

W H I F A

M A

B U T A

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When an exhibition opens at Hobbs McLaughlin our balcony, for large parts of the evening, is the most densely populated spot. As much as one can't fail to be drawn to the bright lights of Canary Wharf, the allure of the balcony is in many respects more practical. It is the only place in our flat where it is acceptable to light-up, and visitors gravitate here to smoke or to talk with those who are smoking. The morning after a private view our balcony's appeal is spelt out in an unedifying fashion, as Melissa and I excavate the many spent, tubular bodies from their mass grave in our flower bed, and are subjected to the unpleasant discovery, upon emptying out the remnants of beer bottles, of drowned butts. Watching their acrid, waterlogged forms float across the sink comes with the unappetising realisation that at some point, I am going to have to stick my fingers into the navel of the plug hole and scoop them out. How different these tawdry butts seem to the cigarettes of the previous night, drooping from lips, ghosting breath as they turn from solid to gas, object to body, body to sky. For then they were the centre of attention, a currency of exchange, an axis around which minds and bodies organised. And how different to the cigarette in its packet, standing brightly to attention in the crisp fatigues of its platoon.

When Alice came over to discuss showing work at Hobbs McLaughlin I asked her whether she smoked, a question that I had been meaning to ask for some time. I had been slightly anxious as to what the answer would be as I very much enjoy the idea that Alice, who frequently returns to smoking in her work, smokes in a new and butt-free way: through her practice. I think I would have been disappointed to discover that she was on twenty a day. Her answer, “only at parties”, was sufficiently satisfying. For if Alice has a habit of smoking, it belongs to that which she produces: it is a part of the posture, the mannerisms, of her work. In Alice’s sculpture the cigarette is integrated as a behaviour rather than as an object, used to articulate ideas and materials. The wobbly Os of smoke rings gently manifest in other forms, whether metal casts of the waistband of trousers or printed and stretched fabrics. Smoking defines Alice’s work in the way that the cigarette defines the body: as a constant, residual presence.

I recently read an interview in which Alice described her work as “figurative sculpture without the body” >1. The distinction between what one is and what one owns is hazy in her work. The things which surround, cling to and reflect the body - bracelets, skin tight fabrics, mirrored surfaces, cigarette smoke - are granted a life of their own. She seems to take inspiration from those entities that traverse the border between object and body, things that define and shape the body, and are defined and shaped by it, in equal measure. This year marks the 100th anniversary of Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning*, and it is remarkable

how pertinent that work remains. The layering of the hand-made and the mass-produced, the exploration of the complex dynamic between personal and impersonal, authorship and authenticity, is still the *modus operandi* of many of today’s artists. When an artist integrates a familiar commodity into the wider composition of a work, cigarette or otherwise, a notional figure emerges from an understanding of who and what that commodity is intended for. The bath bombs that Karla Black is wont to use in her sculpture, for example, come with an idea of ‘the type of people who buy bath bombs’, introducing a heavily mediated character into the work: female, into gift giving, enjoys ‘me’ time, drinks rosé wine (never beer). A spectral figure arises out of materials, from an understanding of the target demographic of a product and the lifestyle which it advertises. The figure, which suffered a series of executions in C20th art, is surreptitiously returning to the scene.

‘The smoker’ is an arrangement, a type of relationship between forms. It is a pose so familiar that it can be re-enacted with or without the body, and with or without the cigarette. All over the world, at any given time, a remarkably similar rendition of ‘the smoker’ is played out as paper fingers of tobacco are raised to myriad lips. The figure with the thin white column protruding from their mouth, or dangling from their fingers, is surely one of the most universally recognisable - and lucrative - of all compositions. A few years ago I went to see a show by Phillip Lai at Modern Art, and walking into the first room of the gallery I came

across the work *Untitled (smokes)*, a large, cuboid aluminium frame. A number of items were arranged around this frame including a lighter, which had been placed upon it, and a couple of unsmoked cigarettes whose butts had been slotted in to holes drilled in the aluminium. By dint of this contact, which echoed the joining of cigarette and mouth, the rest of the work fell in line: in the few seconds it took me to notice this arrangement, the metal structure transformed into 'the smoker'. That such a large and un-bodily work could pose as 'the smoker' is testament to the cigarette's powers of contextualisation, and its inimitable ability to frame a scene.

Visiting my grandparents as a child, my grandfather would often give my brother and me money to buy sweets from the newsagent across the green from their house. I invariably bought a packet of chocolate cigarettes, Old Toad being a particular favourite of the pretend brands on offer. Old Toad haven't been on sale in that newsagent for a while now. Presumably somewhere down the line it was decided that socialising children into the practice of smoking, comparing sweets to tobacco, wasn't wholly appropriate. 'Smoking' Old Toads was rather like smoking the wrong way round. They dematerialised, but from the bottom not the tip. As much as I enjoyed these chocolate cigarettes, there was something frustrating about them. There was never quite enough time to perfect my smoking pose before the paper disintegrated on my tongue, and the whole thing disappeared down my throat.

