

COMPLETE SMUT Art Auction
Created by Punctum Inc

Critical Analysis written by Tristan Meecham.

COMPLETE SMUT Art Auction, a one night event, was held at the Melbourne Town Hall as part of the *2016 Festival of Live Art*. *Punctum Inc* created a 'directed reality'¹ that framed the artist within various 'markets' and positioned the audience in a complex transaction negotiating commerce, artistic value and agency. This hybrid market place (with reference to fine art markets, livestock markets, supermarkets, stock markets, and even black markets) aimed to '*collide systems determining the 'worth' of art with a public interrogation of those mechanisms of desire and transaction that inform our relationship to art*' (Punctum, 2017).

COMPLETE SMUT Art Auction formed a courageous relationship with the audience, a gamble that demanded without any guarantee their invested participation. This auction was real; performance art sold to the highest bidder. Upon entering the Town Hall, audience members were greeted by registrars at a table and inducted into the event. The rules of the event were explained, contracts were signed, credit card details exchanged and bidder paddles provided. Further to this, each audience member received a catalogue detailing the works / artists for sale. Auction protocol and buyers

¹ "The artist Paweł Althamer has referred to the artistic strategy of 'directed reality' and this evocative phrase is a useful way to describe the combination of clear conceptual premise and partially unpredictable realisation that characterises some of the best examples of contemporary participation" (Bishop, 2012).

rights were made clear; the artwork would license for the evening to the highest bidder².

Just by completing the induction, the audience were forced to 'value' their own sense of artistic merit, albeit crudely how much would they pay for performance art, if at all. Additionally, this live art³ provocation demanded the audience consider agency, becoming acutely aware that by not actively

² The highest bidder had the agency to;

- a) Schedule the work for presentation before 12 midnight as many times as the Licence allows.
- b) Determine who can see the work including:
 - 1. Private Showing.
 - 2. Invite Only.
 - 3. Free entry offer to the public.
 - 4. Sell to the public.
- c) If earning box office, choose how the takings are distributed including:
 - 1. Keep the money for yourself.
 - 2. Pledge the takings.
 - 3. Pay the artist/s.
- d) Speak prior to the presentation of the work and dedicate the work to someone or something.
- e) Ban the art work.

(Rules from COMPLETE SMUT art auction catalogue notes)

³ "Live Art is when an artist chooses to make work directly in front of the audience in space and time. So instead of making an object, or an environment (a painting for example) and leaving it for the audience to encounter in their own time, Live Art comes into being at the actual moment of encounter between artist and spectator. Or at least even if they are not physically present, the artist sets up a situation in which the audience experience the work in a particular space and time, and the notion of 'presence' is key to the concerns of the work" (Sofaer, 2002).

investing the conceit of the event would stall. If no one placed a bid, is that a reflection on the audience or the artist?

The audience induction was framed by a larger mise-en-scene. Ten empty cattle pens were lined up side by side in the Town Hall. The house lights were bright and a video detailing information about each available work was projected in the space. All these elements referenced a cattle yard, which was reinforced as individual artists wearing white dressing gowns, were led one by one into the performance space, pulled on a leash by an attendant. Once incarcerated in the cattle pen, the artist was ready for audience inspection. By placing the artists in this subversively submissive context, the illusion of hierarchy and power was established. For forty-five minutes as the cattle pens slowly filled, the audience circumnavigated the artistic 'stock' comparing catalogue notes and plotting potential purchases. Allegiances were formed. Some of the audience banded together to increase their buying potential, others remained incognito at the sides of the space not engaging directly with the farce. The confronting visual signifiers deftly referenced human trafficking branding the artist literally as property; de-humanised in the cages and portrayed as objects. It gave the audience the opportunity to point and compare notes about who they might buy, sell or trade.

The catalogue detailed nine available artworks, each with highly-charged sexualized titles⁴. In this analysis, I won't describe each work individually, suffice to say that each thematically considered "a potentially controversial subject matter - a taboo subject, outrageous act, contentious view point, provocative gesture, problematic and deliberate use of language, a questionable aesthetic, a corrupted operation" (Punctum, 2017). Each title

⁴ COMPLETE SMUT art auction catalogue can be found online:

www.punctum.com.au/complete-smut-art-auction-catalogue

Titles of works included *Trash Classic*, *Animal Jokes*, *In-Fidelity*, *Sex Act*, *A Sexorcism*, *Empress (Where's no clothes)*, *Dirty Business*, *Fais-Moi Une Pipe*, and *Orgasmatron*.

was accompanied with a concise snappy elevator pitch, a provocative project description riddled with innuendo and jargon. The language used to describe each work borrowed from a crass methodology of advertising; Sex sells and sell sex!

