

That's Edutainment!

Doug Fishbone and 'with'

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Chris Townsend, in his recent book *New Art from London*, argues that the most exciting contemporary art is characterised by a return to seriousness and difficulty, Modernist concerns and an unapologetic elitism.¹ These, according to Townsend, are the most legitimate strategies with which to counteract the accelerating dumbing-down of culture. Two exceptions, however, offer more biting critiques of the status quo: Doug Fishbone and 'with'. Populist, satirical, vulgar, often childish or obscene, these London-based artists provide a more rigorous and richly layered alternative to po-faced self-referentiality. These artists get to the heart of art's problematic relation to the entertainment industry and dissect the twisted belief systems and economic ideals of Western society. They're also funny.

Bananas

Born in Queens, New York, Doug Fishbone's first major project took the unusual form of a mound of bananas, up to 40,000 of them, which, since 1999, he has installed in a number of politically resonant locations, from the plaza of the Central Bank of Ecuador, in Cuenca; to Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland, the site of Europe's first Nazi Jewish ghetto; to the scenic backdrops of d.u.m.bo., Brooklyn, and London's Trafalgar Square. The project set up some of the characteristics that Fishbone later developed in his videos: the visual pun (banana peel as a fetish of slapstick humour); the nudge-nudge-wink-wink double entendre (is that a banana in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?); pop culture (Warhol's iconic album cover for *The Velvet Underground*); greed (the all-you-can-eat culture); geopolitical and postcolonial concerns (the bananas carried different resonances in the producer nations); a fascination with popular religious parables (Jesus feeding the masses with a couple of fish); and a love of surreal juxtaposition and absurdity. Doug Fishbone's Bananaman, like the 1980s cartoon, is a not-so-super-hero: well-meaning and always grinning, but ultimately not the guy you'd call out in a real crisis.

A guide for the self-helpless

Those undergoing real personal crises would also be advised to steer clear of 'with'. Posing as a self-help service that offers biographical plugs, or 'Life Enhancement Solutions' (LES's), to fill the 'frustrated ambition and spiritual void of contemporary life', 'with's website, withyou.co.uk, lures the client into a seductive virtual world in which the darker desires of the bored Western urbanite can be unleashed free of personal danger or responsibility – all products are carried out by 'with' agents on the client's behalf. 'With' agents, according to the site, are trained to enhance dull lives via a choice of products that provide the second-hand experience of being chased like paparazzi (Chase Me), being involved in an extremist organisation (Terrorism't), or the thrill of extreme violence (Violentome). Clients might not be left with any actual memories, but, in our exhibitionist culture, the documentation of the experience – 'mounted and framed for your pleasure' – provides all the proof they need. Of course, 'with' is a spoof

company, the brainchild of artist Alasdair Hopwood; none of the products can be ordered, although interested parties are encouraged to join the 'with' client community – a Gold membership scheme for which you receive the kind of plastic wristband worn by chic activists, and discounted tickets to various networking events, where you might share experiences over a customised cocktail.

The artist-brand

Doug Fishbone and 'with' are better described as brands than artists. Both have logos: the former a circular seal containing a visual homonym of his surname above the authoritative 'Doug Fishbone Conceptual Art', the latter a fashionable lowercase sans serif red 'with' that, in its jolly informality, might have been designed for a brand-conscious arts magazine or institution – indeed, in an inversion of Tate's trendy omission of the definite article, 'with's logo self-consciously dispenses of its corresponding pronoun 'you'.

If fifteen years ago, London's Young British Artist phenomenon resurrected the author in the form of the artist-brand, enabling many to become household names, it also brought a degree of biographical entrapment that Roland Barthes failed to liberate – to the point where Damien Hirst famously moaned that he was fed up with always having to be 'Damien Hirst'. Today's marketing-savvy artists, however, can neatly sidestep the trap. By launching themselves as brands from the outset, Fishbone and 'with' are better able to control their identities and dispense with artistic consistency: their logos authenticate any number of divergent activities as a Fishbone or 'with' production. Their personal identities safely concealed behind fictional brands, they can dare to air their less than politically correct opinions from a distance. It's a simple displacement trick that, from theatre to comedy, has always fooled the censors: It wasn't me.

