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**Alison Jones and Amanda Beech: Audience into Community**

Our entire idea of art involves the notion of audience . . . There is a kind of primary audience, real or imagined by the artist, a kind of in-group privy to the codes and structures of the work. This audience has no need to decipher the work since it understands itself as part of it. And then there is the potential audience, drawn from the wider community. This audience may discover that at first that it does not recognize its own reflection. I think that a community can be created from our collective misrecognitions and reflections. My work is based on the assumption that you have the choice of joining the primary audience rather than remaining with the alienated one.

— Susan Hiller, 'Reflections', in Susan Hiller: Conversations about Art, ed. Barbara Einzig, 1996.

When art makes a stand, says that enough is enough, talks frankly and points at what is wrong, the viewer may react in many ways. You may be inspired to pass over from viewing to action, from passivity to activity. You may feel simply reassured that a particular problem can be named as a problem, rather than a social fact mutely accepted. The political territory in which art works most effectively is in language: making something that is only dimly sensed sayable, discussable, or available to view. However, this project of enlightenment must sometimes proceed by devious or even violent means. Art sometimes removes certainties, in particular a certainty about the security of the position from which the viewer understands the problem. As I write these words, I am aware that such 'removal of certainties' is also a strategy now much appropriated by corporate culture as it invades every area of public life. So l will go back a little, to explain what such self-critical practice may positively contribute, and how it differs from the assault on shared certainties by advanced capitalism.

Political art named as such – Peter Kennard might be a good example – boosts shared understandings and possibilities for solidarity and social action, and it does not lack humour or self-awareness about its own limits. Such work has continuing value in a period of neoliberal 'stark choices' that (in the UK at least) we are incessantly ideologised into accepting and taking, as debts are socialised, social agreements disrupted and wealth consolidated and protected. The ritual of publicly demonstrating for a cause when there is a strong likelihood of defeat can have a similar, grimly positive effect and help to keep hopes and thinking alive. However, there is a specific risk for any art known as political in advance that it can do little more than reconfirm the boundaries of a community already known, rather than to transform the terms on which debate is made, or the self-understanding of that community. And that it can only conceive of virtuous political action as, in the end, coinciding with the destruction of qualities we recognize as art-like rather than democratising the availability of these qualities.

There is no finally correct way to tackle these widely shared problems; many strategies are needed, and there is much to be learnt from people one disagrees with. But there is a continued role for art that is speculative, devious and bewildering, and that examines and transforms the terms within which debates take place. Such art also needs to operate without acting as though its own insights are deeply cleverer than the thinking of the audience it wishes to reach. In very different ways, the work of Alison Jones and Amanda Beech is deeply bewildering, and also respectful of the intelligence of the people it would like to address. I will look at their work in turn, in order to draw out some of the urgent themes that they have drawn attention to in the communiqué for this exhibition: 'a sense that knives are being sharpened and that something needs to be said by art for the possibilities of art, the art world, the art audience and its ecologies'.

Alison Jones

Alison Jones's paintings show art in its natural-historical setting – Park Avenue apartments, private views, the super rich holding their champagne flutes. The interior furnishings and objets d'art are part of this system, as is, more broadly, fashion. She has commented on 'the sense of Roman undress' that tends to feature in the photographs of owners' houses and parties that are her source material for these paintings. The art depicted – we may recognize Thomas Ruff, Dubuffet, Helmut Newton or Morris Louis – may protest the settings it ends up in, or not.

That, briefly, is what the paintings show. What they produce (something very different) is gasps of recognition, shock and laughter, somewhere far removed from the certainties of satire. Gasps are not fully part of language. They are what we do when we are overcome, when we can't find words for what we are feeling or thinking. A gasp represents a small derangement of sense. You don't have words for the mixture of contradictory things you feel – so you gasp. Can you grasp what's in a gasp? The enlightenment project of critique (and the tradition of critical art that follows, questions and extends it) aims to make everything, in the end discussable. And we can discuss most things in the end, after we have got our breath back. But critique meets a tricky moment here: aesthetic shock. The painfulness of what you see is at the same time fascinating and funny. It is the achievement of these paintings to provoke a bewildering variety of reactions simultaneously.

The first law of critique is to demystify. So what exactly is going on in these gasps of recognition, excited and appalled, that the paintings produce? Let me set out some observations:

1. A community – the critical art audience, the enlightened ones – is brought face to face with images of another community, mostly female, around market- and auction house-approved artworks often (though not always) depicting women. This wealthy community appears numerous – there seem to be more of them than there are of us. These are paintings of crowds, albeit well controlled ones. Most often, when you look at art in a gallery, you are relatively isolated.

2. The laughter provoked is uneasy. You can take comfort that you are not one of the people in the picture, but what then are those people, automata provided so that we can feel smugly superior? No, they are images of people (mostly women) of a particular social class who are also part of a system of representation in magazine images, high life blogs, and elsewhere. In the clothes and shoes these women wear, and the art they are invited to mutely approve, they exemplify sexist assumptions that are found in different ways across the entire social structure.

