

**File 6
Critical Text**

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**In response to the exhibition:
W e / c o m e curated by
Ahilapalapa Rands at Artspace,
September–October 2014**

In the half-light between Artspace's main and side galleries, Single Brown Female's *Don't care* sits on the polished concrete floor, an A2-sized lightbox with a heavy black power cable that droops from the ceiling. The box illuminates a colour photo of dark curly hair, cropped so no other part of its owner is visible. The image is tightly focused, with a shallow depth of field and deep magnification, drawing out copper, silver, hazel and black strands in what first appears to be an undifferentiated mass of brown.

To its left, the collective's video *One* is projected down the gallery, onto its end wall. It is a three minute loop that shows the back of Leilani Heather and Talia Smith's heads in closeup, its frame dominated by the long, dark curly hair that rolls over both their shoulders. The two artists take turns sitting in front of a white cinderblock wall, occasionally moving their head to the side or flicking their hair, so that a glimpse of their face is visible; there are tiny stutters in the video when one of them is substituted for the other.

Single Brown Female is a collective identity through which Heather and Smith explore mistaken identity, drawing on their own experiences of being confused for each other to question how race and identity affect people's perceptions of others.¹ *One* gives the two artists' long curly hair centre stage, while their faces

are visible only in momentary flashes. It is still possible to identify the two, but the video is staged to complicate the process, rather than facilitate it. By presenting their hair as a hurdle to be crossed, *One* draws attention to how it might become a barrier which obscures the identities of those who have it.

Why might someone mistake two people for having long, dark curly hair? Presumably because they find such hair to be notable, different from their own self-image in a way which makes it capture their attention more than the distinct faces of the people who wear it; because it signifies a perceived condition of ethnicity or gender which overwrites the other's humanity. To mistake two people for each other on the basis of hair type or skin tone is to reduce them to members of a category, to render them faceless; stereotypical.

Don't care illustrates what is lost when looking stops at the first glance, at the identification of surface features and the act of categorisation. Its photograph pays close attention to its subject, looking at what is actually present rather than trying to mould what is first seen so it exemplifies a type. In doing so, the image reveals the vivid, interior diversity of one particular person's brown hair, the uniqueness of a thing which might be used to deny the uniqueness of a person.

Light handed, and ironic in their interplay, both *One* and *Don't care* draw attention to ways of looking; one that thinks the world can be taken in with a single glance, and another which reminds us that close attention and reflection are necessary if we hope to understand what we see, let alone the part that we play in our seeing.

In the long gallery, five channels of video flicker in the darkness. John Vea stands in each of them, cradling a heavy rock until he can hold it no longer. He is topless, dressed in cut-off denim shorts and Chuck Taylors. Long grass blows through the smashed concrete around his feet.

Vea filmed the five videos which make up *Finish this week off and that's it!* over six weeks, during which he chose to live below the poverty line, losing more than twenty kilograms and suffering nosebleeds and migraines while he tried to carry on with his normal life. The videos chart Veá's deteriorating physical condition, his shrinking muscles and pallor; as the weeks pass, he begins to shake and breathe raggedly while holding up the stone. *Finish this week...* distils Veá's experience of deliberate poverty into a single, repeated gesture that emblematises the cumulative toll of hard labour and material deprivation.

Projected at nearly life size, five times along an entire wall, *Finish this week...* permeates the long gallery with Veá's body and experience; the only way to avoid him is to walk away. This unrelenting depiction of Veá's personhood, his way of responding to the particular conditions of his life, sets the scene for an encounter between him and the viewer. One shakes and crouches, shirtless in the night, the other stands in the quiet of the darkened gallery; it is a meeting which offers a chance to reconcile the artist's experience with the viewer's understanding of the world.

What occurs in that moment is an unpredictable product of the viewer's own self-conception and their reading of Veá's video; it is a moment which may confront viewers with a subjectivity that is radically different from their own, one which might destabilise their sense of self and their relationship to the realities Veá communicates. It is an encounter which offers a chance to make sense of a world in which the state of poverty Veá has chosen to inhabit is produced and inflicted on an industrial scale, by shrinking the space of social consideration and expelling 'uneconomic' people from livelihoods, visibility, social consideration and life.²

Around the corner, in the light, the main gallery abounds with reminders of D.A.N.C.E. Art Club's *Guinness World Record Attempt* project. The high walls diagonally opposite Artspace's entrance are painted a sherbet pink, with the collective's name inscribed in shimmering, silver letters. Underneath them is a checkerboard-patterned plywood dancefloor, a metal-framed stage and a sound system built from borrowed parts.

Guinness... centred on Tuafale Tanoa'i (aka Linda T)'s attempt to break the world record for non-stop DJing, which currently stands at 168 hours. The attempt ran for three and a half days; while Tanoa'i spun Ardijah and Earth, Wind and Fire, teams of volunteers monitored the Guinness regulations, and hundreds of people moved in tides over the gallery's new dancefloor. When energy was high, dancers put on red leopard print jumpsuits and giant geometric smocks, voguing in front of a green screen beside the stage. In the early mornings, Tanoa'i was alone with volunteers and a designated dancer, playing slow jams to refocus for the day ahead. When the dancing became too much, people drifted into darkened side galleries to rest, or wrote notes of encouragement which they stuck to the gallery wall.

