

Every action must be due to one or other of seven causes: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reasoning, anger, or appetite.<sup>1</sup>

A quarter turn on every screw. This exhibition was named after an odd thing I found myself doing after installing a show about a year ago. Uncharacteristically, the installation was finished early, and rather than speeding home in a panic to change my clothes half an hour before the opening, I was left with a day or so in which the exhibition was ready to be seen, but not yet open, and I had nothing much to do.

It was awful.

There were some chinks in the paintwork, but I couldn't fix them because it was too late for that. However, it was too early to declare the work done and walk away, brushing imaginary dust off my hands. I was stuck. I couldn't yet tell if the work was successful or not, and even if I could've judged it lacking, I wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. And I couldn't distract myself with the familiar panic of an impending deadline vs. an incomplete to-do list. So, what to do? I wandered through the gallery, adding a quarter turn to every (already sufficiently torqued) screw.

I won't lie to you.<sup>2</sup> The present exhibition isn't that much different to any other exhibition. A collection of works chosen or made according to a theme, then arranged in the gallery as if flung centrifugally to the edges. Equally, this essay is much like any other curator's essay. An explication of the theme, prefaced by a quote from someone famous, followed by several paragraphs addressing the works in a way that flatters said theme. So, if it's all much of a muchness, why bother?

This exhibition is about why we do what we do.

Why do we make art? It is often because we feel compelled. But even compulsions have their origins, and are justified in some way. We eat when hungry, sleep when tired. (Of course, sometimes we eat when lonely, or sleep when drunk.)<sup>3</sup> Even my screw-abuse had its reasons: to distract my attentions, and to fill a need I had to appear capable and proficient when I was actually feeling anything but. Not the healthiest or most logical reason, but a reason nonetheless. So, if art-making is a compulsion of sorts, what are some of the justifications we cling to?

Do we make art to obtain immortality, to fend off death? Image making is a means to capture a moment, to stop the march of time. Like in Sanja Pahoki's video My family – one of them is dead. The urge to capture experience photographically, to remember, sometimes runs in opposition to other impulses of an artist: the obsessive search for the best image, the decisive moment, the elegant arrangement of lines and colour inside a frame. And, of course, a photographic image, in the end, only reminds us that we all die.

Image making is an urge. How to explain it? It's like compulsive lying, and "a lie is no-thing: you cannot of nothing make something; you make nothing at last, and lose your labour into the bargain."<sup>4</sup> Looking at Jackson Slattery's watercolours, one can see an image made with paint, but one can also see the traces of countless lost hours stacked up, but without height.

We make art to change the world. Ask Lee Walton. An artist sees an arrangement of objects, and changes it. Why? To make it better? Sometimes. But sometimes, it is simply the act of changing that matters.

A desire to communicate our experience of the world, to provide an approximation of it for others, is another drive to make art. I guess, following this model, if we added all the approximations together, we'd get another whole world. Kiron Robinson's A Walk is two photos taken while walking. They are quite similar, one revealing slightly more than the other. Or is it less? The point is, they make us walk. It's not the same walk, to be sure, but it is an approximation.

I have a tendency to seek out hardware shops when I'm feeling depressed. I don't think I'm the only one. I'll pace through the aisles for a while, and then leave with a clearer head—and possibly a contour gauge.

This is why I like warehouse-style hardware shops. It's not because they have better stuff (they don't) and it's not because they're cheap (they're not). It's because one can wander about inside, lost and foolish, literally for hours. Anthony Johnson's Untitled (10 m exercises) reminds me of this drifting. It is like a north star of frustration for sculptors everywhere.

Frustration and anger are two big reasons for any action. And usually, outward shows of anger are easy to interpret, even if their causes are not fully understood. Nedko Solakov's video shows us anger, but this anger is hard to get a handle on. We know what it means to see a toppling monument of a dictator, but what does it mean to see an angry man attacking a Modernist abstract sculpture? A copy of one even? The violence is real. The anger is staged. The object is copied.

Art is experienced, it is seen. This reminds me of the imperative in Susan Sontag's Against interpretation, and an undertone of panic that perhaps I projected: "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more."<sup>5</sup> More, and faster, perhaps. One of the reasons to make art is to impress or dazzle. But art is stuck in a losing battle with other image-makers, namely advertising. So, to keep up, we must follow the command of Brad Haylock's work, a few words taken from advertisers. But what would we lose in the process?

Of course, it has been remiss of me to neglect the pleasure principle up until now. Yvette King provides us with party lights and balloons tumbling down the stairs as we enter. This is partially to make us happy, to give us a

celebration, a reminder that stuff can be fun sometimes. But the wheezing of the crappy party lights, and the impersonal nature of the balloon drop take the shine off a little. Unlike the cascading balloons of a game show stage, these are for everyone all the time, and so not really for anyone at all.

We are stuck in a game; we style ourselves as Kings in our studios, masters of the materials we choose, with heroic abilities to wrest meaning from chaos, or more often from banality. But it takes only a foray into a public forum, a gallery, to puncture this fantasy. We realise then that we are but pawns. Sanné Mestrom's interference with the branding of the gallery for this show signposts that. Duchamp, a king among men, legendarily quit art to play chess, implying equivalence between the two.<sup>6</sup> Surely, though, we are not players, but pieces?

In the end, we make art because we're artists—an example of circular logic to be counted among the best of 'em. But why are the things we do that are not art, not art? Johnson's Sleep Transcription is a means to test this. Are we artists all the time, even when we sleep?

I'm reminded of an interview with Roman Signer. The interviewer asked the artist when he'd stop making art, and Signer, apparently arbitrarily, chose the age of 72:

It will be 2010. Perhaps I'll take a break. Do nothing for a year. Then you're quickly out of it; I realise that, and I don't care. I have so many books. I won't be bored... I'll go for walks and have a vodka here and there.<sup>7</sup>

I have reached the same point with this essay that I did with that exhibition last year. It's finished, but I don't want to admit it. I am thinking of all the other ways I could have written this, and I'm panicking a little. So I remove a comma, and then re-insert it, and again I wonder: why? I don't think this exhibition will answer any questions. I can't even really tell you why we did it. I only know, I felt compelled.

—Kel Glaister

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## NOTES

- 1 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I. 1369a5.
- 2 That's a lie.
- 3 Obviously, with many of our compulsions, the logic of the justification may not appear adequate to the outsider, and may be — or may become — destructive.
- 4 Carlyle on Napoleon's false dispatches, quoted from Kerr, P. (ed), *Penguin Book of Lies*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, p 199.
- 5 Sontag, S., 'Against Interpretation', from *Against Interpretation and other essays*, 1966.
- 6 Said the artists. I doubt the chess players thought so.
- 7 Roman Signer, in 'Interview, Paula van den Bosch in conversation with Roman Signer', translated from the German by Michael Robinson. From Mack, G., van den Bosch, P. and Millar, J., *Roman Signer*, Phaidon, London and New York, 2006, p 42.