3. Alison Jones is an enthusiastic reader of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological accounts of art, taste and culture. In these paintings 'art' – its values, its assumptions, whether grandiose or critical – comes off badly. The extra-economic values that any account of art as quality must struggle to justify and explain appear debased and complicit. The 'critical' potential of Thomas Ruff's photographs based on pornography is a particularly notable failure.

4. All of the above points are written as though the content of the images is transparent, available to us as easily as it would be in a photograph. But these are paintings. Their strategy is to be limpid, simple, clear. They do have a brilliant way of appearing transparent. But their own artfulness – the way the images are cropped, reversed out, transformed, examined in mirrors, and realised in the breathtaking one-off performance that watercolour brushstrokes can be – all this means they are made from an unusual combination of immediacy and constructedness. Part of what makes us gasp is the invisible labour in the studio to perfect each image, which sometimes requires many attempts and abandoned versions. It is as though, if she lived in a better world, Alison Jones could just have developed her skills and been a brilliant artist on a formal level; but she doesn't live in such a world, so there is a job of work to do. The skill and judgment that each painting shows – the extra-economic aspects of art's quality – are thrown at subjects that seem unworthy, but which are tackled nonetheless with cheerful gusto.

In this brief account, I cannot provide a more detailed commentary on how the paintings function. It is part of their deep interest that they can be seen at a glance, and that in that glance we know we are seeing something simultaneously complex and blatant; and that they reach out to the potential audience, rather than simply addressing the known audience. I will return, however, to some questions about what these paintings do to our own position, as we stand in front of them.

The privileged subject and viewer of Western art and philosophy has been male; it is a puzzle of these paintings that they so insistently put female spectators in the frame, as objects and also as potential subjects. The feminist understandings that inform the work have been held to through a period, particularly in the 1990s, when feminism was widely rejected and repositioned. One aspect of this was the redescription of feminism as more successful than it has actually been. There have, despite this repositioning,, been signs of an international revival of feminism in recent years. Alison Jones's paintings are part of the movement; but by examining art and more specifically a stratum of the art world, she is using the tools of art against some of the ways in which art functions as part of a patriarchal and capitalist order; and doing so in a way that short-circuits irony while admitting the value of exasperated laughter.

Part of the repositioning of feminism in the 1990s was the unleashing of a state of general irony, relentlessly employed through every level of culture, from tabloids to government. Irony (which does have its uses) involves, among other things, being where one is not, making temporarily tolerable through a laugh or a smirk a situation that is not truly tolerable. The questions about where the viewer stands in front of these paintings is connected with the more specific problem for women spectators in a relentlessly ironised culture: how do I recognize myself in the images I see? (This is, fairly obviously, not an overwhelmingly difficult problem for men.) The female viewer of these paintings sees, I think, that sexualised images are still at the apex of a wider structure of exchanges, that art is part of a system; that the immediate circle of wealthy people around art know this, and don't appear to care. And therefore, in a different way than usual, she experiences a gap in terms of identification, except, perhaps, with the other people in the gallery with whom she may feel more inclined to share an observation or a joke.

But again: I should interrupt this line of thought and admit that while the paintings present a temptation to viewers to 'see' their content transparently, they also work to make a complex content of their own, through the ways such apparent simplicity, the blatant obviousness of a correct critique, is refigured, translated and mistranslated in paint. The pleasures of the process of art itself, as it intervenes in the system of its own circulation of images, have not been deleted from the labour of critique. This is, finally, the most significant source for the gasp that these works produce.

Amanda Beech

Final Machine (2013) is structured as though with a firm didactic purpose, as three lectures. The form of the video lecture is an interesting one, and in many ways it counts as a new form, historically. The internet now democratises the availability of a great many lectures of questionable academic standards, but which adopt the format and assume the authority of the lecture successfully, whether through an on-screen talking head (usually male), graphics or illustrations. It is a standard part of any academic lecture to explain how one has arrived at conclusions, what is the base in evidence, in what way one's interpretations can be deemed valid. There are many video lectures that may be found or stumbled across as the result of a simple search, especially from corporate sources, that do not do this but which, from the counters, appear to have been viewed many times. Final Machine enters this territory – opinion, rumour, the legitimacy or not of knowledge, the power of ideas to do things and to reproduce via human hosts – as a gallery installation, but it is in every way a product of information culture's randomised distribution of learning and authority. This distribution appears decentralised, responsive to individual curiosity, except that somewhere you have a sense of an underlying order of attention towards some things not others; and of course, the feeling that your movements are being logged and tracked.

Final Machine addresses paranoia, ideas and power with a complex, demanding and contradictory script, whose contradictions are masked by the sheer authority of voicing (by Todd Boyce). The voice is the human anchor; it's not a machine but comes from a body, and unites in one person's sardonic and powerful phrasing a number of mutually contradictory ideas and arguments, which we cannot hope to keep up with. This lecturer always knows more than we do, is always ready to explain that our reactions to what he is saying are at fault for reasons he is about to explain. He consents to share his knowledge with us as a way of reinforcing a hierarchy, in which we are positioned as freshmen and novices – 'your little tales of civil support, they're all the same to me'. His rhetoric, some of which is drawn from the writings of Louis Althusser, some from the intelligence community, and some from what we used to innocently call thrillers, is like that of an invite-only presentation in some ghastly civil-military thinktank where the future shape of governance is being decided.

