

# Milton Keynes Gallery

## THE THE THINGS IS (FOR 3)

9 July – 12 September 2010

### Interview with the Artist and Anthony Spira, May 2010

Question: There are two older works in the exhibition that set the tone for the new work by introducing themes that have recurred in your practice over the years. The first I would like to talk about is *Another Ring of Balls*, 2003, where magazine pages have been pasted to the wall in a single, continuous line that loops around the room. When I first saw this piece, I spent a long time trying to make sense of the pages...

Answer: Yes, that was part of the attraction. The first impression was of a random selection or at least that the pages which were hung at particular angles and different heights to each other followed some hidden design principle. Basically, I selected magazine pages that all included a ball randomly positioned on the page and I arranged the balls into a straight line, from the smallest to the largest. It was really important that it wasn't an immediate hit, that it was a slow realisation. I was very curious to see how people would respond at the opening and they became quite animated. It was almost like doing a crossword, with that pleasure you get when you land on the answer to the clue.

Q: At the time I remember thinking about the artist David Hammons' comment about the art world being overly educated because I spent quite a lot of time reading the texts, wondering what the connection was and then I stepped back and saw that there was actually just a very simple formal device that connected everything together.

A: I was not necessarily trying to feed that feeling of people 'getting it' or making sense of it. I'm still interested in a sense of 'hiddenness', which is also celebrated in some shape or form in my more recent double-page collages. It's a kind of illegitimate understanding where actual, rational understanding exists but is enhanced because random images overlap and connect. The correspondences are never deliberate but we read them intuitively, perceptively.

Q: Just to dwell on the balls piece for a while, you must have been collecting pages from magazines for a while?

A: A lot of my projects have some kind of auto-biographical aspect if it doesn't quite add up to self-portraiture. Slowly over the years just reading magazines in a normal way and keeping the pages with balls in them, I acquired a massive collection. The starting point was trying to use an everyday medium like a magazine but try and locate an object within the page that could stand up to this system that I placed upon it. The overall system had to form straight lines because the pages are glued to the walls of a room to create a loop that follows the contours of the architecture. If the eye level row of pages comes to a doorway or window it needs to go up or down over or under the gap in order to circumnavigate the architectural opening yet remain continuous. That is why they are called 'rings', organic rings. By entering the room through the doorway, you are inevitably standing in the middle of the ring, surrounded or lassoed by these works. Ideally you are guided around the room slowly looking at each page and following the architecture. The ball image is the perfect vehicle for this, ordered by size, so that it can appear to roll across the pages or even across the walls and having potential motion to leave the work!

Q: Could you talk about other works that have brought together seemingly random material using various underlying systems? Perhaps your exhibition *From Navels to Nipples Henry Moore* at the Henry Moore Institute in 2006 is a good example?

A: My work often contains a strong geometrical aspect and for this project I was trying to impose geometry onto the body. I decided to find a way of cataloguing images that I found in the Henry Moore Institute library, which is obviously full of books on sculpture, many of which represent naked figures. The organising principle was similar to the centre of the ball in the magazine pages, but this time I played with Leonardo Da Vinci's idea of proportion, the hidden flaccid geometry of the body and of course Henry Moore's notion of sculptural holes.

Each time I came across an image of a naked person or a naked sculpture, I placed a compass on the navel in order to draw a circle whose radius was determined by the length between the navel and the closest nipple. I then cut the circle out, creating a hole or window so that the page underneath became married to the image that was being looked at. I was very interested in creating these chance encounters where an unknown collage was created by this very simple process of removing 'plugs' from each page. Then the pages with holes were all ordered from the smallest to the largest and made into a book where the navel became the new centre point of the page. The circles that were cut from the book pages were installed on the gallery walls in order of size so that it was possible to see the missing bit.

Q: The other older piece that we are showing in the exhibition, presents a full band's equipment, that is wired up, plugged and ready to play. I remember you saying that one of the challenges that you initially set yourself as a visual artist was to try to have exhibitions without actually producing any objects...

