DOCUMENT

UFD002 Amanda Beech Robin Mackay

Image-Force: In Conversation with Amanda Beech

In this 2009 conversation, artist Amanda Beech introduces her work, and discusses the relation between image, critique, and political agency in contemporary art, theory, and popular culture

AMANDA BEECH: My introduction will be quite abstract—a sketch of my interests and some of the ideas that drive me to make the work, and make me keep making it. I'm really interested in examining not only the status of the image as a potential form of agency in and of itself, but also the question of what the figure of agency is in neoliberal democracy; and trying to somehow work through this ideal of action in politics.

In the work, I have looked at the very forceful rhetoric that we find within narratives of freedom, which I think are played out whether those narratives are in philosophy, politics, literature, or popular culture; and at how the images employed there are actually violent and forceful. These are images of a particular form of freedom, the unencumbered or free subject, which actually delivers a very specific kind of force.

I'm interested in how we represent ourselves as free subjects, how exactly we participate in that production

I've been looking at this idea of the subject in action, where subjective freedom embodies the force of law—often state law. And I'm interested in how we, as people, and as cultural producers and consumers, agree upon and participate in the production of desirable images that represent our democratic and liberal ideals—especially when these images upon which ideals of freedom hinge are images of violence.

So I'm interested in how we represent ourselves as free subjects, how exactly we participate in that production. I'm not interested in how I might look at these images as an outsider, at a distance; but in how I participate and get involved, enjoy these images, and produce them myself.

I've investigated these things a number of ways: through curation, through writing, and through my practice. But these questions don't just involve my work—they raise a wider question about art: If liberalism is intrinsically violent, then how does this problematise our perception of the art world as a free space for expression? So these questions of ideality demand a scrutiny of the conditions of liberalism in art, and a critique of the orthodoxy regarding how art practice fits into political space.

In a very general sense, what leads my practice are the possibilities for politics in the context of groundlessness. I am thinking about what happens to our formulation of power within what we could call pluralism—by which I mean the condition where God is dead and we cannot perceive any categorical ethic upon which to plan our action, no strong conception

of an absolute good or evil as absolute, or even a position to move against, from which we could claim a politics. There are no natural bonds that we could call upon to say, we should be a community. All of these kinds of norms are contested in pluralism. This contestation of ground poses a direct challenge to the orthodoxies of an avant-gardist practice—a politicized critical practice—where art has traditionally had a hand in making sure that we know the nature of these grounds, the forces of these 'bad' powers, what 'good' power is, what community would be. Because art's always traditionally been a lynchpin for understanding what our ethics are. But I'm not convinced that art does that, or at least that its ideas of politics are sustainable. This is especially clear when the idea of political art practice becomes a norm in itself. Certain kinds of practices of resistance and anticapitalism become normalized, and end up substantiating the various forms of power and capital that they seek to move against.

If liberalism is intrinsically violent, then how does this problematise our perception of the art world as a free space for expression?

I want to think about how we might rearticulate what critique is, what it is now; and how we might cultivate a more expanded notion of critique that doesn't require any kind of dominance against which to assert ourselves, nor any conception of the teleological, the epistemological, or any psychologisms to defend ourselves through and from. And that leaves me within the space of force and image. It leaves me with force and image, and thinking that through as a politics.

These images don't fall back on any exteriority or foundation, and I am interested in how this nonfoundationalism is read through and as image. So within my practice I think about, say, reality without reference in terms of the image, and also about how philosophy is played out as a form of very convincing literature. These are the things that I continue to focus on throughout the practice.

Just to finish, before we look at some work, I guess that in this way I want to think about force as a socializing principle that is also, possibly, illegitimate. And to suggest that, in looking at image and force, we don't hollow out power and expose it as weak or meaningless, but rather understand power as the very success of image itself, as the work of reality. So, they are the kind of things that I am constantly trying to deal with: What is critique if we think contingency is the space of the political; and how do we imagine art's politics without those idealisms that traditionally tie forms of art practice to ethics?

What is critique if we think contingency is the space of the political; and how do we imagine art's politics without those idealisms that traditionally tie forms of art practice to ethics?

Little Private Governments [2006]

ROBIN MACKAY: Obviously, *Little Private Governments*[1] is a visual work, yet the first thing I notice is the use of language. What might not be evident when you superficially look at the film, or if you saw stills of it, is the extent to which your work is interested in narrative: Narrative plays an important role and recurs throughout the work—this urgent, hard-boiled, relentless narrative of an ascent to power or a descent into a web of intrigue, into a dangerous nexus of manipulations. Specifically, this narrative involves a kind of blurring; it is poised between two different registers: One is the heroic narrative of the individual, an individual conceived as a kind of

1. All of the works mentioned can be viewed on Amanda's website <www.amandabeech.com>.

hero of liberalism and laissez-faire, and this subject's self-realization through his climb to power; but also at the same time, a more abstract narrative with the sense of a more general structure of power, which reminds me of Don DeLillo's line, 'History is merely the story of men in rooms.' Because it is always men, always a 'he'—the abstract 'he' involved in this kind of backworld in which there is an abstract exchange of power going on. Could you tell us a little about where the text comes from, and how you arrived at this way of using language?

AB: This is something that really developed in a very organic way. There are a few different reasons that I am interested in narrative: It's stylistic, from the hard-boiled cop-style narrative, concerning the kind of subject who is a 'subject in action'—the kind of subject that I like to call a non-tragic subject, a subject who doesn't care about being self-conscious because that's got nothing to do with his agency.

RM: Absolutely involved in the world....

