

Years
without
magic

bridget currie
&
louise haselton



coming from nowhere

Less a surprise than something slow. A picture roughed together from many quarters along the dual tracks of long and short time. Short from here, from afar. Kindled fast and fanned by emailed requests, questions, answers with jpegs attached, text messages, long phone calls and a ragged express post envelope crammed into the letterbox. Photo sharing and a Myspace page. Two pads with two different kinds of notes and pages of internet printouts, old catalogues, photocopied drawings, posters, profiles and reviews. The fuel one of these things feeds on in its odd, anticipatory way. Bound to the greater timetable of print production and really just one of the many things yet to be thought, made, written, organised, negotiated, placed, considered and reconsidered in the realisation of such a thing as an exhibition.

Simultaneously this particular exhibition has been doing slow miles over longer reaches. That being the reach of time that these particular artists have spent in a conversation of practices, weave of material sympathies and working interrelationship. Inside a community as well as inside an institution, all the while bracketed by the productions and reflections of a generous, multi-generational peer group. Pocketed into this context field, their concurrent solo exhibitions *Scivias* and *Small Crowd* of 2003 ¹ form a very particular prehistory and point of return for Bridget Currie and Louise Haselton in 2007. The five year round trip suggests some form of gestation or cyclic commitment to observe and extend a working pattern of overlap and alignment. A strain of co-operation that might borrow one thing and leave another from a more literal collaborative exchange. Seeming close yet discrete, private, colloquial, sharing, female. A list of common interests reads:

things unnoticed

shiny

craft

space

traditions

power ²

This series of slowly infused talking points guides their parallel routes into the making, always mindful to the resonance of simple things. Heading again towards a fresh intersection in the form of exhibition, a construct artist Terri Bird identifies well as the ‘juncture in a complex field of interactions and exchanges between practices of production, presentation, reception, distribution and interpretation’.³

mirror trick ^(past)

Reflecting backwards to conjure up what lies ahead, works by Haselton and Currie that I’ve crossed paths with have lingered for their mysterious and minimal transformations of perfectly ordinary objects via unlikely strategies of adornment. A length of tree branch crusted with little round mirrors, one end sheathed in the brightly coloured and embroidered reflective textile work familiar from Indian handicrafts.⁴ Like the physical grammar of the style had been pulled apart and redeployed to some other ends. But if ornamentation tends to keep step with utility, then what exactly was this new object’s function? A suspended state of unlikelihood or pointlessness seems to become a provisional mid or counterpoint from which to fathom the polarities of attraction and repulsion that both the artists speak of in terms of the forceful pull of decorative materials for each of their work.

Somewhere else, in the same city, careful accumulations of assorted pips, seeds and stems bore testament to a summer’s fruit intake, with the remnants of peaches, mangoes, melons and grapes caught up in gilded resinous pools and spills.⁵ These structural residues, the small aftermaths of eating usually discarded without thinking, were captured and brought forward into our field of attention by the metal’s golden meaning. If medieval alchemy looked to transform base metals to gold, here we found the effort turned to base matter in a re-orientation of value tuned to incidental and unnoticed beauty.

At the opening night a woman sat at a table and used a small kit of tools to model items from people's pockets - bus tickets, keys, wrappers, tampons, phones - into wearable sculptures.⁶ A gently performed transaction, those who approached the table had the contents of their pockets or handbags politely appraised, customised and fitted as brooches, hair-pieces or bag ornaments. Literally turning the inside to out, the little scraps and implements we keep on our person acquired the pride of place and implied value of conventionally precious jewellery. And we enjoyed the artist's feat as both maker and giver of the pleasant surprise, finding unimagined purpose in our personal flotsam and returning it anew.

“ w h a t a b o u t *y e a r s* w i t h o u t m a g i c ? ”

Often the first touchstone to solidify from the vapours of preliminary conversation and planning, an exhibition title sets the gathering in motion - 'the words bring ideas and ideas bring words.'⁷ What to make of *Years without magic*? It's curious to note the measure of time, an echo of the years in which Currie & Haselton have been brewing their material, emotional and intellectual kinship. But this sounds a dim place, of joyless functionality and endurance. Bridget says of this sad state of affairs "well, it *has* been years without magic", referring to the centuries lapsed since magic might have held real sway and presence in daily life.

She describes a TV program on the connections between objects from contemporary life and pagan society. In a museum in Germany there's a hat from the 5th century AD made of beaten gold and impressed with the solar and lunar calendars. It's a pointed hat worn by pagan priests and a clear antecedent to the popularised get-up of the magician. The elemental forces, marvels and wonder tamed down as abracadabra party costume.

