

# DON'T LOOK A GIFT HORSE IN THE MOUTH

Gary Garsley, 2006

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Curated by Sally Breen and supported by the Mondriaan Stichting the *Gift* was a site-specific collaborative installation and performance project by Jonas Ohlsson and Jennifer Tee. Predicated on gift giving and receiving it was realized at Artspace in Sydney from the 3rd to the 26th of November 2005. Artspace is a centre for contemporary visual culture in New Holland that essentially fulfils the same role as the Old Holland's Stedelijk Museum's Bureau Amsterdam, with the notable exception of Artspace's studio residency program intended to facilitate among other things, contact between visiting artists and the local community. One of the defining attributes of Sally Breen's curatorial practice is that it seeks to provide artists with opportunities to situate aspects of their practice outside the gallery. Reflective of this, Ohlsson and Tee involved residents of Woolloomooloo, the socially and ethnically diverse neighbourhood surrounding Artspace, in a mask-making workshop advertised with a hand drawn, photocopy flyer promising - free wine and beer, party music and snacks. *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth* was probably semaphored between those who discovered in their letter boxes the unexpected invitation to get to know two Amsterdam based artists (both very good). Further to this was *A Night of Sound with Jonas*, in which Ohlsson concluded his artist's talk with a dj set, a gesture that neatly parenthesised the project with it's two overarching motifs - the framework of exchange and the lubricant of music.

Ohlsson and Tee were transparent in situating the inspiration for *Gift*, within Marcel Mauss's influential text *Essai sur le don* (The Gift). Published in 1925, this widely translated essay refutes many of the conventional assumptions behind market orientated economic theory. Mauss uses his scholarly text to reiterate his conclusion, namely that abiding economic, social, theocratic and cultural systems based around gift giving are the source for many of the legal and economic systems of the present, making them by extension, relevant as topics for contemporary artists. Ohlsson and Tee used the installation to make clear their opinions on many things - *Severed Heads* was a great band, Americans are not the world's smartest people and that only old people like Bill Viola. These and other statements were elaborated through the inter-relationship of *Gift's* disparate elements - masks, wall drawings, rattan, banners, fabric, paper lanterns, balloons, rope and LP records that

coagulated in the often-difficult middle gallery at Artspace like those sweet milk drinks that thicken with shaking.

Mauss was the nephew and most distinguished pupil of sociologist and anthropologist Émile Durkheim. For Mauss the group of pupils and coworkers around Durkheim constituted a type of collective consciousness, a fact that possibly explains the decision of two artists with separate, well established practices to collaborate on a project in Sydney. *Tis better to give than receive*, originally a biblical catchphrase possibly reveals more about the complex web of moral obligation and social responsibility at the centre of the act of giving than most phrases in languages where expressions about presents abound. As Mauss reminds us, *the danger represented by the thing given or transmitted is possibly nowhere better expressed than in very ancient Germanic languages. This explains the double meaning of the word GIFT as both gift and poison.*<sup>2</sup> Ohlsson and Tee, like Mauss see phenomena in their totality and their installation at Artspace could be best explained to those who did not see it as a closed circulatory system of exchange between artist and audience in which the inert material – cardboard, plastic, rope and fabric are given animate characteristics such as personality and the power to communicate.