A: Yes, that was the first work that just presented objects without any middle man, any interference from myself. All of a sudden the context became key. It required social interaction and encouraged spectators to become participants, to become part of the work and to inform the work. Until they are used, these tools are dumb, neutral, albeit bursting with potential...

Q: So is this work just a more literal demonstration of the process that you were encouraging visitors to go through when they looked at the magazine and the ball pieces?

A: Yes, exactly. I've always had this notion that we gain more through participation, if you're left to complete something, it can be more satisfying. I don't want to create situations where there is no access or art where there isn't a way in. It's about leaving something unturned and allowing the viewer to turn that stone over. I don't want to give up control completely but it is quite subtle getting it right. If you leave too much work to be done, people will turn away or not even see that there is work to be done. The band piece was more physical and obvious as I was very interested in this idea of re-joining art and life. There is that similar feeling when you look at images in the collages that don't belong together, because, once you see them together, you imagine how they might work together. We form narratives because we can't believe that there isn't a narrative.

Q: Are you referring to the magazine pages that you install on light boxes so that the images on both sides of the paper appear at the same time? How did you start doing these and what were you looking for?

A: Yes, one image is imposed on the other because the light shines through the page and dematerialises the paper. The two images become linked and we inevitably form a narrative, no matter how irresponsible or illegitimate it may be. We end up forming a relationship, which only exists through chance. I only came across this way of working with magazines when I was looking for pages with balls in them and saw lots of pages scattered round the floor. I picked one up and held it in front of a bright sunlit window and for a brief moment could see both sides of the illuminated page simultaneously. This accidental vision made me think. So it was totally by chance that I saw one of these incredible coincidences which made me realise that there was a potential thread here that could be utilised.

Q: You've also explored this by removing the staples from books or magazines to see the combinations that are printed arbitrarily on the same sheet of paper before it is folded into shape and bound. I guess it's a bit like the Surrealists' 'exquisite corpse' game, only not determined by any artist.

A: Yes. For example, in a sports magazine there was a picture of Mohamed Ali in a boxing ring. His arm went across the join of the page and connected, on the other side

of the join, with a white arm holding a tennis racket. The link between Ali's arm and this tennis player's arm was so close and accurate, that it looked like it had been manipulated. I love the simplicity of removing two staples and the ease at which these inadvertent narratives can be suggested. That's about as low-fi and economical as you can get in making work.

Q: Could you say a little bit more about the work with the grand piano and leather bull whip *ENTRE LE DÉSIR ET L'ACCOMPLISSEMENT, LA PERPÉTRATION ET SON SOUVENIR*, 2010. As I understand it, the idea is for a bright light to reflect off the top of an open piano lid until a whip cracker brings the lid down during a performance at the opening, perhaps extinguishing the light?

A: It's difficult to talk about as the piece hasn't been made yet but I've been working on this idea of expunging dualities. What that means I suppose is that I've tried to make works that don't necessarily have a front and back, a left and right, a black and white. I'm looking for something that is potentially existing within a middle ground as opposed to extremes. the piano has an obvious polarity with its black and white keys but, in the same way that the light boxes have light shining through the pages, I am hoping that the light reflecting off the mirrored piano lid will have a similarly disorientating and dematerialising effect on this very dense, black and relatively organic shape. I hope that it's going to become almost mirage like, in its initial appearance.

In theory the whip cracker will then enter the space and whip the piano in a kind of reawakening. The sound is going to be so loud and have such force that it will be like breaking a spell, like a wake up call, an attempt to shift that illusion back to a kind of reality. The whip will mark the piano in the same way that marks are made onto paper by artists, in the same sort of gesture as Jackson Pollock's drips. The inordinate breaking of the sound barrier by the whip will also tickle the piano, which will then reply with some kind of noise. I am hoping that this conversation where a static musical instrument becomes animated by a kind of animalistic performance will bring this potentially illusionistic tool back to reality. The *coup-de-grace*, when the whip cracker slams the lid down, is a kind of circus act or reanimation that cancels out one illusion at the same time as creating another one. The two tools, the musical instrument and the whip become one, a coming together, like a collage of different approaches.