The emergence of the e-cigarette, widely advertised online under the rather spectacular tag line "No Whiffs No Butts!", offers the prospect of Cancer-Lite smoking, and a cigarette one can smoke indoors. It deviates from the many other tobacco free products on the market in that it acknowledges, exalts even, the appeal of the cigarette. Indeed it is something of a monument to it, created in its image. Aping the form of the 'just lit' cigarette, its solid body proposes a kind of immortal, butt-less fag. It is strange to imagine a generation of smokers through whose lips smoke never passes. And stranger, still, to imagine a butt-less cigarette. For the butt is testament to what might be called the life of the cigarette, its passage through time. Whether the crushed, cylindrical solid of the readymade or the rather more insecure assemblage of the roll-up, it is certainly the carcass of the thing. Inscribed upon the filter, in the yellow nicotine stains and tide marks of saliva, is the history of an event passed. When Robert Rauschenberg set to work on *Erased De Kooning Drawing*, the paper upon which he rubbed was a filter of sorts. In the act of erasure De Kooning's drawing passed through the paper, transforming from a physical to a spectral entity. What remains of *Erased De Kooning Drawing*, a marked sheet of paper in a golden frame and a title, is the fag-end of the work: an earthly testament to the departed.

A week or so after the format of this exhibition was decided - that Alice would show a work and that I would write a text - my sister came over to the flat. She found and read some notes about smoking that I

had left out on the desk, and we began to discuss some of the things that I had written down. In the course of this conversation, it became apparent that she was surprised I hadn't taken into consideration the fact that smoking is bad for you. I had to admit that writing about the health implications of smoking never crossed my mind. In recent years the public profile of the smoker has taken a considerable knocking, so that to think of smoking is to think of innocent babies inhaling smoke from their callous parents' cigarettes, house fires, gigantic tumours and blackened lungs, impotence; a slow and painful death. I gave up smoking a few years ago, taking advantage of a sore throat which afforded a natural break in my habit. My appreciation of smoking has, perhaps ironically, increased since I stopped. It is something of a remarkable phenomenon to me now: it seems that rolled up within those slender fingers of tobacco are so many of the quandaries, and so much of the magic, of the modern world. I am grateful when smoking occurs in artworks, as it enables me to enjoy the cigarette free from moral or personal responsibility. If I can experience smoking in a new way, it rather relieves the loss of the habit.

I asked Alice whether she felt her work was pro-smoking and she said that it was neither for or against, a response that has since stuck in my mind. The idea of an artist assuming a 'neutral' position is rather Warholian. I have struggled in the past with Warhol's work, finding myself at a loss when it came to understanding his intentions. Advertising is designed to tell you something and Warhol's work, utilising this language,

is rife with messages. The work seems always to say something, but I found it hard to know what Warhol himself was saying, or whether he remained silent. It occurs to me that Warhol, like Alice, was something of a smoker, inhaling and exhaling the surrounding world as opposed to standing on the sidelines and commenting on the action. Neutrality is, of course, a false premise. For artists have highly selective filters; they are particular about what they let in, and even more so about what they let out.

Around our kitchen table Alice, Melissa and I discussed the various qualities and types of cigarettes. In the course of this conversation Alice expressed an opinion I have heard many times before, that she preferred the taste of roll-ups. Sartre, who often returned to the cigarette in his writing, ascribed this preference not to any inherent flavour in the tobacco, but to a preference for that associated with one's hands as opposed to one's tongue ². In other words, it is a preference of authorship. Rolling one's own cigarette offers the smoker a window of opportunity to distinguish themselves as a maker and as an individual. One can roll a thin one, a fat one, an unusual one, even a crap one. The smoke ring, too, is a point at which the consumer produces; it is the the work of a most intimate production line that sees the mouth act as a tool for sculpting smoke. To use and to be used, to shape and to be shaped, to consume and to produce; the question of authorship, for the smoker, is hazy. And an artist is, perhaps, the most dedicated type of smoker around, constantly perfecting their smoke rings, constantly in

pursuit of new techniques for inhaling and exhaling the surrounding world.

When Alice exhales Ultra Low into the hallway at Hobbs McLaughlin, it will be the first time smoking has been allowed inside the flat. No Whiffs, No Butts, but lighting up indoors nonetheless.

TEXT NOTES

>1. Alice Channer, 'Conversation: Sam Thorne & Alice Channer' in *Breathing: Alice Channer*, (London: South London Gallery, 2012), p.46.

>2. Richard Klein, *Cigarettes are Sublime*, (London: Picador, 1993), p. 33.

This text was produced for the show 'Ultra Low/ No Whiffs No Butts Alice Channer/ Rosanna Mclaughlin', 13th -16th July 2012.

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