

making & making do

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Within the cohort represented by *What Do I Want? Where Do I Stand?* there are two recurring threads that I would like to touch on in this essay. One is a reclaiming of the handmade, while the other involves “making do” with found objects and materials. My premise is that both of these threads involve cutting out the middleman, and together they can be seen as a response to the economic *Zeitgeist* - a neo-arte povera if you will. The ramifications of thirty years of widespread neo-liberalism, and the ensuing Global Financial Crisis, have created an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. This failure of society can no longer be ignored.

As part of *What Do I Want? Where Do I Stand?* one group of artists have collaborated for the work *On the moment of change, there is always a cup of tea* (2016). For this project Many Hands comprises Casey Carsel, Aya Yamashita, Jordan Davey-Emms, Lara Thomas, Caitlin Ramsay, Elisa Barczak, Emma Cheng, Mandy Chan, Felixe Laing and Liu Yuan. Their individual art practices are exemplified by direct action of the artist’s hand, which enables the nature of their chosen medium to be expressed, be it fibres, clay, papermaking or dough. Collectively, the group are able to pool their resources and mass-produce handcrafted ceramic cups.

This re-engagement with skill would initially appear to be at odds with a concept-driven art institution such as Elam. As Doryun Chong, 2016 judge of the Walters Prize, stated recently “contemporary art has moved away from that emphasis on technical mastery and virtuosity, more towards process and labour of the intellect” (Blundell 52). *On the moment of change, there is always a cup of tea* instead aims for both. As well as responding to the material, the group’s intent is to freely share the benefits of their skills, by serving drinks at public events associated with the exhibition. These social connections with the wider community are central to the work. I believe that the direct links between maker and user quietly assert a pre-capitalist form of production and exchange, in that the profit motive is denied: use-value is provided free of charge. Artist and writer Dave Beech has written that “the affirmation of skill in art is always a call to order. Contemporary artists deploy skill strategically because they cannot pretend that it is not ideological” (Beech 4).

As well as being part of Many hands, Elisa Barczak is also operating a trading table for *What Do I Want? Where Do I Stand?* Barczak is literally cutting out the middleman, by facilitating a fair exchange of value between worker and end user. No money will change hands, and there is no ticket clipping along the way for distribution and retail. This model has been perfected by New Zealand artist Eve Armstrong, with her work *Trading Table* (various sites since 2003). In 2007 Armstrong created an artist’s book, *How to Hold a Trading Table: A Manual for Beginners*. This open-source approach, with generous sharing of information, exemplifies the relational aspect of Armstrong’s *Trading Table* itself. Armstrong has said recently that “the trades became far less about the objects or materials and more about the conversation or moment

where these traders realised the ‘value’ of what they could offer” (Ocula Magazine). With a completely different approach, Patricia Ramos’s work in this exhibition, entitled *cost of living* (2016), also addresses concerns around value, labour economics, and the commodity. With huge quantities of hard manual labour and discarded cans, Ramos has literally created her own currency from rubbish. In my own work, *go money* (2016), solid bronze replicates cheap chocolate coins, which were themselves a deliberately oversized caricature of real money. Now the coins appear precious, but they are a copy of a copy: they are of no practical use, and are no longer even edible.

Dutch architect Bjarne Mastenbroek recently stated that working in today’s internalised retail precincts is analogous to going down historic coal mines. The workers are still denied a connection with daylight, only now they are digging up money (Mastenbroek). We work to consume, in order to sustain the illusion of everlasting economic growth required by the “masters of mankind.”¹ As Rem Koolhaas has written in his essay “Junkspace”, in these endless malls half of society madly shops, while the other half toils to support their consumption by maintaining the whole system (Koolhaas 179). In brief, Koolhaas’s Junkspace is the mediocre built residue that humankind leaves on the planet (which acts as a kind of corollary to the widely used term space-junk). Junkspace is analogous to junk food: rich and calorific, yet depleted of nutrients, designed expressly to tempt you to consume more and more.

Is it any surprise then that the current generation reacts to this over-consumption by refusing to engage? Maybe they don’t have the option. Saddled with student debt, exorbitant rents, and unlikely to ever possess property in Auckland without assistance, they have to choose between hope or denial. Retreat into frugal existence or party like its 1999. Luckily Junkspace is constantly subject to updates, rearrangement, refurbishment, the cult of the new. Its constant change and excessive production produces a surplus of potential material to feed an art practice – diverted en route to landfill.

The artist Thomas Hirschhorn has called the sensorium of Junkspace “the capitalist garbage bucket” while discussing his work (Hirschhorn quoted in Foster 11). With Hirschhorn, the precarious, the hybrid, and the expedient, become an “aesthetics of resistance”, a rallying cry to subvert capitalism (Foster 10). This approach is also expressed here in the work of Felix Pryor, Java Bentley, Kirsty McNeil, and Aya Yamashita, who all make use of whatever the capitalist garbage bucket throws their way. As with the arte povera movement in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, these artists seek freedom from the free market by ascribing value to discarded and everyday poor materials.

Pryor tends to operate at the dumpster diving end of the spectrum. One recent work, *Fasces* (2016), comprises an aggressive assemblage of broken glass cast into a concrete base. Similar works have incorporated scrap metal and other debris. These hooligans are no longer happy playing second fiddle to some prissy art object: Pryor’s plinths have gone rogue. Along similar lines, Bentley acquires and reassembles demolition building materials and other cast-offs, however her new forms suggest vaguely dysfunctional domesticity: a table which resembles an outsize saw horse in *Quilt* (2016), and a grossly oversized vessel incapable of holding liquid for *Utilitarian Tiers* (2016).

Recycled cardboard boxes have featured heavily in McNeil’s recent practice, or rather featured lightly. Balanced precariously in tall towers, or forming a delicate architecture upon *pilotis* of domestic clothes racks in *Skewbald* (2016), the cardboard structure

¹ The 18th Century political economist Adam Smith coined the term ‘masters of mankind’ for those who abuse their position of power to increase their own profit at the expense of others. Their vile maxim of the masters was: “All for ourselves and nothing for other people.”

rises above its humble origins. Her work in this exhibition, *Your space or mine?* (2016), fashions cardboard into multiple miniature architectural spaces. By providing one each for her entire student cohort, McNeil references the ongoing Elam studio space restrictions and negotiations.

Yamashita has been constructing elaborate versions of functional items, with materials as diverse as bread and plastic bubble-wrap. Cheap is political, allowing for a democratic, accessible practice which engages with the everyday. With one recent work, *lint carpet* (2016), Yamashita neatly weaves together all of the loose threads in this essay – found, handmade, and useful – into a carpet painstakingly needle felted from drier lint. After collecting the lint from her apartment building’s clothes dryers over a period of time, Yamashita uses a handheld barbed needle to work the fibres into a tangled, dense, but fragile material.

Of course Foster’s subversive “aesthetics of resistance” is weirdly reliant upon the machinery of capitalism to supply the fuel for its fires. The two exist in a co-dependent relationship. Without the production of surplus-value, and the constant societal pressure to aspire through acquisition, there would be no waste, junk or by-product to be recycled or re-presented.

“Junk is not trash. We know what to do with trash. But Junk hangs around. It promises something fixed. It forces us to imagine another use, and drags us toward its future” (Mitch 3).

Works cited

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