AB: Yes, but who, at the same time as being involved, is also atomized. I watch a lot of film noir—LA noir—and I also read a lot of James Ellroy. Ellroy is perfectly within that framework of the hard-boiled, staccato, performative language, a kind of literature that just blanks you. And I find that, in terms of my interest in rhetoric, in how language actually moves you, those kind of styles of writing, for me, exemplify that kind of subjectivity, or present manifestations of it. This literature turns into the script for the works, if you like, and it moves between representation and demonstration—or perhaps more accurately, it complicates the two.

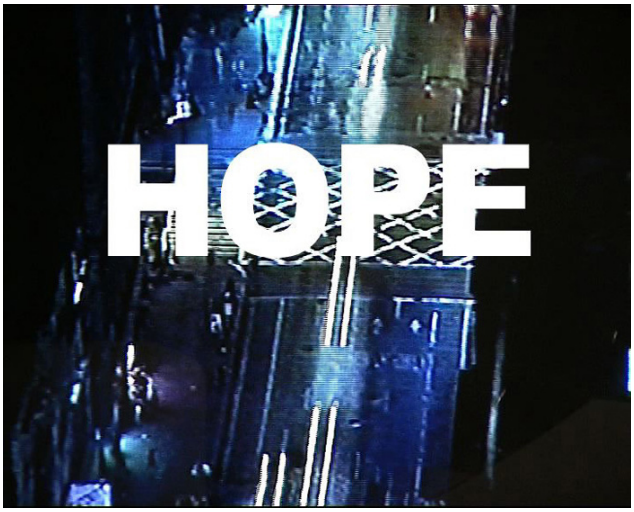
I like to write essays as well as make art, and in many respects the work is a kind of essayism, but it's not absolute—there is no kind of allegorical function of the work, it is not pedagogical, or revelatory. It does not argue for anything explicitly. So I think that, when you look at the work, it would be very difficult to find any message or any meaning from it through that narrative. In many senses, it claims narrative—every time it appears on screen, every word claims narrative, i.e. context—while at the same time it undermines that possibility, due to the claim each image and text makes in its appearance.

The work doesn't talk about something specific in order to say something about the general, it really thinks about collapsing the two

So I am interested in how there's a kind of radical order and disorder that can be effected through the style of language, but also in how the content itself is constantly universalizing and constantly particularizing. The two aren't seen as correlated. The work doesn't talk about something specific in order to say something about the general, it really thinks about collapsing the two. Like, for example, the way in which universals produce subjectivity.

Little Private Governments clings to New York as its primary subject: its history, and the key players who produced the city as we know it now. I was interested in how the literal layout of Manhattan's grid system connects to the idea of equality, and how this form of freedom demands control. I was looking at this firstly in the obvious, literal sense of the birds-eye, transcendental view of the architecture; but then I was looking at how freedom, in order to be secured, has to be privatized, especially in New York. So the work talks through this one fictional character, who is an amalgamation of people from when New York was first settled; and speaks about how New York was a corporation when it was first colonized. The work drives through these figures who actually invented New York, who colonized it, who produced the architecture, who lead and change what it is as a kind of nation—a nation space.

RM: What's evident is the refusal to take any ironic or deflationary stance on this powerful hard-boiled narrative. It's not that you are showing it in order to show how ridiculous or misconceived this rhetoric of power is; in fact the images themselves tend to boost the vertiginous sense of power by using aerial shots and a kind of filmic glamour, and this overflying point of view that is engineered to heighten excitement. So they amplify the linguistic aspect of the work—these words which, as you say, are hard to take in either a figurative or a literal sense, but which nevertheless convey the excitement of being inside the world of capital, power, and corruption.



Little Private Governments [2006]

In that sense, the way that you construct the work tends to challenge the notion of art as critique—that art needs to reflect on itself in order to control and neutralize any rhetorical power it might spontaneously exercise over its audience. Rather than participating in that 'critical' examination of the conditions and possibilities of art, your work systematically heightens its complexity and its force.

Now, the process of critique seems to reach its terminus when art ends up being satisfied simply with ensuring a critical vigilance—the notion that, if art patrols its own operations constantly, then that in itself is a political act; that the best thing that art can do is to manage, control, and govern itself, and by extension police the realm of the image as such. Obviously on the part of artists and people involved in the art world this is totally hypocritical anyway, because the same people claiming to be engaged in this fastidious and prudent criticality are in fact involved in the art fairs and the gallery system and so on—they are involved in a system constructed around economics, glamour, prestige, speculation. The slogan 'Don't Fight It' was repeated throughout your early work. Is that a kind of manifesto of anti-critique? Does it promise to release us from this critical moralism in order to experience the sheer fact of what the image is doing to you?

AB: Yes, you've outlined the central contradiction for critique, the fantasy of choice that it rests upon and which it promotes through certain practices. As you suggest, art doesn't actually become political merely in 'taking care of itself'—in fact in doing so, it evacuates politics to become a duty of 'ethical care'. The problem of critique is therefore central to my work, especially as the work is so concerned with images and acts that deliver a sense of agency.

Little Private Governments [2006]

The term 'Don't Fight It!', though, from a group show I was involved in a few years ago at Gasworks gallery in London, was not a manifesto of anticritique per se, but perhaps more particularly a way in which we could discuss critique without basing it in grounded resistance. This grew also from my concern with what agency is: What is it to have power? What does that mean? How can we behave when we have power? And how do we get it? And what is it that we want? How do we even work out what that is without crude generalisations and correlations?

If you look at someone like Adorno, when you see how this work is absorbed into art practice, the risk is that you are going to make a guilty art, a self-pitying art

I have a problem with a lot of orthodox notions of critique that come out of dialectical modernism because they are basically invested in a kind of Judaeo-Christian narrative where one has to sacrifice one's own image in order to attain a politics. For example, if you look at someone like Adorno, who wrote hate-tracts against the culture industry and American culture, and when you see how this work is absorbed into art practice, the risk is that you are going to make a guilty art, a self-pitying, oh-dear-what-do-we-do art. You are going to very much enjoy being

tragic, and that position for me is basically an emptying out of politics. And it's also really dull! This understanding of autonomy extends to the culture of the outsider as the figure of antagonism, which has been built into many art practices. It's a kind of ideal of the outside that's used to exert some form of agency. Basically, the work is self-deprecating—it harbours its own apology for being art. However antagonistic the work may appear to us, it is self-agonising because its call to nihilism is eclipsed by this ethics of care. And finally, in order to think of itself as being part of everyday life—pulling together art and life—it has to impoverish itself.

