

Getting Things Done 21st June - 12th July. 2015

Fontanelle Gallery
26 Sixth St,
Bowden SA 5007

It's about all the things you do when you're not doing what you do.

That was the tagline for ABC's weekly arts and culture program, The Mix, when it was first on TV. In the promo the host, James Valentine, would say it over the top of a quirky jazz beat that promised dynamism and fun and surprises; culture was leisure, something that happened after hours, perhaps a hobby or a niche interest you could indulge on the weekend. Working in 'the arts', I found this confusing. Culture was what I did, which seemed to place me outside of the target market for The Mix. What do I do when I'm not doing what I do? Of this I have become increasingly uncertain.

Boundaries between labour and leisure in art are becoming more and more fluid, especially as artists become increasingly professionalised, responsible for creating not just their work but also the context and demand for it. They are their own managers, they run their own galleries, maintain their own websites, carve out a living grant to grant, do their admin after-the-hours of any number of other jobs. I say "more and more" and "increasingly professionalised" because that is how it is always described, as though there was once a golden time where artists were free to pursue a vocation rather than a profession sheltered from the machinations of the industry and by extension global capitalism. In the West Australian Newspaper in 1998, art critic David Bromfield bemoaned the recent trend of artists referring to what they did as a 'practice' as though they were doctors or lawyers, describing it as "an over-convenient confusion at a time when the idea that art is an industry still carries conviction with politicians and funding bodies, if not with any one else."¹ Perhaps there was once this golden time, but I have never known it, and I suspect even in Western Australia in 1998 it was a romantic notion.

I am a child of my age. My frame of reference and operation is the studio, the gallery, the museum, the press release, the website, the opening, the market, the education system that supports it all and beyond that, this unquantifiable extra variable known as 'the everyday', although what is 'everyday' varies so much person to person that it's hardly useful to give it this generic term. Life. And beyond that still, the world, because this frame of reference is and seems to have always been simultaneously local and global. Dan Bourke, Teelah George, Shannon Lyons, and Jacob Ogden Smith, the Western Australian artists who have produced this exhibition, and also Ben Leslie, Brigid Noone and Mary Jane Richardson, the South Australian artists

who are presenting it, all work like this, interested and invested in the art object and the art experience as both producers and facilitators. Their practices, as a group, take an expanded view of the means by which the image or object function and perform, how they create value and have value created for them². Beyond that, they all manage galleries, studios and other small businesses, they lobby, teach, write, advise, assist, cross-promote, seek their peers beyond their cities³.

Hito Steryl might describe us all as 'strike-workers', borrowing the term from Soviet Russia where in its untranslated form it refers to "superproductive, enthusiastic labor" available in excess: "free labour and rampant exploitation are the invisible dark matter that keeps the cultural sector going"⁴. When artistic labour becomes the subject of contemporary art practice and its discourse it is most frequently framed like this, against a neo-liberal backdrop in a capitalist horror-show. Measured globally, contemporary art is, as Steryl describes it, the most efficient way of making capitalism more beautiful. But, Anthony Huberman presents a more localised measure, suggesting 'an ethics of care' that prizes smaller networks and gift economies amongst friends over a capitalist economy of large-scale competitiveness. This is the labour of love. In this model, we are neither competitive 'boxers' or the strategic 'chess players' like artists past, but "empathetic, vulnerable friends trying to understand the world together": "winning or competing is not only impossible, but irrelevant. Since the rules keep changing throughout the course of play, the purpose of the game is simply to keep playing the game"⁵.

This exhibition, which takes its name from corporate guru David Allen's work-management philosophy⁶, which examines the hybrid of administrative, intellectual, and physical labour that constitutes contemporary art practice, which developed as a conversation between friends and is being written about by another, could be read either way. Dan Bourke's upscaled and hand-painted ColourChecker, a mass produced grid used to calibrate colour in digital photography, can be used in exhibition documentation to colour grade the other artists' works. This could be either the pursuit of efficiency or an act of generosity, or both. Teelah George's banner, hung on the outside of the building and designed by South Australian artist Sam Songailo using a found diagram as a guide, and her drawings made inside with blutack and other provisional support material might speak together about the tedium of repetitive labour and the shortfall of measurement systems. Or, their strange and opposite beauties could be an

