

of bestial acts and rabbits in hats



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Every performer, implies Zanny Begg's 2008 video installation *Treat (or Trick)*, relies to some extent on the complicity of their audience for the success of a given act, be it the distribution of the wealth or just pulling a rabbit out of a hat. It is an implicitly Brechtian conceit, an element underlined in the work's inclusion in the forthcoming *Istanbul Biennial*, *What Keeps Mankind Alive*, themed, as it is, after the final song in the second act of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. In a curatorial framework circulated in advance of the *Biennial*, *What, How & for Whom (WHW)*, the four-woman, Zagreb-based curatorial collective behind the event, asserted that "bringing back Brecht is an attempt to think about the role of artistic endeavour in the conditions of contemporary capitalism, to re-evaluate our everyday practices, our value systems and modes of operation"; Brecht, they argued "invites us to rethink our position again and again".¹ This is very much the logic that seems to underpin Begg's work, certainly *Treat (or Trick)* but also, and irreducibly, her entire practice as it sits within a general movement toward the visibility of the political in contemporary art.

Interestingly, in terms of its construction of a relationship between a work and an individuated viewer—or, to use logic of the work itself, a performer and their audience—*Treat (or Trick)* is as close to the conventional staging of aesthetic experience as Begg's work has come in recent years. The work invites the viewer into a black circus sideshow tent to see a video shot and projected in the same tent, a three part treatise-cum-magic show in which the 'invisible hand' of the market plays the magician whose rabbit assumes the mystical form of the commodity, at once the objectification of labour relations and the object of consumer desires. The viewer assumes the role of the audience, otherwise detectable only by a canned laughter and applause, an audience which, intertitles tell us, is all too aware that it is being duped by Mr Invisible Hands, but goes along willingly to the show, for the top-hat that produces the rabbit is where the audience's seemingly bottomless desires find their home. In its ironically seductive presentation of the performer-audience dynamic, *Treat (or Trick)* proposes an awareness of similar relationships within the field of art, and begs the question of how they might relate to the social relations objectified in the commodity.

If we are to take the work's references to Marx as more than a repudiation of free market theories of economic management—which, truth be told, even Kevin Rudd is offering these days—and understand it as illustrating a critique of a social alienation whose origin lies in the division of labour, then this is a critique that operates from and is embodied within Begg's practice as a whole. Works like *Treat (or Trick)*, in which Begg is credited as the sole artist, are complemented by a cluster of collaborative projects. Notable among these are her work with Viennese artist and filmmaker Oliver Ressler, with whom she produced the film *What Would It Mean to Win?* as well as an accompanying installation at the 2008 *Taipei Biennale* and *Den Frie Udstillingsbygning*, Copenhagen, and with Keg de Souza with whom she organises the activities of Sydney artist collective *You Are Here*. Complicating this are the multidisciplinary practices these collaborations and Begg's individual work involve, embracing critical, curatorial and pedagogical activities alongside art production, as well as the often simultaneous character of these projects and their varying timeframes—2016: *Archive Project*, one of the chief undertakings of *You Are Here*, is an evolving, decade-long commitment to explore and record the rapid changes underway in the inner-Sydney suburb of Redfern.

These projects have manifested themselves at quite staggering levels of scope and ambition. The *You Are Here*-curated project *There Goes The Neighbourhood*, for instance, successfully positioned debates around the transformations in Redfern within the context of global artistic investigations of gentrification and urban planning. In addition to a major publication and exhibition at Performance Space, *There Goes The Neighbourhood* took in artist residencies, public programs and a restaging of Alan Kaprow's participatory installation *Push and Pull: A Furniture Comedy for Hans Hoffman*, coordinated by Nick Keys, Astrid Lorange and Lucas Ihlein at Waterloo artist-run initiative Locksmith. The work of local artists dealing with highly sensitive issues of immediate relevance to the Redfern-Waterloo community, as well as an information centre on grassroots activism within the community itself, were complemented by contributions by such high profile international artist-activists as Michael Rakowitz, Rene Gabri and Ayreen Anastas of New York's 16 Beaver group, Miklos Erhardt and Little Warsaw,





Brazil's Bijari, Spain's Democracia, Chicago's Temporary Services and Jakob Jakobsen of the self-dissolved Copenhagen Free University, with Temporary Services and Jakobsen visiting Sydney for the installation and accompanying events. It was a mammoth undertaking, but its vibrancy, impact and critical acuity were such that it was arguably one of the most important artist-driven projects ever to take place in Sydney.

Whether working individually or collaboratively, Begg is careful to consider the role of the audience. Though highly political in its subject, her work marks a shift away from the dry earnestness often associated with certain activist art practices, and she has developed a characteristic humour and humility most clearly expressed in the elegant, affecting, hand-drawn animations that accompany the live footage in *Treat (or Trick)*, *What Would It Mean To Win?* and her 2008 film *Don't Say Goodbye: An Exploration of Spatial Politics in Hong Kong*. Moreover, Begg's work operates at a range of social registers, from sophisticated analysis of the strategies and motivations of social movements, to projects geared toward audiences located well beyond the traditional activist and artistic communities. In 2008, for example, Begg and de Souza created a psychogeographical representation of Kali Code, a previously unmapped long-term squatter settlement in Yogyakarta, in collaboration with community members, including local children whose drawings of the area, generated in workshops run by the artists, were added to a giant map. For *There Goes The Neighbourhood* the pair hosted similar workshops at Redfern Community Centre to produce animated counter-narratives addressing daily life in the area, while in collaboration with software developer Andy Nicholson, they devised *Pemulway Dream Team*, a distribution-ready computer game pitching boxers, played by members of the Tony Mundine gym, against greedy developers and general injustice.