RM: Well, art becomes a kind of self-immolation. The core of Adorno's work is always the problem of fascism. So perhaps the ultimate stakes of this are that, under these conditions of perpetual critical vigilance, as artists we can't do anything, but at least we're not doing...*that*.

AB: Yes....

RM: At least if we don't allow ourselves to excite the audience then we don't risk any trouble, that's the kind of severely restricted position one gets into. But you have talked about this as belonging to a tragic paradigm as well, with a reference to Oedipus: that it involves a double-bind between two extreme positions: Oedipus is, as a plaything of the gods, subject to fate, to whatever they choose to do with him; then he attains this moment of, so to speak, critical knowledge, a transcendent godlike moment of knowledge of what has really been happening to him, and its true consequences. But then what does he do? Of course he tears out his eyes, and that's at once a tremendous moment of dramatic expression and a moment of tragic impotence. But you suggest that there's a way out of this double-bind, one that resides in the action of the work itself, in the sense that it exercises these heterogeneous forces and obviates this duality of either being passively subject to the image or of refusing it in a tragic moment of aggressive self-denial.

AB: Well, for me it is dismissive: it's really important to me that I don't care about those kinds of beliefs in art's politics—I see them as (in the most pragmatic sense) useless. And, in terms of having a pragmatic approach to the problem of critique, what I am interested in is exploring and working through the image. This may sound very obvious and even necessary for any artist to say, since all art uses image. However, I mean this as a response to many practices that seek to refuse image, and behave as if refusing image is the best thing you can do for art's politics; and that's the Adornian moment of art's politics—to produce ambiguity, because of this fear that the image is associated with evil because it is illusory, fake—this notion of the image as being unreal and therefore malign.

RM: But that only works within the conception for which an image is always a representation; the image can only be a fake if the image is thought as representation.

AB: That's right. I think what gets me past that double-bind, as you say, is the idea of looking at images as material and abstract languages—as non-representational, but as stuff, as things we negotiate, that we come up against and deal with all the time.

RM: It also has a political element, doesn't it, because rather than seeing it as a liability that must be neutralised and controlled, you are actually affirming the plurality of rhetorical voices—what Hobbes would call the 'battle of all against all'—within the field of language and the image, affirming it rather than saying that, ideally (in every sense), we would need to subordinate it, to control it?

Force is endemic to language. All work does this, whether you like it or not—it's just there

AB: Yes, that's absolutely right. I'm very interested, for better or for worse, in cultural Darwinism. I'm very interested in how Richard Rorty describes the field of culture, politics and philosophy as literature that fights it out in the public sphere. And I want my work not just to participate in that, but to think about how force is endemic to language. All work does this, whether you like it or not—it's just there....

RM: Whether or not you 'own it', any intervention participates in this field of forces that is not, that cannot be, grounded, self-grounded in any absolute critical moment.

AB: Yes, even just sitting here, there are claims being made. And I think, if that's something that I am interested in, then my work accepts its place within that as and as part of that. I am very interested in how the work performs that kind of realism of force without ground.

RM: I'd like to talk a bit more about this realism in *Falk* [2006].

AB: Yes, I filmed *Falk* in Stavanger in Norway, I was out there doing a residency for three months at Rogaland Kunstsenter and I developed it over 2005-6. It was finished in late 2006.

Falk [2006]

RM: In *Falk* there's a kind of relentlessness, between the images and the language, which totally breaks down the capacity of the viewer to try to make sense of what's going on. After a while the viewer does indeed give up trying to 'fight it'. And the way one begins to receive the images then alters: They are specific images but become compressed onto a kind of abstract continuum, in which they are indeterminate signs for possible representations. One can't consciously process all of the images and extrapolate what they might represent; and the same thing with the language, you can't really make sense of it. We were just talking before about escaping this notion that art becomes political through representation, through representing the world in a new way. And instead about a dynamics that would describe how the image is already an act, already a factor and already political before representing. It seems to me your work is a kind of technology for reaching a place where that dynamics happens.

Not only am I interested in trying to move against the idea that to become political, works must represent; but also in negating the idea that artworks gain a politics through ceasing or refusing to represent

AB: Yes, I think it is essential, when you talk about representation, as we were saying before we watched this, that not only am I interested in trying to move against the idea that to become political, works must represent; but also in negating the idea that artworks gain a politics through ceasing or refusing to represent. This is because, for me, both are strategies that end up in the same place. And I think that the way you talk about the act of the image, the action of the image, is really important here, because I've tried to think through how language has affect, how images have affect, and music, of course, because I'm working with all of those processes. Force lies in the action of representation; and this realisation doesn't end up in a reliance upon representation or a refusal of it, but in an understanding of the image as and in action. I was talking earlier about my essayistic policy—that I start off with what I think I am interested in, to form the subject matter of the work. It's crucial that the work always embeds its position within these approaches to power.

RM: There is a backstory to *Falk*, isn't there? There is a real story from which some of the narrative was drawn, which you may want to talk about—although even if the viewer knows that story, it doesn't explain everything that is going on in the film.

Falk [2006]

AB: No, exactly. All the works I make have specific direction and content, but what is essential is how the work locates these narratives within my own hypothesis, and positions them in a wider sense. I read events and redeliver them from my perspective whilst embedding the views of other positions and characters in the work. To that extent the work becomes a form of radical translation, or even fictionalisation, reaching another level of facticity.

