



Rob Kennedy |  
*acts of display*

Rob Kennedy:  
*acts of dis play*

ROB KENNEDY: acts of dis play

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acts of dis play  
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Talbot Rice Gallery



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acts of experience:  
*the politics of Rob  
Kennedy's practice*

BY JAMES CLEGG

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Poised at a number of art historical and cultural intersections, Rob Kennedy's *acts of dis play* provokes a range of different readings. Begin with the historic work *Peasants Playing Bowls* by Flemish artist David Teniers the Younger from 1635, and the somewhat tousled replica made around 100 years later by an unknown artist, mounted on an incomplete temporary wall leaning against the gallery's interior.

Teniers' bucolic depiction of working class folk engaged in a communal game triggers a string of ideas connected to a 'nascent modernity' and the introduction of 'everyday life' as a legitimate artistic and intellectual motif. The Dutch and Flemish artists of this period were staging a break from classical idealism long before the familiar Franco-centric narratives we associate with modernism (ironically the 'fake' painting is believed to be French). The banality of Teniers' scene is, in its way, a poignant prelude to centuries of fraught negotiation with 'reality', that thing we moderns search for in the shadows cast by other forms. Of the things the replica omits, one of the most intriguing is the shadowy figure in the background.

Then return through the Fluxus-like detritus to Conor Kelly's painting 'The Jerk' (2014), mounted at the entrance on another incomplete wall. This portrait of a spider monkey (or is it more of a shadow, black against a black background) reveals just enough of its overtly poised shoulders to suggest something anthropomorphic. Evoking the knotted territory where *species* meet, this extends, from Teniers' proto-modernity, to a narrative about the taxonomies created by modern institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, forcing a dichotomy between humans and animals. A relationship, the mirrored surface of the painting suggests, is blurred and implicates the spectator. The metafictional guide reveals that the etymology of species is intimately connected to exhibitions and spectatorship, its root meanings being, 'a spectacle; mental appearance, idea, notion; a look; a pretext; a resemblance; a show or display.'

Painted across the walls, appearing in the guide and rehearsed by actors in the new video work, are a series of provocative texts. Forming a kind of rhythmic mantra these messages unpick or even

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indict language; the abstract metaphors it produces – they seem to suggest – are not part of a real life, but a prism in which we are caught:

*When you have thus formed the chain of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you will then be able to pride yourselves on guiding them and being their masters. A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas; it is to the stable point of reason that he secures the end of the chain; this link is all the stronger in that we do not know of what it is made and we believe it to be our own work <sup>1</sup>...*

Does this speak to our encounter with Teniers? Are we the jerk, bound to ask certain kinds of question because of our latent conditioning? Do our chains result from the fact that when we look at an exhibition we seek out categories that confine us to a particular mode of being, mistaking the results of that process for something of our own making, not realising that our habits tether us?

An existential knife-edge. Take a different route, a different starting point, feed it through another's perception and the kaleidoscope turns.

\* \* \*

1 Servan, Joseph Michel (1763) *Discours sur l'administration de la Justice Criminelle* from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1991) Penguin, New Ed edition.

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*acts of display* offers an environment in which people can operate without the usual reassurance of knowing first what the things in an exhibition are about – or from another angle – an environment that allows people to proceed from a position of doubt. If the opening account reflects part of the content of *acts of display*, which in reality we might imagine extending across a multiplicity of generated, largely transient interpretations, then it emerges as something both mutable and rooted in experience. It is less something that is there, waiting in the woodwork to be found, and more something that is actively created.

With Kennedy, the liberating of ideas from that which is prescribed by the design of an exhibition (*jouissance* perhaps) is the outcome of a very careful process. That the content appears open, expansive or generative does not mean ergo that *acts of display* is random, unintelligible or even eclectic. Despite being wide ranging, it is tied to a consistent strategy, a didactic imperative that deserves the name of politics. This politics drives Kennedy to strategically avoid the kind of closure that takes place when an exhibition is designed to say something, rather than being allowed to do something. It is the difference between semantic concepts and embodied experience. And this differentiates Kennedy's praxis from a general tendency towards ambiguity and openness in contemporary art and culture. As Martin Herbert writes, carefully tracing out his own commitment to a kind of 'uncertainty in art':

