

Rachel Withers 2003

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**The installation Some Things You Are Not Allowed to Send Around the World (Matt's Gallery, London, 11 June- 3 August 2003) was my first encounter with the work of artist Melanie Jackson, and something of a revelation-** not just in terms of the implausible yet genuine lists of banned items detailed on the show's poster (Germany forbids postage of playing cards "except in complete decks properly wrapped"; Croatia, whistles; Peru, shoe cream; Italy, typewriter ribbon; Somalia and Sri Lanka, illustrated postcards- to name just a few items) but because of the absorbing and reflexive quality of Jackson's project. The result of two years' work, the piece formed an urgent and intriguing meditation on labour- specifically, on immigrant labour, maybe the most heavily policed of all things that (legally or illegally) get sent around the world.

Following a pattern established in Jackson's previous projects, *Some Things* was oriented around a central "myth": a maybe true, maybe fabricated tale of a Filipina maid working in Hong Kong whose "bedroom" is a kitchen cupboard. At night she removes its contents and climbs inside to sleep; in the morning on rising, she refills it and starts her work. Jackson re-told the woman's story via a brief, simply-drawn, looped video animation screened on a partition at the installation's entrance: a hand stacking plates; a person disappearing into a tiny cupboard; a window darkening and growing light again.

Behind the partition lurked a stunning surprise- a sprawling, fantastically labour-intensive cluster of microcosmic environments crafted by the artist from a polyglot assortment of newspaper scraps, and laid out on miniature plateaux formed from thin, ragged plywood sheeting. Amongst the structures teased painstakingly from newsprint were a minuscule circus, a refugee camp, a listening station, a mountain cable-car, a temple, a football stadium, a shipping container port, roadside billboards, telecoms installations, and a fairground bedecked with tiny streams of bunting. Precisely observed, the models were striking not least for their mimetic impact; the newspaper medium had a kind of festive charm but many of the landscapes represented (industrial wastelands, shanty towns- sites of human deprivation and environmental destruction) triggered a creeping anxiety.

At the installation's centre, monitors screened videos documenting a curious social phenomenon that takes place on Sundays in Hong Kong. The city's female Filipino servant community assemble in the financial district for a kind of party, chatting, singing, and endeavouring to raise each others' spirits. (Maybe somewhere amongst the crowd was the very woman of the cupboard legend.) Another monitor, located elsewhere, screened footage documenting the giant agribusinesses of El Ejido, Spain, with their vast plastic-covered acreages of cultivated fruits and vegetables, and their migrant North African workforce, whose labour underpins the industry. On the one hand, installation viewers contemplated the "invisible", underpaid labour of immigrant workers, and on the other, the supposedly "non-alienated" labour of the Western artist, working in a medium (newspaper) whose acid-laden nature guarantees the objects produced an extremely short life-span. The installation offered no tidy formula to explain the complex relation

between these phenomena, but rather left the labour of interpretation to the viewer.

Jackson, who graduated from London's Royal College of Art in [1992], represents yet another counter (if more were needed) to the caricature of the brash, anti-theoretical, commercially obsessed, publicity-seeking 1990s "YBA" persona. "I work very, very slowly, with ideas coming before any idea of exhibition venue, and I'm really only interested in projects that allow that slow developmental process" she states. "I like to pursue a line of enquiry in depth and to have time for ideas to mature. And as I've got older, I've found the early anxieties about visibility subsiding- it feels OK to risk being silent for a while, to wait until something of real importance emerges in one's work." Eager to know more about her practice, I met up with the artist at Matt's Gallery.

RW: This work is crucially about work- am I right?

MJ: Yes, and in particular, it's about hidden work- or rather the way that contemporary Western society both reveres and denies labour. I'm interested in the shifting attitudes to labour that I've witnessed since my childhood. My grandparents, for example, were very working class and took a great pride in the idea of hard work, in a way that was almost spiritual, AND not just about productivity. But now that value system has eroded. Production (and over-production) is virulent, but labour is seen as something one ought to try and get someone else to do. And that's a crucial aspect of the immigration issue- the way it's about displacing, denying labour and effort. There's also the question of the way labour serves both to identify and misidentify people. The subjects I'm drawn to- especially the women in Hong Kong- appear to be totally identified with ceaseless domestic labour- yet at the same time that's evidently a gross misidentification. A whole generation of women, including educated professionals, have been coerced into this working pattern because of the structures that support it. They identify with their role- which they see as heroic- rather than with the nature of the work itself.

In terms of my own labour, that inherited work ethic is something I try to resist, but it's definitely there in my background, and my work is partly to do with testing whether the investment of time is worth anything or not- negotiating that question over years of practice.

Different methods serve different ends: On one hand there's the kind of "instant gratification" that video can bring, but the laborious work this project involved had a certain meditative dimension. Earlier in my practice I felt a conscious need to reject mythologies about handmaking, and I took that very seriously- perhaps too seriously, because I think it extracted a lot of the pleasure from the work and that's something I've recently been regaining. There has to be a joy in making work, or it becomes turgid, thankless. Additionally, my present way of making sculpture means it doesn't have to be a big production: I can be largely self sufficient, working independently and not relying on fabricators. I used to think the fabrication issue didn't matter, but now I realise it does- for me.

RW: Research is clearly another key element in your practice. Your work is dispersed across the objects you've made and the installation's internal relationships, plus texts that you've written, video material,

the myths you reference and so on- interpreting it is like a kind of archaeology, a piecing together of clues. And the totality evidences an accumulation of lots of researched material, very often referencing different kinds of social systems- systems that may seem incompatible, or at least very far removed from one another.