A few days later on the radio they're talking about 'spin doctors in Panama hats'. How might the magician of yore compare with the contemporary phenomenon of the spin-doctor? The unseen stage managers of political minutiae as spun by the media, fact-wrangling to best possible effect (like how to play on the fact that Peter Beattie seems like a decent bloke). Or there's the bewildering, inverted sham-game of the politician in interview, baldly saying they are not doing the very exact thing that they appear to have most recently been doing. Deflecting questions with answers like so many trap doors and rabbit holes, smiling like cats by the end for they know the trick is done.

This deft manipulation of the compressed media moment and the larger communications network certainly hinges on the ‘data mystification’ central to the staged magic trick. The Center for Tactical Magic is a topical project the artists have turned their eye to, whose founder Aaron Gach astutely observes that ‘in nearly all of the permutations of magic(k), the conventions of presenting information are completely fucked with.’⁸ Every other day it seems our societal senses, tolerance, prejudices and reasonable expectations are similarly scrambled asunder. Yet ‘if performed successfully, a good magic trick will have a convincing effect largely because the magician has presented several forms of discordant information in a harmonious manner.’⁹ But here’s the difference between the workers of spin and magic, for the politicians and their spin doctors leave us cold. We know we’ve been had and the trick touches us not with the magician’s pleasing play of wonder but drapes another leaden layer onto our ever-accumulating cynicism.

Like an antidote Currie & Haselton propose their making as a sequence of practical transformational gestures that frame existing stuff and confound any fixedness in our perceptions of it. We feel the magician’s weave of surprise as ordinary objects seem to do unaccountable things and the artists steer us towards a ‘magical thinking’ and ‘counterperception’¹⁰ triggered by highly material interplays of objects and allusions. Interesting in this respect is their mutual interest in Agnès Varda’s documentary project *The Gleaners and I*¹¹, whose subject speaks to their attraction to the ‘makeshift, slipshod, cobbled together, trying to find a way to see the beauty in the unkempt, of unworthy matter redeemed by love.’¹²

In her film Varda mines both urban and rural landscapes to observe contemporary incarnations of the historical custom of gleaning. Well articulated and understood in French law, gleaners are typically those who collect what remains of a crop after harvesting. Varda meets people who continue to do just this, whether the harvest is of potatoes too big and misshapen for today’s supermarkets, or the rubbished remnants and discards of these same enterprises. Further, Varda shows how not only the poor but renegade ethicists, a celebrated chef, psychoanalyst, humanitarian and visual artists all derive expanded meaning and sustenance from the practice of gleaning. The film is likewise enriched by Varda’s centre staging of herself, the filmmaker, as a gleaner of images and encounters. Pivotal to this handmade process is a kind of working intuition and openness to being led. To let the work happen: “ I think cinema should be made by coming from nowhere to becoming a

film. This I believe in. And that's why I made so few films."¹³ Watching and waiting, following your nose. The material leads the way as the artist moves along tracks signposted by small revelations and unwitting continuities (like the moment Varda shares her touched wonder to realise the way she had filmed her own hair and hands in *The Gleaners and I* was a startling echo of a scene from an earlier film). And so we turn a corner back on the surprise magic promises, celebrated by the Tactical Magic protagonists as:

‘a sneak attack, a twist of fate, a buried treasure revealed at last, surprise admonishes the arrogance of stability founded on hegemonic proclivities, thus forsaking structure for entropy, spontaneity, and the unanticipated discovery of underdog victories from anarchic affinities.’¹⁴

mirror trick / present to future /

Working steadily towards *Years without magic*, Bridget has been amassing items of heavy men's clothing - coats, jackets, parkas in a work-wear palette of blues, grey and brown - in a volume that some visitors to her studio have found a little intimidating. Perhaps for the empty threat of two hundred or so bulky blokes - workmen, tradies, labourers - having just been and gone, or soon to return. Into the linings and pockets of jackets and onto socks she's sewing five cent pieces like sequins. Coinage sticks in her mind for the banal convenience that the small, stamped circles of precious metal we carry everywhere have acquired in a finely tuned scheme of monetary value and exchange. A construct in which the five cent piece hovers vulnerably at the line between worth and worthlessness, the lowest denomination that many would now sooner walk past than trouble to bend down and pick up.

Consistent with a strategy of querying the placement and proportion of value, this smallest of coins is recouped as unlikely protector or talisman, stitched and hidden into the folds of common garments. In the gallery these small investments (of time, care, worth) will be revealed when we find this population of clothing shrugged off onto the floor, as though the men have passed through here too. Actually the performers will be the friends and peers invited by Currie to come to the exhibition opening wearing one of her charmed garments, and to shed it into the company of the disordered bulk on the floor. And so the work will take on its shape over the course of the night, subtly rendered by the people who have come along to celebrate it, and what they leave behind.