But while Fishbone and 'with' might have a tactical interest in getting past the censors – cautious funders, jittery public institutions – ultimately they are more concerned with satirising the commercial jargon and marketing strategies that the art world reluctantly has been forced to adopt, and, more importantly its converse, the increasing aestheticisation of the corporate world. Fishbone's banana stunt mimicked on an exaggerated scale those mass public give-aways that corporations have conventionally used to create brand-awareness and that have, with little sign of resistance, recently found their way into the art world: those free espressos that magically appear at biennales just when you thought you might collapse from caffeine-withdrawal. There is no longer any clear delineation between giving freebies to potential consumers and charitable donations; as Slavoj Žižek points out, corporations don't need to be vile any more, for, as with the widely publicised charity work of Bill Gates, 'today's liberal communists give away with one hand what they grabbed with the other'.²

'Inging' the experience

The art world's ostrich policy on dealing with the infiltration of commercial rhetoric and ideals into its midst has made it slow to grasp the recent revolutions in corporate marketing strategy. So while there is a vague consensus that the Art Council's Turning Point policy sounds New Labourish in its insistence on art's advantages for the British

economy, there has been far less investigation into the underlying phenomenon of global economy's love affair with all things vaguely creative. Nonetheless, Suhail Malik³ has done important work in drawing the art world's attention to one of the most distasteful guru books of the late nineties, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's *The Experience Economy*.⁴ Subtitled *Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*, the guide offers creative solutions to companies ready to try anything – here, amateur dramatics – to stay ahead of their competitors.

The book's main thesis is that Western capitalism has evolved from a simple commodity-based economy (raw materials) to a goods-based economy (goods made from commodities, standardised and then sold to anonymous clients), then a service-based (intangible activities, such as hairdressing, performed for a particular client) and currently an experienced-based economy – that is, towards an increasingly sophisticated, differentiated relationship with the client, whose individualised expectations are met with ever-growing accuracy, in turn creating longer-lasting brand loyalty. The experience economy, then, builds on the success of mass-customisation pioneered by the service industry to turn goods into seemingly unique and constantly updated experiences that will wow the client. In order to be transformed into experiences, goods must be 'inged': the 'cleaning experience', the 'briefcasing experience', etc.

The godfather of the experience economy is Walt Disney, and it is no coincidence that 'with' name-check Disney's company name 'Imagineering' to describe their unique methodology for creating Life Enhancement Solutions.⁵ In the Mickey Mouse experience economy any theme can be turned into a park: even death. In one brilliantly insensitive example of good practice in the experience economy, Pine and Gilmore single out a funeral parlour that runs paying workshops to help mourners create the perfect memory board or 'Lifescape collage' to commemorate the life of a loved one. Even 'with's product for the ultimate narcissist, *Dying for It*, in which an agent will collect video footage of the aftermath of your fake death (funeral, moving tributes), seems only gently cynical in comparison with real-life examples in *The Experience Economy*.

The client is the product

The only lasting solution, according to Pine and Gilmore's albeit oversimplified analysis, is to move to the final stage in the economic evolution. In the transformation economy, clients pay not for commodities, goods, services, or merely an ephemeral experience, but for a life-changing self-transformation, whether physical, spiritual, psychological or educational – the range of products, in fact, covered by 'with'. The 'new you' therefore becomes the status symbol; the quest for the most perfect you a sophisticated form of eugenics.

The transformation economy is a utopian 'win-win' model in which the client achieves a more personalised satisfaction from their purchase and the corporation or 'transformation elicitor' maintains a long and profitable relationship with the client. For it to succeed, it relies on clients' acceptance that 'what once we sought for free, we now pay a fee': in other words, cash-rich time-poor people willing to pay to be coached into reading books, getting fit or finding their inner child or god. Yet in the seven years since the publication

of the *Experience Economy*, society has far exceeded even Pine and Gilmore's speculations. Not only are we happy to pay, we are also complicit in publicising these transformations live on television. This new masochism has led to the bizarre situation in which people queue up to be humiliated in front of millions of telespectators, preferably by a Z-list celebrity.

Trinny and Susannah vs. Jerry Springer

'With's live events take their cue from the gallows humour of the contemporary reality TV show. Throughout 2006, 'with' has been presenting live case studies of the products available on withyou.co.uk, in which Alasdair Hopwood and his collaborative partner, artist Sean Parfitt play the fictional directors of the company, who – taking the Brechtian technique of *Verfremdungseffekt* to its absurd extreme – are only ever seen via satellite link-up from a number of arbitrary international locations.

Intimidating, insensitive and spouting a constant stream of psychobabble, spoof 'with' directors Alan Donaldson and Samson Paul are the Trinny and Susannah of the therapy world, where not clothes but rather personalities are the subject of the makeover. In both cases, the pair's lack of appropriate credentials is more than overshadowed by their arrogance and aggressive demeanour, which their already insecure victims gratefully mistake for authority and expertise. In 'with's live demonstration of the Traumaformer product – in which traumatic events are rendered by an agent to spice up an otherwise uneventful life – they add yet another layer of fiction in the form of a phoney Australian TV programme *Re:design Your Life: Down Under*. An actor playing a client gives a heartrending account of his life-changing experience of the 'with' product both live to the assembled audience at the ICA and via footage from the 'with'-produced reality TV show that had been following his every step through the transformation process. The client appears to be caught up in a vicious version of the Truman Show, his devastated reaction to the (fake) allegations that his wife has been leading a double life as a high-class prostitute mocked by an impassive audience. The credulous client is finally encouraged to leave his 'adulterous' wife, and a sudden discomfort is felt by the audience, still suspending their disbelief that the entire scenario is a set-up, at the unnecessary cruelty of 'with's methods and – worse – their perhaps less than altruistic agenda.

