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Broken Fall

Broken Fall I

Exhibited at Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, NZ

Broken Fall II

Exhibited at Newcall Gallery, Auckland, NZ

Broken Fall was conceived as the first stage in an exchange of ideas between Melbourne and Auckland artists. The question that tickled the edges of the project was whether work that ostensibly 'felt' familiar, and in its familiarity had the tendency to paper over differences of place and time, might reveal discernible change in such things as sensibility, affect and readability, through its movement into new spaces and new environments. This was a question for contemporary art as a form of globalised exchange, but levelled against the possible intelligibility of minor translations from artist run spaces in Melbourne to artist run spaces in Auckland ... and back again. Even though gentle handling would be required if small and discrete moves were to be recognised, how these 'shifts' might be identified had never been formulated into a tangible or workable set of parameters that would then allow for a critical study to be possible (legible). It was as though the project had been blinded by a simple assumption — that the differences would become manifest through their own palpability, through their 'obviousness' and that this might be enough. And while the problem of over-thinking and thereby potentially sinking an idea was avoided, the fault-line produced by not forming an axis of interpretative concerns (what *were* we hoping to discover?) weakened the initial premise. Any serious interrogation of the subject seemed to release little more than a bottomless chasm of interpretive difficulties. There was a potential trap to dodge, of course, a seamless slide into crude and ultimately banal cultural essentialism. But the most obvious difficulty fell on the conditions that were specific to *Broken Fall*. The artists from Melbourne had never collaborated before, bringing a whole set of contingencies to bear that had nothing to do with shifts in space and time. Furthermore, how might cultural, geographical, or institutional differences, which in themselves form a constellation of subtle forces, be determined, when underneath the project sit more imperceptible differences effecting each artists' practice — internal evolutionary changes, for instance, that occur across a body of work each time a new set of actions is undertaken? It would seem that the original

premise was too heavy and too loaded with fruitless desires to throw up anything but pointless and clumsy observations ...

And yet, something completely unexpected arose from the project.

Divisions/Displacements

Broken Fall was conceived by Katie Lee, Susan Jacobs and Lou Hubbard and installed in two artist-run spaces in Auckland — Newcall and A Center for Art (ACFA) [St Paul's Street Gallery]

Newcall Gallery [February 10–28, 2009]

From the entrance, a series of objects complicates the approach into the gallery space. Blocking the way is a fine wooden frame constructed in the shape of an exercise bench. Alongside, there is a white rectangle of the same dimensions taped to the floor. There are other objects in the space: a small vinyl covered plank; a pipe of thin, black rubber lying nearby; and a piece of building timber, sawn in two, leaning at right angles against the wall. Next to the entrance, overlooked at first, is a rubberised 'slab', out of which rises another thin, knotted pipe of rubber, reaching to the ceiling.

Looking back to the entrance, it becomes clear that the objects have been arranged — in terms of scale — to communicate with the features of the 1970s building, in particular, the way the timber and the frame relate to the strong lines of an exterior balustrade. The concrete floor of the gallery, and I've never noticed this before, is quite heavily marked. The light in the gallery space, surging through a ribbon of windows at the entrance, makes this a hard space, so that these objects, these monochromatic and paltry structures are struggling to make an impact.

Across the room, at floor level, projected in a cupboard, is a video of Katie Lee doing her best not to fall out of a square taped onto the floor. The exercise is repeated each time she falls outside the lines. In this work, which follows on from earlier installations, training equipment and physiotherapy exercises represent the

kinds of systems and structures that destabilise ingrained behaviour. Through repetitive instruction our bodies can be re-made to produce new ways of being. Katie Lee describes it as becoming proficient at something ‘useless’.¹ What she might mean by this, existentially, politically, phenomenologically, is left open and uncontested.

There are vestiges of these ideas in *Pause Scratch*, a large video projection by Lou Hubbard that overlooks the space from all spots in the gallery. Divided into four screens (grid-like), *Pause Scratch* concentrates on repetitive gestures, the scraping of a ‘scratchy’ and the de-scaling of a fish are set against moving images that are as still as still images — just a whisper of movement here and there.