In conversation with Bridget's material meditations on weight, Louise is crafting coalitions of objects that at first suggest an oppositional lightness and ethereality. Scrounging¹⁵ for materials is the first phase of Haselton's working process and lately she's been chasing down sea shells (spider and helmet, pink and fleshy), an iconic modernist glass vase (*Savoy* by Alvar Aalto, 1936), hunks of quartz crystal and lengths of fine metal chain. For *Years without magic* she's curious to "let go a little", lighten up the restraint that typically inflects her quietly discursive assemblies of things. Riding the counter impulses of intuition and control to come to the pleasure and surprise found in the ways objects will talk to each other.

From the ossified 'fingers' of wall-mounted spider shells she's draping lengths of chain that meet up with the fingers of more shells, drawing fine lines of linkage and transmission. The radiating fingers reverb in turn with a submerged connecting motif of the explosion. Intrigued by a series of delicate pencil drawings of explosions made by a French World War I soldier, in this body of work Haselton seems to be coalescing biomorphic likenesses to the energetics, spectacle and form of an explosion. From the exploding finger-rays and curls of the shells, reaching shards of crystal and the abstracted organicism of the *Savoy* vase.

These materials also specifically manifest 'the degree to which a material can be dead or alive'¹⁶, a quality the artist has been attuned to since undertaking a residency in India a few years ago. The clustered, stacked and linked objects vibrate with a hardened but palpable life force, powered by the shells and crystals time-drenched formation and the heady aura of the vase as cult design status object. Here the illusory lightness of Haselton's material vocabulary gives way under a paradoxical heaviness, this being the weight of cultural associations that her family of materials brings to bear. Sidling up to the new-age 'Magic Happens' bumper-sticker zone of magic, this weight exerts a pull or drag on the objects' apparent simplicity, conjuring up a gamut of active insinuations - crystal power, Judy Chicago-style vulva action and the ethers of high modernism. A visitor to Louise's studio counselled "No, it's not hippy - it's psychedelic", in semantics that nicely describe the tensioned borderlines of taste and discomfort, austerity and overload that her works play gentle havoc with.

Turning a last corner, the meshwork of possibilities convened by Currie and Haselton's empathetic material gathering, research and process is of course yet to be punctuated by a final surprise. Unfolding via acts of spatial interlacing and placement when the destination point of the gallery is reached. Where the artists will co-author that particular envelope of

space to describe the points of transit, affinity and difference between them. In the meantime things will keep moving - proofing, layout, printing, making, communicating - towards and beyond *Years without magic*, a cycle of practice and exhibition renewed, observed and dispersed.

lisa kelly. april 07

notes.

¹ Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide may-june 2003

² Bridget Currie & Louise Haselton, artist statement 2006

³ Terri Bird 'Exhibiting practices and organizational relations', quoted from unpaginated text, prior to publication in *Making Space: artist run initiatives in Victoria* published VIA-N/Victorian Initiatives of Artists Network, Melbourne 2007

⁴ Louise Haselton *Quietism #1* 2006
mirrored discs, embroidered fabric, branch
Things will be great MOP, Sydney november 2006

⁵ Bridget Currie *Golden Rough* 2007
resin, gold pigment, seeds, pips, pits, stalks, shells, found objects
workshopnonstop Loose projects, Sydney february 2007

⁶ Bridget Currie *Constructing wearable sculptures from the contents of people's pockets* 2007
performance
workshopnonstop Loose projects, Sydney february 2007

⁷ Agnès Varda 'Gleaning Agnès Varda' interview with Julie Rigg, The Space ABC Arts online <<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/film/stories/s424327.htm>>

⁸ Aaron Gach 'Secret Pockets. A conversation between Aaron Gach, founder of the Center for Tactical Magic and Gregory Sholette. January 2006' reproduced *If you see something, say something* project newspaper, edited Keg de Souza & Zanny Begg, Sydney 2007 p.6

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ phrasing gleaned from ‘Tactical Magic’ Centre for Tactical Magic, published online <<http://www.tacticalmagic.org/CTM/thoughts/tactical%20magic%20text.htm>>

¹¹ The Gleaners & I (Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse)
a film by Agnès Varda
French language, English subtitles 2002

¹² Bridget Currie & Louise Haselton, artist statement 2006.

¹³ Agnès Varda ‘Gleaning Agnès Varda’ interview
op.cit.

¹⁴ ‘Tactical Magic’ Centre for Tactical Magic, published online
op.cit.

¹⁵ Louise’s term & one I read given as a localised version of gleaning in
an Agnès Varda interview, who thought it was a beautiful word.

¹⁶ Louise Haselton, email to author march 2007.

thankyou.

Bridget Currie, Louise Haselton, Mary Knights & Lucas Ihlein

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