STANDING ROOM ONLY

Michele Beevors

Guns don't kill people, people kill people. That may be so, but guns carry the agency of people's intentions. That is, you can't really kill someone with a feather. The materiality of an object counts and the sentence above should read, People use guns to kill people. The recent work of Triple AAA has developed out of a desire to make the relationships between object and intention manifest for the audience towards an understanding of a shared history.

I have for a long time been interested in the relationship between material culture and the constructions of subjectivity within contemporary art. I wish to invoke some recent debates in anthropology concerning the material world and apply these specifically to a series of events that happened during Triple AAA's visit to the Dunedin School of Art. In Alfred Gell's famous essay on technology, "The Technology of Enchantment," Gell outlines a theory of artistic practices that relies on the relationship between artefact and technology and revolves around the idea of agency – of both the maker and the communities that 'use' the object in question.[1] (The term 'use' could be seen here to mean both to experience and to understand.) While Gell's argument operates strictly within the terms of an artifactual or handcrafted tradition, I think it can nevertheless be used to open up debate around how contemporary art uses its artifacts. Gell's argument about agency was developed in his book *Art and Agency* (1998), and dealt with the idea of intentionality.[2] Gell does not believe in an aesthetic theory of art, but rather that art is a "distributed mind" of a society, and that the creative products of that society or the individuals that make it up are their distributed intentionality. This is interesting, because it leaves aesthetics out of the equation while it raises the problem of the artist's intention and the audience's participation within the artwork as social factors informing how we understand what we see, use, and in turn respond to.

In his 1952 essay "American Action Painters," Harold Rosenberg used the terms "action and arena" in relation to painting and the subsequent loss of identity necessary to the act of making.[3] Rosenberg's essay can be used to open up a discussion of intention and clarify the notion of the everyday and the collapse of Life and Art /Art and Life. It can also be used to reiterate an ongoing concern of Triple AAA, an interest in ordinary materials and the meanings that they accrue over time – how we interpret stuff through use, and how stuff means something else through the collapse of narrative time.

Rosenberg saw abstract painting as the "arena" where the artist records an indexical trace of his body in space through a loss of intentionality. This lost intentionality, Rosenberg goes on to assert, is replaced by immediacy. The final result of this process within the arena is unknown to the artist at the beginning of the work; he has to trade his desire for meaning for the labours of his body. This action, a wilful letting go of self-determination and history as representation, is replaced by the notion of the heroic artist as explorer of material reality (hence the collapse of art into life, life into art).

TRIPLE AAA AT THE DUNEDIN SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY
AN IRISHMAN, AN ENGLISHMAN AND A SCOTSMAN WALK INTO A BAR …

Inventory: rusted steel, sticks, dead stoats, salmon, leaves, photocopies, megaphones, video projectors, scissors, many old shoes, brown paper bag marked "patient clothing," cameras, tripod, lots of string, uniforms, students, doing words, lists, electrical cables, a long table with white tablecloths, odds and ends, debris.

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Each Artist in Triple AAA provided their own interpretation of Akshuns, Actuationns and Live-Works while separating their practice from representation (narrative theatre), but still maintaining that accumulated time was a necessary component. It was important to understand that the audience was as much a part of the action, within the arena, as the artists or the objects. However, it is not simply the element of time that is at stake in relation to Triple AAA, but a concertina of time. No longer a straightforward narrative, time is malleable through the manipulation of audience, object and artist.

In the gallery there were no bleachers, no chairs – the audience had to make do, because the space was filled with things and people. It really seemed sometimes that the audience became a nuisance; with no real designated space, the audience was forced to move about the space, prop themselves against a wall or perch on the floor. On a number of occasions they brought their own chairs, but since the action overlapped all of the spaces – walls, floor and ceiling – on any given day the audience became nomads. The audience ducked in and out, came back over days or did not. No one stayed for all of the events. Each member of the audience took away a different set of memories, a different set of experiences. In the live actions, objects are assembled, used, cast aside, re-used – some are furniture, some not – and it is here that meaning tentatively accumulates.