In *Falk*, I was interested in a particular character who went through a series of political shifts in his life in a complicated mix of basic survival and self interest. Things happened to him and he did things that ended up with his having a massive amount of power in the state politics of Norway and its economics. In my work I investigate certain things, and it would be quite possible for me to write a critical essay on them, but instead I am very interested in how the very problem of that agency can be articulated through these processes we have just been talking about.

Falk [2006]

In *Falk* there's a lot of banal imagery—like filming in a basement or filming in a nice little Norwegian cottage—these innocent kinds of images. I try to think about the line between, say, banality and iconography, or, say, empty metaphors that in fact are very potent. I think that's why I try to think through this question: What is an image of force? Well, an image of force isn't just something that is shocking, gory, and extreme; it could potentially be anything. It is the actual choice to film, that choice itself, that produces the force.

RM: I think the viewer gets to that place as they succumb to a kind of fatigue. One gets the sense that every image is potent and full of significance, but one is unable to process what it is. So there is a forced realisation that it doesn't matter what the image is 'of', it always has this force of choice behind it. It's to do with reaching the level of abstraction with the material of the image that is already there. So do you think that receiving images in that way could potentially change our own notions of ourselves as agents, particularly in relation to our reception of the mass media?

AB: I don't think of the work as something that would deliver us from anything.

What I expect it to do is constrain the viewer and fuck with the viewer. I'm really interested in work that is oppressive and demanding

RM: But presumably as an artist, you show the work, and you expect it in some ways to change the viewer...?

AB: I don't expect that, but what I do expect it to do is constrain the viewer and fuck with the viewer. And I'm really interested in work that is oppressive and demanding. I think that goes back to this idea of art as a free space: democracy 'happens' in galleries, but in the worst sense possible: Let's go to a gallery because it is going to be freer than anywhere else, let's go see an artwork because the idea of a good artwork is that it is open, the open work. I clearly struggle with these hard and fast idealisations of the space of art while at the same time, I continue to explore the politics that art holds to, along with other forms of mediation.

RM: Is there a parallelism here between the political notion of freedom as being a grounded freedom from constraint, and the notion of the place of a work of art as a site of freedom? Whereas, in fact, it's a site of constraint and it is always engaged in a forcing? As opposed to the convivial world of relational aesthetics, where we all get together and have a little open, communal experience, regardless of the fact that the location and the work and the

artist and the curators are embedded in this massive network of capital manipulation....

AB: I remember years ago going to New York and seeing Rirkrit Tiravanija's cookery experience. I'm not very good at participating in things, and I won't give this up for art. The work ends up creating a radical divide between audience and participant, and underscoring the exact divisions that it claims to overcome. The fact that I was supposed to have some soup, or even the idea that I could do what I wanted as long as I was participating—and that even not participating could still assimilate me into the work as an audience to this theatre, all of that reminded me of the neoliberal political moment of absolute inclusion and tolerance. This is the world that Carl Schmitt feared. I don't want to have soup. I don't want to eat here, and why should I!? I'm only seeing the artwork if I eat soup and in that context of unacknowledged representation, those demands on me were massive! It was deeply constraining on all kinds of levels from just being there to thinking about its ideological investment, if you like, in conviviality in the space. The problem, of course, is that the work cannot account for its own representationalism, and produces it despite itself. This is a basic naivety of the work, and of any politics that conceives tolerance as without contract, as infinite and all-consuming.

RM: Conviviality is a key term, because it represents a particular solution, one that has recently gained popular currency, to the problem of reconciling differences. The notion that the core mission of politics is to deliver us from this state of heterogeneous clashing forces and rhetorical powers that cloud our minds and make everything confused and irresoluble—the Hobbesian idea of the war of all against all, the idea that the political needs to install a higher principle to deliver us from that. In so far as that notion is rehearsed in the world of art, art's mission being to deliver us from the welter of images in pop culture and so on, to somehow reduce them down (like a soup!) and bring them down into this single grounded principle that we can then enjoy convivially.

AB: It's digestible in so many ways. You don't just have to eat it. I agree with that but I also think that some artworks have also fallen into a very problematic track of trying to achieve discordance, trying to actually achieve and materialize the play of Hobbes's war of all against all. Just as an example, going back to Adorno, his love of discordance and his idea that if only we could have a discordant art it would then be able to sidestep its recuperation by power. So, in that sense, I equally have a problem with an idealization of discordance.

RM: Attempting to totally disrupt representation by presenting some kind of supposed 'noise'?

AB: Yes, but also the kind of emptying out of meaning and the kind of demonstrative exposition of the emptying out of meaning, in the way Beckett would, for example, or Nauman-style work where what is revealed to you is a process of 'Oh, this is meaningless.'

RM: Right, but at the same time that experience of meaninglessness, you are always receiving it in terms of how you are expected to receive it and the environment and context in which you are receiving it, so it's never 'just happening'.

I am interested in work that doesn't justify itself and doesn't offer tautologies and/or conceptual games

AB: And it's explaining itself to you all the time. It's extremely comforting, this type of work, because it is saying 'I'm doing this now, I'm doing this now,' and it is talking to itself and to you. I am interested in work that doesn't justify itself and doesn't offer tautologies and/or conceptual games. Because while all of that is very fun and it makes you feel very clever because you 'get it', well, that's a very self-satisfied kind of experience. The artworks that I really enjoy operate very differently.

RM: Perhaps this is posing the question in oversimplified terms, but, if representation is always already a rhetorical figure or a device for persuasion, for manipulation, is it significant that your work is dissimilar to that of many video artists who seem to make a virtue out of the poverty of their means—one extended static shot with studied lack of attention to visual placement, and so on? Obviously, what you

are doing, in using techniques and gestures drawn from popular movies and TV, speaks against such displays of false humility and supposed hostility to rhetorical force, exposing them as being, themselves, rhetorical strategies.