D.A.N.C.E. Art Club have said that their practice “[encourages] audience engagement and participation as a way of opening up conversation and making

art accessible to diverse audiences”.³ *Guinness...* provided several hooks for such engagement, most powerfully the opportunity to dance for free in a safe, public space. The project also offered people a chance to help achieve a clear goal with kudos attached; meaning that coming along to dance might confer the warm glow that comes with achieving a new record. Alongside this was the compelling spectacle of Tanoa'i spinning records for three and a half days, only accruing five minutes of rest each hour. Even while dancing, people could watch her striving to break through the physical and psychological barriers this entailed, pushing onward like a marathon runner in studio headphones.

Guinness... was a temporary departure from how art is often experienced at Artspace. It facilitated intersubjective relations, like conversation and shared dance, which were founded on enjoying music and movement, rather than viewing contemporary art from a quiet and critical distance. By making disinhibition and groove more important than artistic training or familiarity with the codes of contemporary art, *Guinness...* reached out to people who valued the former, whether or not they had the latter. This decision conceptualised a new audience for the gallery, which was diverse in the sense that it brought together some who had never entered Artspace before and others for whom it was a second home.

Anthony Riddell's contribution to *Welcome* is found in the Artspace Reading Room, where his five zines and three books are bagged in protective sleeves and laid out on a specially constructed wooden rack. They sit between shelves of Artspace's own catalogues and an empty vitrine, their bright colours and jagged, gestural illustrations leaping forward from the cool plywood and bare wall behind them.

The zines come from a series called *Sacred Vulture Tongue Problem*, which Riddell created in 1993. Their paper is soft and spotted with age, each bound using rusting staples and risographed in a different, thick shade, from aggressive pink to cerulean. The zines combine to tell a surreal, unpredictable story; quests, missions and disasters piling into one another in a mixture of cartoons and typewritten text. They are tales of characters from the realms of the unreal, people and things like "Ichthyopod" and "Cameron, the Primate of Happy Valley". On one page, a duck in a fez speaks to a square-headed man in a top hat, on another, a ziggurat made from jelly is decorated with the symbols of Egyptian gods.

Riddell's books, *A turnip in the shape of a human* (2006), *Recapitulation* (2008) and *Toothmarks on the sun* (2013), are digitally printed and square bound, their bright white paper and crisp text contrasting with the older zines. The novella-length stories they tell are

thick with alliteration, puns and knowing winks to the reader, *A turnip...* opening with the words: "The story began, as all stories begin; with something pulsating to one side". These books' dense and varied thickets of wordplay, their profusion of non-sequiturs, are pleasurable but also taxing; immersing oneself in their flow takes concentration but it also offers a greater pleasure than is garnered from a quick glance.

Just as *Guinness...* offered up an experience that rewarded energy and extroversion, Riddell's publications provide pleasure for those prepared to dedicate attention and time to following the unfamiliar logics of another mind. Originally created outside the frame of contemporary art, alongside Riddell's decades-long exploration of experimental music, tai chi and dance, these texts provide experiences which speak to the histories of cartooning and zine culture, as well as the art publications which surround them. Riddell's books vibrate at a slower, but stranger tempo than *Guinness's* sonic explosion, providing another small extension of what Artspace has to offer.

Lowcostcosplay's contribution to *Welcome* is a billboard on the corner of Greenlane and Manukau Roads, which displays a cover photo from the group's facebook page.* The picture is a photoshop montage, blown up far beyond its natural scale. Bold rays of red

and yellow explode from its bottom right corner, where dozens of tiny images of the group cosplaying are superimposed on one another. The words “everything is cosplay” float across the sunburst background in large black letters, declaring the group’s willingness to cosplay in relation to any prompt, from sheep and *Jaws* to *Street Fighter* and Colonel Sanders.

Lowcostcosplay hoard and reconfigure mundane materials to imitate pop-cultural figures; wearing rows of toilet rolls to represent samurai armour and bundles of bananas to replicate the spiked yellow hair of Dragonball Z’s super saiyans. The memes they share juxtapose their own ramshackle creations with the smooth images produced by the culture industry’s machine-like content factories, sending back new avatars which are distant cousins to their originals, their family resemblance visible in spite of vastly reduced production values and magnified self-awareness. This contrast between divergent, imaginative creation and obsessive, market-driven perfection opens the sleek ideal of the original to reconsideration, suggesting that greater pleasure might come from reinterpreting than from copying; from ‘doing you’, rather than ‘being them’.

This thoughtful and humorous cross-pollination of cultural tropes has a broad-based international appeal, exemplified by the group’s 205,000 facebook likers from

their native Thailand and around the world.⁴ Like Anthony Riddell’s publications, Lowcostcosplay’s work provides a fresh point of entry into Artspace’s programme, resonating with histories of costumed self-definition from drag to LARPing, and repositioning contemporary culture as a prompt for creative play, as well as theoretical analysis.