Amid the last decade's art in particular, one sees the repeatedly recrudescing idea of the incomplete as an end in itself, sweetened with the liberating gift of one's own bestirred imagination. [But] the prevalence of [this] savvy, 'academic' art wedded to doubt has a backfiring effect. When uncertainty becomes an aim in itself, when it appears mechanically and thinly achieved by merely limiting information and jumbling an artwork's parts, the notion of resisting closure becomes a point of closure.<sup>2</sup>

*acts of display* is complete in the sense that no elements have been omitted to create the kind of disingenuous uncertainty Herbert refers to. Rather, in identifying the importance of resisting certain types of understanding, Kennedy is aiming for a goal beyond uncertainty

2 Herbert, Martin (2014) *The Uncertainty Principle*. Sternberg Press; Berlin. Pp. 11-12.



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itself, to open up other kinds of meaning and other ways of being and thinking about an experience. What is at stake here is not the novelty of this exhibition, or even the novelty of Kennedy's approach per se. For novelty and innovation really belong to that modern paradigm that is in fact intolerant of experience, that arrests the world in order to valorise the individual's transcendence of it. As anthropologist Tim Ingold (an academic whose work has influenced Kennedy) wrote in collaboration with Elisabeth Hallam:

To read creativity as innovation is, if you will, to read it backwards, in terms of its results, instead of forwards, in terms of the movements that gave rise to them. This backwards reading, symptomatic of modernity, finds in creativity a power not so much of adjustment and response to the conditions of a world-in-formation as a liberation from the constraints of a world that is already made.<sup>3</sup>

What is at stake in *acts of display* is precisely that which is continuous and extant, a careful negotiation with what is there in life – be it the nuances of materials or the awkwardness of a conversation. *acts of display* attempts to make explicit its connection to the world, signalling the quotidian through – among other things – the detritus imported into the exhibition from other gallery installations, and on-street bric-a-brac, and LED signs, familiar to Kennedy from where he lives in Glasgow, that still occasionally try to sell Kebabs.

Kennedy's pragmatism and the idea that art must be considered from the perspective of experience is a long-standing one. John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, one of the notable forerunners for this way of thinking, was published in 1934. Yet, it is still frequently cited. As recently as 2015 Dónal O'Donoghue posited 'The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Art' and asserted the relevance of Dewey's ideas, in this case applied to the work of a number of contemporary artists to re-evaluate contemporary art education. Dewey's ongoing currency in contemporary debates supports the claim that situating experience at the core of our understanding about art is not a 'dated concept', or even a 'concept' at all, but an ongoing political imperative. Experience, so carefully articulated by Dewey, is a fundamental aspect of our being in the world and crucial to any political system that values people.

3 Hallam, Elizabeth and Ingold, Tim (2007) *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation: An Introduction in Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Berg; London. Pp. 2-3.

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As Edward S. Reed argued in his book, *The Necessity of Experience*, western culture has been particularly hostile to everyday experience: 'The important experiences of our lives – giving and receiving love, making a home, identifying ourselves with certain activities – are dismissed by mainstream Western thought as unreal: subjective additions to a world that is nothing more than whirling particles.'<sup>4</sup> For Reed, Dewey is one of the very few intellectuals to place experience at the centre of his work.

One of the key things we can borrow from Dewey's philosophy is the tenet that life proceeds on the basis of the unknown. 'Meaning' is only a result of experience and not a property of things. Dewey writes:

[A work of art] is recreated every time it is aesthetically experienced. No one doubts this fact in the rendering of a musical score; no one supposes that the lines and dots on paper are more than the recorded means of evoking the work of art. But what is true of it is equally true of the Parthenon as a building. It is absurd to ask what an artist 'really' meant by his [sic] product: he himself would find different meanings in it at different days and hours in different stages of his own development.<sup>5</sup>

If this way of thinking seems counterintuitive, that is because we are so used to the conceits of conventional exhibitions. Labels and storyboards imply that a prefigured meaning is to be found in things, often appearing at the start of an exhibition as if to protect the visitor from facing 'raw' substance. They hinge on a clear separation of art objects from the things of the world, aiming to reassure people that this prefigured meaning is not contaminated by anything outside the artist or curator's control. That implied control is itself a problematic concept given that exhibitions rest on live encounters between people and things. Deleuze, cited later in this essay, referred to these conventions as bureaucratic, which makes a lot of sense when we revisit the definition of that word, 'relating to a system of government in which most of the important decisions are taken by state officials rather than by elected representatives.' By the time we arrive at most exhibitions, so many decisions have already taken place. But, Kennedy's work asks, what if it is decision making itself that provides art with its real transformative power?

