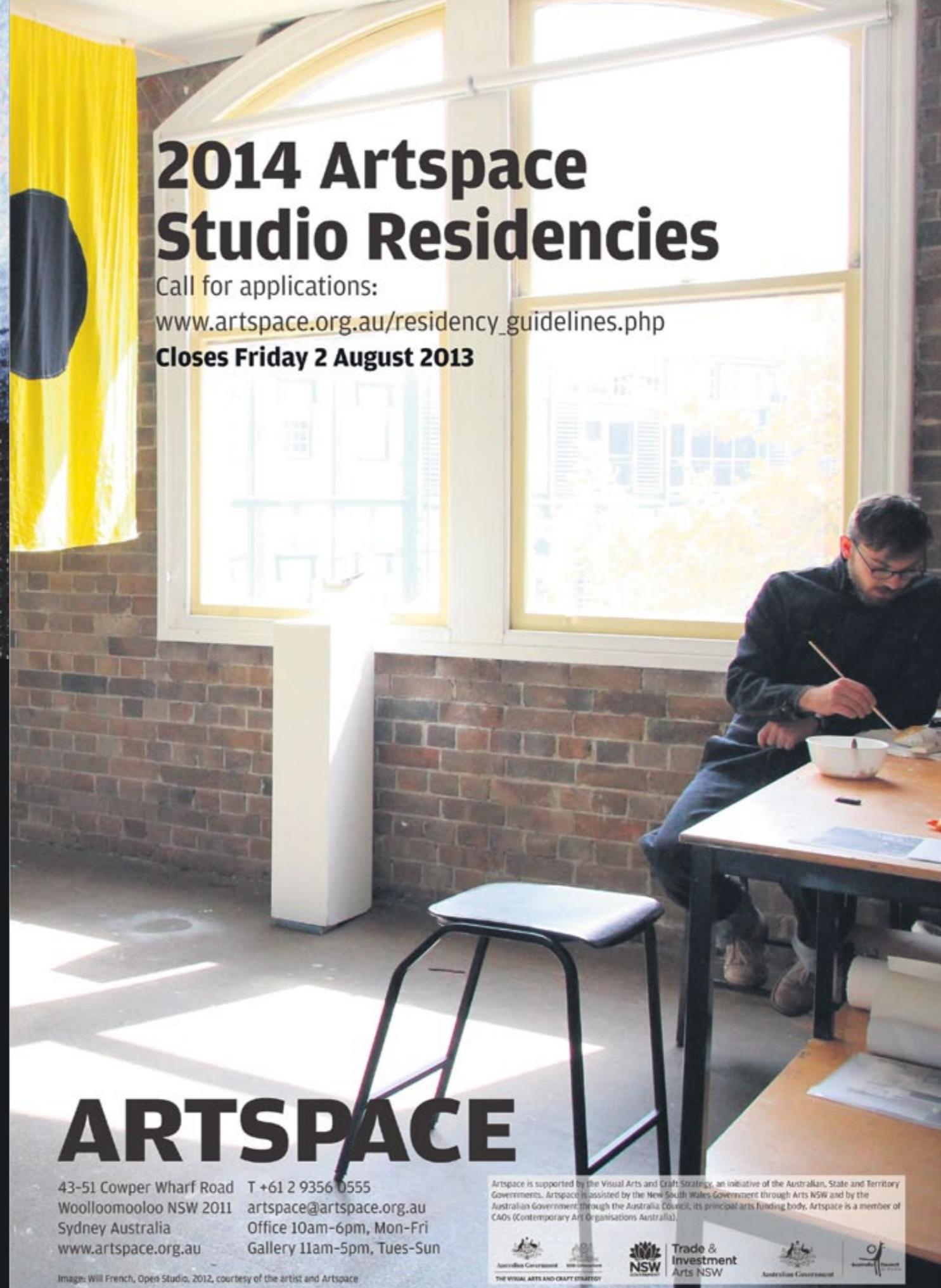
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THE BODY POLITIC

Foreword

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the relationship between art and politics, with several key texts published on the subject and major exhibitions, festivals and biennales addressing the issue. Much has been written on the topic, with critics for the most part lining up on two opposing sides; on the one hand we have those commentators critical of “activist art”, scathing of its apparent lack of aesthetic consideration, and on the other we have those who advocate socially-engaged, relational or participatory art practices as a means to challenge existing social norms. This issue of *Das Superpaper* could be considered a propositional publication, navigating the terrain between and around these competing positions. Most of the artists featured in this issue would not consider themselves to be activist artists – with a few notable exceptions – but nevertheless their work encourages political analysis.

What connects these artists is their engagement with the body as a site of encounter, whether this is through bodies on display or through implied bodies (either within the artwork or those of the audience). Many of the selected works address the politics of representation, directly exploring how artists engage with questions of gender, sexuality and race; markers of identity that are anchored in various ways to the body and which can see the body become a site of contestation. But can this kind of art effect change, in particular in relation to sexism, homophobia and racism?

Foucault has argued that it is through our bodies that we are systematically repressed. He gave the term *biopower* to the “set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power”¹. *Biopower* is a technology of power that facilitates the management and control of populations through a range of disciplinary institutions which foster normalisation, such as schools, hospitals, prisons and the defence force. This kind of normalisation perpetuates the divisions and prejudices in society, such as sexism, racism and homophobia. The artists in this edition all pose a challenge to this method of control by challenging the tropes of this normalisation.

The artists have used a range of methodologies to challenge this normalisation of the body, this biopower, ranging from the humorous to the confronting, the absurd to the poignant, and many permutations in between. Kate Britton looks at the “ethico-political” work of Santiago Sierra as a form of “territorial realism”, where an aesthetic formalism is overlaid on real bodies and real situations. The exploited and territorialised bodies in Sierra’s work come uncomfortably close to the various forms of exploitation that exists under capitalism, piercing the anaesthetised, pristine space of the white cube and confronting the viewer. Marco Fusinato’s recent works often rely on audience discomfort, but rather than territorialising the bodies of his paid subjects, Fusinato’s works implicate the bodies of the audience in an immersive spectacle that demands a corporeal response. Fusinato’s earlier work commented on the politics of resistance through an active engagement with anarchist politics, but as Michael Ashcroft notes, late capitalism has come to cater for individual self-expression and creativity in a way that integrates the goals of revolutionary movements, sanitising and repackaging resistance as a consumable product and increasing the challenge to avoid artistic co-option. Kate Mitchell’s practice reminds us of the relationship between art, bodies and work and the absurdity and futility of artistic labour under our current economic system. As a woman performing repetitive work tasks, one can’t help but think of the role gender plays in conceptions of labour when witnessing Mitchell’s work. Several other articles address the politics of gender within contemporary artistic practice, including Clare Rae’s article on the recent exhibition *Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art* at VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery; Deborah Kelly’s

anthropomorphic challenges to the gendered body; and Tess Maunder’s article on the professional development needs of women artists and arts workers. In a related manner, The Kingpins and Leigh Bowery challenge expectations of gender and corporeal totality through performance and the subversive nature of altered bodies. Nic Tammens’ piece on the agit-femme art rock group Pussy Riot is perhaps the most overtly political article in this edition, highlighting how a conservative state can reassert its identity through the oppression of an avant-garde feminist group. Other artists like Eugenia Lim and Paul Knight take a quieter look at the body and social engagement, investigating the relationship between intimacy, the body and the everyday in the contemporary moment. While Knight’s practice involves a vernacular look at queer intimacy, Paul Yore’s work is a kaleidoscopic paean to experimental sexualities and uninhibited play. Yore recommends the use of psychotropic substances as a methodology for the reimagining of self, which is arguably reflected in his playful, psychedelic, decidedly queer works. Richard Bell’s practice also employs a playful humour, albeit in a more antagonistic way. Bell contests the historical (and persisting) injustices against Aboriginal Australians and the contemporary prejudices held about them. Kelly Fliedner discusses his distinctive use of abrasive humour to highlight the oppression of Aboriginal people. Yhonnie Scarce also creates confronting works about Aboriginal history, but instead of humour Scarce uses a seductive aesthetic to draw in the viewer to her fine blown glass works. Her works confront such important historical issues as the stolen generation, Aboriginal deaths in custody and the colonisation of Australia. Christian Thompson also engages with historical material relating to colonisation, with his recent series *We Bury Our Own* enacting a form of “spirit repatriation” by creating works in response to the archive of photographs of Aboriginal Australians dating back to the mid-nineteenth century in the collection of the Pitts River Museum in Oxford, UK. Finally, Helen Johnson’s work investigates the body and identity through figural painting. In her most recent series she has shunned her usual subject matter in favour of paintings of islands, which serve not as the tropical paradise they promise to be, but as a “repository of Australian shame... the place where Tasmanian colonists sent Indigenous Tasmanians to perish, the place where we indefinitely detain asylum seekers”.

In considering the range of works included in this issue, I must say that I agree with Paul Yore when he states – and I’m paraphrasing – that when restricted to an institutional or gallery context, artists can merely comment on pressing socio-historical concerns. Controversial though it may be to some to make such a suggestion, art is not a substitute for political action. Art will not overthrow a corrupt system. Art will not liberate an oppressed people. But art exists in a dialectical relationship to society. The art of the day is therefore a reflection of the dominant culture at the time and a force influencing the dominant culture. It is through discourse then that these influences can be felt and thus through discourse and engagement that artists can hope to highlight, challenge and reflect the exploitative, oppressive and discriminatory aspects of our culture. This issue of *Das Superpaper* highlights the various methodologies that a selection of artists attempting to resist the status quo use. It is neither encyclopaedic nor a cross-section of current practices. Instead of a destination this edition is another beginning in the discourse around the politics of contemporary art practice involving the body, one hopefully pointing in an outward direction.

BY DREW PETTIFER

¹. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007: 1.

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Issue 27

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SANTIAGO SIERRA: The Docile Body

FACE THE CORNER

It's hard to remain passive in front of a Santiago Sierra work. In fact, sometimes it's just plain hard to remain. Over the eleven days of Kaldor Public Art Projects' recent *13 Rooms* show, for example, Sierra's *Veterans of the Wars of Afghanistan, Timor Leste, Iraq & Vietnam Face the Corner* (2013) was consistently one of the only rooms without a queue to enter, yet was frequently referenced as a standout work.

The work is interesting in the context of *13 Rooms* for its sparseness; it was the only room in which a lone interpreter was completely without prop, whether that was a bicycle seat, another figure, or simply a plinth. In Sierra's work, a lone returned soldier (actual, not symbolic) stands in military pose, their face to the corner of the white cube room, unresponsive to audience members.

What the work did, it seemed, was carve out a space of such silence, gravity and weight, that audiences felt stifled to the point of discomfort far sooner than in other rooms, even that of Abramović's unsettling *Luminosity* (1997). The stark, unflinching aesthetic of the *Veterans...* series is typical of Sierra's practice, which takes strength from an ability to produce work that is simultaneously brutal and compelling.

Several aspects of *Veterans of the Wars of Afghanistan, Timor Leste, Iraq & Vietnam Face the Corner* (2013) mark it as synecdochic of Sierra's practice. There is the use of the live interpreter, paid basic local wage to perform an action devised by the artist; the ethico-political character of the work; the minimalist aesthetic; and what I'd like to formulate, for lack of a better term, as the 'territorial realism' of the work.

REAL TERRITORIES

A few examples will suffice to give a sense of the power of Sierra's practice, though not perhaps of its complexity. Given the mire of ethical territories into which it insistently strays, to assume to grasp it in any rigid way is likely to miss the point. Nonetheless, some description is prudent. Let us take three works as indicative of a practice that is consistently confronting, ethically ambiguous, and compelling.

- (a) *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* (2000). Six political exiles that legally cannot be paid are remunerated in secret for remaining in a cardboard box four hours a day for six weeks. They are thus hidden from the audience, yet can be heard and sensed through the flimsy cardboard walls.
- (b) *Economical Study on the Skin of Caracans*. The backs of ten people who declare to own US\$0 are photographed. A median greyscale is produced from these photos. Afterwards, the backs of ten people declaring to own US\$1,000 are photographed and another median tone established. Finally, the backs of ten people who declare to own US\$1,000,000 are photographed and a median tone established. The value of each greyscale tone is then deduced. The value of the colour black is calculated to be minus US\$2,106. The value of the colour white is calculated to be US\$11,548,415.
- (c) *160cm Line Tattooed on Four People* (2000). Four prostitutes addicted to heroin are paid the worth of a hit of heroin to consent to having a single straight line tattooed across their backs, measuring 160cm in total. This process is documented.

THE BODY POLITIC

For Rancière, the aesthetic pertains to the 'distribution of the sensible'.¹ Questions of what is seen and heard and what is not are not only aesthetic; they are also political. The 'aesthetic' division of things into parts and positions (temporally, spatially, culturally) "determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution".²

In each of the works described above, questions of such distribution and participation are at the fore. In *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* perhaps most of all, the politics of visibility are played out in front of us. There is a profound sense of discomfort created through the tension between the awareness that figures are hidden in the stifling boxes, and the inability to see them, a discomfort that extends to our own position in relationship to the hidden exiles.

For Sierra, the politics of aesthetics is brought to the fore not only through an interplay of the seen and unseen, but also through the distribution of labour and wealth, and the ways in which this is inscribed on our bodies. In *160cm Line Tattooed on Four People*, the artist forces us to consider the worth of our own bodies – would we accept the payment, which equated to approximately US\$67, to have our own back tattooed? If not, how do we differ to the women performing the work?

Economical Study on the Skin of Caracans similarly places us in an uncomfortable position with the proposition that a monetary value can be placed on the colour of our skin, not so subtly eliciting the realisation that there is often a relation between skin colour and social positioning, and raising the question of why – how complicit are we in the system that has created these 'values'?

Sierra's practice continually insists that the aesthetic, the political and the embodied are not discrete domains. Rather, the political (viz. the aesthetic distribution of 'self-evident facts') is inscribed on our bodies. In Sierra's work, socially or politically marginalised or 'invisible' bodies are placed in exploitive environments – hidden, tattooed, shaved, sprayed with toxic chemicals, (de)valued. These exploited bodies stand in stark relation to the bodies that (fail to) interact with them – the bodies of audiences forced into uncomfortable awareness of their own passivity, the body of the artist himself, conspicuously absent yet always implicated.

Indeed, Sierra's work can be considered as unrelentingly biopolitical in that it forces a confrontation between bodies and politics. Almost his entire career has been devoted to this idea of the political body, the body politic. What is happening aesthetically, however, bears just as much consideration. Sierra's use of real people in his works places it outside the realm of traditional performance in visual art. Its ethical ambiguity lends an uneasy relationship to activist art also. In forcing audiences to consider their own relationship with the bodies he presents, Sierra also implicates himself, the privileged artist earning big bucks while paying minimum or no wage.

At the end of the day, it is this insistent *reality* of his work that characterises the aesthetic experience. The real is thrust upon unsuspecting gallery-goers, aggressively reclaiming what has traditionally been thought of as the domain of the imaginary, forcing a new set of relations on us, a new 'distribution of the sensible'.