Not even the blank arena of a brand new gallery comes without baggage, since the immaculate white walls of the School of Art gallery hide the infrastructure of electrical wiring, digital connectivity, plumbing, projectors, architectural design elements and the hundreds of people required to make it run. In this particular gallery, anything looks good – it is so pared back and refined, with just a hint of a connection to the external world hidden behind the ceiling panels. During the shows, all of this extra stuff was exposed by overlapping screens (on walls, floors and ceiling) and Hall's inserting himself through a ceiling panel was hard to miss.

In the first instance, a series of events were planned over two weeks. Students were asked to participate for the first week. A press conference was called.

The premise was to involve the students in the early part of the work, taking their cue from the older artists. The trio had first met at art school in the 1970s in Belfast, where Hall and MacLennan were academics and Stitt was a student. The thinking went that if you involve students, especially art students, then there is an element of not knowing how they will respond. The one consistent piece of advice they get at art school is to question everything … The first few days seemed like a free-for-all, a getting acquainted kind of thing with no rules. Some of the students responded to the 'grown-ups' immediately. Understanding the gravity of the undertaking, others responded by testing the boundaries. Things which had been positioned for a particular reason were moved around, and I swear I saw students playing tag with bits of scrunched-up photocopies from the pile that Stitt had bought in. (These were photocopies of documentation of previous works.) On the second day, students were asked to bring their own stuff, so odd things appeared like a large cardboard ear. Then a man's suit was promptly hung from that the ear. On the second day a lot of smashing went on, with the students participating in the destruction of their own works – a cathartic letting-go of their 'objectness.' On day four most of the loutish behaviour had dissipated, with only three or four of the diehard students remaining.

It was then that things really began to happen. There was a lot of mess, broken plaster egg shells everywhere, together with knots of red wool. On the fourth day, the red wool was covering Hall's head. Like a bloody wounded soldier, he sat with his hunting knife and camouflage scarf tied around his face whilst Bri Chesler laid the red threads over his head. A video played behind him about pig hunting with a pack of dogs. It had been made in New Zealand, but was not as sophisticated as some of the other fishing and hunting shows on the telly. These images of savagery, in combination with Hall's red hunting bush shirt, represented an ideal of masculinity – one that is brutal and has a direct correlation with the image of the Southern Man as sportsman/hunter.

In Rosenberg's essay, the immediacy of action results in an immediate letting go of identity – but it comes with a certain amount of apprehension, giving oneself over to chance, meaning that you have to be prepared for

anything (like a dutiful Boy Scout). If you can't predetermine the outcome, you have to rely more heavily on your response mechanisms, your intuition and your trust of the other performers. Each artist uses action in opposition to apathy. Each overcomes his anxiety of the unknown in different ways. This trust stems from the history of shared experiences, but the anxiety evident in the blank canvas/arena was heightened by the unknown factor which was the participation of the students.

Hall reiterates this anxiety through his ongoing concern with narrative and narration (although his narratives are only partially linear), a re-occurrence of remembered and exaggerated retellings. On the last day of the exhibition Hall told the story of the bloody mop and blood-filled bucket, a tale that he and MacLennan had stumbled upon in a bar late one night. Hall's retelling lasted 40 minutes and had a tone of authoritarian self mockery, with him moving faster and faster in a circle around a megaphone. By the end of the story, Hall was breathless and began to pour red fizzy drink over things and over himself – the fizzy drink evidently stood for blood, although Hall claimed that it was no such thing.

