

PAT HOFFIE

Pat Hoffie has stated that she aims to make the ‘invisible visible’ in her art. For many years, her work has traced the network of relations that constitute art making—as the artist says, ‘whenever someone labels something ‘art’ and someone claims the title of ‘artist’, somewhere else, someone else will be paying the cost of erecting that kind of hierarchy’.ⁱ Since 1993, under the banner of *Fully Exploited Labour*, Hoffie’s practice has often announced the artist’s own complicity in this system. For a number of these works, Hoffie collaborated with artists and artisans in Bali and the Philippines, incorporating their skills in wood carving, billboard painting and weaving to create dramatic and visually arresting installations that use scale, colour and art-historical and pop-cultural references to engage her audience. The seduction is destabilised somewhat when one notices the title of the work, or inspects the label listing her collaborators, or reads the invoices Hoffie includes in the installation, announcing what she paid them.

Although these admissions have not necessarily altered the dynamics of exploitation, their visibility opens up the possibility for a shift in perception. There are two assumptions being questioned here. The first is that because her collaborators are from Asia, they must be at a disadvantage. This view goes to the heart of Australia’s relationship with our northern neighbours, and informs both liberal and racist attitudes alike. Yet these are people being paid the standard rate for their specific skills, and as Timothy Morrell has pointed out, the Galicia family in Manila, who frequently paint Hoffie’s banner works, have benefited financially from the projects more than she has.ⁱⁱ The status of the artist, economically and socially, is not particularly high in Australia (although of course if the former aspect improves, inevitably the latter will follow). The second is that art is the activity of a singular producer. The public perception of individual authorship remains strong, as does the notion of the artistic signature. Despite numerous artists employing technicians and assistants to produce their work, such personnel are rarely acknowledged openly, their expertise subsumed within the artist’s defining vision. Hoffie not only lists her collaborators whenever presenting her work, but also clearly uses their techniques to shape it. Her own hand appears as a frame around, or an intervention into, the distinctive styles and approaches of the people she has employed.

Each of these aspects feed into a central concern in Hoffie's practice, that of the relationship of the artist to society. The varied positions that artists have in different cultures, and have had at different times, are drawn into her art through working with the Galicia family or via her quotations of the Russian Constructivists, for example. The revolutionary zeal of Constructivism, with its call for the education of the masses through the integration of art and life, or the prominence that painting has in the public sphere in the Philippines, affirms Hoffie's stance of art playing an important role in the world. When combined with her particular content, which generally addresses specific events or situations such as the position of women, the treatment of Aboriginal people, or Australia's immigration policy, the result is particularly potent, and more layered than its bold visuality may initially suggest. For underlying Hoffie's work is a certain skepticism, and an acknowledgement of the failure of the avant-garde project in realising its ideals.

Hoffie's employment of Constructivist aesthetics is the clearest suggestion of this, as no-one really talks about revolution without irony any more. Yet her use of it is not a mere stylistic flourish, as most recently seen in Stolichnaya's startling advertising campaign. Hoffie offered Ihor Holubizky this quote from Hal Foster for his text on her 2005 work *Drift*: 'We abuse Constructivism precisely if we do not use it... if we idealise it as an impossible model rather than develop it as a practical program'.ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, there is still value to be found in Constructivism's desire to unite art with political action, to disseminate ideas as widely as possible, and to involve viewers actively in the reception of the art work.

There is also the question of representation: which visual language can we use to depict a horrific event? *Drift* focused on another aspect of Australia's relations with Asia, being produced in response to the sequence of twelve SIEV (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel) incidents in Australian waters through late 2001. The work refers in particular to the sinking of the SIEV X off the coast of Christmas Island on October 19, which resulted in the deaths of 353 passengers. Taking the form of a monolithic cardboard and wood structure, *Drift* was built to the dimensions of the SIEV X, measuring four by twenty metres. Its wedge-shaped construction referenced El Lissitzky's famous 1920 lithograph *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, which uses a non-representational visual language to convey a powerful political message. As with Lissitzky's print, the stark geometric shape appeared to reject sentimentality and subjectivity; its form of realism was through sheer

physical presence, rather than a simulated real via photography or documentary film. Hoffie's work did not attempt to enter the flow of media images, to which we have become largely immune. Instead, as a spectator, one was forced to confront the size of the boat, and to imagine that 400 people were crammed inside it and set afloat.