Pause Scratch is also about age, I think, about the way the image of old age allegorises life as an accumulation of habits and actions. We see everyday tasks carried out unconsciously, incessantly, through movements that are deeply worn into a body’s memory. The mechanical movement of the hands reveals unconscious patterns in our daily interactions with the world, turning the pages of a newspaper, finding the right page to lay the fish on, removing its scales. For Lou, as with Katie, there is an interest in “the nature of training, submission and subordination and the disciplinary spaces in which subjectivity and knowledge are formed.”² The ring, though, on the old woman’s hand, looks a little out of place: this ring borrowed from the artist (the daughter) sits uncomfortably: it’s just a little loose, a little big. It interrupts the fluid motion of the hand.

Directly opposite *Pause Scratch* is an old door. There is something strangely pictorial about it but also unnerving. Protruding from the back of the door is a dead Christmas tree, redolent still of the smell of pine. The intensity of the smell coming from this dead tree is unexpected: its green needles are now the colour and brittleness of rust. This frail, enfeebled tree supports the weight of the door, pushing up against the wall behind it. But there is something more disconcerting. Each of the branches has been carefully removed by Susan Jacobs and then reassembled, branch by branch. This process, so sedulously executed, upturns the tree’s natural

¹ Katie Lee, *Artist’s statement*, “... my capacity to internalise stillness, physically control myself, and get better at something useless.” February 2009.

² Lou Hubbard, *Artist’s Statement*, February 2009

form by inverting each of its limbs. The tree looks off-kilter but the affect is subtle and vague, barely noticeable.

Changing the direction of the limbs on the dead tree, a task that works against the grain, is a response to the scratching of the fish-scales in Lou's video. But the work also contains memories of other works, unknown to the artist. None of the Melbourne artists had visited the spaces before arriving late on Saturday to source materials and install for a Tuesday opening. Since Susan Jacob's "works often begin as problem-solving exercises or tests in resourcefulness, which gradually form their own logic,"³ she had overlaid a further constraint on the project by not looking at gallery plans or archived photos. Late last year, Richard Frater also incorporated an old door into his exhibition, *So long the difficulties of being single* (Newcall Gallery, 2008). Richard's door, removed from its usual place on the gallery's peripheries and re-installed free-floating in the middle of the floor was a gesture that not only disrupted the usual space of the gallery, but also changed the relationship of outside to inside, subtly shifting the spatial dimensions of the room. In the following group show, *NSFW*, held in December, Fiona Connor stacked four old doors up against a painted panel to create a pyramid in the middle of the gallery. The unexpected convergence of ideas between Susan, Richard and Fiona, leading nonetheless to quite different ends, altered the work's Auckland reception, while denoting, thoroughly by chance, the impulse of the project to shift work with similar interests into new and unknown spaces. Had Susan known of the earlier works by Richard Frater and Fiona Connor, would it have altered her concept? I do not know, but what we do know is that in the end she judged the Newcall work, sourced, constructed and installed in Auckland, as a sketch, a work in progress, while the drawings brought from Melbourne and installed at ACFA (St Paul's Street), were now thought of as finished works, upturning her initial design.⁴

If there was something curious and compelling about the way Susan's work at Newcall intermingled the prosaic (the engineering skill of the tree and door) with the poetic (the unforeseen, the awry), and something commanding about the way Lou's large, colour video engaged so forcefully with the space, then Katie's objects moved in a completely different register. This now seems much more obvious. The way

³ Susan Jacobs, *Artist's Statement*, February 2009.

⁴ Artist's comment, Public Skype Conversation, Melbourne – Auckland, February 13, 2009

Katie's objects struggled for attention with the harsh light of the gallery and the heavily marked concrete floor, and the way her video, encased in a wall under the gallery's fire hose cupboard, deluged by fire instructions and symbols, dampened, in an interesting way, the spatial impact of the installation. This was one of its most intriguing aspects, the manner in which these affects slightly deadened the uncanny potential sitting at the periphery of Susan's work, the allusion to the poetic, emptied out for much grittier readings. And the way in which a sense of duration so intrinsic to Lou's *Pause Scratch*, measured through the intimate domestic habits of her mother, was continually altered by its communication with the empty objects of discipline, inert and meagre, that Katie had placed around the space.