MJ: All my works are a kind of excavation, and there are always many ideas that don't make it into the final work. I find research addictive- I have to follow up the leads to have a sense of the rightness of the final piece. Regarding the question of systems, you're right- I'm very interested in the way different systems impact on one another, the way that they can seem to run simultaneously but in parallel- and that ultimately it's the individual who has to try and make sense of them.

My first piece that brought that research process to the fore was [TITLE] after 'The Conjuror' (Project Arts, Dublin and Cambridge Darkroom, 1996), which juxtaposed Bosch's 15th painting of a conjuror performing a card trick with a video I made of Eastern European immigrants playing three-card monty in a Berlin street just after the fall of the Wall. They would fold out a square of carpet and play crowds all over the city using three matchboxes and a marble (in different languages, for the different tourists passing by): an active exchange that had to do with deception, but a sanctioned deception. By linking Bosch's magician- the high cultural icon- with the contemporary immigrants' activity, the work seemed to chart a kind of fall from grace- it discovered a contemporary resonance in an ancient artefact.

But I'm equally interested in contemporary "urban myths", tales of uncertain status which seem to have an archaic quality: for example the three news stories that were retold as video works in the 1999 Matt's Gallery installation *soil and seawater*. One is a semi-miraculous-sounding Norwegian news story about a shoal of herring capsizing one of those huge, monster-sized fishing boats. Supposedly the fish all dived for the sea-bed simultaneously and sank the ship. Another concerns a US battleship challenging a radio source that keeps refusing to yield to the US ship's threats and get out of the way- eventually the source reveals itself as a lighthouse. The third story is about the state of Oregon spending a huge amount of money trying to figure out how to keep its video-poker industry running in the event of an asteroid hitting the earth. I really appreciated the stories' nonsensical quality, but also their expression of vulnerability: They originally arose in response to a residency in Cardiff, Wales (I came across them talking to people there) and tangentially they seemed to express the anxieties of a port that had once been at the heart of the international transport industry, but had lost its role.

In 1997 the artists' books publisher Book Works commissioned me to make a work in their Library Relocations project. The work that resulted, *The Brazen Oracle*, is maybe the most explicit expression of that archaeological interest. I ended up developing a piece that referenced two different libraries held by the University of London: the Goldsmiths Library of Economic Literature and the Harry Price Library of Magical Literature. The two were started at almost exactly the same time- the most fantastic juxtaposition: one an apparently absolute denial of fantasy (but actually built on fantasies about valuable cargoes from abroad, and documenting all the carnivals and rituals they

inspired here in London), the other about magic, conjuring, spiritualism- but pursued in a kind of rationalistic- very British, empirical- fashion. The resulting installation, which used multiple video screens to present various different strands of my research, was staged in the library. Ultimately I'm not sure the piece was entirely successful, but the academic setting licensed a certain measure of difficulty, in that it required the viewer to be investigative in the way they explored the setting and the apparent contradictions between the intellectual foundations of the two collections. Going back to your comment about systems, this work was very definitely about exploring systems that maybe seem completely separate, but which converge in the imagination.

RW: The Library Relocations project referred to a megalomaniac proposal made by the 13th theologian Roger Bacon, to surround Britain with a brass wall that would keep foreigners at bay. Questions of boundaries policed and breached, of the Other both excluded from and present in the Metropolis, recur in your work.

MJ Yes. For example, the setting of The Brazen Oracle- the University of London Library- was important to the work: it was built before WW2 as a kind of world-wide beacon of scholarship, a bastion of rationalism, yet it contains this library of magic compiled by Harry Price, who was a very peculiar, maverick, Barnum-like figure. Plus of course, during the war, the building was used as HQ for the Ministry of Information. And it still contains the embalmed body of the (very irrational) rationalist Jeremy Bentham. When I made the work I was living very near an estate called Jeremy Bentham House- which is surrounded by a great wooden wall covered with racist graffiti, and was (and still is) a site of really bad racial conflict. One video took the viewer on a tour of this wall. The chain of connections seemed to represent the relationship between the fear of "racial contamination" and the contamination of reason in a very actual way.

I'm acutely aware of the problems of dealing with the issue of the Other without becoming banal, or self-congratulatory, or euphemistic.

There's a troublesome strand of art practice, for example, that's about visiting difficult or troubled places but at a safe distance- filming places at night, or empty, because the artist doesn't want to seem to be "standing for" the resident population or to be accused of "picturing the victim" and thereby perpetrating a misrepresentation.

But I was excited by the possibilities- and the difficulties- of documentary raised at the last Documenta, because I'm interested in seeing actual spaces, and the minutiae of how people live- how they occupy those spaces- and the interconnectedness of my own position and theirs. For example, the situation referenced in Some Things has everything to do with Britain pulling out of Hong Kong. It's not really a question of my taking on the cause of the Filipino women; I'm not setting myself up as a spokesperson for them, but equally I'm not separating myself from them. Ultimately, desire pulls both ways; the Moroccan immigrants working in Spain are motivated by the need for money, but they too are seeking to travel, to escape boredom. They're coming from a place that (like ours) is flushed with images from MTV, pictures of a wider world, and they want to operate in that world- Frankfurt is their exotic. In a UK situation, the world, the big stories, are brought into one's domestic environment in a similarly difficult way: they're really close, really present, yet one's

alienated from them by the urgency, the style of mainstream news. Im searching for a way to make work that's both serious and joyful- non-ironic- and trying to resist cleaning stuff up, or editing out its complexity. It's not just about being descriptive, it's about discovering moments of recognition. The critic Ian Hunt described the way in which certain writers use factual historical anecdote as an 'intoxicant' rather than a building block of their fiction. I'm interested in documentary that works in this way. There is a sense of excitement in a moment of mutuality, in the equilibrium between one's own sense of possibilities and another's.

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