In 'early' societies Mauss writes, *social phenomena are not discrete; each phenomenon contains all the threads of which the social fabric is composed.*<sup>3</sup> In respect to the way in which meaning resides across the components of an installation insinuated more or less equally in its constituent parts, Mauss's observation genealogy links installation as a contemporary genre to the immersive spaces conjured up by the rhetorical structures of the Baroque. With its synthesis of disparate media and reliance on text to visualize ideas *Giff* is historically categorized by mashing elements of the Conceptual in art with the Baroque. As a paradigm the Conceptual Baroque allows the linkage of the incongruent references in this work, such as the Bali Nine, Banner Monuments, glue sniffing, film posters and old paintings in an indeterminate non-linear narrative suggestive of what Terry Smith was to call *Open Form Sculpture*. Smith describes this as *not objects with a core, nor even physical elements arranged coherently, but rather dispersed, thrown, placed, laid elements, disposed in real space. This kind of sculpture invokes in its preceptor a participatory sense of himself as a physical body functioning in a space continuous with that of the sculpture.*<sup>4</sup> Additional links to conceptually determined art of the late 1970's and early 1980's is the way in which Ohlsson's and Tee's seemingly unrelated fragments coalesce into a unitary whole reminiscent of musical tactics from the that time which were strongly influenced by models originating in conceptual art. *Sample based music recuperates its history*<sup>5</sup> and *Giff* contains an abundance of references to *Severed Heads* who appropriated sounds as varied as gamelan records and the sound of a watermelon being dropped from a

great height with the goal of rearranging these contrasting parts into a completely new track.

Working with what Ross Harley describes as *punk D.I.Y. strategies, a sort of garage multimedia and street-tech low-end technological improvisation*<sup>6</sup>, *Severed Heads* initially found success as an experimental electronic music ensemble in the United States and Europe. References to them abound in *Gift* including a disembodied *Head on a Stick*<sup>7</sup> across whose balloon face, replete with red rubber protuberances like the ear lobes and wattles of a chicken was scrawled in multicoloured letters, *SEVERED HEADS – MY FAVORITE BAND*. Subcultures are proficient at hollowing out and reorientating the meaning of mainstream iconography and the way in which Ohlsson and Tee use language in their collaboration – a sort of decorative script over the surface of objects, is very much like *toasting* or the act of talking or chanting over a rhythm or a beat. References to marginalized groups – aboriginals and queers for example abound in the installation. Sometimes oblique occasionally direct they are a reminder that *when mass culture does not allow for deviation from implicit norms (of race, class or gender) subcultures arise*<sup>8</sup>. A visit to *Gift* was like reverse meditation, it's fractiousness seemed to engage with Benjamin's cult of the fragment and the concept of distraction as a critical activity contrasted favourably with that of contemplation. Furthermore, for the Sydney audience it marked the increasingly noticeable transition of the artist's role – away from cultural producer (in Benjamin's sense of the word) and towards cultural performer.

Imants Tillers wrote that *advanced art habitually aspires to the condition of religion*,<sup>9</sup> and the way in which the structural columns in Artspace were garlanded, was evocative of a fetish altar heaped with trophies. Specifically with regard to the incorporation of the masks generated by the workshop Ohlsson and Tee hosted in their studio prior to the exhibition. Often displayed like votive objects their presence throughout the installation was one of its characterising emblems. The mask has a pivotal role in high modernism – a creed if ever there was one. Picasso's derivation of an African mask in *Le Demoiselles d'Avignon* perhaps exemplifies their synonymy with elemental cultures and by extension their proximity to original or primary expression. Possibly contextualizing the artist's engagement with masks and mask making in the light of Mauss's text, which reaches its conclusions largely by addresses customs in Melanesia and Micronesia well known for their mask and totem activity. Like the thing given masks are alive and often personify complex exchange contracts between men and gods - residue of the compulsive mechanisms that exist in gift giving and receiving. As Mauss points out *The theme of the gift, of freedom and obligation in the gift, of generosity and self interest in giving, reappear in our own society like the resurrection of a dominant motif long forgotten*<sup>10</sup> as Consequently masks are frequently ritualised expressions, fixed in wood or paper, signifying

the responsibility to give presents and the requirement to receive them. Our tendency to assume a privileged position for our own social contracts leads often to associating the convoluted protocols of others with the governance of hermetic societies. To the rest of the planet the art world is just such a closed society ruled by obligation and reciprocity, where a pervasive amnesia is a symptom of its internal logic and a precondition of its continuance.