TERRITORIAL REALISM

It is this overlaying of the real on the imaginary or aesthetic (and vice versa) that I refer to as territorial realism, and that I posit characterises the aesthetic in Sierra's work. In *160cm Line Tattooed on Four People*, the formal aesthetic device of the tattooed line is quite literally laid over the bodies of the four prostitutes, and yet it is the reality of having live bodies (with their accompanying histories) that gives the work its aesthetic presence. The reality of these women and their stories inevitably becomes the content of the work, the line merely the aesthetic trigger by which we come to this point. This reality has territorialised the minimalism of the line, taken it for its own.

In *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, the real bodies are hidden from us, yet their very invisibility weighs heavily on the work, until the boxes themselves become nothing more than markers of the unseen, their own aesthetic presence having been absorbed by the bodies they hide. Likewise *Economical Study on the Skin of Caracans* infuses the minimal aesthetic of close-up photographs of backs and their subsequent reduction to a median greyscale with the slicing realism of the monetary valuation, forcing a very different aesthetic engagement with the images with which we are presented than might otherwise have been elicited.

In *Veterans of the Wars of Afghanistan, Timor Leste, Iraq & Vietnam Face the Corner*, this aesthetic project seems to have progressed, having obliterated formal aesthetic elements almost entirely. Gone are the minimalist lines, boxes, and colour scales of previous works. Here, we are presented only with a figure, a real soldier in a professional posture, performing a task that seems in this context so pointless we are compelled to ask ourselves if in fact it ever has point.

Here, realism has won the battle. The real is the aesthetic, and vice versa, quid pro quo. What Rancière tells, Sierra shows, his territorial realism precisely the aesthetic proper to an exploration of the distribution of the sensible. The message of both is clear: art, politics, bodies and identities are never very far apart. At every turn they muddy each other, implicate and insinuate themselves on each other, bind together to form the stuff we call reality. The territory has reclaimed the map.

BY KATE BRITTON

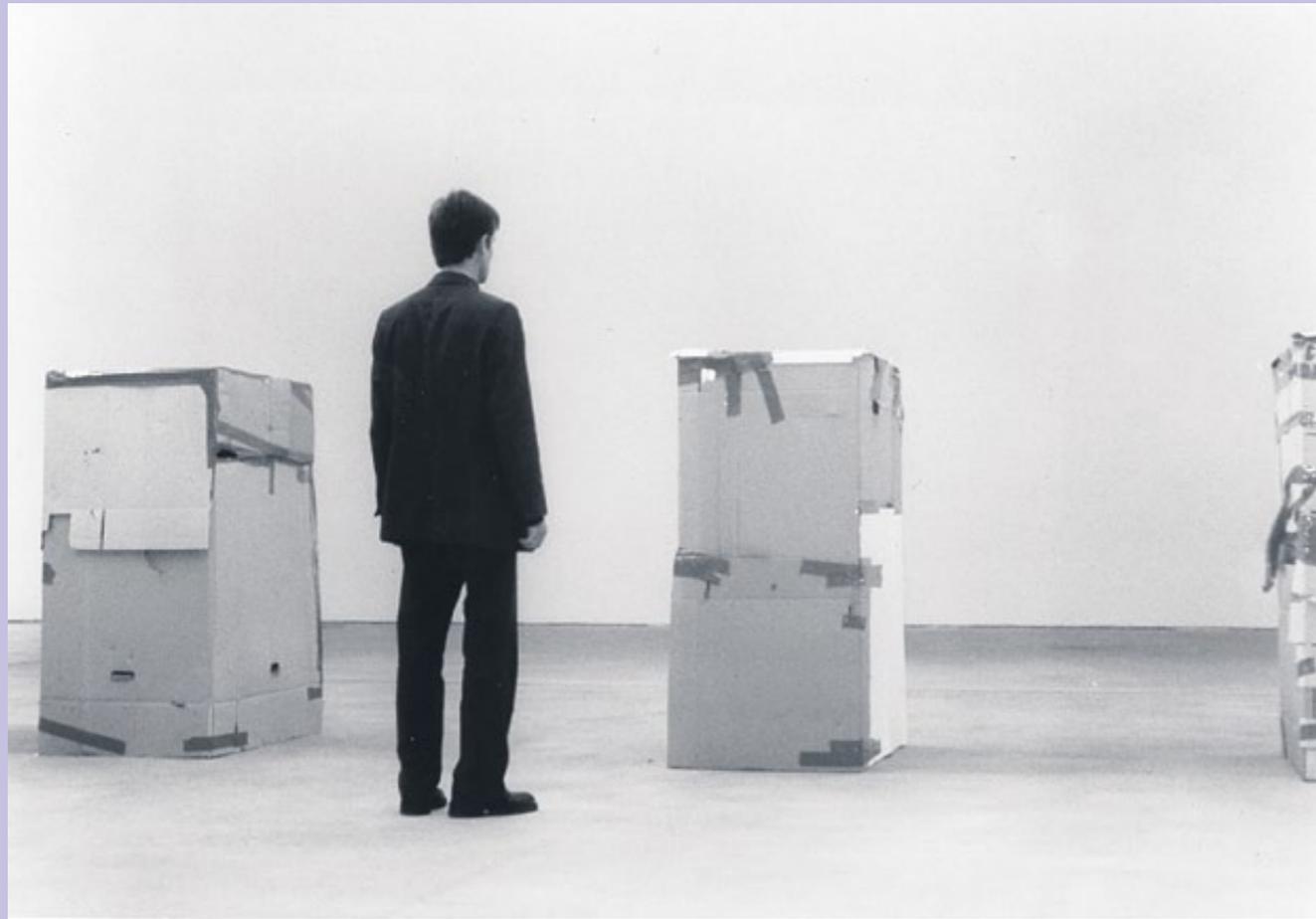
1. Rancière, J. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Bloomsbury.
2. Ibid. p7.



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• |
*Workers Who Cannot Be Paid,
 Remunerated to Remain Inside
 Cardboard Boxes (2000)*



• |
*160cm Line Tattooed
 on Four People (2000).*
 All images courtesy the artist
 and Greenaway Art Gallery

MARCO FUSINATO: Edict and Impulse

Following a basically chronological order, this article looks at Marco Fusinato's practice, beginning with some of his earliest work. Keeping in mind the main shifts that have occurred in his career, it tries to bring out some of the key ideas that underlie it, separate from the political resonances of his work, and by generally leaving his music to one side.

After art school, Fusinato's first work comprised a series of improvisations in painting carried out according to a set of simple rules. Intended to prohibit the development of technique and to make them responsive to the here-and-now in which they were made, this idea takes over formalism's truth to materials, but from a different perspective: that unlearning how to recognise the authority of taste and skill allows you to discover what is most readily and recognisably art. It is a readymade idea of art, but with the accent on the tangibility of the thing, on what is most literally (and figuratively) graspable about the art object. But this body of work also represents the outcome of a kind of ascetic project. One that follows the logic of self-rule and self-sufficiency, the attitude of DIY, anarchism, and punk music; an asceticism that is concerned not with religion, but with the "elementary generation of reality", as the critic Ben Curnow said of it – although there is a sort of ritual seriousness to this work all the same.

For several years Fusinato only exhibited red monochromes, painted quickly and evenly on cheap, medium-sized panels. Yet because the monochromes of his 1996 exhibition at 200 Gertrude Street – like the monochromes hung in improvised arrangements in a number of galleries in Europe over 2000, and like those born of the collaboration with Thurston Moore in 2001, where Moore played a series of ten improvisations on guitar, determining the time Fusinato had to cover ten boards in red paint – are so similar in the literal sense, as well as being basically the same thing conceptually (i.e. the result and document of the same kind of process), there is a sort of remoteness to them, despite their rough and ready nature.

The works that involve music from this time are not so distant, and more anarchic than ascetic. For *Poster*, Fusinato had plain red monochrome street posters pasted up like advertising for bands. In the series of vinyl releases called *Free*, he used guitar shops as studios, getting the equipment for his noise-guitar improvisations by asking to try out an effects pedal, and secretly recording the event. In 1998, he arranged *MONO*-, where

ten visual artists (non-musicians) were asked to play a rock power chord on electric guitars, all at the same time, for three minutes. When asked to compare this work to Yves Klein's translation of ideas from painting into sound in *Monotone Symphony*, Fusinato answered: "Klein operated within a bourgeois milieu and used an orchestra to perform his symphony for him. He kept his hands clean. He was concerned with primal states, the void and the 'higher power'. On the other hand I'm inspired by what's on the 'street' and *MONO*- is an affirmation of that energy."¹

The change in approach that Fusinato took with subsequent work is clearest (and ironically confirmed by the title of show) in the contrast between these early works and the works in the 2006 exhibition *The Approaching of the Disco Void – Repeated and Other Works* at Anna Schwartz Gallery. Here the "bourgeois milieu", which was once carefully edited out of the work, was carefully edited back in. The appropriation mode that Fusinato has tended to work in since takes as its model the real life commercialisation of counter-culture, employing the methods of the entertainment and advertising industries.

For the work *The Approaching of the Disco Void – Repeated*, Fusinato paid a session musician to attempt an exact copy of a John Fahey original recording of the titular song. Actually, Fusinato had the session musician attempt to replicate the song twice, and the two versions are played side-by-side in the video. With a logic that becomes familiar looking at the rest of work, the intensity of the original gives way to the small differences among the copies. With *A Dozen Roses* (2006), Fusinato employed a commercial photographer to photograph twelve single roses placed in beakers, quoting Joseph Beuys' *Rose for Direct Democracy* (1973) and with it the symbol of revolution that it was proposed to be. In *THIS IS NOT MY WORLD*, a banner by avant-garde Group of Six artist Željko Jerman, with the words of the title, was remade by graphic designers. In *Noise & Capitalism*, Fusinato reprinted manifestos in the anarchist tradition at poster size, using overprinting to keep the finished work to four panels – front and back cover, and the inside pages. In this way, the body of the text is layered over itself, obscuring the words and thus the message. Similarly, in *THERE IS NO AUTHORITY*, Fusinato took the hand-painted banner that English punk band Crass had displayed behind them at their shows (reading THERE IS NO AUTHORITY

BUT YOURSELF), and had it remade as a fine wool rug, 9 by 12 metres wide, made to the scale of gallery in which it is shown.

Double Infinitives (2009) is a series of newspaper photographs of riots that have been scaled-up to billboard size, the halftone dots clearly noticeable, and a portion of each of the pictures blacked out from top to bottom, indicating where a caption for the accompanying news story was removed. The masked rioters hurling rocks and in pose, framed by burning wrecks of cars, are life-sized; seen together they look like a kind of anarchist fresco. In one sense these works echo the shock advertising of the United Colours of Benetton campaigns, especially those of the 1980s. With those images, the controversy around their explicitness, and the anonymity of the company in terms of its attitude towards the subject of the ads, almost obscured the way that the campaign impressed the brand with a real sense of currency. And the texture of those billboard images resonates more with *Double Infinitives* than Warhol's electric chairs, for example, even though Warhol's work is a precursor both of Oliviero Toscani's designs for Benetton (one ad even used a photo of what looks like the very the same chair) and Fusinato's pictures, simply because in a Warhol print you can see the evidence of the craft.

Fusinato's focus on the rioters brings up different issues to the ones raised by the Benetton ads, the sense of up-to-dateness that they monumentalise, as well as the moral blankness of the electric chairs. It draws on that common-sense awareness (though the reality is more complex) of the reciprocal interests of the perpetrators of ideologically motivated violence, who provide the media with the spectacle that their audiences demand – and the media who provide these same people with the audience they need for their own ideological purposes. In *Double Infinitives* the black and white also reminds me of the presentation of luxury brands of watches or perfume, as if the moment of violence captured by the photograph is supposed to be like the hint of some exotic scent.

What ties them together is the same thing that makes these works possible – I mean, acceptable – as art: the intermingling of the critique of capitalism and capitalism itself. Today's capitalism aims to realise individual self-expression, creativity, and authenticity – the same values once demanded from society by the radicals themselves. It is this separation not just in time but in meaning that Fusinato's

practice is sensitive to. It explains the attempt to get at a tangible, DIY clarity in the early works as much as it does the starkness of the appropriation-driven later work. But then again, maybe this too-easily-put idea should raise the question of whether or not the artwork exploits an 'awareness' that has no real ground. Is it something like what Philip Brophy called the artistic use of 'dumb semiotics,' artworks that draw on the buzz of associations called up by icons, quotes and slogans, the directness of the form compensating for the insignificance of the content? Or is it, on the other hand, as Jan Verwoert says, that the appropriation art of the 1990s and after is actually alive to the sense that old symbols are not just dead weight (or pre-packaged goods), if invoking them creates new and unexpected effects? For Verwoert, the appropriation art of today involves a sort of possession; the artist becomes a conjurer through which the past speaks to the present. And in Fusinato's work there is a sense of a kind of aimless impulse that resists symbolisation living on through these icons.

It is this feeling that comes to the fore in Fusinato's most recent works, in particular with his physically larger, technologically more ambitious constructions that revisit a Futurist aesthetic of mechanical dynamism. But there are earlier, smaller scale investigations of the idea. The *Sun series* (2002), for example, literally a series of photographs taken of the sun centred on a blue sky, captures a suggestion of the urge to stare at the light until you go blind. And the prints of *Mass Black Implosion* (2007), where Fusinato takes the sheet music of avant-garde composers and draws a line from every note on the page to a single point, likewise suggest the deafening amount of sound created by every note being played at once. The closest Fusinato comes to actually rendering this impulse directly is with *Aetheric Plexus*, exhibited for the first time at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in 2009. Made up of a stage lighting rig, placed in the gallery floor like barricade, along with speakers and sound equipment, the work is activated by sensor when you step in front of it. Once triggered, the work sends out a huge blast of white noise and light, threatening to envelope you, toying with the wish to be drowned out by the sheer volume of the sound and in the heat and intensity of light. (The installation *Parallel Collisions* (2012), with its sensor-activated banks of fluorescent lights

arranged as numbers displaying, along with a burst of noise, short bursts of statistics taken from the internet, recreates something similar – although drawing as it does on the work of Ryoji Ikeda, the strain of information overload in this work colours of the brute physicality of the earlier piece.)

For Fusinato, *Aetheric Plexus* is not, or not only about the jolt of this experience; it is about observing it in somebody else. Either way, the jolt, as striking as it is, is just a hint of something else. Just as the 'realism' of the early, improvised work was only accessible via documentation, and the appropriation works are a series of cover versions and reproductions, these later works can also be thought of as a diminished simulation of what it is that lies on their other side. This continual imposition of observing over participating suggests, in a way, that it is us, the audience, that is the ultimate subject of Fusinato's work. It seems to say: art is the ersatz experience of whatever it is that moves us.

BY MICHAEL ASCROFT

¹ Interview with Ben Curnow, Marco Fusinato catalogue, 2001, p 22.