AB: Well, there are two sides to that question. The first is about the aesthetics that are invested in, and how impoverished images are often equated with honesty. The idea that an image is full of integrity because it is based in a passive author adhering to a certain tradition of passivity.

RM: That kind of integrity comes cheap, doesn't it?

AB: [Laughing] Yes...it is a kind of misunderstood materialism as well, I think. In a research group that I collaboratively lead called Curating Video, we often talk about the idealization of the material that still goes on, as a kind of claim to a better and more politicized art.

When I watch CSI, I invest in how the camera behaves. The camera is justice...it is object/subject, it is the media

Returning to your reference to cinema, the cinema that is made today doesn't really play those conceptual games. It's non-ironic, it's just: there you go, it's right there. And that is very similar to how I see my politics...my political investment, if you like. Also, for example, when I watch *CSI*, I invest in how the camera behaves. The camera is justice...it is object/subject, it is the media. That's the way I'm thinking about my notion of art. So I just make these total equivalencies, that could be completely disagreed with, but that's how I use it. I think, 'Well, that's mine, I am that, that's me'. In that sense, what's in my cultural sphere is mostly not considered to be art, but rather mediated images, actions and narratives on agency, truth, justice and freedom. Ernst Junger coined the phrase 'adventures in functionality', where this idea of science and dynamism meet. Its that kind of practice that has always sat at the core of my work. Now, this is not to say I am in agreement with Junger's work, but it nevertheless has strong implications for me in terms of popular depictions of power.

RM: And that *is CSI*.

AB: Right—for me, *CSI* is Jungerian notions of mediation. And so, if that camerawork was happening anywhere else, I would still have it. That's it, that's Junger.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have an observation rather than a question: in *Little Private Governments*, the text moved between black and white and because of that, I was losing part of the words in the black. The image made no concession to the word, it was integrated with the image, which means you lost part of what the eye was trying to read. In Falk all the text was white, so by extension it should have made it easier to follow, but I think at a certain point you just stop and become lost in it, even though you 'should be' able to delineate it from the image. So get a sense that you are bound to miss out on one or the other. You can't keep that distance—the critical distance of what's being said from what's going on behind it.

It is really important that the work can't be managed. I want to feel annoyed when I watch it myself

AB: Yes, I think it is really important that the work can't be managed. I want to feel annoyed when I watch it myself. For me, it's very much like painting a picture. I used to paint, in fact I still paint sometimes, and that way of constructing a painting where you are just working through that practice and building and then getting rid of this or that—it's like that for me; it is utterly pictorial in that sense as well, as you seem to be saying. In *Falk* there were bits of white text on the ocean that were disintegrating into the background so as to foreclose that distinction between grounds. The text was also shining and a bit blinding, so it's like you are not reading it, you are being blinded by it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wonder how much that effect was constructed? Are you cutting it in a way to make that happen?

AB: Yes, it's not so important that people read everything and find something out, it's more

important that they experience this difficulty. And also, the will of the work is one of imposition: I want the viewer to be given this subservient role in which they feel like they must read it. Now why should you? There's no reason why you should at all. You can look around and let your mind wander perhaps... but I hope that the work refuses this as a possibility. It says: you're in or you're out—that 'locked-in' thing is very important to me.

RM: That's the tyranny of language too. That is what is built into our nervous system. Burroughs: the word is a virus—it gnaws at you, you can't help trying to decipher it. And I suppose a test of whether you're mobilising that would be, as you say, if the work even annoys you as the artist. If it's even irritating to the person who made it, then you've done something right!

The next piece, *Statecraft* [2008] is in many ways a different kind of work to the two other pieces we've seen. It represents certain developments in your practice and in the way that the elements we've discussed are put together; but also, it was a commissioned work, wasn't it—commissioned with a certain 'public art' agenda in mind, which you had to negotiate?

AB: Yes, the work was commissioned by Harlow Renaissance and Commissions East, and was part of a wider project led by artist Roman Vasseur, who programmed a series of events and exhibitions relating to Art and the New Town, arts regeneration in Harlow. This was a two-year appointment and as part of this project he was asked to make public art—community art, if you like. He'd always wrestled with that and thought about what it might mean, and what he did, rather than create or commission a public monument, was to collaborate with the painter Diann Bauer, and make what they called the 'Harlow Temple of Utopias'. This was a container, and on each side of the container there were these epic, dynamic, very architectural images that were collapsed on each other. It looked slightly carnivalesque, slightly manga.[2]

So, I was asked to show the video work inside the container. We had a lot of conversations throughout this process—Diann, Roman, and I—I'd show them some rushes of some film that I'd made, and they would talk about my ideas, and they'd talk about their ideas. So that, even though we were making work very separately, it quickly became a very interesting collaboration, to the point where, after we showed it in Harlow, we recently took it to DNA Gallery in Berlin. There we re-did the project and re-formed the work together. This kind of collaboration was something I had never done before. The video work is mine, but it led to my making other works with Diann afterwards, and being very involved in curating the overall Harlow work as a project.

In the film I was very interested in the origins of Harlow as a new town, as something that was invented and made by the architect Frederick Gibberd. To plan the town, he bicycled through Harlow, through fields, and when he came across a little brook he went, 'Hmmm...good place for a hospital on that hill.' So he would write 'hospital' on his map of the fields; and it was conceived like that. So it was very much a kind of genesis story, and I was really fascinated by that, and how that connected to the ensuing contradictions between social, economic and cultural processes.