Begg's expanded conception of artistic practice integrates the socially engaged function of self-organised activity, the strategic constitution of new publics, with the socially concerned content of her more properly artistic works, which offer a symbolic imagining of the political sophistication—potential and actual—of these new publics. Through this dual politicisation, Begg and her complex network of Australian and international collaborators, a continuation of the activist networks developed by the 1990s social movements who first realised the communicative power of the internet, participate in a significant revitalisation of the social function of aesthetic production that works with and against existing institutional structures to stake a claim for symbolic and political autonomy.

In conversation with Justin Clemens toward the end of 2007, Anthony Gardner noted the clarity of recent shifts in institutional and commercial legitimations of the political in art. Where the most visible art of the 1990s often concerned itself with fashion, advertising and film—'different uses of the image'—Gardner observed that the past few years have seen a turn toward more explicitly political work, at least at the level of those more readily available art barometers, international biennales and widely distributed magazines like *Frieze* and *Artforum*.² Although never entirely absent from contemporary art discourse, politics has arguably moved away from the margins, to

which it was relegated in the embodied subjects of 1990s ethnographic art, and toward the very centre, where it has become a regular justification for a range of curatorial and critical conceits.

Apart from important questions about the capacity of the market to appropriate practices oppositional to it, a capacity that is especially pronounced with regard to art, this new legitimacy for the political in art derives in part from concurrent expansions of both fields activity, that is to say, a general broadening of the practices deemed acceptable in both art and politics. While 'the political turn', as this shift in art world preoccupations has somewhat problematically been described, has channelled aspects of the artist as ethnographer model into a liberal democratic conception of globalisation where 'trauma' and 'difference' become roughly synonymous with 'world', there has also been a shift toward accepting as art practices that are political in form as well as content. In a general sense, this means that as art has become more socially engaged, its modes of production, distribution and presentation have themselves become more socialised. What is produced by these practices is not simply a series of works concerned with issues of relevance to the public sphere, but also an assertion of artistic agency within the total complex of human relations.

The rise of the curator, whether interpreted as an opportunity for critical agency or simply 'middle management jostling for a place in perpetuity', has arguably overshadowed similarly marked shifts in what is broadly legitimated as artistic practice. Just as the role of the curator, at least in its ideal form, has absorbed both the reflexivity of the artist and the authority of the critic, the division of labour traditionally excluding discursive and organisational activities from the purview of the artist has undergone significant erosion in recent years. This is, of course, an erosion that has occurred largely on institutional and commercial terms—Marcelo Expósito has pointed out that challenging the division of artistic labour is itself a tradition within historical avant-garde practices, and a necessity in others, specifically marginal or emergent fields like video art before the mid-1990s, and one might add to this practices operating in contexts with limited cultural infrastructures, particularly the work of artists in the global South.³ And while this erosion reflects the shift toward flexible and communicative labour of post-Fordist societies, certain symbolic hegemonies are maintained in the name of economic and political interests—thus the presentation of the curator rather than the artist as the subject of substantial functional transformation.

As much Begg's practice constitutes an embodied critique of the conventional division of artistic labour, it is at the same time a tactical exploitation of her role as an artist within persistent cultural hegemonies. The figure of the artist, with its perceived position of subordination within these hegemonic structures, will always retain a greater potential to resist professional codification than that of the curator. The sheer breadth and ambition of Begg's practice is an attestation that the activities which an artist might undertake alongside and as an extension of conventional artistic production, that is to say, as an actor within a given system of relations, are boundless, providing a mobility that, if exploited carefully, can produce real effects in the world. Her work is motivated by the same contingencies that led Simon Sheikh, several years ago, to ask the question, "What can we do for ourselves?", playing out the "ongoing negotiation, translation and articulation between interested agents and groups" and fulfilling the necessity he perceived "to establish networks, to compare and mediate practices as well as theories". "Art matters, certainly", he concluded, "but art is not enough."⁴ What matters more, Begg seems to suggest, is the socialisation of the artist. In highlighting the dynamic of the performer and the audience, the implication of *Treat (or Trick)* is that the audience divests itself of the performer's tricks, or better, that it becomes the performer itself, not to deceive, entertain or conceal the 'bestial acts' that Brecht concluded keep mankind alive, but as a performer whose audience is only made up of other social actors. In answer to the age-old question of the relationship between politics and art, it introduces the figure of the artist as a political being. Art becomes political when the artist asserts their agency in the world. It becomes politically effective when it encourages its audience to assert its own agency.

Notes

¹ What, How & for Whom, 'What keeps mankind alive?', unpaginated press release circulated by the *Istanbul Biennial*, 29 June 2009

² Anthony Gardner, from 'Anthony Gardner and Justin Clemens in conversation', *Speech Interviews*, <http://tiny.cc/2YxfW>, 30 November 2007

³ Marcel Expósito, 'Inside and Outside the Art Institution: Self-valorisation and Montage in Contemporary Art', *Transform*, October 2006, <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0407/expoito/en>

⁴ Simon Sheikh, 'Representation, Contestation and Power: the Artist as Public Intellectual', *Transversal*, October 2004, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1204/sheikh/en/print>