•|
Imperial distortion, 2012
 fluorescent tubes, ballasts,
 aluminium, frames, powered
 speakers, electrical cables
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Anna Schwartz Gallery
 Michael Buxton Contemporary
 Australian Art Collection

•/
Mass Black Implosion
 (*Mikrokosmos:*
Change of Time,
Bela Bartok), 2012
 Ink on archival facsimile of score
 29 x 22 cm (78 x 57 cm framed)
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Anna Schwartz Gallery

•/
Untitled, 1996
 Courtesy the artist and
 Gertrude Contemporary

•/
THERE IS NO AUTHORITY, 2012
 Installation view,
 Anna Schwartz Gallery Sydney
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Anna Schwartz Gallery

Untitled Project, 1994
 C.S.D. Gallery, Sydney
 Courtesy the artist and
 Gertrude Contemporary

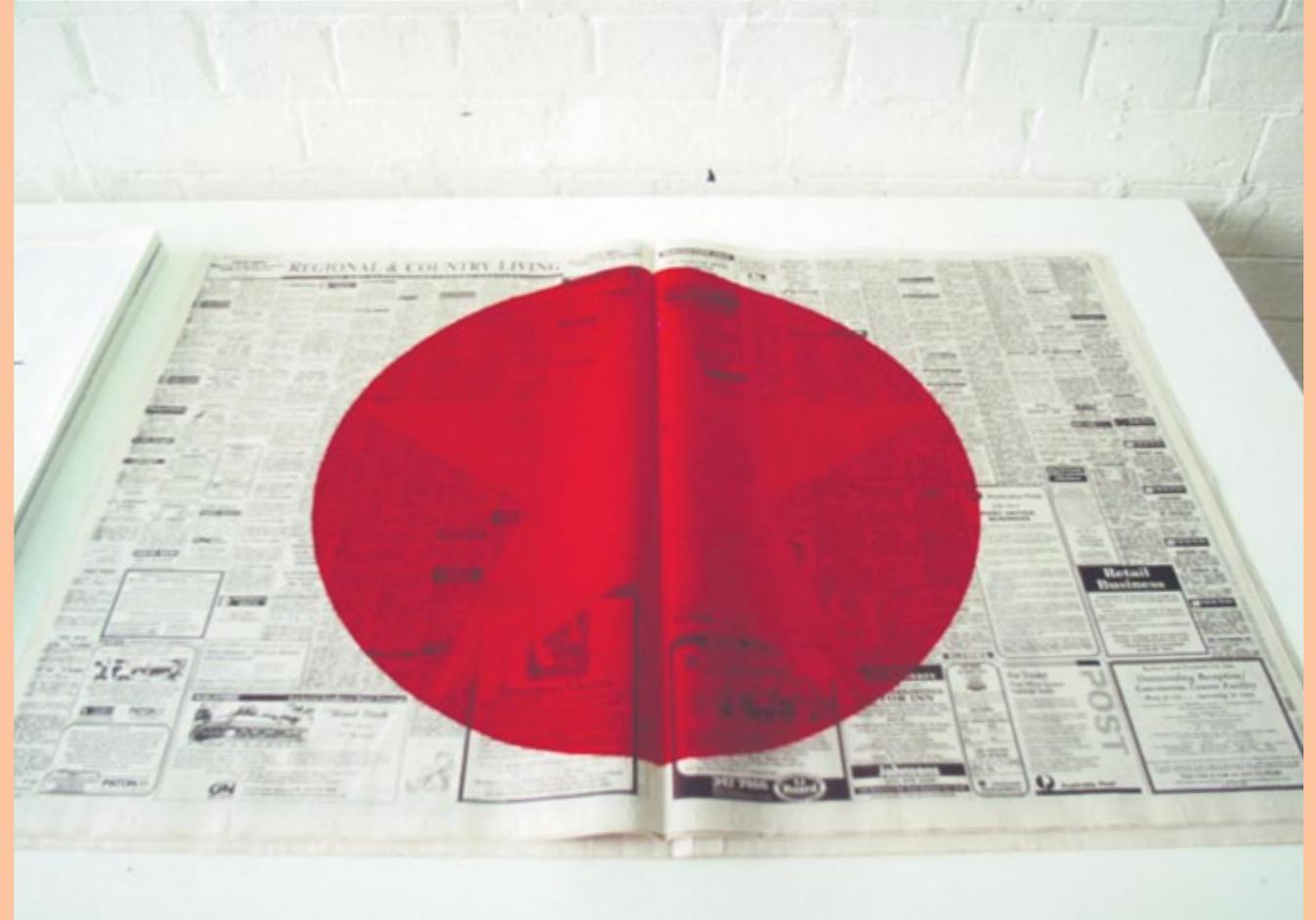
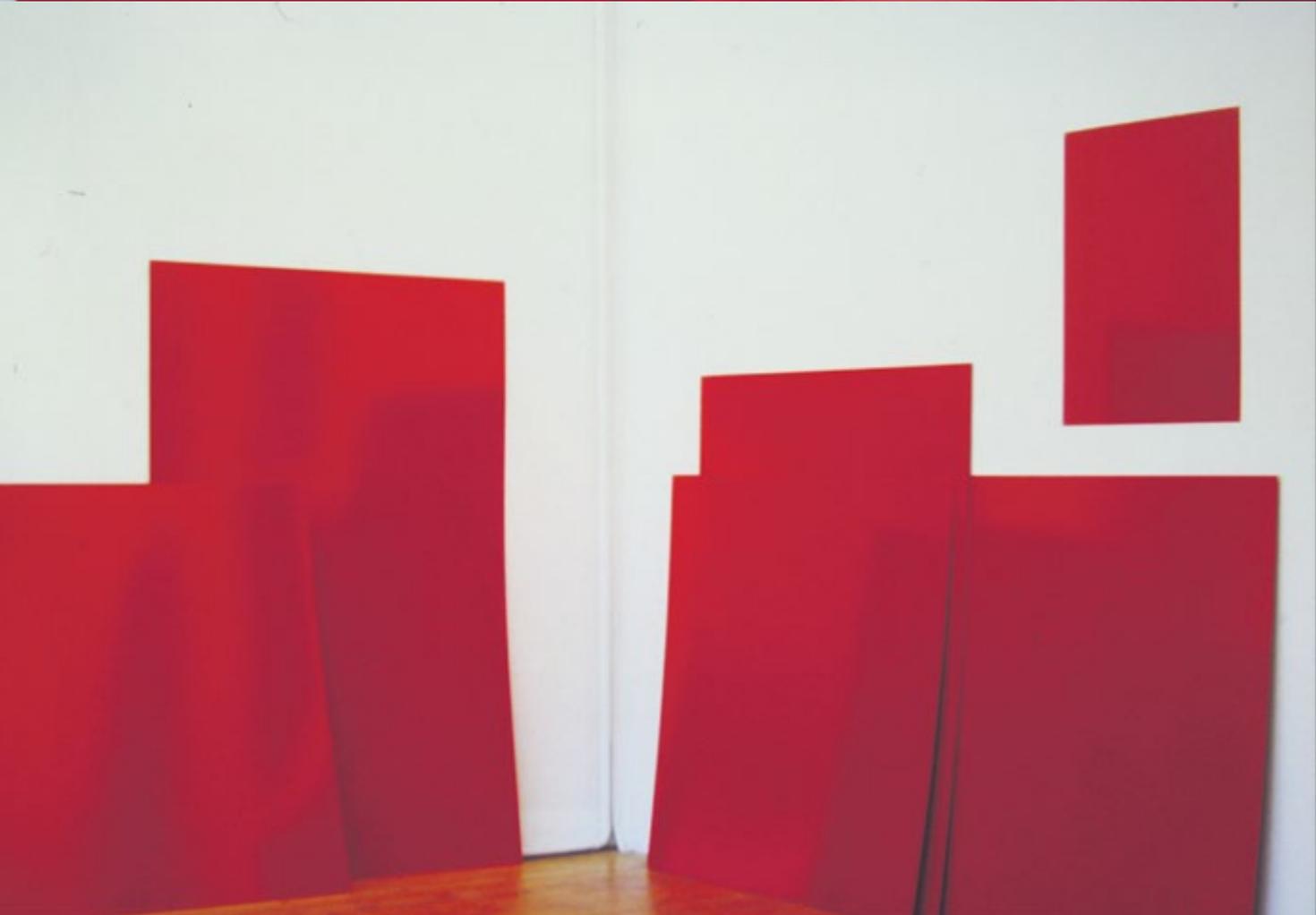
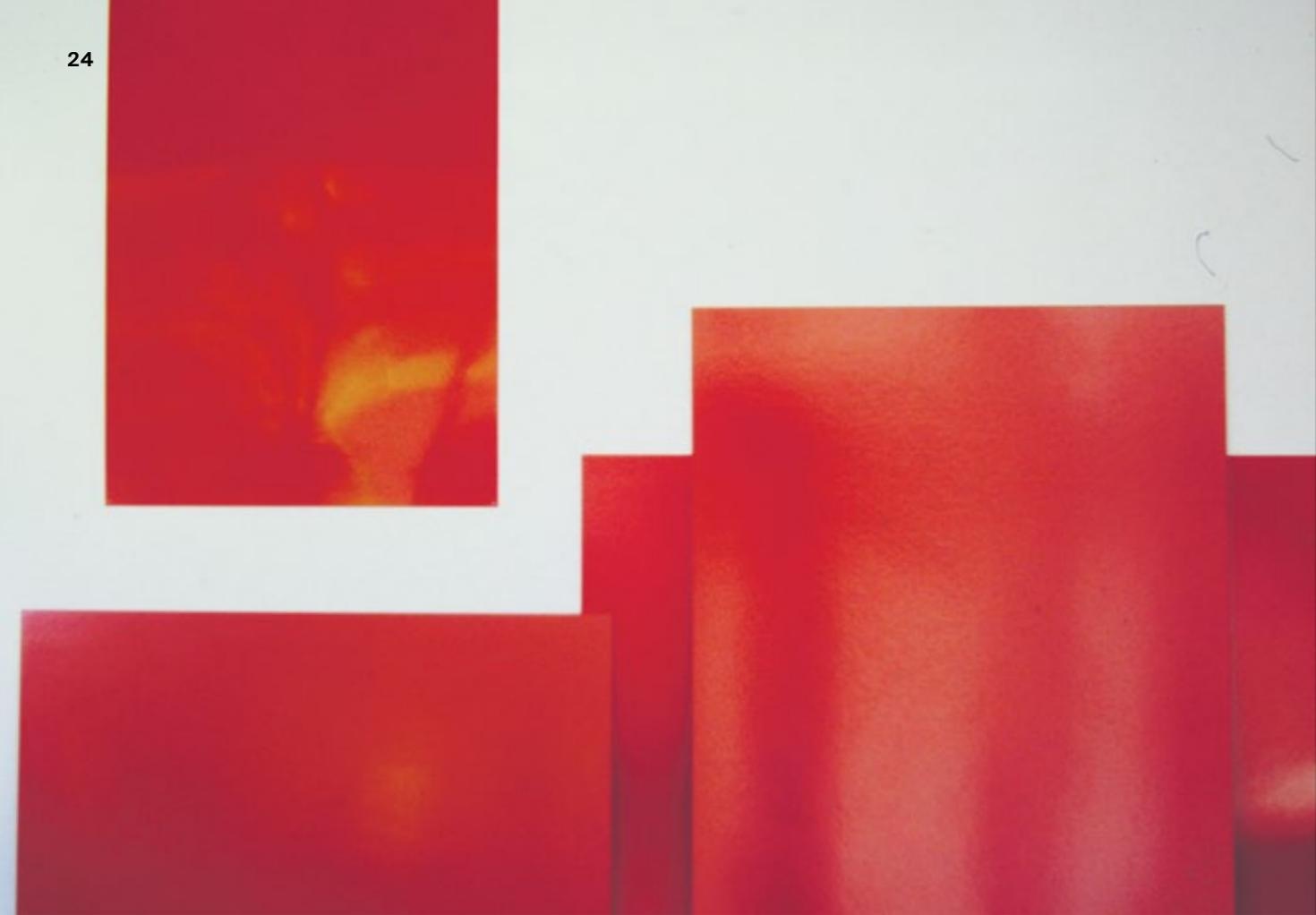
Change of Time
 Changement de mesure
 Wechselnder Takt

BÉLA BARTÓK

Allegro pesante, $\text{♩} = 250$

126

H. 15189



DEBORAH KELLY: New Forms Against Old Ideas

“Art tells you things you don’t know you need to know until you know them.”

– PETER SCHJELDAHL

Deborah Kelly’s animation *Beastliness* (2011) opens with a woman’s face prettified with makeup, seductively staring at her audience. A thick moustache creeps along her upper lip then rapidly spreads, weaving its way around her contours, engulfing her face until only her eyes and mouth are exposed. She opens her mouth, inviting us in, deep beneath the surface, as we are thrust down her throat. Here, in a dark undefined space, we are witness to a surreal gathering; a party to which we are all secretly tapping our feet.

Beastliness is part of Deborah Kelly’s strategy to disrupt our passivity and readiness to accept culturally determined values as natural. Her work is often displayed in public spaces so as to affect everyday encounters, or else requires audience participation; it activates critical thinking about human conditions you may not have thought to challenge. Subtly, through parody or guise, questions or doubt slip in without resistance and you find yourself confronting your own complicity in the politics of representation. Through *Beastliness* and the intimacy of collage, Kelly seeks to expose and undermine the cultural ideologies that impose controlling boundaries and classifications on the gendered body. With a glance we quickly appraise the physical parameters of the body, but rarely do we grasp the arbitrary and artificial constructs that give meaning to its form. We search only for those signifiers that reassure us of our established concepts of how the body should be; we are comforted by what we believe to be natural, unchanging and predetermined.

Collage draws from a visual language – marketing – that’s often directed at women and is motivated by controlling and shaping the

consumer through creating a sense of lack. The infinite possibilities for reconfiguring these visual cues lends itself to the task of challenging representations of femininity. At times, Kelly’s collages utilise conventional demarcations of femininity, such as the coiffured locks that crown the heads and faces of the women in the *Hairpiece* (2008-2010) series, or the strutting lips on legs in *New Nature Girls (we take the air)* (2010).

Yet another group of collages shown together in her solo exhibition, *Tender Cuts* (2010), circumvents cultural types by marrying human and animal body parts to construct new hybrid forms, unbound by cultural dictates. In *Ostere arises* (2009), a rabbit’s head emerges from a plumage of feathers, its naked torso extending into the fleshy legs of a woman, high-heeled and posed awkwardly. In another, *She beseeches you* (2008), a snake coils around the neck of a fox. Her many breasts are clothed only in jewellery and her hips fan out into vibrant orange butterfly wings. Initially it seems foolish that these ‘beasts’ would adorn themselves with snakes and strategically placed wings, but the presence of jewellery, heels, and stockings remind us of our own costume rituals. Kelly explored the cultural analogy often made between animal and woman in a performance on ABC Radio National (2010). She read an extensive list of ‘animal-like’ adjectives used to reference women, listing the slang that so easily trips of our tongue, like ‘stupid cow’, ‘bitch’, ‘turkey neck’ and ‘beaver’. It exposes the derogative undertones in the cultural imaginings which define feminine characteristics.