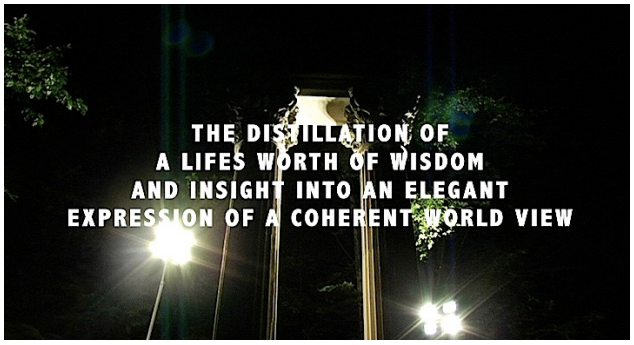
Statecraft [2008]

RM: So this work returns to the themes of *Little Private Governments* with this notion of founding, spanning and dividing space, albeit in a very different location and a very different political landscape.

AB: Yes, that's really true actually. I hadn't thought of that, but now that you've said it, what has become more apparent to me is that I see each piece work as a way of developing the other, and maybe again talking about it in terms of painting is really useful to me: I understand the work as reflecting an interest in spatiality as much as in time or 'time-based

2. See Roman Vasseur's account of the project in *When Site Lost the Plot*.

narratives'. So when I return to *LPG*, where I looked at architecture as a metaphor for democracy, I realise that in each of the works that I've made, I've been really interested in locality, specificity, as big philosophical metaphors. Whether it's Las Vegas as the figure of the truth of 'bad' democracy (*We Never Close* [2008]), or making a video set in Lake Tahoe in Reno, which is right on the state line between California and Nevada—and you can gamble in Nevada but not in California (*State Line* [2007]). In the case of Lake Tahoe, it was a place of deep dirty deals, where Sam Giancana owned the hotel but Joe Kennedy had owned it as well; and this is at the time that Joe Kennedy's son, Bobby, was going after the mafia. So all of these contradictions played out in one site are really interesting to me; and how the law becomes manifest as legitimating image establishes the heart of these moral dramas. So, I guess, time and place—you're right—is extremely important; and the work I am making now at Spike Island (Sanity Assassin) is really much more invested in that too.



Statecraft [2008]

RM: One thing that came to mind when we were watching that that hadn't occurred to me before was how this work can be seen as a kind of bastard child of those New Town films that you sometimes see in archive footage—'Come to Milton Keynes—land of opportunity!'

The work is very different from *Falk*, for instance, and it is mostly for circumstantial reasons because of the nature of the commission. First of all, it meant that you were able to have a crew. We were talking about the use of the camera before, and here you were able to use crane shots and use this kind of visual, gestural language more ambitiously than you had been able to do before. Moreover, previously, as you've just said, you worked with specific sites, and the spatiality and history of these sites was important to you. But you had worked with places for reasons of their history, places from which you had quite a considerable cultural distance. Whereas here you are actually working for the town, in a sense. So you had to deal with the immediate reactions of people living there right now, as the film was made and as it was displayed in situ.

AB: Well, if we discuss the public reaction, it wasn't just to the film, because we have to consider the context, the 'Harlow Temple of Utopias', this magnificent building I was so impressed to be able to put my work in. Of course, the video's soundtrack was booming out of this weird building in the middle of Market Square that we installed at an angle. When we first installed the whole thing, a funfair was on, so it all seemed okay, but then the fair left and it was just us. We had loads of graffiti artists coming up to us and saying 'We're not going to graffiti you because you're cool.' You know, 'We've decided that you're okay, so you're not going to have any trouble.' So that's a response from part of the community. Another part of the community that I worked very closely with was the Gibberd Trust, who allowed me to film Frederick Gibberd's house, which is the interior that you see in the piece.

RM: Yes, there were two different locations that were very much a part of what the film is about.

AB: Right—I hope that it's clear in the work that there is a juxtaposition between the two locations, which are very different. One, of course, is daylight, public space; and then you get this other scene at the house. Now Frederick Gibberd, the architect who built and commissioned other architects to build Harlow as his 'team', built himself a house on the edge of Harlow, which was the house I filmed in. The house looked like a James Bond-style retreat: In the garden he's got these neoclassical columns, and he also has a folly, a little maze-type area; so it's basically an Enlightenment-style garden—a Neoclassical garden. And this is someone who was doing British modernism in the fifties, advocating modernism for Harlow. I was intrigued by this distinction. It's easy to think that this plays out as a huge contradiction, but then I thought, no, it's not: It all makes sense completely, the sense is so clear to me. That's why in the work there are a lot of references to economy

and rationalizing politics in terms of community. A lot of the work was influenced by Friedrich Hayek, the neoclassical economist. I think all of this collapsed together for me, and I wanted to work through it. It was certainly important that these two spaces were played out in the film because of the history of Harlow.

RM: You still retain this element of the narrative of the ascent to the centre of power, but it's geographically located this time—you are going from the peripheries he built for other people to live in to this kind of powerhouse, located on the edge, but in a sense the 'centre of power', from which he controlled their construction.

My thesis was that the only way that that power can be rationalized is through drugs and deep privatization and deep seclusion

AB: Yes, my thesis was that the only way that that power can be rationalized is through drugs and deep privatization and deep seclusion. That was my logic, and the film again calls upon the character of an 'essay', not any particular subject who existed in real life. The problem that I try to deal with conjures the subject at the centre of that problem, and in that way the reasoning-out and moving-through of these narratives is the subjective moment of the work. In making the work, I was looking at how the utopian ideals of modernism, through to brutalism, necessarily demand seclusion and territorialism, so that's my little theory. And when I got to Harlow I was like, 'Great, here we go—this is it.' To play that out as a kind of fiction was very exciting to me. The estate was amazing because it was like Siena. It was labyrinthine.... I love these places in Italy, San Gimignano, I go and visit them a lot because I'm interested in the aesthetics of republicanism. I found this estate so much like that.... Of course, I don't see the video as 'critiquing' Harlow—I thought it was amazing. I wanted to capture the glass and the concrete. I wanted to use that sort of promotional language, I wanted it to look like a quasi-tourist video.

