

Work in the art of Gosia Wlodarczak, Dylan Jones and Chris Bennie

One of the many aspects of the contemporary art world that goes unspoken is what artists do for 'work'. Unless an artist is in a professional or academic position in a university, a full-time practitioner or their work directly relates to their practice, details of what they do when they're not making art are rarely disclosed, at least not in an institutional setting.

With art's marginal status in Australian culture, it is more than likely that artist's here will engage, not necessarily unwillingly either, with some form of regular work to sustain their practice. While work has undergone dramatic shifts in recent decades, moving towards casual, flexible and temporary engagements, the expectation of arrival at a certain time and place, or that the outputs are ready on a particular date remains unchanged and therefore self-discipline and time-management are more relevant than ever. It is a delicate balance; negative effects ensue when the amount of time spent working increases, and yet sustaining a creative practice without a sufficient income is nearly impossible.

What happens though when work *defines* one's practice? Can the 'right' type and amount of work actually benefit and enrich, as opposed to hinder, one's creative work? Three artists whose work (art) has recently or will soon be exhibited in Brisbane who engage generatively with 'work' are Gosia Wlodarczak, Dylan Jones and Chris Bennie.

Gosia Wlodarczak is a Polish-born Australian artist living in Melbourne. At QUT Art Museum's recent exhibition *Portray and Play Gosia*, assisted by her dedicated partner Longin Sarnecki, spent nine days in a custom-built enclosed space in the gallery. Wlodarczak's *A Room of Facial (De)construction* (2018) responded to self-portraits submitted by visitors through a postbox in the entry. The activity was designed for children, however people of all ages actively participated. Wlodarczak selected portraits, affixed them to the wall of the space and responded to them in an ongoing performative wall drawing. Each day Gosia worked with a different coloured pen and could be seen only on a live monitor. Direct engagement with the public was inseparable from the work and the exhibition, and at the end of the performance the space was opened for visitors to walk through.

As I facilitated the school holiday public programs coinciding with Gosia's performance, I considered the changing relationship between artists and institutions. As Gosia was commissioned to be performing in the space during and defined by museum hours (10am to 4pm), and most of the result of this endurance labour will eventually be overpainted (one wall panel will be collected), the artist is therefore providing a service to the museum. This differs to the traditional relationship of acquiring an object made by an artist, usually from a commercial gallery exhibition. Removing the odds of one's work *not* being collected or exhibited upon completion, Gosia's performances are instead more like temporary site-specific work contracts, remunerated for the exact time spent drawing in the gallery and subsequently provide a more predictable, regular income for the artist. Moreover, Gosia engaged directly with the public, the performance responded to the exhibition's curatorial premise and the section of the drawing acquired by the museum will function as a reminder of this experience in the museum, rather than a private experience in the artist's studio. Like working, Gosia's subjectivities are secondary to the performance

process; she *must* respond to her immediate surroundings, and she *must* keep drawing. Gosia performs these drawing around the world, and leaves the space at the end, never to see the drawing in person again.

Another artist whose work is actively defined by 'work' is Dylan Jones. Dylan is a Brisbane based emerging artist currently preparing for his second commercial exhibition *From One Side to the Other* at Jan Manton Gallery in March. His forthcoming exhibition will consist of paintings of the fifteen major bridges that cross the Brisbane River. He states in his previous catalogue:

[M]ost mornings, my day starts as I paint the sun rising over the streets of Brisbane. After this morning affair has ended I spend a few hours at 'work' as a landscape gardener. As the day begins to fade you can often find me back out on the streets capturing the last moments of light.
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In terms of work, he informs me that:

[W]hen I'm driving between jobs I'll see dynamic compositions formed by the river or the streets of suburbia. Painting in the morning and afternoon is just as much a logistical choice (i.e. avoiding the heat, there are less people around, I can get a park near the city) as it is a creative choice (i.e. better shadows, soften edges, richer colours, light vs. dark).³

While the artist working in oils and in nature is widely practiced, what differentiates Jones's practice is the degree of consciousness that work affects the creative process and the appearance of the paintings. As Jones must paint before and after work (note: working while those who own the properties he tends to are at work) the colour schemes and tonal compositions of the paintings are distinctly those of sunrise and sunset. Like thicker, more scented versions of On Kawara's *I GOT UP* postcards, the paintings document the artist's morning (and afternoon) ritual, painted *ex negativo*; defined by when they *cannot* be painted. Dylan regularly posts images of himself working in the morning, sometimes followed (not without an involuntary gasp from me) by him scraping an 'unsuccessful' painting from the substrate, similar to Kawara destroying paintings that were not finished at the end of the day. What changes when I am aware that Jones is both a landscape painter and a landscape gardener is wondering whether his occupation influenced his work, or his work influenced his choice of occupation, either consciously or subconsciously.

In contrast, as I write this essay, my phone pings and I notice several of my Facebook friends are going to an event. I click and the description reads:

Join UQ Art Museum for a No Lights No Lycra event and catch our Ecstasy: Baroque and Beyond exhibition in its final days. Immerse yourself in the ecstasy of dance. Spend two hours dancing like there's no one watching while listening to music selected by artist and DJ Chris Bennie. The lights are low enough so you can move as you please, uninhibited.²

Based on DJ, academic and artist Chris Bennie's seminal work *Mothership* (2004) depicting the artist dancing to techno music in his mother's loungeroom for 24 minutes straight, the museum has invited visitors to dance for two hours to Bennie's selection of music. In *Mothership*, Bennie is free in that he can move as he pleases to the music of his choice (German electronic techno music), and yet the signs of

physical exhaustion remind us of the physical exertion of this performance, that his body is 'working'. Remunerated for the set hours of *No Lights No Lycra*, Bennie, like Wlodarczak becomes a supplier of labour in the museum, while also inviting the 200 or so attendants to physically work for the two hours, regardless of how leisurely. More so than Jones and Wlodarczak, leisure and work blur in Bennie's event, as DJing requires a range of both technical skills and physical work (i.e. shifting equipment, mixing etc.) and yet is oriented towards facilitating enjoyment. Similarly, Bennie views dancing as a form of liberation and became interested in electronic techno music for its former counter-cultural status. Like Bruce Nauman, what began as an exploration and exertion of one's own body on a screen has, in this case, morphed into engaging directly with the audience, specifically visitors' bodies in real time.

What connects these three artists and their relationship with work is the disarming effect knowing that they work 'like us' has on the viewing experience. Far from polished objects mystically emerging from the studio of singular full-time creatives, these artists expose and transform their 'work', whether considered artistic or not, as if to encourage us to do the same. Whether it be a disciplined drawing performances in the museum, landscape gardening or DJing/dancing, these artists sources of income feel conceptually inseparable from the work that they make. They seem to think of work not as a limitation but as a generative framework for their creative practice.

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¹Jan Manton Art Gallery. 2017. *Dylan Jones: Creature of Habit*. Brisbane: Issuu.

https://issuu.com/janmantonart/docs/dylan_jones_-_creature_of_habit.ppt.

²UQ Art Museum. 2018. "No Lights No Lycra". <https://www.facebook.com/events/1171654539644865/>.

³ Email correspondence with Dylan Jones, February 8th, 2018.