The exotic creatures presented in *Tender Cuts* reappear, dancing across the screen, in *Beastliness*. In this black void, we watch the many strange and wonderful yet surreally familiar creatures cavort with the freedom of indulgence we secretly harbour. Their dancing mutates into eroticism as a mating ritual begins to unfold, and flowers burst out in orgasmic rays of pleasure. These hybrid forms are undeniably feminine, yet also undefinable. The psyche is splashed across the flesh in all its distorted, jarring mess, and the result is intoxicatingly beautiful. We are privileged with brief access, only to watch these creatures self-devour as we are dragged back

out to face the woman. Now, looking at her from the outside again, she purses her lips, blowing forth her internal beasts – that have been transformed into feathers, soft and unthreatening. Her polished face is restored.

Beastliness was presented alongside a series of workshops for an exhibition at Sydney’s Artspace (*Make More Monsters*, 2011). These workshops required participants to construct their own human-animal hybrids from leftover magazines whilst listening to feminist readings. Through the process of creative production, Kelly initiated a vehicle for her audience to contemplate and question their own position within the discourse of gender politics. The resulting creatures materialised this internal dialogue, laying bare unconscious or unchallenged beliefs and values. To have your dormant thoughts stare back at you is confronting. It’s an inevitable evolution for Kelly’s hand-assembled collages – transforming an intimate process into a public collaboration typical of her socially-engaged practice.

Kelly’s work presents the body as a site of contestation by exposing the arbitrariness of its culturally determined topologies. She uses parody to question and expose the formation and sustainment of outmoded concepts no longer useful in a divergent society. Accepted notions of femininity polarise what it is to be a woman, creating a disjunction between belief and experience. Discourse continues to revolve around the dichotomy of beauty and repulsion, acceptable and inappropriate, conjectures that have no relationship to the materiality of the body. The new bodily forms in works like *Beastliness* defy restrictive classifications, allowing the multifarious possibilities inherent within an individual to co-exist and be interpreted on their own terms.

BY SUMMAR HIPWORTH



•
Ostere arises, 2009
Handmade collage on
Italian cotton paper,
80 cm x 59 cm
Courtesy of the artist
and Gallery Barry
Keldoulis, Sydney

•/
Make More Monsters
Still from the digital
animation *Beastliness*,
a series of analogue
paper collages,
2008-2010
Animated by Christian
Heinrich and Chris
Wilson, with original
soundtrack composed
and performed by The
Brutal Poodles
Courtesy of the artists



SUFFERING THE FOOLS.

Pardon me for being born into a nation of racists.

“O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these racists!”

Richard Bell's recent *Lessons on Etiquette and Manners* at Monash University Museum of Art, was essential viewing for any Australian. Bell is a contemporary Indigenous artist who has had major solo exhibitions in New York and Boston and has been included in numerous projects all over the world, so it's outrageous that this was the first major solo exhibition of his art in Melbourne. Later this year he will stage his first major solo project in Sydney, at Artspace, titled *Imagined Victory*. Bell's activist paintings, videos and installations are at once intelligent, humorous, beautiful – and provocative, working as he does from the assumption that white Australians are generally racist. He candidly explores his experience and history as an Indigenous man and is outspoken in his attack against colonialism, offering a parallel history of sorts. He displays his evidence with a self-assured gusto that can only be admired. Bell's work investigates the politics of being black and comments directly on deep-seated community-held racism whilst focusing more broadly on western cultural appropriation of indigenous art forms.

Both *Worth Exploring?* and *Bell's Theorem* comment on the way in which Indigenous art is perpetually observed through a lens of anthropology, constantly battling a value system of classification whilst being appropriated from the outside. *Worth Exploring?* at once challenges the legal legitimacy of European colonisation, mocks the Indigenous art market convention of documenting authentication and wryly appropriates other Western art works with a distinct abrasive humor. The issue of authenticity is a complicated and controversial one in Australia right now. Not only do many Indigenous artists need to prove the authenticity of their own work, they have in some situations needed to prove their own Indigenous heritage in the eyes of various funding and government bodies. This model offends many people as it most disadvantages

those whose roots have already been attacked, such as the children from the stolen generations who have no clear understanding or path to their heritage. The issue also elicits (often racist) commentary on who is black enough and what constitutes a 'genuine' Aboriginal. The demand that an Indigenous artist prove who they are (when a white artist is rarely asked to) connects to an assumption held within the broader community that if someone identifies as Aboriginal then they are seeking to receive benefits. Bell is clearly affronted by this and mocks the internal logic of these modes of classification by making obvious their absurdity.

Bell's displeasure manifests in a plethora of different ways and evokes varied responses of humour, guilt, defence, anger, and confusion in the audience. His work, which is directed at “everyone who isn't a decolonised blackfella” unleashes a strong (and at times uncomfortable) rhetoric of conflict and rivalry between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In his video work *UZ vs THEM*, a mock boxing competition is set up between Bell himself and a white boxer. The video depicts their pre-match taunting and goading. Bell is cool and calm pre-contest, surrounded by a hyper-sexualised posse of blonde cheerleaders, while his challenger appears hysterical, frothing to begin the fight. Although the outcome is left ambiguous (we never see the actual fight) there is a sense that the relaxed Bell overcomes his deranged adversary, presenting an *imagined victory* of sorts.

The anger and outrage of a racist Australian populace is channelled particularly well in *Broken English*. Bell interviews a series of bogan-esque everyday Aussie types, who confess, among other things, that they begrudge benefits being given to Indigenous communities. The anger expressed in *UZ vs THEM* seems justified when it appears that not only do Indigenous people need to constantly prove their Indigeneity, but they also have to

fight for anything they are given. *Scratch an Aussie* depicts Bell's anti-authoritarian attitude and disdain for racism through comedy of the absurd on a whole new level. In an unusual role reversal, Bell presents himself as a black Sigmund Freud, counselling a group of young, blonde, Aryan beauties clad in gold bikinis or boardshorts, who announce their petty worries about the world. Like other artists before him, Bell uses humour as a tool for communicating difficult ideas. The Bell/Freud character sits behind the teenagers as they espouse their shallow quandaries and racist jokes, pondering and then laughing at their every word. Their bare white bodies, ridiculous problems, and downright ignorance evoke memories of the Cronulla riots and the ugly and vacuous nature of Australian racism.

The calm facade that Bell displays in most of his videos belie the fact that he is a man who is generally pissed off, rallying against systems of classification and a history of inequality. He appears at times to be barely suffering us white fools. He positions himself at the centre of his works, organising discord around him, between black and white, between colonised and decolonised, between the audience and the artist himself. Bell's comic freedom fighter alter-ego riffs off his public persona – the artist who wears shirts with slogans such as 'White Girls Can't Hump'. He is the ultimate artist agent provocateur, wreaking havoc amongst his audience, confusing them, enticing them into offense, daring them to question his work and ultimately captivating them.

The newest work within the exhibition, *Tent Embassy*, pays homage to the original Aboriginal tent embassy protest outside of Parliament House in the 1980s. Bell, like many others, proffers that ownership is important and expresses a desire to find space where he and other Indigenous people are not shut out. He offers a literal and symbolic space for conversation within the gallery. Unlike other



works in the exhibition, *Tent Embassy* appears to be more of an open attempt to broaden the conversation, a realisation that Bell's voice is one of many that are needed. The provocative character of Bell – the artist who suggested earlier that the exhibition is only for the 'colonised whitefellas' has revealed his altruistic side.

In an interview at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, after they purchased *Worth Exploring?* in 2006, Bell confessed, “I have to believe that art can make a difference, I have to believe that it can lead to political change... there will be lots of kids studying this work down here... I want it to be seen by lots of young people and I am sure it

will affect them and the way that they see Aboriginal people... I hope.” Although Bell creates division within his works, he ultimately as an activist recognises the importance of the conversation that arises from provocation. In order for non-Indigenous and Indigenous histories to converge and not run parallel, there needs to be more artists, writers, and intellectuals observing the 'decolonisation' that Bell refers to as well as and alongside our 'colonised' histories.

BY KELLY FLIEDNER

Broken English, 2009
(digital video stills)
Courtesy of the artist and
Milani Gallery, Brisbane





•\•
Scratch an Aussie, 2008
 (production still, detail)
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Milani Gallery, Brisbane
 Photo: Mick Richards

•|
A prelude to imagining victory,
 2012-13, Installation view:
 Monash University Museum of Art
 Photo: John Brash

|•
Uz vs. Them, 2006
 (digital video stills)
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Milani Gallery, Brisbane

All the Right Moves: THE WORK & WORK OF KATE MITCHELL

“I got the blues thinking of the future, so I left off and made some marmalade. It’s amazing how it cheers one up to shred oranges and scrub the floor.” – D.H. LAWRENCE

“There are moments when art attains almost to the dignity of manual labour.” – OSCAR WILDE

“The Lord loves a working man...” – THE JERK (1979)

The notion of artistic labour cuts to the core of artistic activity. It deals with the reality of artistic endeavour and the economic weight it carries within society. While the problem of artistic labour came to the fore in post-World War II avant-garde art, the collapsing divide between art and life, work and play has continued to unfold, taking on new depth and dimensions in the practices of contemporary artists. Artists today go further by asserting themselves as workers within an increasingly globalised economy, bringing to bear artistic strategies first adopted by avant-garde artists who “managed, staged, mimicked, ridiculed, and challenged the cultural and societal anxieties around the shifting terrain and definitions of work.”¹

Performance art has been distinct in the way it embodies the changing definitions of labour by presenting art as a task performed. Assuming the role of manager and worker, the artist is often found both setting and completing task-like activities that adopt “strategies of efficient and productive labour in a parodic and deliberately unproductive way.”² Such performative work within contemporary practice has become increasingly self-aware of its historical underpinnings and more reflexive in its critique of artistic labour.

Kate Mitchell is a Sydney-based artist who is well aware of the historical and critical facets of performance and task-based art. Her live and video-based action works re-engage audiences with questions concerning the limitations of temporal perception, physical experience and the art/life continuum, following in the tradition of endurance and durational performance. Her whimsical approach to the honoured demands for resilience, strength and determination in endurance-based individual performance results in a subtle interplay between historical references and contemporary experience. Mitchell’s work *9 to 5* (2009), for instance, sees the artist enacting a sundial by standing in one spot and watching time pass by her own shadow, and in another work, *Lost a Bet* (2011), the artist physically carries a man from his home to his office. The contemporary flair and sincerity that her work brings to the everyday realities dealt with by performance art provides new entry points on the problem of artistic labour.

As the 21st century information age continues to redefine the parameters of work and leisure, a sense of ambivalence and humour in response to the changing reality of artistic labour has emerged within contemporary practice. Belgian artist Francis Alÿs, for example, calls into question the very definitions of work and leisure through an absurd

scenario played out in his work *Turista* (1997). The artist literally aligns himself with manual labourers by standing in a line with several other men, each with a hand painted sign advertising their services for hire. While positioned alongside electricians and plumbers, Alÿs’s sign is labelled ‘tourist’ – a service low on the list of priorities for those looking to hire a manual labourer. In equating the work of a tourist with that of an artist, he raises the question: is being a tourist (or an artist) really work? In truth, both are exhausting and come with “highly prescribed forms of behaviour.”³

Similarly, Mitchell’s work is heavily imbued with humour and absurdity; however, with the use of cartoon and film codes and conventions, she has set herself apart from her contemporary counterparts. Her performed acts of ‘work’ and feats of hard labour take on comical dimensions with their direct references to familiar slapstick scenarios, which the artist refers to as the “cartoon impossible”. In her work, Mitchell finds herself in some challenging situations, such as sawing a plank of wood while sitting at one end of it, which directly references a Buster Keaton performance (*In A Situation*, 2011); repeatedly falling through a number of shop awnings (*Fall Stack*, 2012); and climbing a ladder through a hole in the floor that leads her back to where she started (*Getting Through It*, 2012). Mitchell’s use of video goes further than merely documenting the performance, as the video loop enables the artist to achieve infinite cyclic actions that only exist within the cinematic world. This approach not only elides the distinctions between performance, video documentation and time-based art, but also engages with cinema’s broad visual vernacular, recreating a “filmic reality” where these exaggerated actions can take form.

Regardless of the familiarity or predictability of the actions played out, Mitchell’s work builds audience anticipation, holding attention with both the absurdity and futility of the task at hand. The resulting effect is one that evokes the performative works of such artists as Bruce Nauman, where the “only possible resolution is the impossibility of imposing a resolution.”⁴ Similar to Nauman’s studio-based performance videos, the absurd act that is performed repeatedly in Mitchell’s work reflects something of the methodical and repetitive nature of manual work, and the dogged determination and optimism required of artists grappling with the challenges of artistic labour.

BY CHANNON GOODWIN



1 Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (2003).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Robert C. Morgan, *Bruce Nauman* (2002).

CHRISTIAN THOMPSON: We Bury Our Own

In what might fairly be described as an odd city, the Pitts Rivers Museum is one of Oxford's odder attractions. A monument to both the collecting spirit of nineteenth-century imperialism and the charming, agonised self-reflexivity of contemporary anthropology, it assembles colonial spoils and more ethically acquired artefacts from around the world, arranging them not chronologically or geographically but thematically ("swords", "head supports for sleeping", "ways of torturing one's enemies", "cosmetics") in crowded glass cases. Objects, from shrunken heads to improvised toothbrushes, jostle for position within its cavernous space. The result is a beguiling glimpse at the interrelationship between the foundations of anthropology and the colonial adventurism on which it relies, simultaneously conjuring and flinching at the disturbing excitement of the colonising impulse to know, to catalogue, to record, to document, flaunting but recoiling from the thrill of the quest for a totalising knowledge that would underpin and sustain the British Empire.

This magnificently conflicted museum provides the backdrop and the inspiration for Aboriginal artist Christian Thompson's most recent body of work, a series of photographs called *We Bury Our Own*. Affiliated with the ARC-funded research project, Globalization, Photography, and Race: The Circulation and Return of Aboriginal Photographs in Europe, Thompson's photographs grow out of a sustained meditation on the Pitt Rivers' important collection of photographs of Aboriginal Australians, dating back to the 1840s. Instead of referencing them directly, Thompson has assembled his own collection of self-portraits that respond, formally and thematically, to the images in the collection. They aim to enact what Thompson calls a form of "spiritual repatriation", an artistic attempt to "bury his own" through an engagement with the archive.

The Pitt Rivers' description of the Globalization, Photography, and Race research project reminds us that while the original photographs were taken by European anthropologists and explorers as scientific documents, records of their colonial explorations, and devices for positioning Aboriginal populations within anthropological and evolutionary racial schemas, they often held a more spiritual

significance for their indigenous subjects. Thompson's body of work insists on the latter tradition, refusing inscription within scientific systems. His heavily symbolic images, replete with flowers, healing crystals, miniature ships and kitschy Aboriginal art products, resist the literal, documentary impulse of scientific record-keeping, making sense only as aesthetic and spiritual performance. They insist on photography as ritual, but one too idiosyncratic to be used or interpreted as anthropological evidence.

If the photograph as scientific document seeks to deduce characteristics of the genus from the particular individual, *We Bury Our Own* performs a different relationship to the collective, emphasising the multi-layered performances that, drawing on but not reducible to collective identity, constitute individuality. It takes the body not as an index of a general racial truth, but as a multi-surfaced canvas on which identity is performed. The juxtaposition of Oxford's academic dress, generically symbolic or spiritual objects such as flowers and crystals, and kitsch, commercialised markers of indigeneity, denies Thompson's photography any straightforward relationship to "authentic" Aboriginal identity. Instead, it points to the multiply inscribed identity of contemporary Aboriginal experience, as expressed through an expatriate artist, who became, in 2010, one of the first two Indigenous Australians to ever attend Oxford University.

