

Deadpan Exchange VIII - Mexico City

20th March - 5th April 2014

This exhibition presents seven artworks, framed in the context of an international exchange that explores an ongoing discourse around deadpan aesthetics and deadpan humour. This project, devised and initiated by Heidi Hove and Jonn Herschend, can be likened to a sort of deadpan relay, as artists from one country are invited to respond to artworks made by artists from another. When complete, the project will culminate in a large exhibition that showcases all contributions to the Deadpan Exchange. This evaluative overview will raise key questions about the theme and how it has been interpreted culturally, aesthetically and conceptually by those selected. The artists presented in this exhibition are responding to the works created by seven artists from Lithuania, who exhibited in Deadpan Exchange VII in the UK 15 months ago.

The deadpan aesthetic provides an objective and unsentimental representation of its subject, with little emotive lead in for the viewer. Work of this nature relays an experience with no narration, no expression and no direction, so that the reading of subject matter is untainted, unbiased and uncomplicated by the artist. It speaks for itself. The deadpan aesthetic in the 1970's was often performance led, such as the work of Yoko Ono, Martha Rosler, and Vito Acconci. In the 1990s deadpan photography took centre stage, widening the focus beyond the artists' individual perspective to 'a way of mapping the extent of the forces, invisible from a single human standpoint, that govern the manmade and natural world.'¹ Deadpan humour in art is complex and multi layered. The subject is presented with inscrutable delivery and can be serious, tragic, comedic, dark. There is an impassiveness to the work, an emotional stillness that leaves the viewer perplexed and thus open to gut reactions. This may emerge as an uneasy laugh, or a wrenching sadness that stays with them long after they leave the gallery. Bas Jan Ader's *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1971) for example pulls the viewer towards a wave of emotions, without providing indication that the actions performed are significant or genuine. Ader does not acknowledge the camera as his facial expression shifts from expulsions of tears and grimaces to moments of suspended elegance, as if waiting for the next wave of emotion to begin. Like most of his work, the film teeters on the brink of self-control as he seemingly waits for a release, for that moment of letting go.

If we consider popular culture on the other hand, responses to emotive subjects are often measured and controlled. If a feature film or television programme succeeds in moving the viewer to tears with its content, for example, the viewer feels a pang of embarrassment when caught in a moment of emotional 'weakness'. In some television sitcoms, laughter is inserted artificially so that the sound of joy is controlled, forced, timely and of a certain quality. It seems significantly poignant when we consider that the man who invented canned laughter, Charles Douglass, did so after returning home from the Second World War. It is in this context that we can consider David Mackintosh's response to the work of Lithuanian artist Robertas Narkus. *The Absent Audience Show* (2012) was a sound installation by Narkus that recontextualised the spectacle of canned laughter, generating a synthetic haunting as one entered the gallery. David Mackintosh's *Sadness and its Friends* (2014) responds to this work by considering the application of canned laughter to early British situation comedy, such as Hancock's Half Hour, The Likely Lads and Rising Damp. Often tinged with tragedy, these post war sitcoms epitomize a characterization and writing method that acknowledges tragic events underneath a veil of humour, whilst depicting familiar everyday situations. Mackintosh's animation seeks to unravel this underlying sadness, turning to a composer who actively sought to encompass sorrow for inspiration. Henryk Goreki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* from 1976 primarily focuses on separation through war as subject matter. Mackintosh has made the work in this exhibition whilst listening to Goreki's expression of sadness, the resulting animation containing a balanced mixture of emotion that is akin to Ader's *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*. Tragic events are sandwiched between calm, normal, reassuring scenes.

In the context of 'deadpan', there are other underlying similarities that can be found in the works exhibited. Some artists have examined the ridiculous; one work mocks the absurdity of women's magazines, whilst another provides us with photographic illustrations of buildings that should not be built in the city of Preston, using somewhat bizarre props. Michael Day presents us with a suspended military helicopter, a vehicle often associated with war poised in mid air as static glitches move rhythmically to an imagined rotating propeller. *No Name* (2013) is a looped digital capture of paused analogue video that halts time and dislocates meaning. Its threatening presence is frozen, and leads the viewer to question what happened before and after this moment, whilst perhaps encouraging one to consider the way in which we engage with televised images of war that are mediated, sanitized and easily removed from view at the touch of a button. Responding to the works of Laura Stasiulytė, Day playfully suspends this image and presents us with a 'strange kind of non-motion'.

¹ Cotton, Charlotte (2004). *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. London, Thames & Hudson.

Means of mass communication repeatedly penetrate our consciousness, so that imagery and digitized experiences and events have a significant impact upon the way one lives. Through the appropriation of fliers, magazines and newspapers, Lesley Guy responds to the 'absurdity, quantity and quality' of information we are inundated with on a daily basis. In her installation *Variations on a Theme - The Golden Girls* (2014), Guy responds to the work of Akvilė Anglickaite's *The Letter* (2012) with a series of sculptures using paper mache in conjunction with magazine imagery. Anglickaite's video work is focused around a letter published in *Tarybinė Moteris* (The Soviet Women) in 1982, which depicted an observation of everyday life whilst incorporating propaganda that seems ridiculous from a contemporary perspective. It is unclear whether the woman's experience in the letter is real or not, and if we look objectively at British magazines such as *Woman's Own*, we see similar absurdities driven by capitalism, aimed at women. John Berger, when discussing the effects of advertising, comments that the publicity image 'steals a woman's love for herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product'². Magazines are a good example of this, blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality by juxtaposing advertising, the latest soap dilemmas, celebrity gossip and real-life dramas. The process of separating oneself from the language of mass communication reveals this calculated trickery, and Guy's sculptures present a jarring contradiction as she applies glossy versions of female identity to paper-pulp forms.