It is interesting to analyse these highly sexualised provocations within Australia's current artistic climate of censorship and boycott. The title of the event *COMPLETE SMUT art auction* referenced the artistic and political controversy Melbourne visual artist Paul Yore faced in 2013. Presenting his work at Linden Gallery, Yore was charged with producing and possessing child pornography after complaints were made about his installation. Linden Gallery faced significant pressure from local council to close the exhibition, with one Liberal councillor labelling the work "complete smut". The government censorship and accusatory labelling enraged many in the community. Another reference includes the 2008 Bill Henson controversy, his exhibition shut down on similar grounds to that of Yore. At the time, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd declared Henson's artworks "revolting"⁵. Both events demonstrate how fraught government regulation can be as neither politician had seen the work of Yore or Hensen. *COMPLETE SMUT art auction* invited

⁵ "The former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's declaration in 2008 that Henson's nude photograph of a thirteen-year-old girl was "revolting" is a local twenty-first century example of a government leader's misleading condemnation of visual art. Rudd's intervention occasioned a raid on Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery by the New South Wales Police, diverting attention (intentionally or not) from a greater social problem troubling his government: its failure to prevent access to child pornography on the internet. Since the Howard government spent millions of dollars developing pornography 'filters', which in the end did not work, the Rudd government (and now the Gillard government) have failed to provide an alternative solution. The fact that Rudd seized the opportunity personally to pillory Henson cannot be divorced from this highly charged political context." (McDonald, 2016)

a similar controversy, dangling a carrot at conservative governance daring them to engage in a similar way. By alluding to these recent incidents, *COMPLETE SMUT art auction* engaged directly in a sensational commentary; inter-changing power relationships between artist, government and society.

At 7.15pm, a female auctioneer appeared in a pulpit raised high above the cattle pens. She recapped the rules of the event before launching swiftly into the auction of the first performer. Her functional approach was direct and efficient. As such the audience were swept up into the proceedings, with little time for hesitation. Bids were made in quick succession, increasing in ten dollar lots. When the first artist was sold, the highest bidder was immediately escorted out of the room by staff, as the artist remained confined in the pen. The auctioneer continued, moving onto the second, third, fourth lots and so on. The thrilling auction was filled with tension, some audience egged each other on to drive up the price, others did not partake in the capitalist role-play, choosing only to watch the action. All the while, a strange tension was ever-present, based on a moral dilemma of buying an artist and *regulating* their work.

At this point, I must disclose that I was swept up with the proceedings and placed a bold bet on *Lot 5: A Sexorcism*⁶. The excitement of the frenzied auction had pulled me in. I had formed a bidding consortium and at last minute raised my hand, a ruse bid to increase the price. But the consortium

⁶ "A Sexorcism is a public workout and 'possession' of an alpha male. It contains monstrous gestures and questionable language in a marathon expulsion of Promethean proportions. Esteemed performer Craig Peade, sexorcises himself and spews up his inner leader, inner captain and inner lifter in a head turning tour de force. Lending all in his possession to this public eviction and exorcising, he delivers an unapologetic sexorcism of man power, which might get messy. A Sexorcism comes with a selection of refreshments supplied by its sponsor."

Description taken from *COMPLETE SMUT art auction catalogue notes*

did not approve this last minute push. As the auctioneer slammed her hammer down I was individually escorted out of the room as the highest bidder of Lot 5. I include this revelation as it provides particular insight to the rest of my analysis, framed by the fact that I had purchased work and had transformed into a philanthropist of sorts. I had chosen to invest, an investment that extended past my capital outlay and pushed me into a complex role-play of values and commerce. I became astutely aware of a darker subtext; freedom of choice related to hierarchy and exclusivity.

In private negotiation with an attendant I determined how *my* performance would be regulated. I returned back to the foyer to find the auction complete and the audience scrambling in what can only be described as ordered chaos. People were purchasing tickets, bargaining and exchanging tickets, haggling in yet another market; a black market trading in art. The hierarchy of roles constantly shifted; some who had purchased work selling tickets, some who had purchased work giving tickets away, those looking to buy or steal tickets to individual events, Arts House staff trying to create order and sell tickets, people who had purchased work meeting ‘their’ artists, artists free from their cages preparing their events and blatantly disregarding sponsors. The variation of role-play went on and on. The foyer was frenzied and became an over-the-top degustation of artistic choice and option. Eventually with tickets purchased and/or traded, the frenzied audience moved to individual performances scattered around the Arts House building. The festival of smut had commenced. Buoyed by my recent purchase and disorientated by the choice, I made my way to the opening of *Lot 5: A Sexorcism*.

Regardless of the highly charged individual performance works available, it was the larger curatorial framework that I found most provocative, intelligently manipulating the audience and revealing quickly how some *assume* influence and power. The audience’s frenzied experience of buying and regulating art referenced a contemporary farce of conservative political censorship, which attempts to elicit public hysteria and panic. Considering recent government

policy and arts funding cuts, *COMPLETE SMUT art auction* critiqued this engagement by framing cultural value directly in the world of commerce and trade. All the while *COMPLETE SMUT art auction* dared the government to shut the 'smut' down, revealing it takes a lot more than money to silence artists and their work.

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