Fishbone's PowerPoint-based video works also reveal the dark side of the new eugenics. His works are littered with the detritus of the transformation economy – fat people, anorexics, perverts and religious fanatics – all those who don't have the means or motivation to become perfect specimens. In his videos, Fishbone, like the 'with' directors, plays a fictionalised version of himself, who alternates between an over-sexed, outrageously endowed artist ('I'm an artist and no one knows how to touch a woman like an artist') and a wilfully ignorant all-American guy who, all the while claiming not to be a racist and certainly not 'a hippy or a lesbo or anything', is nevertheless fond of the sort of wildly prejudiced statements and conspiracy theories that keep Jerry Springer in business.

Towards a common understanding?

Fishbone's videos satirise the genre of edutainment that is the preferred communicative medium of the transformational economy. While, for instance, Fishbone's *Towards a Common Understanding* (2005) sounds like the title of a UN peace conference, and purports to investigate the deadly serious issues of war, religion and class, it also carries the disclaimer that 'the current film is for entertainment purposes only' and that the opinions given within it 'are not necessarily those of the author'. His films all follow the same formula, with Fishbone – the tone of whose voiceover mixes the neurotic humour of Woody Allen and the know-it-all confidence of blue-collar Brooklyn – weaving a narrative through a succession of stock images obtained from the internet that would test the ethics of even the most liberal copyright lawyer. Watching one of his films feels like accelerated channel hopping through every type of TV genre in the company of someone with Attention Deficit Disorder: infomercial (advertises flogging Fishbone's watches, 'designed for the art of living'), nature programme (fish and lab monkeys feature regularly), news channel (Abu-Ghraib torture scenes), comedy (Chinese restaurant joke: 'Diner: This chicken tastes rubbery – Waiter: Sank you sir!'), science programme (global warming charts), New Age channel (Daoist parable), late-night porn and so on.

Yet Fishbone's humour extends beyond a simple absurdist juxtaposition of popular entertainment genres. His commentary also mixes a range of registers – from Beavis and Butthead smuttiness, to live stand-up comedy, corporate PowerPoint presentation, moralising preacher and psychiatric patient – that constantly undermines any seriousness in his line of enquiry. The constant slippage between sign and signifier, image and commentary is a knowing nod to Barthes, while Fishbone's jokes run the gamut of Freud's joke-techniques: composite words, displacements, double meaning, rearrangements, witticisms. This allows him to make links between apparently unrelated phenomena that express the dangerous illogicality of Western reasoning – 'Noam Chomsky / Boneless Ham / White Gorilla / Ku Klux Klan' runs one particularly surreal word-image sequence. Language, like beliefs, is relative, Fishbone constantly reminds us like a good postmodernist lecturer, and therefore, we are pessimistically left to conclude, there will never be a common understanding.

Doug Fishbone's and 'with's blend of light entertainment, semantic disruption, political and corporate satire might be said to belong to an art-historical lineage of serial mischief-making whose roots lie in Dadaism. And yet, however cynical Fishbone and Alasdair Hopwood's outlook, it is never nihilistic. Despite the populist jargon, their obscurantist, multilayered fictions require a high degree of sustained concentration and engagement from the audience, a principle to which many artists pay lip-service but few achieve. Both artists expand on the institutional and media critique developed from '60s Situationalism to comment not only on the strangling bureaucracy of the art world, but the pervasive privatisation of the public cultural sphere and the exploitative publicisation of the private world of self-improvement. In this, they avoid the fetishisation of the body that has long served performance and much video art, which now not only feels outdated in its naive self-importance, but worse finds itself sharing ideals with the new transformation economy: those of the authentic and transcendent experience. In its place, then, Fishbone and Hopwood propose venturing out from the humourless safety of art-historical references to the worlds of satirical television comedy and live stand-up, where laughter

is the only ‘authentic’ experience on offer; complete freedom of expression the goal for which the art world must likewise remember to fight.

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¹ Chris Townsend, *New Art from London*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2006

² Slavoj Žižek, ‘Nobody has to be vile’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 28 No. 7, 6 April 2006, reprinted in *Variant*, Issue 26, summer 2006.

³ Suhail Malik also draws interesting comparisons between *The Experience Economy* and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. See the transcript of his paper at The Showroom Conference 2006: Artist-culture and the spirit of capitalism.

⁴ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass., 1999.

⁵ Trademarked by Walt Disney in 1967, the term – a contraction of ‘imagination’ and ‘engineering’ – has less than glamorous origins: it was coined by Richard F. Sailer in 1957 in an article called ‘BRAINSTORMING IS IMAGINATION engineering’ for the *National Carbon Company Management Magazine*.