Mauss writes frequently of his concern *with 'wholes', with systems in their entirety.*<sup>11</sup> The totality of an installation should exceed the sum total of its parts, so that in addition to its aesthetic aspect they reveal morphological types disclosing something of the form and structure as a whole. With *Giff* there was no vantage point, it was an alimental environment not so much seen as witnessed, not read but inhaled. The author function within collaborations is one where the individuals involved find simultaneous expression. Just as the thing given can never be completely separated from those who exchange them the artwork cleaves to its makers. Ohlsson and Tee have strongly individualistic practices, one visibly distinct from the other. Both have characteristics of what in Dutch is called *omgevingswerken* or environmental works, where the milieu is understood to be both a tangible and intangible thing. In works of this type personal experience features prominently and there is clarity about the quotations from daily life. *Giff* contains for those familiar with the work of its authors clear forensic evidence of four hands clapping. The beautiful drawings that are so substantial a part of Ohlsson's oeuvre, such as that of a moustached Oxford street type with his hand through his y-fronts stuffing his engorged penis into a didgeridoo being sucked on by an obese semi naked man is stiletto bearing more than a passing resemblance to Australia's foreign minister. Whereas the quasi anthropological and historiographical ambience and the porosity of the partition between fact and fiction as exemplified by the *Banner Monument for those who Died In the pursuit of leisure and the Radical desire of the Good for the Marvellous* hallmarks of Tee's work.

In his introduction to *The Giff*, Mauss endeavors, as do most authors to establish a cognitive structure for the reader to negotiate their intentionality. He makes it clear that the philosophical tradition within which he places himself was one where conclusion were arrived by analysis of concepts rather than facts. He says, *we take our own social convention for granted and we seldom think how recent many of them are and how ephemeral they will perhaps prove to be. Men at other time had, and in many parts of the world still have, different ideas, values and customs, fro a study of which we may learn much.*<sup>12</sup> At a time where tolerance of diversity and respect for the differences of others is imperiled by the subterfuge of the war on terror, where sameness is ubiquitous and some societies believe not only in the superiority of their institutions

but in their right to impose these on others by force, such a reminder is salutary. Several hundred years of colonial and postcolonial history link The Netherlands and Australia, exemplified by the first name for the fifth continent in an European language - New Holland. They share a commitment to cultural pluralism. Their largely urbanized populations are drawn from many countries and faiths. In many ways Sydney is closer to Amsterdam than Amsterdam is to Cairo. Or Sydney is to Jakarta for that matter, which certainly undermines some of the common assumptions around the absoluteness of factual observation and the limits of its usefulness in establishing the nature of complex things. Mauss was right.

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- 1 Formed in Sydney in 1979 by Tom Ellard, Richard Fielding and Andrew Wright.
- 2 Mauss, M., *The Gift*, (translated by Ian Cunnison) Routledge Ltd, London, 1988, p., 61
- 3 *ibid*, p., 1
- 4 Smith, T., in *The Postmodern Art of Imants Tillers. Appropriation en Abysme*. Coulter-Smith p., 14
- 5 Harley, R., *Electro Attractions. The subcultural logic of technology in contemporary popular music*. Masters dissertation. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, U.T.S. 1994, p., 28
- 6 *ibid*, p.37
- 7 An expression used by Mick Taylor in the horror film *Wolf Creek*. It describes someone who has had their spinal chord severed, allowing them to be tortured for information while not having to worry about them fleeing. *Wolf Creek* opened nationally in Australia on the same day as *Giff* 3rd November 2005. How's that for coincidence?
- 8 Harley, R., *Electro Attractions. The subcultural logic of technology in contemporary popular music*, Masters dissertation. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, U.T.S. 1994, p., 9
- 9 Tillers, I., *Locality Fails*
- 10 Mauss, M., *The Gift*, (translated by Ian Cunnison) Routledge Ltd, London, 1988. P., 66
- 11 *ibid*, p., 77
- 12 *ibid.*, p., vii