

Futile Gesture No.10

He rubbed it. It was sweating. That was something. He stooped and smelt it. A faint fragrance of corruption. What good was that? He didn't want fragrance, he wasn't a bloody gourmet, he wanted a good stench. What he wanted was a good green stenching rotten lump of Gorgonzola cheese, alive, and by God he would have it.¹

In *More Pricks Than Kicks* Beckett's anti-hero Belacqua builds himself a foul sandwich, fastidious in his ritual of carefully burning the bread and assembling its festering components. The construction of this meal is full of masochistic detail and purpose. It is humorous in relation to its subversive culinary and aesthetic criteria, but also in terms of its anticipation of failure and potential disappointment.

I'm reminded of Belacqua's meal in Candice Cranmer's video-performance *Futile Gesture No.10*. In this work the artist assembles improvised arrangements of objects upon a plinth covered with a blue tarp. Cranmer moves in and out of frame, adding bits and pieces to form a still-life of paint tins, a plant, a tennis ball and other bits and pieces kicking around her studio. Though the composition remains loose, particular details (a bit of spray paint here, a lit candle there) are tinkered with to achieve a satisfactory pictorial organisation from the point of view of the video camera. Once the arrangement is sufficiently complete, Cranmer takes hold of a corner of the tarp and attempts to pull it from beneath the collection of objects – dispersing them in a clutter onto the floor below.

This process is repeated several times. The tarp is repositioned and the objects are picked up and reassembled in a new formation, which is subsequently decomposed by Cranmer's attempt to remove the tarp. Though the work is shot in a single sitting, the footage has been cut up to accelerate and punctuate the process of composition. Short segments form a kind of 'creation' montage, heightening anticipation by giving the process a regular rhythm. This positive energy is then undone in the casual flopping of everything back onto the ground. With each iteration of the trick, the activity seems to become more chaotic and desperate. The wine glass is broken, but refilled with a little liquid. The objects are lined up again despite the fact that they are now coated with paint. Things are thrown at the set-up from off stage with little hope of success. At some point a degree of composure is lost or given up; the formality of the exercise is abandoned and impact and accident come to the fore.

Cranmer's ritual, performed for the artist's own potential satisfaction and disappointment, employs a narrative tension not unlike the little obsessions which propel Beckett's characters through an otherwise impoverished existence.² There is something oddly affirmative in the repetition of this failed party trick. The process of composition is willingly wiped clear, and the chaos of dispersion met with an ongoing curiosity.

A number of the objects employed in this work make reference to previous pieces, which similarly involve the manipulation of found materials in front of the video camera.³ Cranmer's practice seems to deviate between a type of casual constructivist sculpture, and the production of more formalised images or process-propositions, often presented through the medium of video. *Futile Gesture No.10* seems to sit in between these two conditions. Installation practice becomes another 'gesture' to be investigated by the artist, no longer a form afforded significance by a particular artistic context, but an activity as equally futile as any other.



In a previous work, *Futile Gesture No.5*, the camera is positioned in front of a first floor window, providing a view of the street below. A lit match is waved across the frame by the artist, who is standing behind or next to the camera. This again has a pictorial bent.⁴ The flame is like an improvised addition to a scene that is otherwise composed of events beyond the artist's control. The flame makes its way across the scene as a type of disruption, or an assertion of the artist's presence and influence on the recorded image. This gesture also seems like a rudimentary attempt to gain attention or communicate with the world below; though it is positioned in an uncertain space between the viewing frame of the window and that of the recording apparatus.

No.10 works with a similar sense of uncertainty. Even if Cranmer achieved the sleight of hand in question, the assertion of futility has determined it in advance as an empty gesture. But the repetition of activity, within set parameters, hints at the possibility of a kind of payoff, in distinction to the immediate circumstances that determine success or failure. No one stops to notice Cranmer's modest pyrotechnics, and her assemblages all end up on the floor, but the recording of this process by the camera enacts a monumentalising of these moments, in that it manages to defer the question of their (in)significance.⁵

It would seem impudent then to try to ascribe it a meaning of one type or other. The futile gestures seem to cumulate an indeterminacy in regards to the significance, the motivations, the possible effects of the artistic act. At the end of *Futile Gesture #6*, in which Cranmer walks on the spot sliding on a mound of butter, the video freezes in the split second where she loses her balance and is about to fall. It is at this point of possible resolution where the video is suspended, and the next gesture has to be devised.

Stephen Palmer

Stephen Palmer is an artist and writer, and is employed in the Art History & Theory Program, Department of Fine Arts, Monash University.

¹ Samuel Beckett *More Pricks than Kicks* (London: John Calder Publishing, 1993), 13.

² Another example being Murphy's carefully ordered consumption of a packet of assorted biscuits. The preferences of his appetite (he must eat the anonymous biscuit first, the prized ginger last) are set in conflict with his desire to explore the full range of sequences made possible by the assortment. Whilst engaged in this conundrum, which serves to delay gratification, he becomes distracted and loses most of the biscuits to an old woman's dog.

³ See for instance *The Look Of (Fatal Attraction)* in which Cranmer inflates balloons until they burst, and *Futile Gesture No.5* described below.

⁴ Cranmer positions these activities in relation to pictorial composition and her uncertainty in relation to her background as a painter. Conversation with the artist 27th of June 2013.

⁵ Michael Fried spoke recently in Melbourne about an 'intentionality' he ascribes to the laborious stop animation *Pacific Sun* by Thomas Demand. Demand's mimetic exactitude in his reasoning constitutes an example of a return to prominence of the artistic hand, where the work of making is charged with discernible purpose within the bounds of the picture plane. In contrast, Cranmer seems to undermine the possibility of this intentionality, instead creating situations where intentions come undone and situations fail to resolve. This comparison is suggested by the crashing of objects that occupy both of these video works. Michael Fried "Thomas Demand's 'Pacific Sun'" *Faculty of Arts: Dean's Lecture* (Melbourne: Melbourne University, June 5, 2013).

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Candice Cranmer