Aaron Stoller offered a useful summary of Dewey's thoughts in the

4 Reed, Edward S. (1996) *The Necessity of Experience*. Vail-Ballou Press; New York. P. 10.

5 Dewey, John (1934) *Art as Experience*. The Berkley Publishing Group; New York. P. 113.

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*Journal of Aesthetic Education*. He wrote that, 'For Dewey, existence is not an object or essence but an event that is always undergoing negotiation, adjustment and revision. Each individual's process of learning and growth begins not in knowing, but in unknowing – in the soil of disequilibrium and lack, where desire, imagination and creative action can take root.'<sup>6</sup>

Kennedy's engagement with 'knowing' and 'unknowing' is made clear through his use of language. In the early planning stages of the exhibition, in the midst of a dialogue about the relationship between participation and language, Kennedy referenced a video of a performance by 'choreographer of objects' Jérôme Bel. This performance entailed two actors moving within a grey, square space. They brought in various domestic objects that were placed on the ground or held up in pairs, in different combinations. Bel's work and other similar examples offered Kennedy a means of expressing a key point about language, that is, that its capabilities are not more or less than physical exchanges; nuanced, yet obstinate and opaque. So, if you ask a question of language it might yield an answer, but the answer like any 'thing' will also require interpretation. It will, in other words, be subject to ongoing experience and will not sit outside the doubt and disequilibrium that attends everyday life.

Within *acts of dis play* language is insistently referred back to embodiment and materiality, including the physicality of speech. The actors rehearsing texts within the newly commissioned video (also called *acts of dis play*) have English as a second language. Kennedy worked with them whilst living in Athens. Given only a couple of days to learn the texts we witness them in the video trying to find their way through language. Not its meaning, but the sounds necessary for that meaning to register in the mind of someone listening. These are not authoritative readings, but tentative learnings; a series of sonorous explorations led by 'unknowing'. The scripts the actors have are dense with annotation, something that further emphasises the materiality of the words. They are reminiscent of Robert Smithson's 'Heap of Language'. With this work Smithson created a drawing consisting of hand-written words related to language, 'pigeon English', 'Phonology', shown piled in an impenetrable heap. Contrasting the clean graphic text deployed by artists like Joseph Kosuth or Lawrence Weiner, it made emphatic the role of the material, a kind of manifesto that words have bodies.

6 Stoller, Aaron (2013) *Educating from Failure: Dewey's Aesthetics and the Case for Failure in Educational Theory* in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 47, No. 1. P. 24.

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Where text finds its way onto the walls of *acts of display* it is in the guise of hand-painted messages, rendered from different projected fonts. Their content always seems to refer back to either a distinction between language and experience, or to the physical constructs that underlie their semantics. Taking multiple forms throughout the exhibition they are literal passages that acknowledge the role of the perceiver as they move through and among things.

The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever. The true life takes place when we're alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments.

He said this more than once, ... in more than one way. His life happened, he said, when he sat staring at a blank wall, thinking about dinner...<sup>7</sup>

And:

... dull as they were to the subtle influences of their surroundings, they felt themselves very much alone... They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organisation of civilised crowds.

Few people realise that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every significant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd...<sup>8</sup>

The meta-fictional guide for *acts of display* offers another critical treatment of language, through etymology. Etymology, in tracing the roots of particular words, reveals the fact that our language derives from our position to things and the positioning of things. The word about, for example once meant 'on the outside of' and 'in the vicinity of'. The etymology of the word *explain* reveals a Latin root that means 'flatten out'. In both cases, the meaning of the words takes them from being some kind of answer for what we are experiencing, to words that more simply situate us in and among things.

7 Delillo, Don (2010) *Point Omega*. Picador, London.

8 Conrad, Joseph (1897) *An Outpost of Progress* [short story]. Available online at: [www.online-literature.com/conrad/184/](http://www.online-literature.com/conrad/184/) [last accessed: 28/02/2017]



In a linguistic culture that seems content to trade explanations and descriptions of what something is about for direct experience, these revisions become of critical importance to Kennedy's project.

It could be argued that the use of found objects in the exhibition enacts a similar logic. The chairs, the detritus, the trolley introduced by artist Tony Maas – invited by Kennedy to intervene in the foyer and other liminal space around the gallery – remain both obdurate and ambiguous. Rather than being severed from the world to carry a pre-figured concept into the exhibition they lurk, un-labelled, on the peripheries. Just as language isn't allowed to break away from its own bones, these objects remain mediators to a broader set of contexts.