In terms of execution and in terms of scale and placement, many of the connections formed between the works were quite subtle, resistant to cold readings. This was a calculated part of the work, particularly in Susan's arduous inversion of the branches of the dead Christmas tree, which looked odd but refused to openly brag about the labour that had gone into their production. While this meant that the connection between Susan's work and the scratching in Lou's video was shadowy and obscure, there were nonetheless thematic manoeuvres in the works around disciplinary inculcation that were more transparent, such as Katie's 'training' to internalise inner stillness reflected against the looped-domestic habits formed over many decades by Lou's mother.

At Newcall, the door, the tree, the space, the video and the other objects all operated in largely divergent ways and induced quite different responses, forcing observations on the nature of the collaborative project that would otherwise be imperceptible.

ACFA (at St Paul's Street Gallery) [February 10–13]

St Paul Street Gallery was taken over by AFCA for the duration of the show. Embedded in a university, it is a conventional contemporary space in terms of its concrete architecture, its darkness and spot lighting, its reverential stillness and quietness, and its demands and expectations. And, for all of these reasons, the affect of the installation, up for only four days, shifted dramatically in accord with its institutional framework.

Now reduced to a single monitor on the floor, Katie showed a video that documented an earlier but related show of a white rectangle taped to the floor: its content, empty and still, issues an 'aura' nonetheless that is in distinct variance with those utilitarian forms that were rendered unproductive or useless at Newcall. The weight of the attention falls on Lou's large projection of a kitchen sink where French football figurines are forced into team formation by the pressure of water: their individual, hexagonal green (grass) plinths coming together to form a larger hexagon (an allusion to the stitching on soccer balls). Opposite this work of patterning, training and compulsion are Susan's three drawings/collages: trees are turned from wood into timber under the force of industrial/human intervention, and in a miraculous return, dead branches reform as verdant growth.

It would be too crude to think of the division of work between Newcall and ACFA as a simple distribution of objects across two spaces, but perhaps this is a place to begin. The elements in one space referred back to the other, but without there being a beginning or an end (in the sense, for instance, of there being a question raised at Newcall, which ACFA then answered, or as a teleological line of development that sought for an ultimate resolution), but rather as a gesture of reflexivity that linked the spaces in a complex and, perhaps more crucially, in a divisive way. The idea of the 'group show' as a cohesive collaboration within each of the galleries was effectively subverted by the awareness of the inter-connecting pieces that each artist had installed in the opposing space. The placement at ACFA, for instance, of elements that directly referenced the Newcall installation — Katie's empty video, Lou's projection of 'water-tortured' soccer figurines and Susan's drawings — resulted in shifting the reading away from how each artist's work connected with the group and onto how the pieces deepened and complicated the artists own practices. The effect was to force each artist's work into a singularity that undermined (interestingly, productively) the whole collaborative process. Arising in the interpretive chasm that opened up between the two spaces was a form of self-referentiality and circularity (and remembering that this work was intentionally without teleological or dialectical objectives) that expunged the collective ambitions of the group. *Broken Fall* was particularly interesting for this. While pursuing shared goals (an urge for collegiality), it posed a structure loose enough to accommodate individual objectives. And yet, dispersed across the city, and falling into very

different kinds of spaces, this was a project that came together only to disintegrate through a self-imposed and delicate process of fragmentation.

Performances — Tim Coster and Richard Francis

Tim Coster and Richard Francis, local sound artists, responded to the installations. Tim's piece, performed after the opening at Newcall, involved recordings of the Melbourne artists during their set-up, combined with numerous live and "pre-recorded acoustic investigations of the site." The sounds were then "digitally looped and layered to reflect an accumulation of actions over time."⁵ An everyday sense of time (linearity) and space (extension) was complicated by compressing them into co-existent spatio-temporal affects, while also overthrowing the usual sense of live performance as continuous and unbroken. Unanticipated layers were added to the work of the visiting artists through Tim's performance. In particular, the sense of duration so integral to Lou's work was intensified. But more unexpected, the chunks of the past — those toilings and mumblings gathered from the installation process for the performance — returned as remnants of making and thinking (since the artists had decided to go 'in cold' to the spaces and to access the materials and resources once they arrived, much of the resolution of the work occurred 'on the spot') and it was this recording of the pleasure of installing, of performing, of thinking, that was re-presented by Tim to the audience and the artists in newly-gifted form. At Newcall, the memory of the sound work hung like a sweet and sticky mist to the works.