What is, however, most striking about *We Bury Our Own* is less its insistence on the idiosyncrasy of the individual or the hybridity of identity, than its attempt to reinscribe both within a larger spiritual gesture that generalises and eclipses identity. The archive, in this context, assumes not just a historical but also a spiritual significance, as a repository of ancestral traces that Thompson describes as not just speaking to but also, at times, speaking through him. Indeed, the photographs themselves, largely black-and-white, with dashes of added colour, framed in the head-and-shoulders style typical of nineteenth-century photographic portraiture, self-consciously subsume Thompson into the archive. Covering his eyes with small round objects, ranging from butterflies to crystals to dot patterns on his own hands, he denies the

primacy of the individual in favour of an appeal to the abstraction of enchanted objects. As a result, *We Bury Our Own* is imbued with a kind of passivity, a repudiation of the active construction of identity in favour of an expiatory loss of self that, redeeming the suffering of the ancestors, generalises the individual until he embodies both a spiritual nation and the spirit of the archive itself.

BY ALYS MOODY

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Thompson at work
Courtesy of Chris Morton
Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK





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Danger Will Come,
 2012
 100 x100 cm
 c-type print on Fuji
 pearl metallic paper
 edition of 10



| •
*Lamenting the
 Flowers*, 2012
 100 x100 cm
 c-type print on Fuji
 pearl metallic paper
 edition of 10

All images courtesy
 of the artist and
 Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi

PUSSY RIOT: Some closing statements...

“In reality, the Young-Girl is simply the model citizen as redefined by consumer society since World War I, in explicit response to the revolutionary menace.”

– PRELIMINARY MATERIALS FOR A THEORY OF THE YOUNG GIRL (TIQQUN)

On August 17 2012, three members of the all-female punk band Pussy Riot were found guilty of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” for their action *Punk Prayer – Mother of God Chase Putin Away*. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich were each sentenced to two years in prison. In the closing comments of their trial they honoured Alexander Vvedensky, a poet of the early Russian avant-garde whose writing for children was deemed “anti-Soviet” by the State. He was declared a dissident, persecuted, and exiled to Kursk. At the beginning of World War II he was charged with “counterrevolutionary agitation” whilst trying to evacuate with his family. He later died in custody on a train to Kazan. Now acknowledged as a key member of the Soviet avant-garde and other non-State-sanctioned art movements, the poet-philosopher Vvedensky symbolises the tireless progressivism of the artist in the shadow of an iron regime.

The closing comments made by the three women encouraged comparisons to be drawn between the martyrdom of Vvedensky and the members of Pussy Riot, unveiling old cogs that made both the USSR and the modern Russian state turn, and showing how that state has attempted to reinforce its political identity through continual oppression of the avant-garde.

The Western press was quick to present the trial as an unmasking of the Putin government: an administration harbouring residual Stalinist cultural conservatisms behind a veneer of apparent freedoms. Specifically, market freedoms, signifiers of the neo-liberal capitalist economy that crawled out of the Cold War. The correlation is one arch-conservative Russians have long embraced, giving Putin the warm praise befitting a Stalinist second coming.

Hegel said that all great historical events occur twice, and Marx agreed, but added “*first as tragedy, then as farce*.” He had a string of examples culminating in Louis-Napoleon, the nephew of Napoleon I, who had just taken the throne. The farce of Putin is his very image – an absurd Russian 007 presidential playboy – a product of his transition from invisible agent of the KGB to media-saturating President, rendered in 200 dots-per-inch in CMYK and printed upon the pages of newspapers from *Die Welt* to *The Times*. The face of Vladimir Putin is the image of neo-liberal Russia – well-groomed, handsome, austere.

Pussy Riot is that which stands in opposition to this – this being what the anonymous collective Tiqqun outlined in their *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, a critique of an image culture coddled by the desires of capitalism and nursed by the perversity of neo-conservatism (for Russia, a residual Stalinist memory). The Young-Girl is consumer capitalism’s idealised citizen, the symbol of our modern fetish for youth and femininity. She may not literally be young, or even female, but she is wealthy, vacant, unquestioning and superficial. She is hollow, her personality a collage of absorbed pop-culture. Pussy Riot are most definitely not Young-Girls. Although Tiqqun’s book is opposed to a unified theory – they prefer to refer to it as a *Trash Theory* – their criticism resonates with the obstacles of contemporary feminism. Indeed, they say “the triumph of the Young-Girl originates in the failure of feminism.” Just as they state that “Berlusconi is a Young-Girl”, Putin is also a Frankenstein-ian product of the “anthropomorphosis of capital”.

Like Tiqqun’s *Trash Theory*, Pussy Riot’s means of resistance uses the languages of absurdity, abrasiveness and aggression embodied in the dialectical strategies of their chosen medium, punk music. It would be a mistake to consider their work as simply music by a punk group, as they clearly state that their practice – encompassing their performances, identity and breadth as a “movement” – operates within the historical narrative and political frame of specifically-Russian contemporary art.

The roots of punk lie in Thatcher-era Britain, where the Sex Pistols proclaimed “No Future” and staged a *Punk Prayer*-style spectacle, singing their ironic take on “God Save the Queen” as they floated idly down the Thames past the Houses of Parliament on the day of the Queen’s Jubilee. It was an anthem for Britain’s new lumpen youth that saw no promise in society and no future for themselves. They presaged the collapse of industrial capitalism, and gave form to the disillusionment of a nation of abject youth.

The lens of any amateur art historian will show us the correlations between the performative actions of Pussy Riot and their various predecessors – the street actions of the Situationists, the 1970s Happenings of Allan Kaprow and their sublimation in the politico-street performances of artists such as Zeljko Jerman, or the unnerving interventions performed by Jiri Kovanda. Though Pussy Riot’s aesthetics of shock, trash and revolt-ing chic may look like punk-pastiche, the truth of their image is an agit-femme carnivale composed of a gang of anonymous *devushkas*. They create a horizontal connection between contemporary protest aesthetics and the *skomorokhi*, the East-Slavic tradition of colourful and comedic harlequins, loved by the people for their disruptive humour, but persecuted as blasphemers by religious and civil authorities. The *skomorokhi* cavorted in colourful masks and, like the aforementioned artists, made a practice of drawing spectators into their performances.

Pussy Riot’s hand-wrought balaclavas provide an image of the Anonymous Girl as a pattern for a global resistance movement. Composed in colourful anonymity, they are a remedy for the aesthetic austerity of global Black Bloc protests and the creeping patriarchy of Anonymous’ Guy Fawkes masks.

The reference to *skomorokhi* is important in aligning their strategies with a history of Slavic performance that employs pastiche and satire in burlesquing the ruling class; in her statement, Maria Alyokhina

discussed what she learned from her time in prison: “Another element [of this process] is becoming aware of this government functioning as a performance, a *play*.”

The idea of the play was echoed in the Western press aptly describing their appearance in court as a ‘show trial’. In effect, Pussy Riot’s performance, resistance, and appearance on trial acted as disturbances in the regulated act, coaxing Putin and the government – despite the bad press – to announce that ‘the show must go on’. Calling out the government’s co-dependent relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church in their performance *Punk Prayer – Mother of God Chase Putin Away* brought the language of the State into contact – and therefore contrast – with the poetics of these young women. Essentially calling a spade a spade, they tore away the symbolism preserving a statist illusion, a *trompe-l’œil* – one that has its foundation in the historically deeply symbolic and religious Russian people, and its articulation in the automated abstractions of Stalin’s bureaucratisation of language – through what could be considered a contemporary poetic realist theatre.

“The voice and poetry are two strategies for reactivation. Once poetry foresaw the abandonment of referentiality and the automation of language; now poetry may start the process of reactivating the emotional body, and therefore of reactivating social solidarity, starting from the reactivation of the desiring force of enunciation.”

– FRANCO "BIFO" BERARDI, THE UPRISING: ON POETRY AND FINANCE

“Pussy Riot are Vvedensky’s students and heirs. His principle of the bad rhyme is dear to us. He wrote, ‘Occasionally, I think of two different rhymes, a good one and a bad one, and I always choose the bad one because it is always the right one.’”

– NADEZHDA TOLOKONNIKOVA, PUSSY RIOT CLOSING STATEMENTS

In *The Uprising*, Berardi makes the case that capitalism purloined abstraction (including symbolism) from the avant-garde and used it to serve the free-floating world of free-market finance. Symbolism was snatched from Rimbaud and press-ganged into use as capitalist abstractions such as debt and speculation – symbols of hypothetical money that does not actually exist. Berardi urges resistance to these linguistic vices, and proposes poetry as a stratagem for reclaiming radicality (both in the social body of humans and the roots of words). In short: rediscovering meaning. He gives examples from contemporary protest and resistance – Occupy and the multiple Springs – to illustrate his theory. The book makes no mention of Pussy Riot nor of the conditions of contemporary Russia, yet it is piercingly relevant to the closing comments made by the three members on trial. As they explain their context, strategies, actions and consequences, they illustrate the cultural condition of contemporary Russia, the history of art and oppression, the action-readiness of punk, their place as women, and their experience of incarceration. Pussy Riot’s actions are a template for a resistance articulated in poetic actions of realness, situated in the lineage of Vvedensky and the Russian avant-garde. Pussy Riot extend from the world of art towards the world itself.

BY NIC TAMMENS



GIVE IT BACK: Mentorship

Women within Australia's art world struggle with the same gender discrimination issues faced by women in the wider workforce: pay inequity, sexual harassment, and more subtle organisational discrimination such as exclusion from networks, lack of flexible work options, and shortage of training and mentoring opportunities.

Recently, both internationally and locally, we have seen major exhibitions, publications and media responses to notions of gender and contemporary feminisms. Although there has been much discussion on gender ratios for practicing women artists in Australia, less has been said concerning women in the surrounding cultural professions. The gender disparity in other areas of the contemporary art ecology (such as academics, curators, gallerists and the board members of our institutions) has a run-on effect on the actual representation of women artists. To tackle broader gender inequality, we must look not only at the artists themselves but also at Australia's current and future decision makers.

LEVEL's *Feminism and Art in 2013*, a day-long symposium held at Queensland University of Technology's Creative Industries Precinct, did just that. The symposium tackled two areas: *Performing Feminism* and *Cross Generational Feminisms*. The second panel answered the following questions: "With the recent resurgence in discussions of gender issues, how are we working together to move forward? What are our inherited legacies, and what are we currently leaving behind for the next generation of women?"

One of the major themes that emerged was the importance of cross-generational mentorship for women. The panelists agreed that establishing support networks within your industry is the best thing you can do for yourself as a practitioner. Mentorship is a positive framework for intergenerational partnerships and professional development, especially for tackling the urgent issue of gender equality. Within the contemporary art ecology there are many key situations of mentorship – an assistant curator being gradually guided into higher-level museum positions, for example. One could define many artist-run communities as self-generative networks that foster cross-generational mentor experiences, while universities create formal opportunities for such exchange. It is imperative to ask, therefore, whether these experiences are the same for women as they are for men.

An MIT publication by Christy Chandler (Stanford University) called *Mentoring and Women in Academia: Reevaluating the Traditional Model* tackles specific problems women are facing in establishing mentorship relationships. She says:

"Women are at a unique disadvantage because there is a shortage of potential mentors in business, academia, technical fields and other professions. Typically, mentors tend to associate with protégées who are similar to themselves in terms of gender, race, social class. Since white males generally hold the majority of upper-level positions in the professions, the number of possible mentors for women is limited."

Roy Cohen, author of *The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide*, agrees that gender in mentorship is a real issue. "It is a practical matter," says Cohen. "There are just not enough women in leadership positions, and like any community not all of them want to, or can, be mentors." Cohen notes that men traditionally open doors for each other, allowing for much informal networking. "Men tend to have historical relationships to tap that may be less available to their female colleagues – like membership in the old boy's club." Indeed this point is emphasised again by Chandler when she says: "The term 'tokenism' is used to describe accomplished women or minority group members who, once selected into a commonly, white male, inner-circle, became

labeled as the 'token' representative for the group." Indeed, more work needs to be done in order for women to challenge these stereotypes.

Chandler and Cohen highlight the barriers women face in the general workforce, but a recent study at the Centre for Curatorial Studies at Bard University¹ suggests that their points are crucial for the art ecology as well. It states, "The survey has the virtue of indexing how very traditional patterns continue to be so firmly entrenched in the sociology of the art system generally." According to the CSS Bard study, women studying curating at a post-graduate level outnumber men approximately 5 to 1. The study posits that, far from being a positive sign, it's evidence that "emerging male curators don't seem to need the validation of a curating degree to the extent that women do."

The survey asked female directors from curating programs at four major institutions about their thoughts on professional expectations in training, career paths, and modes of operations between men and women curators. Helena Reckitt of Goldsmiths argued that "...where contemporary art is concerned, the field has been much more receptive to maverick male curators, to those who come from non-art or non-art historical backgrounds but who have something of the impresario about them. Very few female curators have risen to prominent positions without solid professional or academic credentials." She saw as another barrier the fact that "marketing – yourself and your ideas – is an essential component of being a curator today. This kind of self-promotion can be especially difficult for women, who have internalised social mores about taking a facilitating role in relation to the artist, whom they are conditioned to identify and advocate for. This is surely why the confidence offered by a master's degree in curating, coupled with the collegial spirit it can engender, is so much more appealing to emerging women curators than it is to their male peers."

That 'collegial spirit' – most effectively engendered by female-female mentorship – can be a way to break through traditional and often patriarchal systems within the art ecology. Cross-generational discussion leads to increased professional development opportunities for young women, from where further inequalities such as the pay divide between the sexes may also be combatted.

It is clear therefore that a lack of access to mentoring and networking opportunities is not a sideline issue. Mentorship has been hugely positive for my own professional development. I was fortunate enough to participate in the 2012 iteration of Gertrude Contemporary and Art and Australia's Emerging Writers program and have over the last year been mentored by Rachel Kent, Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia. This program, and successfully delivered others like it, present invaluable opportunities for emerging cultural producers within Australia. But there is more to be done.

Although contemporary art often acts as a transgressive political vessel, the systems of art production and their surrounding politics lag behind. Action, conversation and education needs to continue to tackle the barriers facing women. On a personal level, I appeal to women in positions of power within Australia to consider mentoring younger women. Collective action, not just discourse, will make a real difference. The formation of stronger links between generations of women will target unhelpful gender stereotypes and professional discrimination whilst fostering crucial friendship for the years to come.