Charles Quick presents a series of numbered photographs entitled *A model of an Iconic building that should not be built in Preston* (2014), which responds to *Vilnius Postcards* (2009) by Lithuanian artist Arūnas Gudaitis. Like Guy, Quick presents us with a series of unconventional and witty representations, focusing on models for 21st Century utopian architecture. Utilizing a collection of small pocket sized objects obtained by the artist over a number of years, Quick holds up each one for the viewer so that its scale is proportionate to the urban landscape beyond. The objects in this context adopt the functionality of an iconic building - a feature on the skyline that commands the viewers attention, a selfish distraction from the collective urban landscape upon which it is situated. In his proposal, Charles Quick quotes from Oliver Wainwright's 2013 Guardian article *The Cheesegrater: Richard Rogers sprinkles the Square Mile*, in which Wainwright discusses the new Rogers building and its relationship to the skyline of London;

'Alongside it stands the curvaceous Gherkin and, to the south and bulging like a bouncer, the Walkie-Talkie. In addition to these towers, there are plans for a building shaped like a can of ham, another like a knife, and yet another like a rolled-up napkin. The City of London is becoming a bizarre dinner party in the sky'.³

Reminiscent of Claus Oldenberg's drawn visualizations of unfeasible large-scale monuments as they appear in situ, Quick's proposals appear at once ridiculously magnificent, egotistically monolithic, and unashamedly insensitive. As a humorous inventory of what not to do, we are encouraged to think about the future of 21st Century architecture and of Preston, England's newest city.

The performative aspect of Quick's photography is echoed in the works of Simon Le Ruez, collaborative duo Mathew Gregory and Karin Bergström, and in the final closing sequence of my video *After* (2013), which draws on the relentless irritation of advertising explored in Aistė Valiūtė and Daumantas Plechavičius' piece *Ultra Vires* (2012). *After* is a 20 minute film that studies a condemned brutalist building as if the lens were dutifully studying a photograph. A trope to the failures of contemporary consumer culture under capitalism, an empty modernist shell that was once Sheffield's vibrant market hall is the subject of failed utopia, captured using methods akin to the deadpan photographers of the 1990's. After the viewer is taken slowly and silently through the isles and lifeless halls, a woman is imagined sitting in a disused cafe. With deadpan delivery, the woman sings a song from her fading memory, the words interrupting the silence of the space with a warning. In contrast to Quick's outlandish utopian proposals, this visionary design was realized, and for many has become part of Sheffield's brutalist heritage, despite its unkept facade.

Simon Le Ruez draws directly on the performative stance of the figure depicted in Milda Zabarauskaitė's untitled photograph from 2012. The positioning of the hand, which rests mindfully against the subject's hip, was for Le Ruez reminiscent of the poise and elegance of a Flamenco dancer or Matador. Interested in the 'evocation of balance, movement, ceremony and celebration', Le Ruez presents the spectator with an assemblage of mixed media in which 'refined and colour coded structures collide with pictorial imagery'. When visiting Le Ruez in his studio to view *Torero* (2013) for the first time, I was struck by the elegance of this work. Playfully constructed using an eclectic array of materials and media, the impassive gaze of the female matador from underneath a beaded

² Berger, John (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. London, Penguin Books / British Broadcasting Corporation

³ Wainwright, Owen (2013). The Cheesegrater: Richard Rogers sprinkles the Square Mile. [Online]. *The Guardian*, 16 June. Last accessed 05 March 2014 at: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jun/16/cheesegrater-leadenhall-building-richard-rogers>

surface immediately creates a feeling of discord between the violent nature of bull fighting and the beauty and grace of the spectacle. The matador is after all highly skilled in deadpan delivery.

The deadpan aesthetic is marked by a careful pretense of seriousness, a non-expression set up to elicit a reaction in the participant. Its delivery relies on language or some form of communication in order for the recipient to understand the purposeful irony of the situation. For example *Projet Pour un Texte* (1969) by Marcel Broodthaers is a videoed performance that sets itself up for failure, as the artist passionately writes a letter in the pouring rain. As the ink washes from the page the artist continues, and the shambolic nature of this slapstick act results in smiles and laughter from the audience. But there is an underlying sentiment about communication, about language and expression, which makes this work beautifully poetic. In the same way, the collaboration entitled *Förstå [Understand]* (2014) between Swedish artist Karin Bergström and British artist Mat Gregory deconstructs tangible expression. The works playing through the speakers were created by Bergström, who recorded the sound of her poetry and diary entries, firstly in Swedish and then with English translations. The sound waves of these recordings were then interpreted as musical notation and performed on a music box. Gregory's field recordings and narratives playing through the headphone set are taken from the same time period in which Bergström composed her written works. These sounds mark a moment without detail, and provide a dialogue between the pair without words. In their proposal the artists pose two questions; 'how can we find the language of emotions?' and 'how, without expressions or words, can we communicate our emotions through sound alone?'. Responding to the work *Candy Shop* (2012) by Lina Lapelyte, the installation explores 'the possibility of understanding an emotion without a mutual language', through the deadpan presentation of sound.

The eclectic mix of themes in this exhibition is driven by the artists and their individual practices and interests, the conceptual content of the works exhibited in Deadpan Exchange VII, and by the overarching theme of deadpan in art. The complexity of this project has resulted in 7 works that are skillful in fulfilling these criteria, each one balanced in both its response to the work and to a wider critical dialogue. It may be too early to provide an evaluative commentary on the exchange and the cultural, aesthetic and conceptual implications that have been initiated by this international conversation. Yet we can see themes emerging; fantasy and failure, comedy and tragedy, beauty and violence. All of these elements allow us to form an understanding of what it is to be human in the 21st Century.

**Exhibition text written by Victoria Lucas
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