During Hall's story, Stitt had been throwing baby powder around and onto the drawings made two days previously, and intermittently began to cut up the trousers he was wearing. Finally, he sat down carefully on a short stool and begun to carve into his arm with a scalpel. Initially, the word that he carved was thought by some who were there to be "normal." Later, after the carving had ceased and things were winding down they saw that it was "norven" –a dialect term for "northern." It clearly displayed the difference between the hard-boiled northerner and his southern counterpart (the pig-hunter of a previous day's video), although each was equally aggressive in his own way. Through a display of bravado, the Northern city-dweller had clearly won, resorting in the last instance to self -harm: the hard-boiled baby-face standing on the edge of the abyss, staring into a brown paper bag marked "patient clothing" as he patiently cuts words from a list – "little bastard," "little …," "little …." Are these self-descriptions for Stitt or are they 'little' insults, provocations to the audience? What is the relationship of these insults, and self-harm, to the neat plastic bag of child's soiled underwear? This hung from a piece of string, like evidence: tagged and bagged.

Stitt's "little asshole" charcoal drawings directly relate to the evocation of the ghost of Pollock's past and the dismissal of the private space of artistic contemplation (the studio) by making the action happen in front of the audience. One sees the ideas of artist as genius and artistic production as secret as disingenuous. The drawings are also reminiscent of a child being told only to draw between the lines, since Stitt's actions exceed the edges of the paper and continue onto the walls with all of the gusto of a wilful child. MacLennan begins at the opposite end to slowly introduce his own form of interference, turning every other drawing to face the wall and writing words like "belonging," "doing," "speaking" and "being." MacLennan wears things on his head – old tights, a busted soccer ball, an accumulation of old shoes, dead fish and, on the last day, dead stoats as well. MacLennan practices the calmness of the shaman, at one with nature as it is culturally constructed; the array of dead things and animals and fish resembles a constellation in which sometimes magic or coincidence is possible, perhaps even meaning is possible.

On the final night of actions, Stitt begins to remove the drawings, throwing baby powder onto them and then over his shoulder as he does so; the smell of the powder is all-consuming, obliterating the now week-old fish and smell of dead stoats that permeates the air. Baby powder is such an evocative substance, but its use here is sinister. While it temporarily hides the smell of rotting flesh, it overlays this with pleasantries, thoughts of new life, of baby skin. A sudden unease creeps in, it's difficult to breathe – what was once a loving gesture smothers instead of sooths, and so becomes evocative of impending doom. This gesture in particular highlights the fine line between nature, nurture and abuse but, together with the soiled underwear, becomes too much to bear. Stitt's examination of anxiety through authority seems menacing, an acting out of apparent toughness; black clothes, short back and sides – a uniform for artists, to be sure – but he also re-enacts trauma (self-harm). In an isolated incident he puts on a wig and shows the audience his breast.

MacLennan's demeanour is also a uniform, since his calmness slows almost all of the action to the pace of a dream. He seems to hover above the floor like some kind of ghost. MacLennan has chosen to deal with anxiety with dignity,

to highlight the constant threat encountered every day in a war zone. MacLennan projects an otherworldliness, a slow-motion composure in the face of undeniable grief, an attitude which tends towards the poetic. The names of people killed during the troubles in Northern Island are turned into a chant, a recording played over and over, as a male and female voice read the list of the dead backwards – as if this act can somehow, temporarily, even magically, resurrect the dead by the simple act of remembering. MacLennan becomes some sort of high priest of nature – in his long overcoat and bits of animal and sometimes fish, the shoes of people long dead, and (on the last day) a pair of dead stoats, mourning with us our own pathetic losses.

Hall seemed to see his role as a provocateur, often rushing about with a ladder (sometimes he was tangled in it), megaphone or camera – this disrupted the pace, which was purposefully slow as everyone fell into rhythm with MacLennan. Hall's work is defined by the stuff that travels with him. The camera, the pocket knife – it's out of these simple tools that Hall examines spaces. The baggage that Hall carries is the practical pragmatism of working-class logic, the efficiency of the right tool for the right job, a working-class masculine ideology. Cameras and documentation become of paramount importance if everything you do is temporary and fleeting. Triple AAA had Joe Worley, a student, take photographs throughout the whole exhibition. Worley wore a suit as an official photographer/documenter, but at times found himself caught between the real world and the arena.

