

HOW TO WRITE: READING GROUPS. FIVE YEARS GALLERY, 2015

HOW TO TRANSCRIBE A PAINTERS PRACTICE - STUART CUMBERLAND.

Pleasures and Problems of the Body

"It makes sense from our standpoint of a philosophy of literature and poetry to say that we 'write a room' or 'read a room,' or "read a house.' Thus, very quickly, at the very first word, at the very first poetic overture, the reader who is "reading a room" leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past. You would like to tell everything about your room. You would like to interest the reader in yourself, whereas you have unlocked a door for daydreaming. The values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room: he sees his own again."

Gaston Bachelard: Poetics of Space

Pleasures and Problems of the Body is an attempt to transcribe a painter- Stuart Cumberland's practice through reading, writing and performing.

To transcribe Cumberland's practice is like trying to catch a fox by the tail while it's running after your own.

Pleasures and Problems of the Body is a psychoanalytical investigation involving aspects of psychoanalysis, experiments, readings, and entertainment. The performance is playful, lighthearted and reminiscent of child's play, but with an adult knowing that refers to Cumberland's use of Freud's Fort/ da discourse. Fort/ da was a game invented by his 18 month old grandson. Freud observed him play with a cotton reel attached to a piece of string, throwing it away from him ("Fort", he would exclaim, German for 'away') and then pulling it back ("Da", the child said, German for 'there'). Freud noted how the child enacts and enjoys presence and absence. Cumberlands works are a representation of the most primal human sensations of loss and return.

The performance Pleasures and Problems of the Body is inspired from and performed in the style of shows and plays like Horrible Histories: Stupid Death, Nathaniel Mellor's "Ourhouse" and an episode from Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream ("A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe: very tragical mirth", Act Five, Scene One), where a play is put on at Hippolyta and Theseus's house. Hippolyta condemns the play as being "silly" while Theseus defends it as being nothing more than imaginative. The play serves to challenge the audience's notions about reality and imagination. Seeing the pathetic acting of the artisans, Theseus remarks that, "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact". (5.1.7-8).

The performance piece at Five Years consists of several loose episodes: 'You Better Hide' , 'Four Circles', 'Itchy the killer', 'Chew Chew Swallow', and 'Stick them with the Pointy End.'

These mirror Cumberland's approach at 'Stuart Cumberland: Congratulations' exhibition (The Approach gallery, 2007), where the dialogue between each painting creates a whole, but at the same time represents a mismatched style. Writer Ben Lewis describes Cumberland's work as having no purpose, no harmony, not much form and says: "None of the layers go together. It's like a mismatched outfit, a stripey shirt, tartan jacket and flannel trousers on an ugly person ... In the nineties, many painters wondered how to renew their art form in the wake of Conceptual Art and the 'death' of painting. The ambition of painting – the bravura skill of the artist, the position of the medium at the top of the hierarchy of visual art forms, the myth of the artist-guru – had all been discredited. There were various solutions. Many painted photographs. Some quoted a past style from neoclassicism, or graphic design and illustration. Others turned to narratives and symbolism. Most eschewed large formats. Cumberland's practice has been largely influenced by a German artist Albert Oehlen (born 1954), who painted epic canvases in a polyglot mixture of styles, painterly mistakes, erasure and over-painting, hovering between abstraction and representation, which he dubbed "Post-non-representational" or simply "Bad Painting". The pictures beg the viewer: "Go on, turn away, cast a dismissive glance over at me, then look elsewhere." It is in this rejection of the gaze that the value of the painting lies.

In 1969 the famous curator Harald Szeemann staged an influential conceptual art show 'When Attitudes Become Form.' Cumberland's painting has become an attitude. An attitude becomes form. Cumberland states-

"A drip may have been understood as a mistake relative to pre-twentieth century painting but not any more. Besides I always enjoyed maths at school; the teacher always would tell us to show how we worked something out, it was no good just giving the answer- 42. I want to see it all, all of the process."

In the performance piece Pleasures and Problems of the Body , Drip is a little creature that acts as an Inspector's assistant. Drip's main task is to help the Inspector with the investigation, but he spends a significant amount of time just dripping, because that's what he does best. This creature refers to Cumberland's largely used method of painting; dropping his trousers and pants to his ankles, wielding a brush loaded with juicily coloured dripping paint.

Freud's Sublimation theory, channeling lower sexual urges into higher aims such as art and science, is what Cumberland uses involving many of the lazy basic human desires to decadently slob around, piss, dribble and drip everywhere.

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In 2001, artist John Baldessari created an interactive piece entitled In Still Life, a modern interpretation of Still Life by Abraham van Beyerem (1667). Within the exhibition space Baldessari hung the original Still Life work, and next to it- an empty frame. Exhibition goers were encouraged to digitally rearrange the 38 objects in the original painting, or remove them all together. By doing so they had created their very own still life. The idea was that when people

completed a still life using *In Still Life*, it became their own piece. *Pleasures and Problems of the Body* is the *In Still Life* version of Cumberland's work. Elements of Cumberland's work are transferred from a painting into performance art.

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"Paintings and planning the whole process is something like planning of a heist." Stuart Cumberland.

In *Pleasures and Problems of the Body*, the man in charge of the investigation is Inspector Oldbury. The rooms are intended to be similar to a psychiatrist's room, a police interrogation room and in one of the episodes- a sex room that Stuart would call a 'wet room;' something he repeatedly uses as a reference to the suburban so-called sexual deviants who install a wet room in a house for sex. Cumberland doesn't consider himself as being any different, but the painter and the art world, in all of their sophistication's call it the studio.

The investigation is supported by clues in the form of Cumberland's paintings. Inspector Oldbury has been confronted with a mysterious urge to crack Cumberland's code- has he committed a crime? Or have we committed a crime? What is the crime? or as Theseus asks in the play *Midsummer Night's Dream*: "How shall we find the concord of this discord?" (5.1.60)

Subversive quality- who am I at the moment- a young woman, an artist, an audience etc. In the painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, Edouard Manet leaves us wondering if the woman in the picture is looking at us, talking to a customer or perhaps is daydreaming. Does the mirror show a reflection of the waitresses or is it another person in the picture? Who am I without the past and who am I yet to become. "I don't want to change, but I don't want to stay the same". Says Friedrich Kunath's in the show *The Most Beautiful World in the World*.

The investigation does not have a clear conclusion, "My paintings are not meant to look finished" says Cumberland. The audience is free to make their own conclusions. The victim and suspect become one and so as the artist and the audience. What is the artist trying to say? Yet the main question is- what is the audience taking from it? This is the moment when we catch the fox and the fox catches us.

Each layer in Cumberland's work, although brutally degraded, quote to an episode in post-war art history. The dots refer to Roy Lichtenstein's and Sigmar Polke's Pop Art. Cumberland uses Benday dots in the CMY colours of the printing industry – cyan, magenta and yellow – painted through a stencil. On top of this, comes layer of black, vigorously painted brushstrokes, in the form of squiggles, circles and triangles. These motifs have deprived over years. These motives refer to Picasso and the body parts indicate figures in his late portraits, but

also carry echoes of the eighties pictogram-filled pictures of the German painter A.R. Penck. The white voids look like the patches that Robert Rauschenberg screen-printed newspaper photos onto in his paintings. On top of that comes another layer – large expansive rectangles of white applied with a roller. In the last solo exhibition- Four Circle Paintings at The Approach gallery, 2011, Cumberland uses the celebrity and mass consumption as an undercurrent that debates arts historical legacy of painting. He states, "If communication requires the use of dominant currencies of cultural exchange, then celebrity and mass consumption have become such dominant currencies."