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In this way, Kennedy's treatment of language extends to literal things and their role in how we gain understanding of the world around us. In a formative period leading up to the exhibition, Kennedy developed a number of events that specifically tried to draw out transformative experiences. For example, 'Playtime' involved the gallery space being filled with a large number of cardboard boxes that would facilitate a series of games. Academics were invited to be 'game leaders', with the job of imparting something of their knowledge of the world to a group who then had to creatively enact their understanding. Cutting, drawing-on, wrapping, shredding and building the boxes, these games slowly transformed the space, manifesting a complex, discursive process. With materiality an emphatic part of the project, all the activities centred on how ideas could be expressed with simple formal and tactile means. In this way the 'unknowing' triggered by the problem posed by the game didn't end with 'knowing' as such, but another series of things requiring consideration. Solutions didn't close a problem, they just created new starting points.

Dónal O'Donoghue, in his essay mentioned earlier, finds a suggestive way of expressing how experiential art informs education. Resonant with 'Playtime' and aspects of Kennedy's work, he writes that experiential artwork:

... creates the conditions, for those of us who are open to the possibility of being seduced and cajoled and made different by them, to come to know ourselves in the strangeness of ourselves as we do things that we would not do habitually as we participate in the world [...] in ways that are not always available to us. Further, it could be argued that these works and our participation in them create an occasion for us to come in contact with, or encounter, our learning selves and to feel ourselves becoming and unbecoming.<sup>9</sup>

Building from these prototype events, the environment of acts of dis play has a particular aesthetic that seduces and cajoles. The detritus, found objects and the simulation of some kind of spatial precariousness all function to take us out of our exhibition-going habits. Before we can ask, what is this about, we also have to ask, is this finished? Are this chair and these old boards part of the

9 O'Donoghue, Dónal (2015) *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Art: A Potentiality for Thinking Art Education Differently in Studies in Art Education*, Volume 56, No. 2. P. 110.

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exhibition? It invites us to try to get to know ourselves in an unfamiliar situation, to discover what it is we can discover by being with things in a room.



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Where Kennedy introduces frameworks or patterns, they are playful references to the boundaries between art and life. For example, the differences between the Teniers painting and the replica were turned into a kind of game. The replica, thought to have been made in the middle of the eighteenth century, over 100 year after Teniers', is almost identical excepting three elements. They are the dark clad figure (who appears to be urinating in the background), the tree and the trail of smoke emitted from one of the cottages. In emphasising these 'missing' elements, Kennedy is on the one hand replaying his own encounter with Teniers' – on first seeing the painting he didn't notice the dark figure. This emphasises the mutability of even something as assured as a painting. On the other hand and more simply, he is theatrically breeching art and life.

Every Saturday of the exhibition a different performer put on a costume, usually worn by a stooped mannequin in the space, to become the dark figure, using their own style of performance to enliven and endure the space. This included Welsh artist Kathryn Ashill, who used a hairdryer and expanse of gold tinsel to elaborate on the 'macho' act of urinating, performance poet Mickey Mallett and Barry Burns, a supposed ventriloquist who had a puppet dressed in a smaller version of the outfit. The figure, thus brought to life, brings in a range of elements.

The missing smoke is evoked by, among other things, Merlin James' 'A Fire Somewhere' (2009/11). It was selected by Kennedy, like paintings by Julian Kildear and Conor Kelly, because it seemed to offer something unknown, or to borrow from Martin Herbert again, the 'not quite sayable'. James' pure experiment with the limitations of painterly form is shown in an unconventional manner, suspended from the top of the leaning scaffold tower and viewable only through a small spy hole in the side of the upper Gallery. The title lends a certain kind of urgency, the work, the fire is somewhere, is placeless – a Modernist work set adrift from the stable white cube.

The sense that *acts of display* promotes discovery is reinforced by one of the connecting threads of the found footage in the *acts of display* video. That is, their makers don't know what it is that they are filming and are led instead by some kind of uncanny phenomenon. We see a gamer playing some form of medieval hunting game.