Opposite the vacant DJ station and its silent speakers, Jennifer Katherine Shields’s sculpture *Para* dominates the bare white wall to the left of the main gallery entrance. It is a two metre long, makeshift public bar, built from basic timber framing and irregular scraps of plywood that allow glimpses of its interior. The bar’s outer surfaces are painted with a thin brown stain, the front edge capped with a single sheet of raw copper, nailed in place and oxidised by the hands of gallery-goers.

It is a humble and familiar object, one which suggests many ways it might be of use. People lean on the outside and survey the main gallery, or they sneak behind to look for beers and use it to hide their bags. The bar is open at both sides, where little flaps of plywood allow people to slip inside and imagine themselves for a moment in the role of a bar worker, on show to a gallery full of customers. By creating this performative space, dense with social codes familiar in other settings, *Para* makes it possible for people to play new roles in the

gallery, to interact in ways that momentarily reproduce the separations and power relations that bars create in the hospitality industry.

Shields' accompanying essay, *Para-: A Working of Contemporary Parosexuality* is presented in a small, stapled booklet, sometimes found on the bar and sometimes on the floor beside it. In it, Shields describes the historical position of the Victorian barmaid, a person whose unprecedented visibility and social position behind the bar granted her the freedom to be crude or flirtatious without social sanction, insofar as her behaviour did not challenge her status as an object for male amusement and sexual titillation.⁵ The Victorian barmaid's historical situation has been described as one of parosexuality, a condition in which sexual energy is expressed "in a channelled and safe manner, in contexts where the usual social rules [do] not apply".⁵ The temporary suspension of such rules does not erase them, however, and parosexual interactions can easily be constituted in ways which do not challenge the oppressive paradigms that continue to police sexual expression in other contexts.

Shields has identified the inclusion of minority-identifying artists within galleries as another situation in which people might be offered a kind of conditional visibility on terms which do not challenge their wider

oppression.⁶ By recognising inclusion as a process which might be problematic, as well as productive, her argument points toward conditions which ought to be considered in thinking about the relationship between an arts institution and those it sees as outsiders.

The very idea of seeking to include a person is, in itself, a recognition that they are currently excluded, a fact which calls the status quo into question. But an institution's response to that fact may be to offer acts of inclusion that "[paper] over the cracks" rather than addressing the root causes of exclusion.⁷ In general terms, offering inclusion also presupposes that being absorbed into an institution is a desirable thing, that people 'outside' always want to come in.⁷ It is worth considering how inclusion might work when this is not the case, when artists and members of the public have chosen to be outside an institution because its current way of doing things is harmful or threatening. Inclusion in this context cannot only be about broadening the range of experiences or attractions on offer; it must recognise that the structures and practices of any institution reflect particular ways of understanding the world, and shape the experiences of all people who choose to interact with them.

Chantal Mouffe speaks of galleries like Artspace as institutions where "common sense" is constructed, places in which artists and audiences can

work together to expand human possibilities by challenging dominant consensus and making new modes of interaction possible.⁸ If an institution wishes to work alongside a widening group of people, both artists and non-artists, in constructing a better common sense, then it must recognise that such transformative practice requires transformative change; that the way it operates and understands itself must be thought of as carefully and creatively as the variety of experiences that it offers. In doing so, a gallery might come to look at those outside its walls not only as potential audiences to be catered for, but also as agents of change, people with the capacity to lead it towards a future beyond its current imagination.

1 Artspace Auckland (2014) *Welcome*. Retrieved from <http://artspace.org.nz/exhibitions/2014/welcome.asp>. Accessed 24 November 2014.

2 Sassen, S. (2014). *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press.

3 D.A.N.C.E. Art Club (2014) *About*. Retrieved from <http://danceartclub.co.nz/about/>. Accessed 24 November 2014.

4 Lowcostcosplay (2014) *Lowcostcosplay*. Retrieved from <https://th-th.facebook.com/Lowcostcosplay>. Accessed 24 November 2014.

5 Shields, J. K. (2014) *Para-: A Working of Contemporary Parosexuality*. Retrieved from <http://jenniferkateshields.wordpress.com/2014/08/30/para/>. Accessed 24 November 2014.

6 Shields, J. K. (2014) *Interview with Alex Mitcalfe Wilson on Para-* Retrieved from <http://jenniferkateshields.wordpress.com/2014/10/07/89/>. Accessed 24 November 2014.

7 Beech, D. (2008) Include Me Out! *Art Monthly* 4(8)/315, 1-4.

8 Mouffe, C. (2013) Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art. *E-Misferica* 10(2). Retrieved From <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/emisferica-102/mouffe>. Accessed 24 November 2014.

* Lowcostcosplay's contribution was originally intended to include additional works. See: <http://www.artspace.org.nz/exhibitions/2014/lowcostcosplay.asp>

With thanks to Laura Suzuki.

Published by Artspace NZ
December 2014
Text written by Alex Mitcalfe Wilson
Edited by Anna Gardner
Designed by Index
Printed on a RP3700
Edition of 80

ISBN 978-0-9941173-3-5

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