The scale, placement and shape of *Drift* also employed a notion of Minimalist 'theatrics', demanding a reflexive encounter between the viewer and the art work. Yet this was not an enclosed, deflective object, for at one end of the structure Hoffie placed a doorway through which one could enter a tight space lit by a single bulb. Here she placed a text containing basic details of the event, providing just enough information for the viewer. The tension between revealing and concealing—the visible and the invisible—is constantly at play in Hoffie's work, which oscillates between baroque excess and modernist economy. In the process of producing this installation, and for the work that followed, *Maribyrnong: No place to weep*, 2005, Hoffie pared back her research data to its barest essentials, using names, dates and codes to convey the enormous tragedy of the situation. *Drift* featured several rows of coloured shapes on the wall, each representing a passenger on the boat and colour-coded for men, women and children. The words 'SIEV X' and 'October' were painted mural-sized on the wall, 'October' also recalling the Russian Revolution. In all, the work functioned as a makeshift memorial, its monumentality undercut by the cheapness and relative fragility of the materials.

Maribyrnong took a similar formal approach, drawing on Constructivist and Minimalist aesthetics to evoke the plight of those held in Australian detention centres. On the black-painted walls appeared the mural-sized words 'Maribyrnong', 'Australia' and 'March 2005', the date that a government report was tabled in response to a damning inquiry into the conditions at Melbourne's Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre. At the core of the installation was a large cardboard cube, three metres by three metres, which when approached from the entrance of the gallery appeared closed and blank. On circling the structure however, the back wall proved to be open, revealing a simple wooden version of a cell, complete with four bunk beds, a side table and a single fluorescent tube. The dimensions and contents of the room were derived from a drawing Hoffie had surreptitiously obtained from a Maribyrnong inmate. Again, one was confronted by the physical fact of being confined to a tiny, crowded space, a visceral experience no amount of media coverage could elicit. By bringing into

public view what officialdom chooses to hide, or reduces to meaningless, dehumanising data, Hoffie takes up the role of activist and information disseminator, in the grand tradition of the political artist. This position is underscored by the second sculpture in the installation, a four-metre tall model of a broadcasting tower, based on Gustav Klucis's 1922 design for a street-corner loudspeaker to proclaim Lenin's speeches on the Revolution's fifth anniversary. Logistically impossible and never realised, Klucis's tower is a perfect combination of socialist idealism and aesthetics, now safely housed as a tiny, elegant model within the Museum of Modern Art collection in New York.

The remarkably easy translation of radical avant-garde practices into institutionalised objects (although they do not always sit quite so easily; during the Reagan era for example, the Russian avant-garde works in MOMA's collection were installed in a cluttered stairwell^{iv}) shadows Hoffie's works, which are often specifically designed for gallery and museum environments. Of course museums are themselves an enduring legacy of modernity, with their attempts at rarefied autonomy between clean white walls; yet they may also house the spoils of colonialism, or be built from funds raised through exploitation and conflict. Locating itself squarely within these sites, Hoffie's work picks up the messy threads of modernism and weaves together its utopian aspirations and violent undercurrents. Through the process, the artist makes visible the fact that nothing, or no-one, least of all herself, is outside, or beyond culpability: we can all step inside that leaky boat or tiny room, and be lit by the same bright bulb.

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ⁱ Pat Hoffie, artist notes, 2006, unpublished.

ⁱⁱ Timothy Morrell, 'Fully Exploited Labour', in *Pat Hoffie: Fully Exploited Labour*, exhibition catalogue, University Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 2006, unpaginated.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hal Foster, 'Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism', *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932*, Rizzoli, New York, 1990, p.253, quoted in Ihor Holubizky, *Drift*, exhibition sheet, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2005, unpaginated.

^{iv} See Douglas Crimp, 'The Art of Exhibition', in *On the Museum's Ruins*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1991, p.264-265.