EMPATHY AND HUMOUR:
THE SUSURRUS OF PEOPLE AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Go ask Alice, when you're ten feet tall
Jefferson Airplane, White Rabbit

In the world of Anne Graham, things are ordinary and then they are not. Oversized combs rest against a wall the way a ladder might. Laundry lint blows about in soft clouds inside a small specimen cabinet. Seedpods, the size of sofas, immaculately stitched in leather, sit on the floor and solicit being sat upon. Pairs of shoe innards, made of glass, are stacked from large to small, forming the contours of *Glass Mountain* (2012). Yet however fantastic this world may be, Graham never loses contact with the real of substance. Ordinary objects, or our knowledge of them, become anchoring points in the manner in which Victor Shklovsky described the poet's capacity for 'making strange'.

Indeed, a rigorous logic underpins this straddling of the Surrealist and the everyday. As in the works of Lewis Carroll, nonsense is never just nonsense, inanity for inanity's sake. A connecting thread of logic, and solid, real-world provenance, is realized in the reception of the work - the seed pods are, in fact, functional sofas, in the way that Salvador's Dali's oversized pair of lips, *Mae West* (1937), could also be sat upon. The laundry lint is genuine, and sourced from the Lithgow Laundry, even though few would think to use its physical properties to create the encased wonder of a billowing cloud. The shoe innards, though made of glass, and resolutely non-functional, accurately reproduce the way the gradations of real shoe innards replicate the contour models of geographers.

Like Carroll directing the wordplay of his *Alice* books towards amusing his young friend Alice Liddell, the humour of Graham's surprising connections generates goodwill. Her visual puns and wonders evoke the generosity of spirit that accompanies a well-told joke. Indeed, as Freud has pointed out, there is more to a joke's surprise than its pleasant release of psychical energy. The inadvertent offense of a misfired joke reflects poor taste while a well-told joke generally uplifts and contributes to the sense of wellbeing associated with the social good.

This empathy with others is reflected in Graham's more explicit works of social engagement. Sitting on the pavement in a series of locations around New York, Graham worked at her sewing machine making functional garments (*Sweat*, street performance, Manhattan, New York, 1994). Street savvy, she blended in, tapping into the way small time entrepreneurs, with little capital, and few means of production, were making do. Working there required trust and a certain quality of intuition. You wouldn't want to mistakenly steal someone else's patch. New York streets were unpredictable and carried a sense of risk. At any time, the delicate balance could have turned. Under the flimsy protection of daylight and her gift of conversation, she shared the vulnerability of those who made their living on the street.

This element of political solidarity informs Graham's 'action' works. A strand of Marxist socialism, inhabiting what little remains of 'the commons' – the sidewalks - with her fellow workers, is at the core of her work. She puts herself in the place of the other. This sets her practice apart from other street-based art forms – the *derives* and *psychogeographies* of the French Situationists (late 1950s), or the Japanese actionists of the late 1940s (Hi Hat notably broke new artistic ground when they abandoned the gallery to don lab coats and scrub the streets of Japan in 1948). While there are certain synergies with these early actions and the happenings of the 1960s – participation in the everyday with a degree of unpredictability and Surreal sensibility – Graham's actions have more in common with feminist performances that tested ethics and gender limits, like Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (New York, 1964), in which audience members were invited to take a pair of scissors and cut off a piece of her clothing, or Marina Abramovich's *Rhythm-0* (1974), in which a table of objects, and her body, were made available to an audience for six hours of participation. These performances, like Graham's, involved a degree of risk, putting the female body on the line (*Rhythm-0* included a loaded gun on Abramovich's table of objects). Graham's work, however, never abandoned social concerns and directly challenged the bourgeois divide that set art apart from the domains of labour, class and difficult living conditions.

In particular, in respect of disadvantage, the New York work complemented an earlier series of tent and 'habitat' works in Australian locations. These eschewed the gallery for direct participation in the life of the street and the social fabric of the margins. In 1992, in Woolloomooloo, not far from the white cube of Artspace, the fires of the homeless regularly dotted tiny parcels of vacant land under the towering concrete pylons of the freeway. The housing commission pushed uphill towards Kings Cross and William Street.