Dan Bourke
Teelah George
Shannon Lyons
Jacob Ogden Smith

invitation to meditation in the case of the former and a record of meditation in the latter. Depending on how cynical you feel, outsourcing is a tricky slight of hand, a way to achieve something beyond your skills, a way to connect meaningfully with another maker. If the keyboard grammar and san-serif aphorism of Shannon Lyons' 'mural' seems generically, corporately aspirational, it might help to know that it is a painstaking reproduction of a West Australian gallerist's fairly idiosyncratic email signature, which makes the act of reconstructing it a personal memorial and act of preservation now that gallery is closed. Sisyphean struggle continues in Jacob Ogden Smith's photographic documentation of the rural property he is slowly renovating, dovetailing the work of art and life. The time signatures of completed projects, made sculptural, and uncompleted projects made less so, and the transformation of the earth of the property to rudimentary vessels suggests a brief pause in an ongoing battle against entropy, but in that visual checklist may also be some satisfaction in each small step taken towards the elusive, autonomous 'good life'⁷.

In each of the works, slowness, material pleasure, beauty, the loop-the-loop of doing-it-yourself disrupt the rhetoric of efficiency and professionalization. So, *Getting things done* is about all the things we do when we're not doing what we do, and it is still about *work*, but *Getting things done* is also about how all the things we do are work, and it is still about contemplation. We find ourselves a long way beyond the old dichotomies of the realist worker's struggle and contemplative bourgeoisie leisure⁸. If the boundaries between labour and leisure have all but completely dissolved, as the exhibition might suggest, how will we know the difference between a liberating opportunity for holistic mindfulness and a system of inescapable exploitation? And, if "contemporary art is the answer to the question: how can capitalism be made more beautiful?"⁹ can it still also be the answer to the question: How do we live well in times like these?¹⁰

¹David Bromfield: *Artspeak spoken here*, January 10th 1998, Big Weekend Arts, The West Australian Newspaper, page 7. This statement ignores the other, very applicable meaning of the word practice: repeating a skill until one gains proficiency.

²This is obviously, in describing the work of seven individuals, a gross simplification.

³Out West, Dan Bourke runs a risograph printing press, Benchpress, and is the former manager of Galleria, an ARTI that closed in 2013 and which Ogden-Smith was also involved in setting up; Lyons, with her partner artist David Atwood, runs 'Applecross', a project space based in their apartment. Jacob Ogden-Smith is in the process of setting up a market garden, called Vigorous Vegetables. Teelah George has worked with various institutional collections to generate material research.

⁴Hito Steryl: *Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy*, 2010, eflux journal, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy>

⁵Anthony Huberman: *HOW TO BEHAVE BETTER*, 2011, The Serving library, <http://www.servinglibrary.org/>

⁶Getting Things Done "involves removing tasks from the mind by 'externalizing' them. Allen's five steps towards 'applying order to chaos' read vaguely like the process of developing an artwork or exhibition: 1. Capture, collect what has your attention; 2. Clarify, process what it means; 3. Organize, put it where it belongs; 4. Reflect, review frequently; 5. Engage - simply do.

⁷Please note that no responsibility can be taken for any discrepancies between the works on show and the works described in this essay, which was written prior to their being completed.

⁸and perhaps a shorter way beyond what 'collectivisation' traditionally looks like, for *Getting things done* might be about a 'shared ethos' but it does not describe a collective.

⁹Steryl, *ibid*.

¹⁰In his written 'Apologies' for his solo exhibition *Administration is just Oulipian Poetry* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art in 2014, George Egerton Warburton contemplated a kind of zen administrative transcendence that is neither salvation or escapism: "Filling out, replying, and pitching becomes a mathematical automated process and there is pleasure in that blankness...The document is now a feeling. It becomes a form of rule-based poetry. In that moment I am no longer working for whoever I am sending that document to." In 2015 Egerton Warburton would find notoriety as a member of the 'USC7', the class of 7 MFA students of the University of Southern California's Roski School who dropped out in protest against the University's administration. Their open letter stated that they were "dropping out of school and dropping back into their expanded communities at large" (fanomfa.tumblr.com, 2015).



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