

Transcript of *I Know How Hard It Can Get* artist talk between Graham Mathwin and Taylor Reudavey.

28 / 09 / 17 @ 6:00pm, Moana Project Space, Perth.

*(Graham) You have transformed gallery spaces and their conventions in many ways - from the micronation you set up in your undergrad, to locking people out of your recent Hive show, and keeping them there for your speech at Free Range, and now transforming this space into a purgatory / waiting room. What does this ambiguous series of transformations stem from?*

(Taylor) I guess it comes from a fascination I have with the social implications of “putting on a show”, which consists of certain codes and expectations that are quite different to those of a normal social encounter among friends, even though most of the people who turn up to my shows or engage with my work are friends. I’m interested in how the artwork as a gesture is situated among these often pre-existing relationships, how it feeds off them and temporarily transforms them, like there’s a moment where I go from the identity of Taylor, that is, the identity that I live through, that I am known as and perhaps predicted as, to that of a performer. I don’t really have a studio practice at the moment, so I guess that’s my joy of working, of doing something that has a shared effect. And I get the impression that audiences love that shit. I guess it also plays around with the work/non-work divide that artists often worry about; it’s a nebulous distinction already so why not have a bit of fun with it, kind of thing.

Now, I want to jump back to something else we’ve spoken about a bit outside this context - namely the review of your work in Seesaw. Specifically you were concerned that the author had considered your approach somehow “neutral”. I was wondering if you could elaborate on your apparent neutrality and the discourses of manipulation—especially of authenticity, that you are interested in.

The vibe I got from the review was that the show was read as a collection of differing opinions and convictions that were all equally valid, that I was presenting them as equally valid, so the show as a sum of its parts was neutral. I think that kind of reading is quite blind to how these opinions and convictions are conveyed and, as you said, very manipulative, and by placing them in the one space I wasn't saying "maybe you should think about it this way, and this way". I was bringing to light how they're interacting with each other and undermining and inadvertently affirming each other in some ways; Joe Hockey's "lifters and leaners" rhetoric seems to sabotage Shannon Noll's apparently sincerely motivational message to the downtrodden in "Lift" and turns it into this really unforgiving "just get off your arse" kind of statement, it's co-opted by the false optimism of neoliberalism that Hockey's speech represents and pitches, argues for. And the character of The Bludger, who's left out of Noll's male working class narrative, she can't identify with that and she also seems to be really distancing herself from it, but she also can't seem to defend herself against The Interviewer's line of questioning which is a continuation and reflection of Hockey's sentiment. So it's a pretty nasty power play, I think, and if we can say that The Bludger is the one who's really losing here, then I think that accurately reflects how this conversation is playing out on a national level, where the emotional appeal, the kind of begging, of Newstart recipients, who are living in poverty and really suffering, is just shut down by the Liberal government in the name of austerity, like the Libs seem to think they're giving out way too much, they're not being strict enough. So as a Newstart recipient making work about welfare policy, I can only dream of approaching it neutrally. And I don't think the doubt and ambivalence that I've brought to this work should be mistaken as a position of neutrality.

Your film is very self-deprecating, both in a humorous sense, and I feel in a sense that attempts to embrace a discourse rarely attempted—one of culpability and guilt. In a way, it is about the failure of the politics of guilt to change the fact that you cannot find a job. Which continues to destroy you without offering any opportunity. I guess I was wondering to what extent you were performing an inversion of the neoliberal paradigm which assumes everyone is responsible for themselves, and their faults are their own, but a lot more of your film is about the psychological damage this ideological thinking does.