BY TESS MAUNDER

1. Suhail Malik (2013) CSS Bard, Red Hook Journal: Survey on Gender Ratios in Curating Programs. www.bard.edu/ccs/redhook/survey-on-gender-ratios-in-curating-programs/

EVERYTHING IS FUCKED: Psychedelia, Queer Identity and Uncertainty in an Antipodean Context

“We step and do not step into the same rivers, we are and we are not.” - HERACLITUS OF EPHEBUS

1. *Everything is Fucked* was the first needlepoint I ever made, and it resulted, quite randomly really, from a most cheerless and bizarre time in my life. Knowingly futile, it was stitched from rainbow-coloured wools in the months immediately following my discharge from an English psychiatric hospital, whose walls I had been forcibly institutionalised within. A *double entendre* suggesting the imperative of the phallus in frenzied, out-of-control human breeding, the rather gaudy piece is also a celebration of pessimism, a pessimism in part born of hopelessness. Verily, the piece could suffice as an accurate summation of my *Weltanschauung*. I think everything and everyone is fucked, in one way or another. Fucked in the head and fucked up the arse (literally and figuratively speaking). And that is precisely why I became an artist. And moreover, why we are all here, it would seem: to aimlessly run amok on the planet.

2. *Everything is Fucked* contained within it the germ for several more textual textile works culminating in one ambitious work that wholly consumed me in wool for over twelve months. I sought, in the fabrication of *Boys Gone Wild*, to describe a distorted symbolic space, a fragmentary pictorial within which frolicking boys communed with the plentiful offerings of nature – and each other. My intention in depicting such uninhibited juvenile play was foremost to point to a joyfully experimental sexuality, one unrestrained by disciplinary power and puritanical morality. Flowering adolescent subjects epitomise for me a sense of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’; they embody some vast potentiality that serves as an allegory for selfhood generally, caught in an uneasy flux. This condition of uncertainty or confusion necessitates an inquiry, the project of confronting the supposed fixity of our identity.

3. Persistently problematical descriptors like “white”, “gay” and “male”, socially-prescribed and vulgarly imposed on the subject, confirm the inadequacies of the limited language available to us when we talk of identity. Self-determinacy is of utmost importance here as we are all alone in our bodies, and must necessarily engage in self-discovery. Personally, I would tentatively put forward certain revelatory psychotropic substances as tools to aid the reimagining of the self, although the path of the psychonaut is potentially

perilous. Via the vulnerability produced through confronting the nameless unknown, one can perhaps begin to grasp the absurdity of our circumstance as a species: physical ensnarement within the finite monkey-body, the awkward hominoid vessel we unthinkingly inhabit. And the inherent deceitfulness of our language, where essentially arbitrary signs cling desperately to fleeting referents, and only through habitual repetition do we create some sense out of the symbols we scrawl or the squawks produced by our larynges. Could psychedelics help us develop vernaculars that more fully express human diversity and changeability?

4. From personal experience, it seems that the alkaloid psilocybin effectively dissolves stubborn dualisms: medium/message, mind/body, self/other, culture/nature; and can lead one quickly to the inference that everything is intrinsically interconnected in some incomprehensible way. It is this sense of interrelatedness that I seek to emulate in my work, with the application of found objects and appropriated imagery. Obviously the so-called psychedelic experience transforms one irreversibly, and I believe it should be sought not merely for purposes of blithe frivolity but prudently, and primarily with the aim of consciousness expansion. I think too, the taboo surrounding psychedelics is born largely out of a fear of how vigorous and far-reaching an ontological revision they can provide, and the problems such a review might have for rapacious consumer capitalism, which relies on a certain conception of the individual. An evasion of singular categorisation could circumvent the very process via which one becomes both a consuming subject and an object to be consumed in the overarching demonic scheme.

5. In Australia we have a particularly skewed sense of self; our national identity has been forged (and is still being affirmed) on the violent colonial frontier, which we choose to forget. An anxiety arising from the contestation of the land has in turn informed a particularly harmful form of masculinity, one that asserts itself through jingoistic belligerence and the drunken reverence of obsolete symbols of foreign imperialism (which seem easier to accept than the philosophy and law of pre-invasion Australia which continue to flourish). If confined to an institutional or gallery context, artists can only hope to comment ironically on such pressing historical and socio-political concerns. I think it is in the subtlest ways that art can influence these ongoing discourses, and therefore artists can perhaps best disrupt and subvert sensible, rational order with absurdity and irrationality, exposing the disjunctions between language and reality through playing with ambiguities.

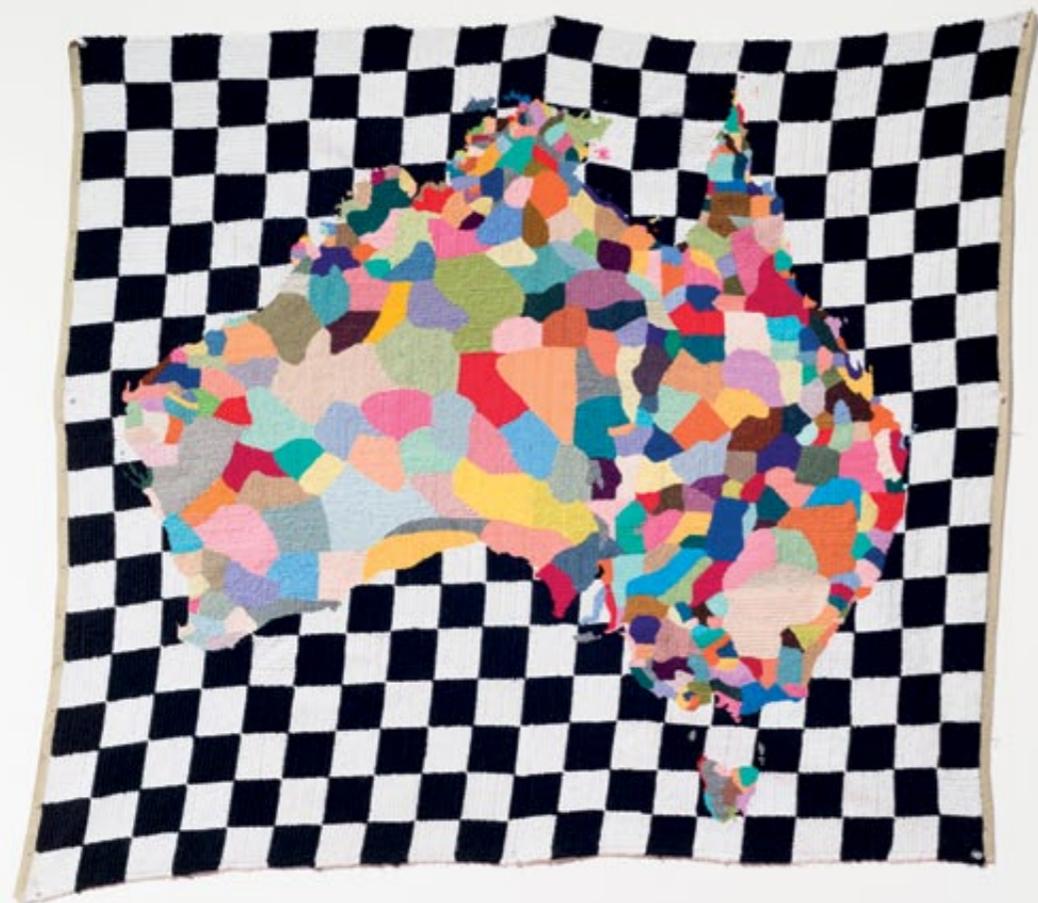
BY PAUL YORE





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The Big Rainbow Funhouse of Cosmic Brutality, 2009
 Mixed media; found objects, toys, plastic flowers, fairy lights, record player, cardboard, fountains
 Dimensions Variable
 Image courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Devon Ackermann

•||•
Everything Is Fucked, 2011
 Wool tapestry
 65H x 87W cm
 Image courtesy of the artist.
 Photo credit: Devon Ackermann.
 Private collection



•
Map, 2012
 Wool tapestry
 90H x 101W cm
 Image courtesy
 of the artist.
 Photo credit:
 Catherine Evans

•
Trash, 2013
 Wool tapestry,
 beads, wire, wood
 114H x 128W cm
 Image courtesy
 of the artist.
 Photo credit:
 Catherine Evans.

THE BODY, SHUT AWAY AND ON DISPLAY:

The recent performative practice of Eugenia Lim

How do you both engage with and disengage from the outside world? While our connection to our bodies is intrinsically subjective, and often assumed as a principally private understanding, the multi-disciplinary work of Eugenia Lim reminds and reveals that our bodies are also innately socially-reliant. If we tire of the social realm, to shut oneself away is not an easy option; it requires endurance and planning. Lim's recent works develop a complex critical dialogue around the relationship between the body 'on display' and the body 'shut away'. These two ideas represent extreme points on a continuum between the social and the individual, the public and private, expressing relations which are culturally-coded and socially-enabled.

Lim's fascination with such themes was piqued while on exchange in Boston, when she attended an anime convention and witnessed the ritual of cosplay (costume-play) for the first time. Life-size embodiments of anime fantasies, characters like Bleach and Sailor Moon, battled it out to be the most culturally 'authentic' – an impossibility. Adopting a subtly anthropological gaze, Lim was interested in the inherent tensions between intimacy, anonymity and role-play, observing a kind of cultural fetishisation in the total immersion of American youths into an idealised Japanese subculture. Japanese culture embodies a number of extremes and tensions within the social-private continuum. On the streets of Harajuku and Akihabara, young Japanese regularly perform characters and identities in public arenas, flaunting everyday presentations of the body. Yet at the other extreme, Japanese society and history displays extreme practices of being 'shut away'.

Lim's fascination with marginalised identities and the tensions between the individual and society is explored in her recent performance *Stay Home Sakoku: The Hikikomori Project* (2012), whose title references two prominent Japanese examples. *Sakoku* was the Tokugawa-period policy of 'national isolation' whereby Japan closed its borders to external travel and trade, the body politic enforcing a radical national 'shut-in' of its citizens. *Hikikomori* is the contemporary phenomenon of self-imposed extreme isolation by youth shut-ins. However, total disengagement is illusory. Tokugawa Japan continued to trade with selected countries, and the drastic actions of the *hikikomori* remain socially-enabled and facilitated by family members and cultural conventions. Even in extreme cases of shutting oneself away, the body remains connected to and reliant on the social realm.

For *Stay Home Sakoku*, Lim staged a performative project that engaged with these complexities and contradictions, literally putting her body on display and shutting it away. She transformed a gallery at Melbourne's West Space into a makeshift bedroom, which she inhabited for one week. Living with the constant possibility of public display and scrutiny, she simultaneously denied herself direct human contact, unable to talk with visitors and relying on deliveries of food from viewers and friends. While the project began as an experiment in adopting the *hikikomori* lifestyle, it developed beyond this specific cultural phenomenon, extending Lim's contemporary engagement with a lineage of pioneering performance artists. She drew particular inspiration from examples such as Tehching Hsieh's series of *One Year Performances* (1978–86), Chris Burden's *Bed Piece* (1972) and Joseph Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me*

(1974), seminal works whose actions of total bodily immersion assume intensive dimensions of isolation and endurance.

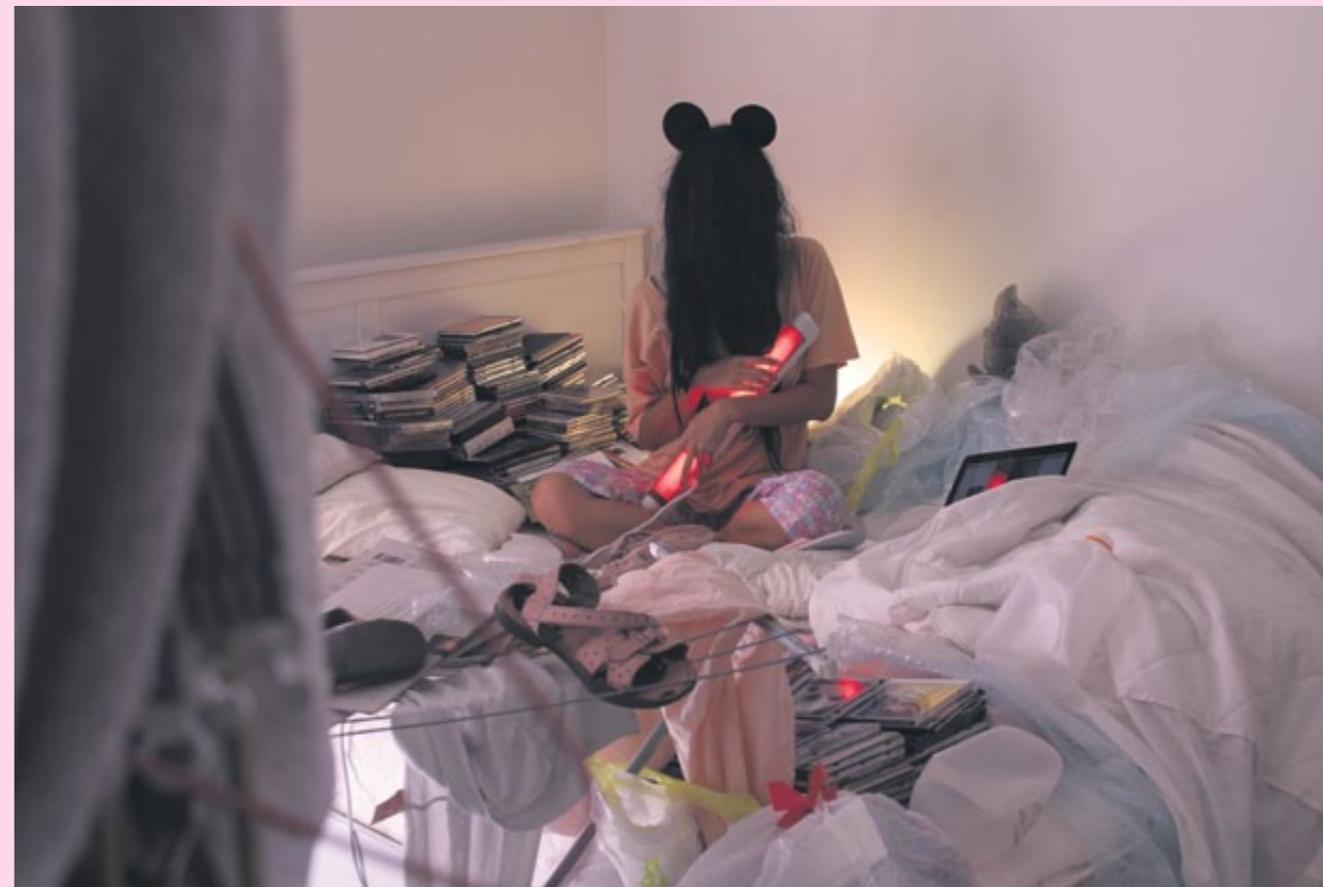
Lim's contemporary dialogue with such performances reveals how the seemingly opposite actions of shutting the body away and putting it on display are in fact both acts of endurance and transgression. *Stay Home Sakoku* succinctly appropriates the phenomenon of the *hikikomori* to track the ripple effects of early performance into the networked age. Amidst an overwhelming digital array of communication, the implications of being socially connected are transforming notions of isolation. In *Stay Home Sakoku*, the act of shutting oneself away is reconfigured as an immersion into a digital existence. Lim describes this as a sense of approaching a 'digital vipassana', a meditative retreat into quietness, facilitated by immersion in an online community.