Early on, Triple AAA went shopping at the local recycling centre, also known as the dump. What they chose to buy and dragged into the gallery were objects that both alluded to a defunct use and were tinged with the sentimental and profane in equal measure. The things they purchased were telling: a rusty old garden rake, a lot of old shoes and two totem tennis poles. What better symbol of a utopian ideal of childhood and sunshine than a totem tennis pole – at the same time as this object projects happiness and innocence, the spell of sentiment is broken as it turns rusty and abandoned, in every backyard in the antipodes, to finally end up in some junk yard or another. But what does this object mean once it enters the clean white space of a gallery? In a museum, the object is locked irrevocably in the past. But in a gallery the totem tennis pole, like many other similar objects, works as an index of time past and present simultaneously. Like a bag of leaves (see below) or a snap-lock bag of soiled underwear, the totem tennis pole is at once an index of its past use and a dredging up of the sordid histories that betray the initial understanding of the object as innocent. The innocent object becomes horrific by association; tainted, we recoil from its associations – what people get up to in the name of leisure becomes too traumatic to think about.

This collapsing and wilful compression of time is what is at stake throughout the series of events. As Stitt crumples photocopied documentation of past actions – as MacLennan slows down the pace of his breathing so that any action is performed at snail's pace (for everyone in the room) – as Hall whirlwinds around a megaphone, elaborating and embellishing his history as he proceeds, 30 years collapse into yesterday. An overwhelming sense of loss permeates everything; from the bedcover of leaves (a quilt-covered plastic bag full of decaying leaves) to the totem tennis pole, everything looks and feels immeasurably sad, everything and everyone is broken. The haul of old shoes dragged into the gallery grieves with the weight of the loss that they represent.

In his essay "Subjective Discourse or the Non-functional System of Objects," Jean Baudrillard sees the bygone object as an affect of anachronistic time; out of touch with its own time, it ceases to simply be useful, and therefore become a sign of the psychological need of the subject to return to the site of origin, the mother, and also an invocation of the authority of lineage, the father.[4] The assorted goods bought into the gallery reflect these ideas, especially the things associated with Stitt, the "patient clothing" bag, the soiled childs' underwear, photocopies of documents relating to previous performances and shared acquaintances (including a photograph of the artist Kieran Lyons); with MacLennan, the mouldy old shoes added to the general feeling of hopelessness and a compression of yesterday into today. The gallery was filled with examples of the detritus of everyday living – and of the day before that. When the objects were in use, they were a constant reminder of lineage (an inheritance of working-class baggage) and when they lie there on the floor, death. At this point, the gallery becomes a space where past and present exist simultaneously.

If there is indeed a masculine musk that overhangs the gallery, then this is diffused by sadness, and if Hall and Stitt enact rage – at one point screaming at each other in a test of bravado, "I'm your mummy" – it is a re-enactment of the rage of youth. This masquerade seemed both ridiculous and sinister, invoking as it did an ear-to-ear grin in some and fear in others.

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1 Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *Art and Aesthetics*, eds J Coote and A Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 40-66.

2 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

3 Harold Rosenberg, "American Action Painters," *Art News*, 51:8 (December 1952); repr. in his *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959).

4 Jean Baudrillard, "Subjective Discourse or the Non-functional System of Objects," in *The Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and its Destiny, 1968-1983*, eds Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis (London and Concord, Mass.: Pluto Press, 1990), 35-61. In Baudrillard's universe there are two categories of objects: those that have a function (a toaster or a megaphone) and those that once had a function, but now do not as they have been superseded by more modern (and comfortable) versions of themselves. To this latter catergory Baudrillard gives the name of the bygone object. He associates this class of object with a telescoping of time as the subject imagines that the display of such objects (the example is given of the bed-warmer – totally useless and out of time in a modern house with oil-fired heating) as a stitching together of history in contemporary contexts acts as a reassurance of point of origins – which at the same time glosses over the inevitability of death.