I guess the guilt that is coming across in the film, which I do genuinely feel, isn't due to the neoliberal arguments of self-sufficiency and work ethic and that kind of shit. I can dismiss that because I'm an artist who's invested in their work, I'm not sitting on my arse all day doing nothing with my life, it just happens that my line of work doesn't have the economic viability that neoliberalism exclusively recognises. My guilt comes from somewhere that's less individualistic: it's a kind of internalisation of the

idea that the unemployed have withdrawn from their responsibilities as citizens, which is a bit different to the “lifters and leaners” thing. The most hurtful and demoralising thing someone has said to me whilst I’ve been unemployed is: “you’re basically an adolescent who’s living off society rather than your parents, you can’t expect society to fund you while you go around doing what you want”—referring to my art practice—“you’re not behaving like an adult so you’re not able to make any meaningful contributions to society” kind of thing. Maybe that was informed by neoliberal rhetoric, I don’t know, but that really hit home, and I couldn’t turn around and say: “Actually I just did some rollerblading in an art gallery and that’s a pretty important contribution” (laughs). So really the guilt comes from selfishness, maybe, from enjoying privileges that the workforce seems to be giving me and not doing enough in return. My unemployment has created that guilt and is constantly feeding it. The fact that I can’t really escape it makes me unsurprised that it’s crept into my work, my film.

I wanted to ask about the blending of fiction and reality in your work. You construct a documentary-like aesthetic, but you include fictional or strange aspects, for example, *Miss Opportunity*. Why not make a purely documentary film?

A purely documentary film, I think, would end up being a bit of a sob story. To talk about my unemployment experience in a very direct and sincere way is basically just asking for sympathy and not much else. Which I wouldn’t reject, of course, but in a political and rhetorical sense that’s certainly not an empowering position to be in. Whereas putting on a performance, as *The Bludger* or as *Miss Opportunity*, is empowering. It allows me to engage in my condition, my circumstances, in a way that’s more complex, more worldly, it goes a bit beyond introspection, and lets me break away from a certain fixed identity and subvert it from lots of different angles.

You are possessed of a certain irony in your political positions in the film. For instance, wearing a military jacket while walking through Subiaco at night, while scripting a dialogue that is actually quite sympathetic to dominant political discourse. Why the irony here? What function does self-deprecation serve here, where it seems to undermine your politics? Or is this a parody of your politics, the way in which perhaps you feel your status undermines your view?

Again, this is me trying to get away from my position as someone asking for sympathy, that kind of dead-end that identity politics can invite if you're not careful, if you're placing yourself in a conversation as a fixed subject. You need to step outside yourself in order to be self-deprecating, you need to assume the voice of someone who's not at all convinced by you. I didn't make the film so I can let everyone know I hate myself (laughs), it's about treating myself as a political subject, rendered here as The Bludger, who's on the receiving end of a really harsh policy, informed by certain ideological convictions, where there's no easy way of proving them wrong or unfounded. It's like yes, you might find me at home smoking durries and feeling sorry for myself instead of doing an internship or handing out my CV or whatever, but I'm not doing that out of spite for the taxpayer, I'm not smug about it! I'm not a job seeking machine. Maybe that could be my next artwork (laughs). (In robot voice) "Do - you - have - any - positions - going". Pull out my CV with my little robot arms (laughs). But yeah. Anyway. I'm not a job seeking machine, I'm feeling disillusioned and tired and can't put myself forward as a competitive candidate for a hospitality job that day. I think that kind of subject is under-recognised on both sides of the debate, because it's so problematic. At least it begins to address the mental health issues experienced by the long-term unemployed, which a term like "bludger" certainly doesn't, though it isn't just about disillusionment, otherwise these motivational messages (points to *Reading Material* video) would do the trick—I really do feel that giving out a payment that is well below the Henderson poverty line, forcing people to interact with a system that is also seriously underfunded and run by workers who are pretty disillusioned themselves, or implemented by algorithms that are just plain wrong; this is a recipe for disaster, for putting vulnerable people under extreme stress, the threat of destitution. The left and the right seem to agree that Jobactive isn't really working, the difference is their suggested changes. And I don't trust the Libs, they have no fucking idea, you know.

I've talked a lot about the film. Mostly as it is so complex, but can you talk about the two other voices evident in the show—their construction of authenticity, and also perhaps your distortion of Shannon Noll's white-male-working-class image, and the changes world economy that both voices seem to sublimate merely to "hard work" as if it were the solution?