Within her constructed retreat, Lim maintained contact with the exterior world exclusively through online tools, not just for communicative means but also to extend the durative dimension of her occupation. She collaborated with performer Yumi Umiuware, who issued her with daily exercises based on Japanese *butoh* techniques. Detailed and repetitive, these instructions required intensely introspective activities, yet they simultaneously made Lim's body palpably more visible. As she jumped, stretched and meditated within her confines, she physically embodied the remnants of digital communication, maintaining a corporeal response to her digital immersion.

Stay Home Sakoku involved an intensive embodiment of the extremes of the social and the private, and continues to resonate throughout Lim's subsequent practices. Notably her most recent performance, *Narcissus* (2013), inverts many earlier concerns. Presented at a Kings ARI flash night, this strikingly more intimate performance involved Lim confronting her own body and image – starkly on display and in a state of near-nakedness, yet refracted and mediated through an artistic antecedent. A direct counterpoint to her earlier bodily 'shut-in', *Narcissus* continued her engagement with the legacy of 1970s performance, reimagining Marina Abramović's *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975).

Having chosen five stills from Abramović's performance as 'perfect' examples of artist beauty, Lim adopted and performed these poses in front of a televisual 'mirror', constructed through real-time video capture and playback. Her appropriation of Abramović's critique and the myth of *Narcissus* constructed a visual and performative feedback loop, remediating idealised representations of the gendered body. However, the presence of the physical body always confounds the image. The real-time video playback does not perfectly keep up with Lim's frenetic movements as she brushes her hair and preens her image, creating subtle temporal gaps between the body and its representation. It is a fitting final image of a cyber-body approaching the physical, undeniably linked but still maintaining a fissure in representation. Such performative after-effects poetically reinforce the interrelated junctures between display, immersion, isolation and representation that Lim's practice so concisely critiques.

BY KATE WARREN



Stay Home Sakoku, 2012
Live-in performance
and online chat,
West Space ARI and
www.stayhomesakoku.com,
22-29 March 2012
Documentation and images:
Eugenia Lim

THE KINGPINS: Collective Bodies

There is drag, and then there are the Kingpins. The group is difficult to describe simply – it is much more than a drag king ensemble. It is representative of a queer performance culture that is peculiar to Sydney, infinitely more nuanced, more malleable than drag is broadly understood to be.

From the distance of Melbourne and Brisbane, I have become aware of the Kingpins and a number of other young Sydney artists who seem to me like ambassadors for this subculture, the richness and exuberance of which I can only guess at. From the work that has spilled into the Australian art world, I imagine how the live experience of their performances compares to the more widely visible, more generic drag culture that had its apogee in the 1994 film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. As with the latter's costumes, the popular perception of drag is a tight fit: female impersonators acting out, along narrowly prescribed lines, an idea of what the freedom to be who one wants to be might look like.

The Kingpins' early video works followed in the tradition of drag by pastiche of music videos, retaining the format but rendering their content uncanny – and this before YouTube made the cover into a meme. However, the Kingpins' approach is increasingly more complex and ambiguous than just cross-dressing and has facilitated their expansion into video art. They tackle hypermasculine archetypes including rappers, wrestlers and bikers, but it is the inherently camp aspect of hypermasculinity that they illuminate, getting beneath the performance of 'straight acting', rather than just mimicking it. The thrust of their performances is not the old-fashioned frisson of one gender dressed and performing as the other but the implication that masculinity is inherently camp on its own. The thrill, as Susan Sontag suggested when she said "Pure Camp is always naïve", is not in apprehending the performer inside the costume but in realising that the costume was already unwittingly the performance.

The two biker figures from the video installation *Rhapsody Happens* (2005) pick up on the performativity in that particular genre of masculinity; they are exaggerated, undeniably camp but in keeping with their models. The excess of the costume and props magnifies the grain of truth in this presentation instead of

revealing any deception. The jolt in these videos comes from the realisation that they both comprise two figures instead of one, something that is artfully concealed, though also hinted at. Being a multi-member group, the Kingpins are able to further confound bodily conventions by merging together into collective bodies.

Polyphonic Ring Cycle (2009) plays out this collective, anatomically perplexing body in a shift from four plausible, if eccentric, costumes to a centrally placed third leg as a part of each and then to being joined into a single costume that unites the Kingpins in a twenty-limbed being. Like a theme with variations, each iteration is performed to an identical soundtrack and attempts identical choreography. Despite the drag king makeup and faux chest hair, gender appears beside the point by the end; it becomes lost in the performing bodies as they merge inside the costume and is ultimately subsumed by the act of performance itself. Just as the erotic leads away from sex, the Kingpins use the body to lead away from gender.

While conventional drag centres on the spectacle of gender performance, the Kingpins begin with a song, a place, a corporation such as Starbucks, or indeed Artbank, which commissioned their most recent work, *Spider Nanny* (2013). As Técha Noble explains on behalf of the group, "Artbank was the catalyst for this work. So we made a giant piggy bank." This is the performance of an entity that both nurtures and devours, that fattens on accumulating interest. Like *Rhapsody Happens*, the video is costume driven, largely static and features a collective body, this time with multiple bejewelled eyes, a swelling, pink, pregnant abdomen and eight legs with pink high heels more Fran Drescher than Mary Poppins.

Spider Nanny is no less subversive than the Kingpins' previous works and demonstrates how far their practice has travelled from its origins on the stage. Such a trajectory would be unimaginable for a conventional drag act but it is the fluidity of queer performance and its inherent disregard for convention that has allowed these artists to build the impressive career that they have. Such are the rewards for thinking outside of binary opposition.

BY FRANCIS E. PARKER



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Bikers, 2005
Photographic Still Liz Ham
60 / 42 cm

•/•/•
Spider Nanny, 2013
Video still
Videographer: Joshua Raymond
Commissioned by Artbank





BACKFLIP: A Feminist Walks into a Bar

Three years ago I co-curated an exhibition during the *Next Wave* festival in Melbourne. The exhibition was called *The View From Here: 19 Perspectives on Feminism*, and at the time it felt like feminism was pretty unpopular. Although we felt that we were riding the Third Wave of renewed interest in feminism and feminist art practice, when developing the exhibition we were often met with disinterest, confusion and qualifying statements that started with “I’m not a feminist but...” Thankfully, in the intervening years feminism has firmly planted itself in our cultural consciousness, appearing almost daily in national newspapers and all over social media in uproarious fashion, whether to bring sexist radio presenters into line, or even to hail our own prime minister as a feminist icon (after her famous ‘Misogyny Speech’). Only last week I read an article proposing Margaret Thatcher, rightly or wrongly, as a feminist role model.

Similarly, in an art context, feminism is well and truly back in our lexicon. One may argue that it never actually left, although certainly during the 1980s and 90s it took a turn into dark territory. The “post” feminist backlash that reacted against the perceived essentialism of 1960s and 70s feminist works dealt a death blow to many women artists working with the body, although the renewed interest in theory and critique arguably pushed feminist practice in new and interesting ways.

In the early years of the 21st century, decades after revolutionary feminist artists used their bodies to explore ideas of femininity, subjectivity and identity, there is a continued prevalence in contemporary feminist practice for performance. In *The View From Here* the majority of the artists in the exhibition used video as their medium of choice. This was not a curatorial decision on our part. Video was a crucial tool for many feminist artists documenting performance in the 1960s and 70s, and it seems that the need for lens-based techniques to document performative practices has not waned.

In the exhibition *Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art* at Margaret Lawrence Gallery at the VCA in Melbourne, Laura Castagnini has brought together a range of local and international artworks

to challenge feminism’s bad reputation as unfunny and authoritarian, instead proposing that feminism can be mischievous, and indeed that feminist art has a rich legacy of satire and wit. Through the work of Hannah Raisin, the Hotham Street Ladies, Pippilotti Rist, Catherine or Kate, The Guerrilla Girls, Brown Council, Nat & Ali and many more, Castagnini is offering a strategy for engaging with feminist art in a light-hearted way. Each artist or collective in the exhibition uses humour to disarm the viewer, which, Castagnini says, allows a break or space within which to alter thinking or perceptions.

One of the interesting aspects to arise from *Backflip* is the continued engagement for many of the artists with performance art and performative works. The interconnection between the body and performance is one of the defining features of the feminist art movement and exhibitions such as *Backflip* allow a renewed engagement with these ideas.

In Hannah Raisin’s video work *Flowing Locks* (2007), the artist is seen gesturing and posing in front of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art with exaggerated long body hair flowing from her armpits and vagina. The humour in this work is self-evident, and the references to early feminist performance works are cheeky. As Castagnini notes, many artists look back to earlier practices. “Women artists keep returning to ideas of femininity – expanding or subverting notions of the ideal woman, but also really investigating their own bodies.” Bodily subversion is particularly evident in the work of Melanie Bonajo, a Dutch artist who re-enacts VALIE EXPORT’s iconic work *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, employing EXPORT’s crotchless pants. However, rather than displaying the performers’ genitals, Bonajo instead paints over the pubic area with rainbow colours, imbuing the action with a playful levity.

One might argue that many works in *Backflip* are re-treading familiar ground, yet it is this continuous backward gaze that Castagnini is so interested in: “lots of artists and thinkers and writers are looking back to the 70s as a point of reference, whether it’s to critique or pay homage to, or to seek advice or make comparisons.” While this may indicate a cultural nostalgia for revolutionary moments in history, perhaps the referencing and appropriation of these early feminist practices speak of their continued

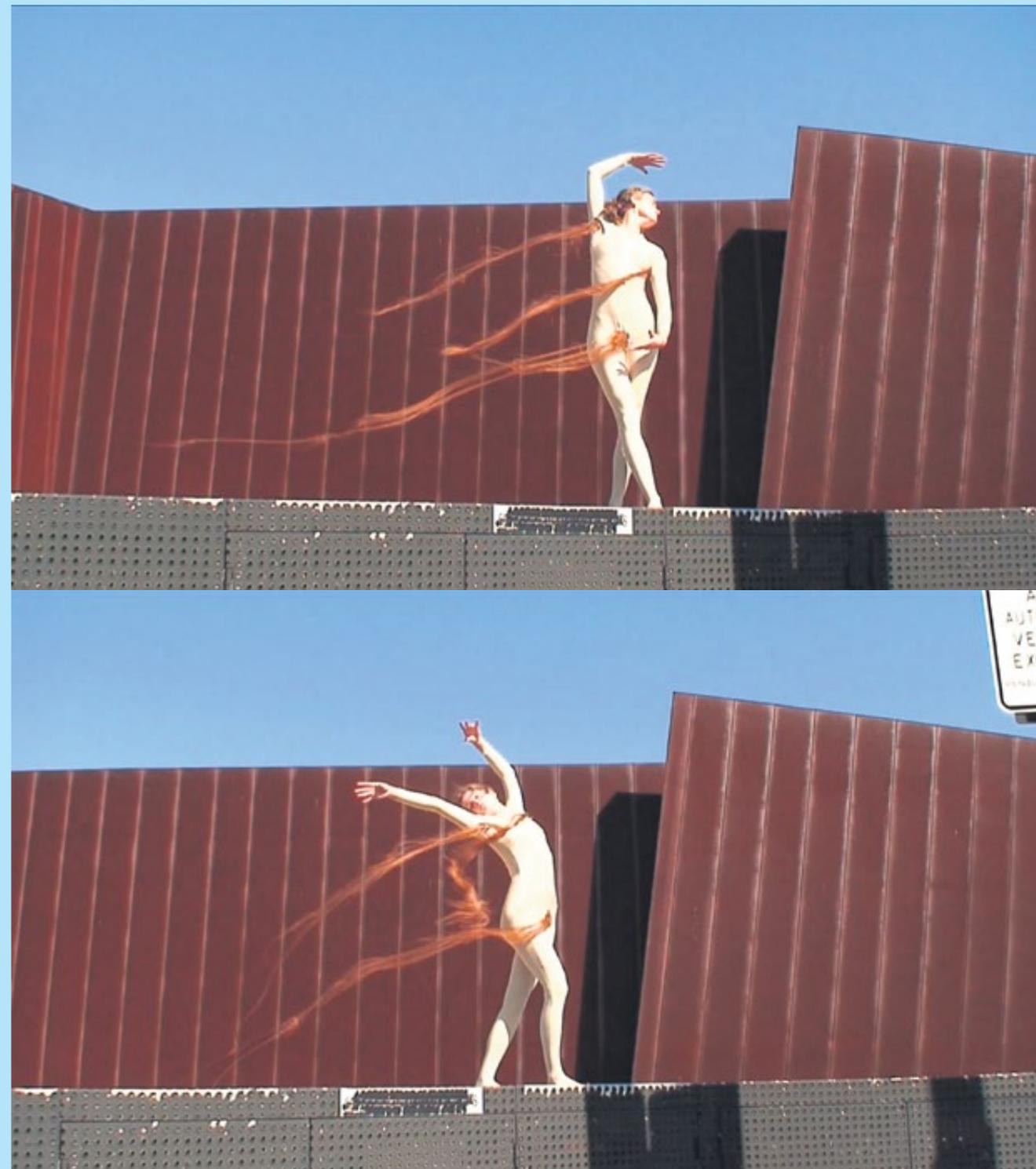
relevance to contemporary artists and the issues we are still facing. “It’s crazy that women are still making work that reacts against the stereotypes of women in Hollywood,” she says, “but then images of women are still so problematic so it makes perfect sense that feminists are still outraged. I like how that puts a finger on the pulse of where we’re at with feminism. On the one hand you could say ‘people are still making work about the same shit’, but actually the world hasn’t changed, so people are still responding, women’s bodies are still regulated, breastfeeding and (body) hair are still issues.”

Backflip also broaches the question of gendered humour. In developing the exhibition Castagnini notes one book on the subject by Jo Anna Isaak from 1997, however the area is still greatly under researched. Given the plethora of humorous feminist art in existence, this raises the question: why hasn’t it been written about? “If the cultural gatekeepers are usually men, they’re looking at these works saying ‘I don’t get it, what’s so funny?’ then they write about it as if it’s aggressive. Maybe women burning their bras was hilarious, and in good fun?” Castagnini posits that humour is subjective based on gender, and that perhaps the female humour in feminist practice has been misread and lost.

Backflip invigorates feminist art by exploring its links to the history of performance art and performative practices. By re-assessing and re-presenting these ideas, the artists in *Backflip* are proposing new ways of relating to the performative body as the subject and object of the works. Combined with the utilisation of humour as a device to unnerve and equalise the playing field, *Backflip*’s agency is in its ability to connect with a wider audience and perhaps even lighten the load of feminism’s baggage.

BY CLARE RAE

*Backflip:
Feminism and Humour
in Contemporary Art*
VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery,
Melbourne
26 April – 25 May 2013



THE MUSIC OF FRIENDS: Paul Knight and Intimacy

There is an image of Paul Knight and his boyfriend Peter standing in matching yellow underwear and green socks. They have their backs to the camera and are positioned in identical poses with their hands behind them. The camera's shutter release cable is visible in Knight's hand. It is as if they stopped mid-way getting dressed (or undressed) to take a photo. In another image, Knight is wearing the same socks while he penetrates his boyfriend on the couch. Later, two socked feet appear at the edge of the frame, pressed against a naked chest, presumably Peter's.