Q: So two totally incongruous objects with all their uncompromising associations are brought together in a brutal act and after the performance, the whip is left, ensnared or trapped in the piano's closed lid, like a tail...

A: Yes, it does remind me of a cartoon animal like Mickey Mouse, the shape of the ears of the mouse for example but the action itself is quite anarchic and violent. What I love about the bullwhip is its similarity to the violin siren works that I made, where violinists move around a space making sounds like police sirens (*Violin Siren* 2004-present). There is a hallucinogenic aspect where the sound exists before the object appears so that

you only realise when you see the violins that the sound is not produced by a police car. It's the same with the whip, where the sound precedes the object and also exists separately from the object. I am interested in how musical instruments are very specific objects that represent a particular sound without being specifically tied into the sound they produce.

Q: Is this somehow playing with the idea of language as being separate from meaning and exploring the gap between the two? You've made several other sound pieces, including *Went to America didn't say a word*, 1999, which records all the ambient sound around your journey and *Now*, 2000, where you made a compilation using the word 'now' from lots of different pop songs. In the first piece it seems that you were asserting your presence through an absence or 'negative sound' while in the second you have once again chosen a thread that links disparate things together through one (albeit arbitrarily) shared facet. It seems that you play with the divergences between form and content, devising systems to create some kind of order that grapple with ways of understanding and envisaging the world. These devices are all apparent in the Geneva piece, *16-24 FÉVRIER 1985, LE LIVRE BLANC DE GENÈVE OLIVIER LOMBARD JEAN-CLAUDE SILVY*, 2010.

A: I found this book, by chance, of black and white photos of the Swiss city coated in a thick layer of snow that obscures the shapes of cars and other street furniture. By systematically placing all the pages from this book in order and on a red light box, not only does the paper disappear so that the back and front of the images merge into one, but the red gel will in theory totally dispel the polarities so that the white becomes a very light red and the black becomes a very dark red as everything is cast in a warm glow. It's kind of a crass way of 'melting' the snow by implying the notion of heat through the colour red. For me it's very much about celebrating the gap between things.

In the work *Went to America didn't say a word* where one of the gaps was the absence of my response to any verbal questions thrown at me as I was in a state of refusing to talk; using language in order to communicate. It was a kind of self-portrait in that it was a real time record of my journey but my presence through the audio recording was actually an absence. *Now* randomly chained together tiny bites or increments of language that none the less were long enough to recall the time and place associated with the whole song. It was a kind of jolting of romantic memory and a closing of the gap of time.

Q: This idea of dissolving polarities is also the main intention with the light box tables with hermaphrodite like images, *WOMAN MAN MAN WOMAN WOMAN WOMAN MAN MAN* *GEORGE M. HESTER*, 2010.

A: Yes, what I am trying to incorporate here is a third type of sexuality, combining halves of men and women in a variety of potential combinations. I am literally taking the male page and cutting it in half, taking the female page and cutting that in half and then

swapping around the halves, so that these two halves become a new whole that is part male, part female. The light shining through takes it one step further and adds another dimension of removing the materiality of the actual page.

Q: Why are you so concerned with dissolving polarities? Is this related to the loops you create?

A: I am mainly trying to find somewhere that isn't extreme, something that is around the middle, with a residue of two extremes. It is related to the circular aspect of geometry that I have been intrigued by over the years. I am trying to find a sphere or circular arrangement that has no front or back, beginning or end. Something that is in a perpetual state of flux.

Q: The denim work which is looping around the building *NO NO MORE THAN DENIM (FUCK FUCK FUCK)*, 2010, performs as a kind of cloak for all these naked bodies! Or at least, it cloaks the building, rolling through the gallery so that people can walk on it too.

A: The title of the show *THE THE THINGS IS (FOR 3)* implies a kind of impediment like stuttering that is connected with the title of this piece. Similar in nature to the inadvertent jerks and uncontrolled swearing associated with Gilles de la Tourette's syndrome . Hopefully this work will become a kind of walk way or a cat walk. Like an architectural feature that connects the separate spaces of the gallery, it will slowly over the course of the exhibition acquire an accumulation, a record of visitors' footprints, and their own respective walking habits or gaits.

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