I'm not the first person to distort Noll's working class image, like, he's basically a meme these days (laughs). I remember a while ago, like he hadn't posted on his Facebook page for ages, and out of nowhere he posts this photo of himself making dinner, like "Yum, fish tacos!" and the comment section was absolutely priceless. Like,

“fish tacos are good mate, thanks mate, keep up the good work, thanks, cheers mate” (laughs). Anyway. Whether or not Nollsy feels that he’s the voice of the working class, that’s where he’s come from and that’s what makes him authentic, is beside the point. He’s a commercial singer who is marketed to the working class, he has a career because the producers of Australian Idol thought he could be the Jimmy Barnes of a new generation. This is where authenticity becomes marketable as well as a means to put yourself forward as like, “the right voice to talk about this issue”. Next to Guy Sebastian, Nollsy was the “real” Australian Idol because he’s more white, less sexually ambiguous, more masc and so on; that’s the basis of the “Nollsy was robbed” joke, I think. And whether people engage with that joke ironically or not is something I can’t really answer, but it does show that as a cultural figure Nollsy has a difficult but fundamental relationship to authenticity, it defines him and undermines him. That’s why he’s a voice in the show. Also, “Lift” was released as a single about six weeks after the Howard government brought in WorkChoices. I was a bit too young to really get it at the time, I think I was about twelve or something, but I think he was co-opted then in a way too: like, “You’ve just had your hours halved? Buy Nollsy’s new single, it’ll make you feel better”. And Hockey’s authenticity is based on his position as an elected member of Parliament speaking with the nation’s best interests in mind. And Parliament is like one big theatre. All three voices here are very measured and well-planned performances, so authenticity here isn’t just about immediacy and improvisation—though my film plays with that trope, it’s meant to sound like The Bludger is just speaking off the bat. But it’s about asserting that you’re coming from a certain position and you know best because of it.

Self-care and self-improvement appear endlessly in the film, and there is something poisonously self-centred about the manner politics is engaged in this, in this age and nation. There is a sense, and I wonder if you would agree, of relentless loneliness in the work, particularly that any moment of solidarity with other unemployed people is undermined immediately by divisive political differences.

I would definitely agree. I made a conscious decision not to produce, say, a more socially-engaged body of work that would be about the experience of other people who are unemployed, about rounding them all up and giving them a voice. I’m yet to have a meaningful conversation with anyone in the Jobactive waiting room, and the space seemed to really discourage it, being in plain view and earshot of the office where the appointments were going on. So there wasn’t any opportunity for solidarity in that space and I wanted the work to make that very clear, even if it does come across as, I don’t know, less noble. I just didn’t feel like I had the ability to create solidarity

through the work alone as well as in the space itself, in other words. As for divisive political differences, I'm interested—just hypothetically speaking here—if solidarity can exist among people who disagree or don't particularly like each other or whatever. If you're all moving forward with the same purpose, then it really shouldn't matter if you hate each other's guts, right? But that requires a politics of organisation rather than identity, one of action and doing publicly rather than being privately, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt. I guess that's where I've gone wrong in her eyes (laughs).

In the film the camera is a weapon, and an unwelcome intruder. What is your relationship to film, and do you consider the camera an aggressor, or is it simple to have a healthy ambivalence to it?

I wanted the camera to come across as an aggressor, yeah, because I wanted to mimic the conditions of the kind of interview a jobseeker would be put under—whether it be from a job coach, or in an actual job interview, this idea that someone is being measured against pre-determined criteria and if they don't meet it, if they don't impress them, then they're rejected, they're dismissed. And there's a few moments where *The Bludger* becomes gendered, I guess you could say, when the camera is like a peeping tom, or when the camera, that is, *The Interviewer*, is blatantly watching *The Bludger* hang up her underwear or leering at *Miss Opportunity*. Sorry to make you do that, Graham (laughs). I felt like I couldn't ignore the fact that *Bludger* is the only woman here in the show, or adolescent girl maybe (laughs). And there is definitely a politics to being a woman, a young woman on camera. Being coy, being coquettish, playing hard to get.



*Courtesy of Moana Project Space's Instagram.*