RM: Another difference is the use of the text. You are using much larger amounts of text at once. Is there any particular reason for that?

AB: Well, I think that when you are making any work you want to develop and change your work and think about other ways of pushing it. And with this work in particular, as I said, I was pursuing the notion that we can't assert that force looks like this or that. Previously, I've been very interested in cultivating the obvious, in terms of producing propaganda-style text that was very attacking. But often, good rhetoric is the language that is the most neutral, rather than the most obviously forceful. I've been studying rhetoric, Quintilian rhetoric, and I've also been looking at Abraham Lincoln's speeches. I've been studying how in his speechwriting there would be these big visual symbols, which would mean, 'say umm now,' or 'breathe'—everything was accounted for in the speech. I was really interested in that, and how every speech considers itself to be something that is motivating. I began to think about other forms, more discreet types of language and argumentation, and to look directly at forms of philosophical argumentation. So, the idea of doing packages of text, which are kind of quieter—I wanted to think about how in fact that made them more insidious.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How much of it was found text? Because at the beginning it felt very much like it was taken directly from found things, and then towards the end you had put material together or written it yourself.

AB: Well, some bits are kind of 'screen grabs' or 'soundbites'.... I would go to meetings with these Harlow councillors, and would be there thinking 'this is great, say more!' And then I would go back and read some Hayek, and I would say, 'Well, how would I encapsulate that?' How do these positions and formations of language sit together, aesthetically and politically? I was also reading Alan Greenspan, who was Chair of the Federal Reserve Bank, reading his massive autobiography *The Age of Turbulence*. In it he was saying 'trust in the economy'—this is before the economic collapse and everything, before Fanny Mae and Freddie Mac, before all that happened—and he is saying we will always be adventurous, we will always have risk, that's the one thing you can have faith in with humanity. There's always risk and it is always going to be through capital. The last chapter of his was called 'Delphic Future,' and I was really excited about this—this appeal to the oracle, and this relationship to Greek mythology that

he was invoking through capital. So, although it's not directly quoted from people, the text in the film is an amalgamation of all my reading at that time, processed and paraphrased.

RM: It brings into view a kind of vertical linkage where you've got this managerial language of town planning and so on, which is supposedly pragmatic and non-political, but which in fact is inhabited by the spectres of heroic political visions.

AB: Well, actually, it is a great political vision. I know it seems ironic to even say it, but as an artist brought into that domain you are their vision. And as an artist you are there thinking, 'You want me to sort out Harlow like by making one artwork? What?' What was fascinating was how, as managers, they ostensibly don't believe in that, but in a way they still do. I don't mean that art was a cynical add-on to appease residents, or to distract them from 'real issues'. What I found fascinating was the whole idealization of culture by managers in this more complicated sense: that art was something they had to be vigilant about and needed, something that on the one hand they believed in, and that on the other hand they were intimidated by. In order for art to secure any social respite for regeneration, it had to enter into this very difficult birthing process, if you like. And I really wanted to try and pull this condition of art and social space into the practice in some way.

Take the sculptures that you see in the video, which I considered to be like archaeological finds from British modernism, and which were all over Harlow. The town was officially opened by Kenneth Clark, who said 'Harlow is a city of culture'. Henry Moore was there because he was mates with him, and Henry Moore lives just up the road. There was more art commissioned in Harlow than any other place in the UK, and it is full of this British modernism. And I was intrigued by its relationship to art as a founding moment, an originary moment.

RM: It is also a 'cultured city' in the sense that it was manufactured. A particularly 'unnatural' place, it was the product of Gibberd's vision. And so it's interesting that people who live there are not so aware of this, and they are bringing in an artist to try to represent to them this work of art that they already live in.

AB: Well, during this time, Matthew Poole did a series of panel discussions, and on one of the panels I remember an audience member asking Roman [Vasseur], the lead artist, 'Why did you commission contemporary artists to come in—couldn't you have just spent that money cleaning the British Modernist sculptures, because we really like those?' And of course all the panel were shaking their heads, 'No!' It was really amazing to see the rift of conservatism in that question from a position that assumed itself to be very much forward-thinking. I really wanted to see if the work could handle all that, and maybe it doesn't. But that's all the stuff I was thinking about.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Did you make the music for this as well...the sound track?

AB: This sound track I worked on with Joe McGonagle. This is the first one where I worked really hard scoring the piece, more than I have in the past, and it's something I got much more into in terms of building a different relationship to narrative. It took many months of conversations and looking at different forms of music and working with this guy. We talked a lot about Michael Mann and Manhunter, because in the work I constantly identified the house and the character as moving towards that kind of psychology. So this house became the Manhunter scene where the albino is killing the blind woman. It doesn't make any sense, but I was just thinking about this place as a scene, as a theatrical stage, for events like that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: And *Manhunter* is a really dark film, isn't it? Darker than *Silence of the Lambs*.

AB: Yes, but it's also very much like a pop video... Michael Mann, you know, he's very glossy, let's say. I was interested in the kind of glibness of it all. The glib seriousness that goes with Michael Mann, and the choral nature, the poppy nature of his films. You get that in *Miami Vice*, for example.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: There was that bass beat going on, but the you had these chords very short going up and down...three different chords in a repetitive fashion, but they worked because that's how techno music works a lot of the time. But the sharp chords... they were quite distinctive string sounds, synth sounds. But now that you mention it, it does seem

like that could be some kind of tension or something, in an '80s way.

