

REVOLVER II

Spoiler Alert!

Michael Newman, November 15, 2014

Perform: to accomplish, to make manifest, to enunciate, to enact, to consummate...anxiety, hesitation, rehearsal, encore, curtain call.

Patrick Goddard

A Social Contract, 2014

Autocue, 2010–2014

Free Radicals, 2013

By the time you notice it you are on top of it. You have accepted it's terms before you are even able to read *A Social Contract*. This accurately mimes our relation to the social symbolic order. The writing on the carpet comprises a statement that is a 'performative', which means, according to the philosopher J L Austen, that the statement does something, it creates a state of affairs rather than simply describing it. So in this case we are always already within the state of affairs created by the performative statement. It is too late to take a position, as we can only take it after we have already in it. This is reinforced by the 'sloping' of the letters, which not only recalls the titles of an epic movie, and therefore the copyright statement, but also creates virtual diagonal lines on the floor converging behind the position that the visitor by now is in. If these may be taken as the hint of the construction of a perspective picture, this means that the viewer has already passed the point of intersection at the ideal, monocular point of view. If we consider this to be the point from which the viewer dominates the world reduced to the visible, it is also the position of the viewer's subjectification, therefore combining domination and passivity. By projecting this behind the visitor by the time the visitor has seen and possibly stepped on the notice, Goddard reminds us that far from being free to dominate, we are always already 'in' the picture. That the statement begins 'YOUR PRESENCE' gives a twist to the meaning of presence: presence as implication. That this work is titled 'A Social Contract' makes reference to the theory – or better fiction – in political philosophy that a contract lies at the origin of society, but also draws attention to the connection between the physical experience of the work – always seeing

it 'too late' – and the subject being always already within a social Symbolic order, including the language of the 'contract' itself. We are always already implicated, in every sense of the word. Our self-aware reading lags behind the performance of the performative statement. By the time we realise what is happening, it is already too late, which is only to say that the work itself raises questions about the very critical reflexivity that it operates.

The carpet is stained, appears marked by use, and has lighter rectangles as if it has darkened around where furniture was placed. The walls are covered with raw plasterboard, with nail heads showing. Is it a corporate or institutional space which has been used and is now emptied out, or is it a building in the process of being renovated? Ruin, or gentrification? And, between the two, where is art? The gallery has been made to look like that kind of building that developers loan out for an art exhibition, an activity that will ultimately contribute to raising property values. Or it could be an artist squat.

Rounding the corner, we see facing us leaning against the opposite wall a large light box in a vertical 'portrait' format. It has a rotating screen, that moves round and back with a whirr. The light box is like those used for rotating advertising displays at a bus stop. But there is no picture, only a strip of blue that appears at the bottom but never covers the four vertical fluorescent strip lights. The whole thing looks used with marks on the surface, and slightly battered. If constructed, it is out of already existing parts, and gives the impression of being a found 'readymade' - perhaps closer to David Batchelor's found light boxes, than to Duchamp's readymade, provoking thoughts not so much about aesthetic indifference, as about the movement between the street and the gallery. It is at once a displacement of non-art into art, and a construct made from already existing parts, like a Dan Flavin work using fluorescent lights, an effect enhanced by the peacock blue glow created by the tinted perspex behind.

The room is filled with the sound of a man's voice speaking phrases that, on turning round, we see the phrases displayed on a monitor, rising upwards towards an arrow where the written coincides with the spoken. The monitor is placed on a plywood cabinet, with a computer and audio, flanked by a battered pair of speakers. The phrases that the voice is reading comprise a collective noun followed by what the collection is of. One such sequence goes:

sheol of shadows
coalition of cheetahs
wake of vultures
band of brothers
archipelago of islands
flight of stairs
caravan of nomads

cohort of zebras

Some of the combinations are quite odd, destabilising the relation between the elements and the collectivity, which can range from inappropriate to unexpected. The rhetorical form is catachresis, from the Greek for abuse, so a semantic ‘misuse’ of a term, which in this case serves to disturb and open up predetermined categories, so that the abuse of the already-there gives rise to invention. We can see in this way how Goddard, through his approach to already-there language and things, re-functions the readymade and the approach to art through appropriation. The way that the phrases are read seems to render prosaic the lyric potential of some of the phrases, levelling them with the others — the prose of everyday work and social relations.