It was here that Graham set up *Walla Mulla Park, Working in Public* (1992), a temporary kitchen and projection space. She cooked and fed people, entertaining them with conversation and a makeshift cinema. Anyone was free to drop in, thus encouraging dialogue across a spectrum of people who were not likely to engage with each other – the homeless, whose ground she occupied, the arts community who sought her out, people from the housing estate, and anyone who was just passing by. As with the New York sewing work, danger was never far in the volatile mix of homelessness, alcoholism, drug abuse and mental illness that is part of everyday life in disadvantaged communities. Yet, her practice cannot be reduced to social work.

Many of Graham's action-based projects could be considered precursors to the relationship-based works which came to be tagged under the banner of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, including Francois Alys' *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) (five hundred volunteers, forming a line atop a Peruvian sand mountain, were each given a shovel to 'advance' the mountain ten centimeters from its original position), or the convivial sharing of Thai meals cooked by Rirkrit Tiravanija from the boot of his car in Germany or in a New York gallery space, *Untitled* (303 Gallery, 1992). Graham's street works likewise foster relationships of community and collectivity, but are, in many respects, less genteel, in that the potential for volatility is always there. Unpredictability is one of the tensions when working among the disadvantaged and Graham's works address this with generosity and compassion.

The habitat works were a series of gifts, of food, shelter, and engagement, even though reception was uncertain. Someone could always get too tanked on grog, or forget to take their meds. The convivial element of relational aesthetics was on offer, at the forefront – offering conversation, friendship, and unlikely encounters as social re-shapers. That rare commodity of conviviality amongst those from different social classes, with the potential of reciprocal generosities, was at the heart of these provisional gatherings, which were more impromptu party events than do-gooder occasions for charity. Conviviality brings with it opportunity for small enactments of human actions like dignity – the way one shares a plate, or accommodates a view inside a conversation amongst strangers. The content of conversation wasn't important here, but rather the provision of a social stage and the manner in which intangible social goods like respect could be restored.

Throughout the broad range of her various modes of practice, a staple element is a Levinasian ethics of being 'for the other'. A recent residency at Big Ci, Bilpin, in the Blue Mountains, resulted in a series of 'portrait-installations' of her fellow residents. Composed in the lavish manner of painterly still lifes, her arrays of objects described her subjects with the sense of bounty. Like a well-set table for an honoured guest, each portrait was a gift of offerings.

Dangerous Games (2015) for artist Daniel Kojta, consisted of a half-scale pool table that, like an abridged edition, condensed the acumen of his sharp intelligence. The balls and cues

were of frighteningly lucid transparent glass. Cartographic and naturalist wonders rounded out the portrait of photographer Cath Barcan: porcelain casts of exotic parrots, an Art Deco teapot, various shells, a sheep's skull, a trumpet, tiny pumpkins of very bright orange, a map of Asia, and a faded globe on a pile of hardbacks.

Astra Howard's portrait resonated with Graham's shared enthusiasm for Duchamp, gardening and Surrealism: a greenhouse stacked with shelves bore pots sprouting hands, somewhat like the human candelabras in Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946); the bespoke garden tools and implements, distinctly not readymade, wryly referenced Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14) and *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915).

For *Whispering and Rustling, the Susurrus of People , Places and Things* at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Graham created *Ada and Alan* (2016), an unlikely coupling of Ada Lovelace and Alan Turing, whom Graham describes as 'botanical mathematicians'. Both are famous in computing: Ada, in the 1840s, for the world's first computer program, Alan, in 1950, for the Turing test under which a machine might pass for human. However, Graham responds to their mutual desire to align analytical thinking with nature. In this double portrait the art of computing is both feminized (Ada) and queered (Turing) as the ribbon unwinding from the transparent black crinoline representing Ada is threaded into a Fibonnaci spiral designed from one of Turing's sunflowers.

If there's susurrus murmuring its way through Anne Graham's actions and works it's whispering of her convivial humour, Surreal juxtapositions and the warmth of her empathy for the people, places and things of the natural world.

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Notes
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