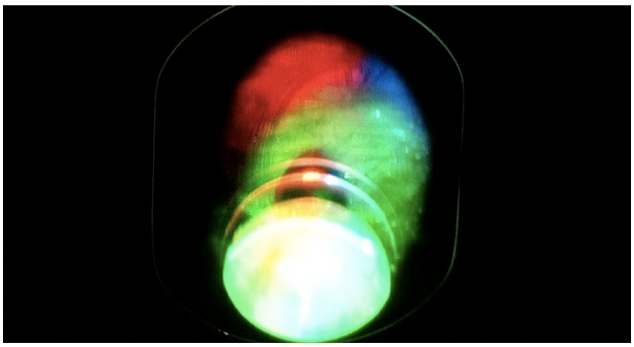
AB: Yes...I thought, 'God, well I might just do some '80s thing.' We were looking at Michael Mann together, and one of the first of the things that came up about Michael Mann was Moby. And we were, like, 'No, not Moby! Can we get away from Moby?! Is it possible?' Moby is one of his favourite artists, and we seemed destined to do Moby. Then simultaneously, I had just seen the new Batman film at that time, it had just come out, and the scene where The Joker is hanging out of this car going down the street and he's laughing hysterically, became another reference point. It's like you suddenly go deaf when you are watching it, because this music kicks in and its very choral, a wall of synths, and all the sounds cut into the film. It's like this weird hysterical kind of blindness. And I thought, that's Michael Mann, in Batman. So the work is made up of research, but also comes out of those accidental moments of first-, second-, or third-time encounters where the key element becomes the point where they are chosen to be placed in the work.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was quite interested in what you were saying about Frank Gibberd's house and the landscape of Harlow, and you said something about how there was a contradiction that he lived in a neoclassical building, or a pseudo-neoclassical building; and then you saw it wasn't a contradiction and that it made really clear sense to you...could you elaborate on that?

AB: It's my supposition that those ideologies—those socialist ideologies, of equality—that they can only work if you privatise certain notions of family. For example, if you look at Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, he talks about how equality must be ordered through the creation of discrete private environments for each family unit. In that sense, any appeal to socialism as a united habitation—a key project that inspired the modernists who built Harlow—can only work if it was always already privatised in some form. And I thought, 'yes, it's pretty obvious isn't it?' So those socialist hopes were always just hopes, and life as its own necessity built through the family always interpellates those hopes within capital.

I was also intrigued, of course, with the idea of privatisation, not just in an Althusserian sense with regard to the family institution, but also Thatcher's privatisation of industry, and how Harlow suffered massively from that, and how there was lots of embezzlement going on in the town. There's loads of research on that, I was really fascinated by the whole workings of the government promising this world of culture and politics, but, of course, when it came down to it, there was no investment in the town whatsoever. Money was top-sliced, and put into other places, so the community never benefited at all from any of its production.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You said you were interested in spatiality rather than time, or the passage of time; and there seemed to be certainly two concrete locations, Harlow and Gibberd's house. But there also seemed to be a third location of formlessness, which was the lights and ending on the vegetative space that wasn't a frontier so much as something that was always already there...these formless points punctuated and sat between Harlow and Gibberd's home, and there had to be a transition back through some of the lights and then some of the foliage before we got to his land.



Statecraft [2008]

AB: This comes back to the force of abstraction—using disco lights here in the work does not lead to formlessness, as they are obviously hired disco lights! These images are both empty and full, as we've discussed, and that's all it is, and it never claims to be anything else. At the same time, however, the appeal to its representational potential, in terms of what the image could be, is something that is incorporated and invested in, in the work. The trees at the end of the work are doing that, as you say—and it's just trees. The image of nature at the end of the work is always already, for me, 'Delphic future', this kind of primary existence or something

almost pre-political if I want to go that far; and I wanted to use those levels of abstraction to call upon those realms, those other realms, non-concrete/concrete realms, if you like, which appeal to some kind of nature metaphysics. The work thinks through all its images like this, so an image of light is just as concrete as the concrete of a brutalist building. They both have massive ideological investment. So the work doesn't so much move from one place of form to another of formlessness, but rather seeks to identify these two operations within all its images, in each text and in each video frame.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How do you come to choose to use the words that you use, because a lot of them are quite poignant and weighted, so, what that's process?

AB: Normally I have ideas and then see them through in specific locations, it's like being asked, Where are you going to start writing an essay from? Where does that come from? Sometimes you can rationalise it—you see certain things that make you want to write or you see a film or whatever.... For example, a couple of years ago I went to Tokyo to do a conference called 'Ubiquitous Media–Theory of Culture and Society'. I went out to Tokyo to do this conference and when I was there listening to these Japanese academics speak through a certain Hegelianism, and they were saying things like 'the head is nothing without the body' and 'from progress to simultaneity', I found this amazing in the context of my experience of Tokyo. This relationship between philosophical rhetoric or argument, politics and culture is where the languages I choose derive from.

At that time I was going out into Tokyo and seeing these Daniel Buren installations in housing estates, and I started photographing them and then writing notes from these people and thinking 'How does that philosophy work through this kind of socialism, as a social experiment in art?' This work resulted in a series of prints.

I guess what I'm trying to say, in answer to your question, is that it comes through circumstance, but also through a prevailing interest in certain ideas. And I hope that my language does change and is moved by other people. It makes me think of Walter

The Head is Nothing Without the Body [2008]

Benjamin in his essay 'The Task of the Translator', where he says that the best translation is when you change your own language, you become something else, you have that openness to other stylistic forms...and meaning as well, meaning itself is reproduced and reconfigured through that openness. So although I'm very focussed about what I am interested in, I'm also very open, I hope, to allow the work to change.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So do the fundamental conceptual intuitions you work with transform themselves through the experience of through the different places?

AB: Yes, because experiences offer up things you just never thought of before. In that sense, I guess that's why it's different to some practices which are concerned more with developing a technique, I'm not so interested in that.