

COURTNEY COOMBS

PATRONISE ME

28 November – 19 December 2009

Curated by Timothy P Kerr

Essay by Nikolaus Baylart

"I need your help to realise my dream", Courtney Coombs asks visitors to her 'Patronise Me' exhibition, conveniently providing them with her personal bank account numbers should they so graciously wish to oblige. The archetype of the starving artist scrounging for grants and working three mindless jobs has evolved, stopping just short of charging an admission fee. But to explain away Coombs' gesture as merely an audacious fundraising scheme would be to ignore her growing body of work and her incisive exploration of the role of the institution, and its relationship with the artist/curator.

Nine scale models of the exhibition space, not unlike those found in the curatorial offices of most art museums and galleries are placed in the space itself. Within each a different object, or exhibition, is "installed", from models of decadent fixtures such as racquetball courts and aviaries, to the artist's own staple material, the humble foam block.

To display a model in a gallery space immediately draws one into the realm of unfulfilled potential, where the artist straddles the boundary between artist and curator and must ultimately accept the irreality. Coombs' models admit to her hesitation as both an artist and a curator: is she accepting the reality of being an artist whose financial situation limits her creativity, or is she accepting the reality of being a curator, where greater impediments to achieving her vision come to the fore? Would 'Patronise Me' remain the same had one or more of these obstacles been removed?

In the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, Gordon Bennett's famous proposal to literally turn the historic collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales upside-down was rejected, and instead the artist constructed scale models of the gallery as it could have been. There are greater obstructions to creative expression than merely finance. Conservation, logistics, structural integrity, workplace health and safety, public opinion, and the attitudes of a gallery's executive branch all play their parts in influencing the outcome of so-called institutional critique, with the seemingly dictatorial conditions inherent in a gallery ultimately guiding what, precisely, an artist can in fact critique. Coombs' 'Patronise Me' exposes the institutional pragmatism that so necessarily leads both artistic and curatorial creativity. The inability of the artist to construct a functioning swimming pool in the gallery space, for instance, is not for a lack of financing. One need not ponder for long the ramifications of attempting to display tens of thousands of litres on the first floor of a primarily wooden building—one of the few remaining vestiges of now "ancient" architecture in the CBD of a city defined by Bjelke-Petersen and Newman's monumental modernisation regimes.

The great question is, does Coombs' pragmatic admission of defeat in fact leave us with a greater work of art? Or better yet, would a successful project have stripped her work of the surgical attention towards that which is necessary for the successful display of art?

Like Bennett's proposal, Coombs' work succeeds as a direct result of its failure. Her models allow us to appreciate her critique of the space and her understanding of it as an artist/curator, while also facilitating an objective interpretation of her project. To look down at her models and interact with them physically, to be caught in that plane between the greater space that exists and the lesser model that has been constructed, gives the spectator an omnipotence that reveals her conceptual approach. The spectator is privy to the underlying mechanics of the gallery space, and is able to explore and interact with it from within, above, and between. The spectator, in fact, now occupies the same position as the curator.

Engagement and interactivity, on all levels, is a prominent focus for Coombs, and echoes her own approach to the space. Dominating the area within one of the models is a foam block that, had it been constructed in the gallery, would only allow for a small space for guests to awkwardly manoeuvre themselves. Although the element of free interactivity remains, Coombs surreptitiously controls the spectator's actions through influencing their sense of spatial relations. An imposing foam block that dominates a room both physically and psychologically is bound to draw attention to the space itself, especially to an audience that ordinarily approaches a space as an irrelevant location in which art happens to exist. Constructing models not only enhances this awareness of the space, but it reflects the similar approach an artist must take when creating an installation artwork.

'Patronise Me' serves almost as a narrative to Coombs' own engagement with the space, prior to any installation of artwork or assault by the spectator. Any artist would bring conceptual ideas to the gallery as a physical location, but must view it with a curatorial hat. What concepts will work? What will fail? What must be adjusted? What is possible? How can I compensate? These are the questions a critiquing artist-cum-curator must ask themselves when engaging with a space. Hesitating between the two roles is crucial to as thoughtful an incisive investigation as 'Patronise Me'.

In understanding the relationships between artwork and space, curator and artist, and concept and reality, do we as the spectator in fact become patrons, and play our role in helping this particular dream come true?

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