Using an analogue modular synthesizer, Richard Francis' performance for the closing of the show at ACFA was an improvisation of "a piece of tonal and textural music." As a response to the installation, Richard worked with "resonant qualities of the gallery space and acoustic objects."⁶ The performance began with the live sound of crushing paper, opening out to a series of sounds pressed through and around the smallest and largest contours of the gallery space. This had the effect of gluing the audience to the space as much as to the performance; in the way that

⁵ Tim Coster, Artist's Statement, February 2009.

⁶ Richard Francis, Artist's Statement, February 2009.

film has the potential to ‘suture’ its audience’s into the life-world of the film. But where narrative plays an important part in the distortion of filmic time and space, Richard’s performance ‘stitched’ the audience to the moment, to the space, to this lived space through a series of subtle distortions of the spatial and temporal conditions. There is a moment when audience slips into the work, is lost in the work, only to be brutally brought back to real-time at the shocking conclusion of the performance. The close of the work is a deliciously disorientating moment, but this feeling is fleeting, since it also brings an end to the intimate and intensified fusing of audience to space.

There was the unforeseen fact of the gift.

Thank you
Lou Hubbard, Susan Jacob Katie Lee,
Tim Coster, Richard Francis,
ACFA artists,
Richard Frater, Anya Henis, Patrick Lundberg, Martyn Reynolds and Richard Bryant (from London),
Newcall artists,
Sonya Lacey, Ben McManus, Sarah Rose, Sam Rountree Williams, Alexandra Savtchenko-Belskaia,
John Ward Knox and Holly Wilson, Alice Springford-Gough, Selina Foote
And
Adrien Allen, Annie Bradley, Leonhard Emmerling, Catherine Garet, Alan Joy,
... and Marcel Mauss.

The kind of generosity (of spirit, of collaborative will) demonstrated by the two performances brought into clear visibility the generosity of all the artists. It seemed to be one of the most important outcomes of the project — it seemed to hinge, finally, on this — and it turned the project away from a question about familiarity and disruption into a question about the nature of collaboration, and how collaboration, in its relation to giving and taking, operates very much along the following lines, for it must always be remembered, lest we sink *Broken Fall* in a mawkish soup and strip it of its critical potential, that the gift, as with collaboration, is neither simple nor unconditional:

It follows clearly from what we have seen that in this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence. To keep this thing is dangerous, not only because it is illicit to do so, but also because it comes morally, physically and spiritually

from a person ... The thing given is not inert. It is alive and often personified, and strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place.

In the middle of the 20th century, when many wrestled with the consequences of both capitalism and communism, Marcel Mauss searched for alternative models of transaction in Polynesian and other societies. In particular, by investigating a general theory of obligation surrounding the gift, he asked, “What is the principle whereby the gift received has to be repaid? What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?”⁸ Mauss documented how intricate and thorny the gift is and how it inevitably moves in its own dark and treacherous current. If a mutually satiated exchange is to take place, the ground between giver and receiver must be navigated lightly and with stealth. Since all the good is in the hands of the giver, the act of receiving is always unchartered, meaning that each gift must be negotiated anew. There can be no mistakes or false starts, and words, gestures and actions must coalesce into a seamlessness that conceals any ‘misgivings’.

The gift unfolds into a complex system of exchange, and can never be reduced to purely economic terms. This was its appeal for Mauss and his followers. Collaboration too, depends in part on the gift, with all its intricacy, its obstacles, with its obligations and complicated prestations, and under such conditions, “to refuse to give, or fail to invite, is — like refusing to accept — the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse.”⁹ The generosity of the Melbourne artists to come to Auckland (blindly) to work with strangers in unknown spaces, and the hospitality of the Auckland artists to support the work, unseen and unedited, carries the stamp of the gift. This was the unexpected, yet edifying outcome of the project.

References:

Artists’ statements: Katie Lee, Lou Hubbard, Susan Jacob, Tim Coster, Richard Francis, February 2009, unpublished.

Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (Essai sur le don, 1954), trans. Ian Cunnison, Routledge, London, 1988

⁷ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (Essai sur le don, 1954), trans. Ian Cunnison, Routledge, London, 1988, p.12

⁸ Mauss, The study was confined to Polynesia, Melanesia and North West America, p.3

⁹ Mauss, p.11