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Suddenly attacked by a huge sabre-toothed tiger he hastens to slay it, only then to find that by some glitch its hulking form coils around in the air to ascend to the heavens. He sounds surprised and comments that he is happy that he could share that moment with us. In another piece of footage someone films a huge, perfect smoke ring slowly rising into the sky. Due to atmospheric pressure or cold temperatures the ring is an uncanny form, a kind of platonic spectre against the amorphous clouds. These films echo the fact that the exhibition is not trying to set-up solutions, but is instead about coaxing people to imagine a world-in-formation.

Returning to the term politics it seems that acts of display positions itself not through a series of political statements as such, but by engaging with the experiences that give rise to statements in the first place. As such it deals with power and control at a much deeper level, one hardwired into our culture and society and one that is already established when we enter a recognisable situation, bound by chains of ideas.

'We are wrong to believe that the true and the false can only be brought to bear on solutions, that they only begin with solutions,' wrote Deleuze contemplating the work of one of the last century's other great pragmatists, Henri Bergson. 'This prejudice is social (for society, and the language that transmits its order-words, 'set-up' ready-made problems, as if they were drawn out of 'the city's administrative filing cabinets', and force us to 'solve' them, leaving us only a thin margin of freedom). Moreover, this prejudice goes back to childhood, to the classroom: It is the school teacher who 'poses' the problems; the pupil's task is to discover the solutions. In this way we are kept in slavery. True freedom lies in a power to decide, to constitute problems themselves.'<sup>10</sup>

As we watch the crowd in Kennedy's video, bored of waiting for a darts match to commence, create their own game by throwing white chairs into a clearing. As we witness riots and pranks, this freedom seems evident. As the video fills with swarms of things and abstract images born from the static of televisions it is apparent that we are being shown forms of understanding that are anything but bureaucratic. Kennedy does what he does so well as a film-maker and creates moments that are meditative and then accelerates tight sequences of synchronised sounds and images to create a greater rhythmic logic, he builds a palpable sense of excitement.

10 Deleuze, Gilles (2006 [1988]) *Bergsonism*. Zone Books; New York. P. 15.

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The excitement that is expressed here, the sense of a collective, improvised energy imparts something to the spectator that valorises the doubt that we all face in real life situations.

There is [...] nothing intrinsically wrong with processed information, but there is something wrong with a society that spends so much money – as well as countless hours of human effort – to make the least dregs of processed information available to everyone everywhere and yet does little or nothing to help us *explore the world for ourselves*. When processed experience becomes dominant, something is terribly wrong, especially in a society that aspires to be democratic [...] The less firsthand experience we enjoy, the less likely we are to learn how to profit from our circumstances, to think and feel for ourselves, and to act according to our own lights.<sup>11</sup>

*acts of dis play* celebrates people as living agents with capacity for change. This is clearly political. Yet it is not a politics that is reducible to a theory or statement, it is the politics of letting art and exhibitions do things. It is about letting things move forwards into the world, brought into existence by interpretation of other generative factors, rather than continuing the pretence that meaning exists *in* objects. *acts of dis play* is not a mandate for a particular political change, but it seeks to enable people to reignite their 'own lights', to gain a confidence to overcome our dependency on 'set-up' and readymade meanings. It is hoped of course that these ideas are contagious, shared by many others. That one day this kind of practice will come to epitomise what art can do. It is a positive hope, one not bogged down by exclusive knowledge or tough theoretical frameworks. Kennedy believes that art is still a protected space in which experience can be defended. And the message is, to borrow from John Dewey, that, 'Art is the living and concrete proof that [people are] capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature.'<sup>12</sup>

11 Reed, Edward S. (1996) *The Necessity of Experience*. Vail-Ballou Press; New York. Pp. 3-4.

12 Dewey, John (1934) *Art as Experience*. The Berkley Publishing Group; New York. P. 26.

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As the broken LCD screens try but fail to play Kennedy's video and an amplifier extracts only partial information from its soundtrack, we of course are left to doubt whether this account is true. But only by embracing doubt will we move on. As the cherry tree in the gallery, another element missing from the replica Teniers painting, stands supported only by debris, so must we be confident in living on the basis of our unknowing, supported by the everyday bric-a-brac of our understanding.