These are some of the scenarios that comprise the collection of snapshots in *Chamber Music*, a photographic diary spanning the years 2008 to 2013. The title refers to a genre of classical music historically performed in intimate, domestic spaces, such as a living room. Described as "the music of friends", chamber music is played and experienced for pleasure.

It is an apt title for this body of work. *Chamber Music* purports to document Knight's relationship with Peter. We see the couple at home, at the beach, in the countryside, eating and having sex. It is difficult to know if these images have been staged for the camera or have been simply recorded in the unfolding of the couple's everyday lives; whether Knight is being honest in his depiction or if he is subtly parodying the genre of snapshot photography. It is probably somewhere in between and Knight has described this work as constituting "a confused performative and confessional realm where appetites offer themselves, so that photography can feed on some of the objects of its own obsessions."

Chamber Music continues the concerns of previous work such as *Intimate Couples* (2008-2012) where Knight explores the raw, intimate and habitual sex lives of a series of couples, or *Constructed Scenes* (2006), where odd and ambiguous scenes of affect are reproduced from popular media. Critic Robert Nelson called *Constructed Scenes* at the time "a tinder-box of aesthetically unauthorised emotions". Lit with stark frankness, these previous works are notable for their highly stylised compositions and for the ways in which

they capture the vulnerability inherent to intimate relationships.

Chamber Music, however, is marked and framed by the personal life of the photographer. What is most interesting for me is the ways in which the photographer himself appears within this work as author, voyeur and participant at once, marking a shift in Knight's slow and insistent interrogation of the photographic image.

I cannot help but think here of Victor Burgin's analysis of Helmut Newton's *Self-portrait with wife June and models, Vogue studio, Paris 1981*. A naked model is pictured observing herself in a mirror, a scene which is interrupted by Newton's unexpected appearance in the bottom of the frame. In the shadows, Newton's wife sits observing. Burgin argues that this image confounds a number of sexualised viewing positions – Newton is both the observer and observed – creating a kind of "perverse space". As Burgin writes, "from this position [Newton] now receives the same look he gives." Responding to Laura Mulvey's argument that the gaze is inherently masculine, Burgin suggests that this is not so straightforward when it comes to viewing photographic images. There is I think, a similar logic at play in *Chamber Music* and Knight's practice more generally. His work is as much about the mechanisms that drive and circumscribe photography as it is about any particular sexual mise-en-scène depicted. Knight's interest in what he calls "the abilities and failings of the photographic image" would suggest that what falls outside the frame is as important as what is contained within it. This dynamic between the photographer, the subject, the space and the viewer is what constitutes the 'intimacy' in Knight's photographs, an intimacy peculiar to photography.

BY NELLA THEMELIOS

|•
14months #3, 2009
From *Intimate Couples* (2008-2012)
Lambda print, 40x50cm
Image courtesy of the artist and Neon Parc





HOVERING UNEASILY CLOSE TO SEA LEVEL

an interview with Helen Johnson

For the past eight years, Helen Johnson's paintings have almost always included human figures. She recently paused her figural work and is now creating a new series of paintings of empty desert islands, to be exhibited at Sutton Gallery later this year. Interested in the perspective of the artist—who also maintains an active curatorial and critical practice—I recently conversed with Johnson by email.

I'm keen to hear how your aesthetic experience of your paintings is shaped by your having painted them – and how this might compare with the experience of looking at and thinking about your work for others. Many of your paintings include images of people who are your friends. I'm not so much interested in the Dorian Gray factor here (the obvious fact that not only the people but also your relationships to them have changed over time) but more in whether you find that the figures in these paintings exist as portraits, for you.

As time passes, I begin to see that I was loading all this social stuff into those paintings without even realising it. I guess because I always tend to choose people who are compelling or interesting to me, I have ended up painting various boyfriends, close friends, peccadilloes and such. Circumstances change, but the paintings stick around, and they do become loaded with these histories. It's not always comfortable – as with the painting of my current boyfriend and his now ex, for example – but I don't think it's a bad thing in terms of the work. It's just another way in.

I think, and I would imagine this is the case for all artists (and painters especially, who are coding reflective distance into the materials as they work, by stepping back, then coming forward, then stepping back), that there are times during the making of a work that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to see the work for what it really is, because you are so close to it, and when it is fresh you still have a narcissistic attachment to it, because it came out of you. These things conspire to make it difficult to experience a work aesthetically. I come at this question from a Kantian understanding; I consider myself a Kantian, both in terms of morality and in terms of aesthetics. In painting,

as in writing, sometimes it becomes important for me to 'forget' them in order to return and proceed with them. This is perhaps in order for me to be able to have a renewed aesthetic experience of them – if your understanding of aesthetics is, as mine is, predicated on the encounter and the precognitive 'free play' of the understanding and the imagination (which is not attached to concepts – though leads one's mind into a deeply invested contemplation of concepts as they emerge from form).

I know that your recurrent interest in painting life-sized figures is in part a strategy for soliciting an empathic response from the viewers of the works. But for you – even though these don't feel like portraits – they are pictures of people to whom your relationship is complicated and close. If a viewer knows this, or suspects it, even, mightn't her potential for empathy be checked by a kind of distancing that comes of being 'out of the loop' somehow, looking at a representation of a stranger?

I think that it might first be useful to make a distinction between empathy and engagement. Beyond the question of whether a viewer can derive a sense of empathy in beholding a representation of a stranger, there is also the question of that representation's treatment. When I think about this in relation to my own work, I think something I am trying to do is reflect the viewer back at, or onto, themselves, rather than offer them an empathetic relationship to the person depicted. There is often a sense of intimacy, that as a viewer you are encountering a private scene, but it is not about empathising, it's a different kind of engagement.

In my most recently completed figurative work the figures are featureless, and though they are in the foreground of the composition, they are engulfed by the cartoon that hangs on the museum wall behind them, which is an adaptation of a late 18th century etching in which 'Black-Eyed Sue and Sweet Poll of Plymouth' farewell their boyfriends, who are being sent to the new prison colony, Australia. The painting is more to do with how histories manifest than depicting subjects. Indeed, the two women in the foreground are constructed,

their heads adapted from seventies magazine spreads, their clothing stamped onto the canvas, and their gestures and feet modeled on my own hands and footwear, as the most convenient model. Their hand gestures are more present in the composition than their faces. So I guess in the sense of portraiture they are not knowable.

To turn to your paintings of islands: why are there no figures in these images? I want to think about what function the human figure has in your work in terms of being a vessel for political potential.

The island paintings will all have different bits and pieces in them, and different aesthetic energies, but there are no people in them so far. I want to preserve their appearance and function as symbols, and introducing figures might detract from this. The desert island is a symbol that to me, in an Australian context, negates itself: the desert island as a tropical paradise, a haven for laziness, personal freedom and bricolage; and the desert island as repository of Australian shame, the place where colonial Australia sent its second-offender convicts, the place where Tasmanian colonists sent Indigenous Tasmanians to perish, the place where we indefinitely detain asylum seekers.

The scale of the first finished work in the series is roughly equivalent to your paintings with figures, and you've told me that you quite deliberately composed the work so that a viewer is symbolically placed in the space of the island. When I see this, I feel surprisingly discomfited. The image is drawing on recognisable tropes from popular representations of desert islands, and yet it is so out of whack in its colours, its edges, its scale.

They feel like that for me too. The colours and the forms are quite pretty, almost whimsical, but they are also uptight, the components sectioned off from one another, so the spaces where gestural marks are allowed has been strictly pre-determined. In this way the island paintings become, to my mind, neurotic, as I think islands are, in a contemporary Australian context: sites of neurosis. There is a sense of 'out of sight, out of mind' with the way the Australian government



keeps asylum seekers on islands. Like they're not really 'here', so 'we' don't have to take responsibility for them, as people. But this hovers uneasily in the background of contemporary Australian life. And this is all I really want the island paintings to do in this context: not tell people off, or create a 'moral high ground' (they are too close to sea level for that), but just to have them hover uneasily, persistently, at the periphery.

BY ROGER NELSON

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<i>The Prophetic Nymphs (thinking WTF)</i> , 2013	<i>Australian Modernism (Saskia)</i> , 2009	<i>It usually never rains</i> , 2013
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas 180 x 250cm	Synthetic polymer paint on paper mounted on plywood 120 x 170cm	Synthetic polymer paint on canvas 112 x 168cm

All images courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery



YHONNIE SCARCE

Pictorial

In recent years Yhonnie Scarce's practice has been characterised by the display of extraordinarily fine, blown-glass sculptures within concise installations of found objects, such as specimen jars and manacles, that reference both the intellectual and literal tools by which Indigenous Australians have been historically persecuted and controlled. The glass component of these works typically takes the form of bush fruits that, in a kind of Indigenised transubstantiation or eucharist, stand in for the deceased bodies of Indigenous Australians. Works like *The Collected* (2010) and *Not Willing to Suffocate* (2012), which consist, respectively, of glass long yams and bush bananas stored in archival drawers and suspended from laboratory stands, use the medium to mark the fragility but also, importantly, the beauty of Indigenous bodies and culture in the face of brutal colonial systems of knowledge and history.

By contrast, the recent large-scale work *Burial Ground* (2011-12) shifts the focus from epistemology towards memorialisation.

Comprised of 224 black glass yams piled atop one another (one for every year of colonisation), the work is a disconcertingly beautiful anonymous mass grave. While the dark, painted glass clearly figures the Indigenity of the grave's occupants, it also evokes the archetypal 'dark glass': the Claude glass, a black tinted mirror popular among 18th and 19th century painters for its capacity to render the landscape it reflected in a picturesque aesthetic, reminiscent of the work of its eponym Claude Lorraine. The fundamental paradox of the dark glass was that in order to see the aestheticised landscape reflected in it, painters were compelled to turn their back upon their actual subject. With *Burial Ground* Scarce holds a dark glass seductively up to the viewer in order to engage them in the savage, shared histories of Australia, while pointedly memorialising the collective historical back-turning that persists to this day.

BY RYAN JOHNSTON

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The Collected, 2010
Blown glass, found woodenboxes,
perspex, dimensions variable
Collection National Gallery of Victoria

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Not Willing to Suffocate, 2012
Glass, painted metal,
65 x 15 x 20cm each
Photography Janelle Low

•/•
Burial Ground, 2011
Blown glass and perspex,
33 x 133 x 38cm
Collection Art Gallery
of South Australia
Photography Janelle Low

All images courtesy the artist and
Dianne Tanzer Gallery and Projects





LEIGH BOWERY

The Incredible!

At the evening's climax the beautiful, show-stopping Leigh Bowery strolled through the doors. The audience froze and watched with amazement. His bandaged head, genderless body and skyscraper height challenged the audience to question if this larger than life creature was art, fashion, performance, music or something from another planet. He left them speechless. He is stimulating, provocative, and a walking form of art. It is my absolute pleasure to introduce Mr Leigh Bowery.

Leigh, as always you look absolutely surprising and stunning.

Why thank you. I'm incredibly happy to be here.

What are your tits made from?

(Laughs) Willpower more than anything.

And the headpiece?

Surely that's not comfortable?

I tend to use quite a lot of makeup and I was on an economy drive. I thought the more fabric that's on the face, the less makeup I use.

Where did this all begin?

I came from Australia, that's where I started off. The suburb I was born in was quite interesting because it was called Sunshine. This was a nice sparkly start to me. So that's how it all started. But then London started to beckon me. There were the Blitz Kids and all these gorgeous clothes and music, it just seemed so exciting. It seemed like the melting pot of all the most exciting things in the whole world. So I just had to jump on that jumbo jet and get myself there as soon as possible.

What is it that stimulates you?

The thing that stimulates me more than anything has always been ideas. Ideas really get me excited and the area that gives me the most freedom with ideas is art because there are no barriers and no parameters. It's completely free and so that's the area in which I place myself now.

Why do you use clothing to explore this?

Do you consider what you do to be fashion?

Fashion was the thing that I was always really excited about. Rather than painting a canvas or sculpting with clay I put all these ideas onto myself. When I wake up in the mornings and I've just had a bath and I'm all clean. I look at myself as a fresh canvas and then I will put a little bit of paint on and then some trimmings

and I sort of make myself into this creature.

I like the idea of dressing up and the way that clothes can change people.

You're usually found in a nightclub, but what happens when you step onto the streets?

I wish there was no difference wearing this on the street, but there is. If I go into a supermarket or a corner shop all my hard work coming up with these ideas would just be greeted with laughter and derision. The only place I'm really comfortable is in a nightclub.

So what do you wear when you're on the streets? How do people engage with you?

I must say there are club people who I see all the time in the club and I can walk past them in the daytime and they won't recognise me. I like doing the opposite of what people expect they want. On the street I wear wigs and suits. Sometimes I strap a pair of high heels into my shoes because I like to be tall.

You've become quite a fashion figure.

We've seen you on the cover of i-D magazine and sitting in the front row of catwalk fashion shows. How do the fashion people feel about what you do? How do you fit into fashion?

I don't think they look at my clothes as something that will be seen on the high street next season. But I think they are quite amused and stimulated by how far I take things. So that's how I roughly fit into fashion. I'm just on the border of it and I want what I do to be a bigger issue, not just something that was in fashion for three months.

Would you describe what you do as performance art?

They're more or less just a big entrance and that's all it is. I think the longest one has been four or five minutes and I like it to be a big entrance with a surprise so it will be as memorable as possible. Sometimes, I'd be dressed up and it was so extreme that there was a performance going on without me even knowing it, so I thought I'd take charge of that.

How do the people around you affect the way you feel in what you wear? What is their role in all this?

I think about getting reactions from what it is I do. It wouldn't be much use if I kept what I do to myself at home. The audience is a big part of it. Communicating and selling ideas is what it's all about.

You had your first exhibition at the Anthony d'Offay gallery in London.

This must have been such an exciting time for you...

Yes, it was the first time I had to think about performing within a gallery.

This must have completely changed your engagement with an audience. Can you describe this performance?

For the people who came to see me it appeared that I was sitting behind a plate of glass. But actually it was one of those two way mirror affairs. All I could see was my reflection and I didn't have to deal with the audience. I think it was just an experiment of what my reflection brought out in me.

What did it bring out in you?

There is obviously pain and pleasure in all the things that I do. There is sort of a tension between a really lighthearted side and also a very dark sort of side and something glamorous, but also something horrifyingly twisted.

How do you continue to 'up the ante'?

I went through a period where my favourite fabric was flesh. Human flesh. I didn't wear any clothes for a while.

There has been talk of a 'pussy wig'?

Yes (laughs). I was sporting this pussy wig that I devised which was really good because I didn't need strings or anything and could kick my legs all about the place and nothing would spill out or fall out. The most ridiculous things are the things I end up liking the most. The more stupid it can be the better.

What's next for Leigh Bowery?

I think the only thing that is left to explore is my belly. Eventually I'll have a diving board coming from my bust.

We'll all be waiting to see that!

Thank you so much for coming in to share your sparkle with us.

Thank you, the pleasure is all mine.

**A CONVERSATIONAL COLLAGE
BY ADELE VARCOE**