This voice gets under one's skin. It is however, regularly interrupted by gunshots. The gunshots compromise and cast some doubt on the authority of the speaking voice: they drown out and fracture some of his precious sentences. It is not clear that the gunshots are, as it were, being fired by the speaker. So who is firing them? Final Machine is not actually a thriller, for all its use of locations in Miami, the Mojave desert and the Dominican Republic, and its overriding sense that the whole planet has potentially become part of America's backyard. It's a compromised didactic device where anti-humanist thinking that may have had (and may still have) some usefulness has got into the hands of the wrong people, is being propagated in the wrong kind of training camps. The gunshots are fractures in this didactic structure, and seem to open up the possibility of a split between words and images, between the oppressive voice and the image-track, restlessly surveying desert, jungle and abandoned concrete structures. The gunshots are holes in the sense that the lecturer would appear to want to enforce on his 'audience' – though that word cannot really describe the notional public space that the work creates around itself. For the viewer of this work surely feels isolated, atomised and powerless, like a solitary internet snoop or gamer thinking: if only I can get to the next level. Final Machine takes the risk of a script that addresses you as a single vulnerable auditor in an unequal one-to-one exchange. But it is nevertheless, full of holes, gaps and breaks.

Holes are a visual feature of Final Machine. The gunshots connect visually with the circular mask or hole into the image that is used so consistently through the three lectures. The equation of camera and gunsight is a very longstanding one, but the way the motif of the disc is used is peculiar, and moves somewhere beyond the equation of seeing and physical violation. Sometimes the central disc is joined by other, smaller discs, and different segments of video play through each hole as the discs move. The footage on the holes may rotate, as though somewhere in its rotation, the figure will cohere with its ground, the suture be joined. The lectures themselves are interrupted by centrally placed discs of red, green and yellow for long periods. Green, red and yellow are part of the common navigational grammar of file management, as well as a cliché of policy-speak, the notorious 'green light'. The green, red and yellow discs are accompanied by seemingly arbitrary periods of silence: the physical and temporal divisions of the work makes its message and its programme a fragmentary one. The hole or disc, which seems to be both a negative and a positive space, takes on a peculiar visual and philosophical complexity: it is 'a hole in the centre of all operations', a hole in things, and in the structure of our knowledge, which remains deeply and perhaps stupidly connected with the faculty of seeing. The 'seeing' that the camera allows us to do in these lectures takes us to exciting destinations, but does not let us understand much; we see plants and flowers unfolding in time lapse, and they are fascinating to look at, but one is left wondering what they mean. The sometimes mechanical movements of the camera alert the viewers to the fact that human sight has been successfully sublimated into a mechanical, affectless, post-human kind of seeing. (These post-human camera movements are not an avant-garde invention or achievement: they are widespread in contemporary video games, television and film.)

Art sometimes takes the risk of not being pleasant to experience. Final Machine does not seek to immediately make itself friendly. As a viewing experience it is nevertheless compelling. It leads you to hope that it will have some kind of ending that will explain the journey it has taken you on to get there. The disappointment and frustration it creates, the way it takes you into its confidence, makes you sometimes feel almost helpless and ready to trust the speaking voice to at some point consent to explain 'how things really are'. This is part of Amanda Beech's peculiar aesthetic strategy. At the same time that the work makes you feel helpless and bewildered, it also cultivates resistance: I found myself arguing with its provocations and dismissive assumptions, even as some of what the lectures set out starts to sound plausible. It is a work that seems to expect us to work back against it, to question its own pose of authority and to seek out the fractures in its speech and thinking, which may precisely be the fractures where our own – the audience's own – real social thinking can claim back its space and agency.

'Community' is one of the most vulnerable, abused words in contemporary politics. Communities can exist to entrench prejudice and fear as well as to equalise the effects of chance and extend hope. And yet we do live, within the artworld and outside it, in changeable configurations of trust and mutual support that can be called, without any sentimentality, communities. In Lecture One, when the lecturer let me in on the secret that 'we know the romance of community and the round tables are smashed', I wanted to argue back; I did not feel ready to be recruited by this coercive 'we' that the lecturer used, however apparent the wounds in the word community are. I also felt vaguely disquieted, in case I was not really part of what Susan Hiller calls 'the primary audience, real or imagined by the artist, a kind of in-group privy to the codes and structures of the work'. Then I started to think that such doubts are silly; what Final Machine risks, and encourages, is not a correct interpretation, a correct line, but an audience that stirs itself, argues back: an audience discovering itself in a community of argument. It is not part of a tradition of art that seeks to make perfect objects of culture, and would rather dissolve itself in social life than be a thing. The romance I set out here of a vibrant community of argument may sound far-fetched in relation to works of art experienced in galleries, most often in relative isolation from others. But in the noise of the gunshots, and the knowledge that you go on being alive after hearing them, a space opens up to get on with living, after all.

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