*James Clegg*  
2016



Performances

















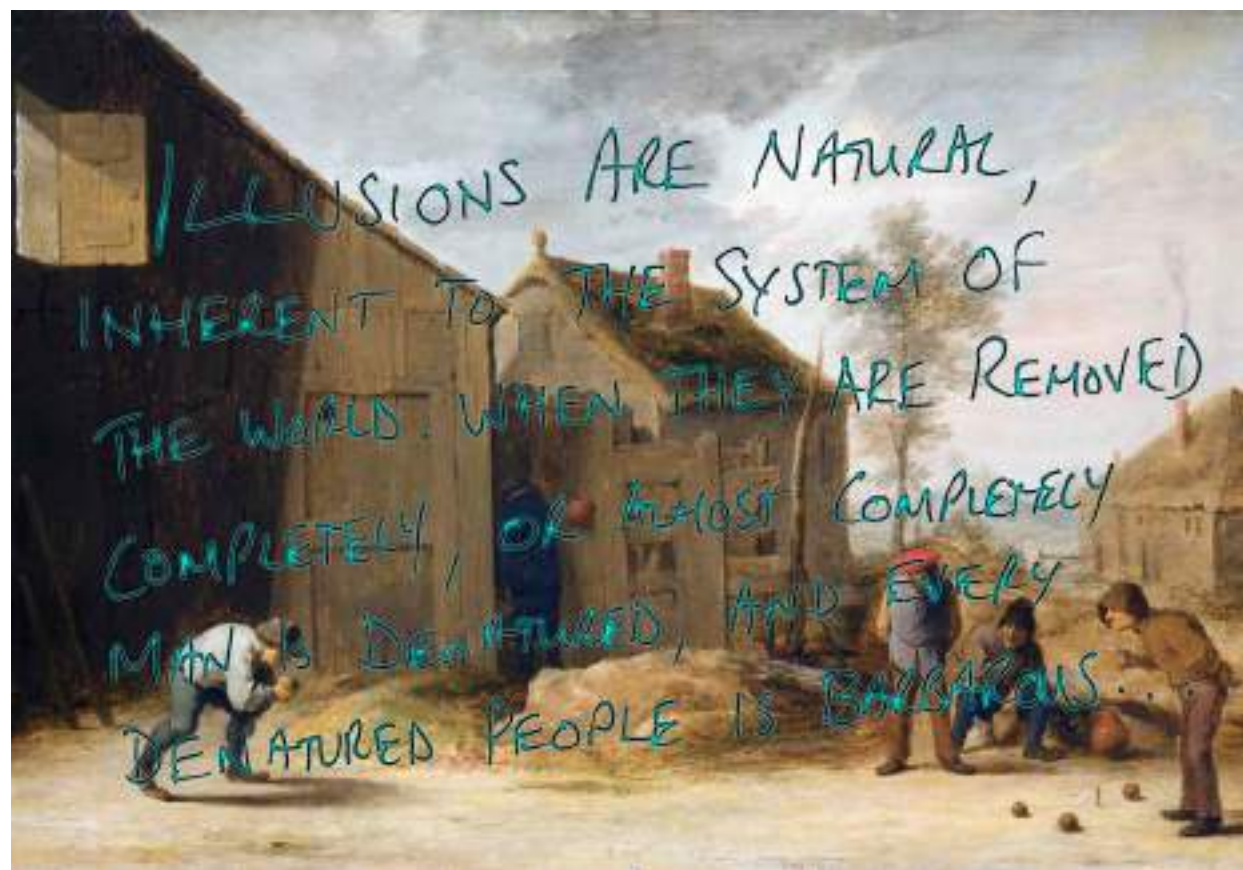






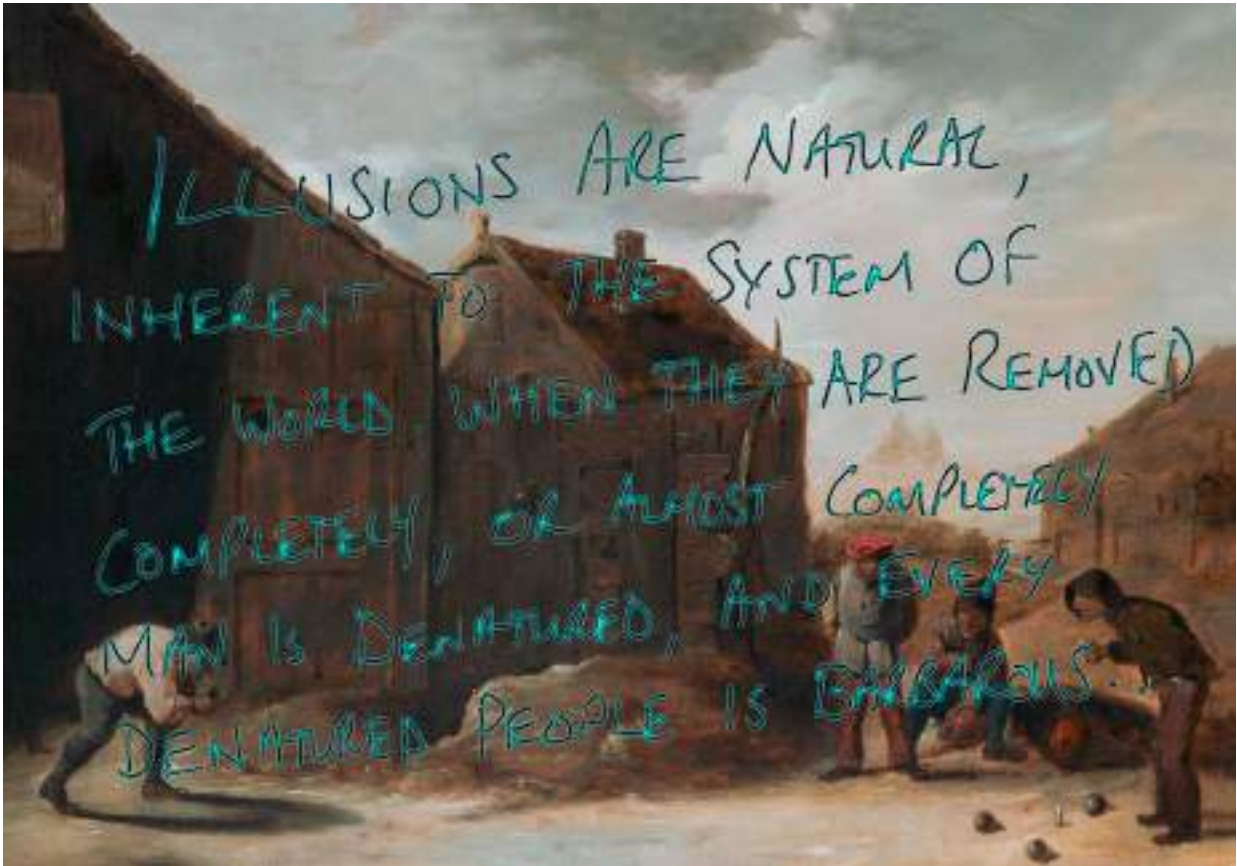






ILLUSIONS ARE NATURAL,  
INHERENT TO THE SYSTEM OF  
THE WORLD. WHEN THEY ARE REMOVED  
COMPLETELY, OR ALMOST COMPLETELY  
MAN IS DENATURED, AND EVERY  
DENATURED PEOPLE IS BARBARIAN.





ILLUSIONS ARE NATURAL,  
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THE WORLD. WHEN THEY ARE REMOVED  
COMPLETELY, OR ALMOST COMPLETELY,  
MAN IS DENATURED, AND EVERY  
DENATURED PEOPLE IS IGNORANT.

## LIST OF WORKS

Merlin James  
*A Fire Somewhere, 2009/11*  
Acrylic on fabric  
41 x 51 cm

Conor Kelly  
*The Jerk, 2014*  
Oil on canvas  
41 x 51 cm

Rob Kennedy  
*acts of dis play, 2016*  
Video  
30 minutes

Julian Kildear  
*John, 2007*  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 80 cm

Tony Maas  
*Travels through Infra-reality, 2013/16*  
Mixed Media

David Teniers the Younger  
*Peasants Playing Bowls, c. 1630*  
Oil on board  
35 x 57.2 cm

Unknown Artist  
*Kulspel [Bowls], c. mid-18th Century*  
Oil on board  
34 x 51 cm

## LIST OF ELEMENTS

LED display panels  
Scaffold access tower  
Assortment of chairs  
Mannequin  
Assorted broken flat screen TVs  
Cherry tree & mixed debris  
Cardboard boxes

## PERFORMERS

*Saturday 29 October*  
Mickey Mallett

*Saturday 5 November*  
Kathryn Ashill

*Saturday 12 November*  
Barry Burns

*Saturday 19 November:*  
Isobel Lutz-Smith

*Saturday 26 November*  
Jamie Green

*Saturday 3 December*  
Rosina Bonsu

*Saturday 10 December*  
Suzi Cunningham

*Saturday 17 December*  
Michael Barr





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