If one part of *Autocue* is a lightbox, what is missing is the image that we would normally find on such a thing, which in the street would be advertising, and in the art gallery might be a Cibachrome transparency of a photograph. What we have instead is language on one side, and a functioning material object on the other. What links the two parts is that they are both ‘scrolling’ with machinic repetition. In each case something is promised – revelation and meaning – and at the same time reduced to emptiness or pointlessness. But in the suspension of the space, its suggestion of an out-of-work office, attention is turned back from the result – the image, the simulacrum, the ad or the manual or catalogue – to materiality and labour, to the machine and the voice.

What is occurring on the monitor is a process – or representation – of subsumption. The multiplicity of particulars – the plural term – is subsumed under the category – the singular term. Subsumption involves a process of abstraction: the individual qualities are abstracted into a universal term. Marx writes of the subsumption of the particularity of the labour process under the universality of the value-process of Capital. The abstract universal of value finds a real existence through the concrete labours subsumed under it. Capital takes hold of the labour process to produce value through its ‘formal’ abstraction. One side of *Autocue* shows linguistic subsumption, and the other side shows something that is the product of social or industrial labour becoming an ‘abstract’ (non-representational) work of art. If linguistic subsumption is disrupted by catachresis, what would be the equivalent disruption of visual abstraction? Is the revolving light box as work of art itself a catachresis jamming labour and abstraction?

The ‘missing’ image of *Autocue* is supplemented by the large video projection of *Free Radicals*. We are propelled on a first person ride through a water chute, or to be more accurate, a compilation of footage of journeys down many water chutes in water parks around the world edited into a continuous flow. Sometimes we can see quite clearly where we are, whether enclosed in an opaque tube, or looking through a transparent one at the seaside, at other times the experience becomes a blur of colour and light. At the same time we hear a man’s voice, the same as that of *Autocue* (the artist’s) enunciating

phrases with 'free' in them, which ends up sounding like a catalogue of the ways in which we are not free, phrases already there before us that predetermine the forms of freedom, just as the thrill of the ride, its sublime transcendence, is predetermined by the configuration of the tubes. This voice is periodically interrupted by another, coming from speakers behind the viewer that seems to open up a mocking or cynical distance ('yea right'), prompting, contradicting ('you said that'). While the main voice is playing with quotations: 'Trawling the webbed winter or our disconnect'; 'Abscess makes the heart grow fonder'; 'a home for abandoned cats and gods'; finishing with 'spiking writing a viking vocab of a hob nob hobo homesick nomad'. At times the voice seems to be intoning something like an 'Under Milk Wood' of contemporary social existence. This seems to open up fissures in the predictable and predetermined meaning. If the 'free radical' is a nomad, are his or her lines of flight 'free' or always already reterritorialised (homesick).

There are traces in *Free Radicals* of the philosopher Max Stirner, who argued in *The Ego and His Own* that there is a difference between freedom from and freedom for, and that 'My freedom becomes complete only when it is my - might; but by this I cease to be a merely free man, and become an own man.' Also Hakim Bey's idea of 'temporary autonomous zones':

To say that 'I will not be free till all humans (or all sentient creatures) are free' is simply to cave in to a kind of nirvana-stupor, to abdicate our humanity, to define ourselves as losers.

I believe that by extrapolating from past and future stories about 'islands in the net' we may collect evidence to suggest that a certain kind of 'free enclave' is not only possible in our time but also existent. All my research and speculation has crystallized around the concept of the TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONE...

He writes of pirates as 'social bandits' whose islands were utopias, 'enclaves of total liberty occupying empty spaces on the map. We might also think of the 'lines of flight' of nomads in Deleuze and Guattari's writings. In the midst of these figures of freedom, Goddard's approach is far from simply affirmative. What, after all, does it mean to accompany enunciations of freedom with video of water chutes filmed and pirated from the internet? The tubes of the water chutes suggest the interior of a body, perhaps a replacement for Leviathan whale as a metaphor for society. In biology free radical cells are necessary to life in cell signalling and the killing of bacteria, but as unbound energy, cause cancer, ageing and death. Goddard's work may occupy a position of ambivalence, somewhat pessimist, somewhat cynical, aware how escape is recuperated, but willing to celebrate the cracks of potential opened up by the unpredictable play of language, and what can be done by shifting and displacing the economy things and images.