

Reclaim the Street (Theatre)

words: *Tyler Coburn*

Try as I will to avoid the buzzy terms that turn articles like this into soft targets, I would like to prepare the reader with some broad generalisations about Emily Roysdon, My Barbarian, Vishal Jugdeo, Emily Wardill and Emily Mast. Young testaments to the enduring popularity of certain first names; predominantly schooled in Los Angeles under the likes of luminaries Mary Kelly, Andrea Fraser and Frances Stark; American, Canadian, English: these upstarts all share a semiotic approach to the liminal spaces of theatre, performance and the moving image, positing language as a primary determinant of the frames encompassing stage, set and the people and characters contained therein. A debt to the critical work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler is evident, particularly considering the emphasis many of these artists place on processes of (and gaps in) subject formation – between who one is normalised to become, in a given society, and that which exceeds or resists these conditions. Good students of history, they masquerade tropes of satire, deadpan, *verfremdungseffekt* and camp with a speed and levity that marks their distance from the first wave of postmodern reflexivity and with a focus on class, sexuality and gender less reductively wrought than in comparably topical work of the preceding generation. The crux of the difference may lie in a growing suspicion about 'identity' as a plausible political rallying point, in the fear that such reification risks delimiting alterity within normative bounds, curtailing what Roysdon describes as the realm of the unspeakable, of the imaginary. 'In order to develop this new imaginary, we must be willing to disrupt our knowledge of self, and to risk unrecognisability', Roysdon writes in the essay accompanying *Ecstatic Resistance* (2009), a group exhibition she curated at X-Initiative, in New York. That willingness is a responsibility these five artists assume.

Over the past several years, Emily Roysdon has contributed to significant reformulations of the terms of political protest, with, in her

own words, 'one foot in the queer and feminist archives, and another in my lived experience of collectivity'. Most notable among these contributions are arguments forcefully issued on the pages of *LTTR*, a journal run by an eponymous New York collective comprising Roysdon, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, K8 Hardy and Ulrike Müller. For *Work, Why, Why Not* (2008), a live component of a related series of sculpture, film and video, Roysdon reinvests performance as a platform for social organisation: over the course of 20 minutes, performers variably assemble in groupings (a circle of chairs, a dancing line, a family-portrait-like configuration) and wheel around four oversize semitransparent mesh screens suspended in wood frames and airbrushed with images of a lone dildo, a ladder strewn with cut letters and two hands opening the mouth of a supine person, as if in an attempt to dislodge an obstruction. Offsetting this silent choreography are phrases Roysdon asks audience members to deliver, via two microphones, in response to written prompts (for example, 'When you sense someone is taking a risk say, "I have been her"'). As voices intervene and overlap, a traditionally unilateral axis of theatrical engagement gives way to a reactive model inclusive of audience testimony.

Los Angeles collective My Barbarian's *Post-Living Ante-Action Theater (PoLAAT)* (2008) evinces a similar concern with the political dimension of audience participation, though by rehashing tactics (from levitating a spectator to soliciting viewers to shed their clothes) of 1960s performance collectives the Living Theatre and the Action Theater, it humorously but critically comments on our distance from the optimistic spirit of past radicalism. In place of the eight rungs structuring the Living Theatre's 1968 *Paradise Now*, which included such events as the 'rite of universal intercourse' and the 'rite of guerrilla theater' – and which culminated in the performers drawing people into the streets to begin the 'beautiful non-violent anarchist revolution' – My Barbarian offers its



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Emily Mast

Lives and works: New York

Everything, Nothing, Something, Always (Walla!), 2009.
performance still, 11 November at X-Initiative, New York, for Performa 09. Photo: Karl Haendel

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Emily Roy & Don

Born: Easton (Maryland), **lives and works:** New York and Stockholm

Work, Why, Why, Not, 2008, live performance at Weld, Stockholm.
Photo: the artist



Emily Wardill

Born: Rugby, **lives and works:** London

Game Keepers Without Game. 2009, production still, video (colour, sound), 76 min, 2009.
Photo: Polly Braden. © the artist. Courtesy the artist, Fortescue Avenue/Jonathan Viner, London, Standard (Oslo), and Altman Siegel, San Francisco



My Barbarian

Formed: Los Angeles, 2000

Death Panel Discussion. 2009, performance still, performance, Participant Inc, New York.
Courtesy the artist and Steve Turner Contemporary, Los Angeles





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Vishal Jugdeo

Born: Regina (Saskatchewan), lives and works: Los Angeles

Square Configuration (Decorum) Study, 2009, production still, HD video.
Courtesy the artist

event as a 'performance lab' to teach the audience five techniques, such as 'estrangement' and 'inspirational critique', delivered in the warm, musical tones of a vintage children's educational programme. At a moment when several other artists are raising concerns about arts pedagogy by parroting authoritative speech, My Barbarian partly makes good on the instructional imperative of radical theatre by offering seemingly innocuous fun that belies cutting social commentary.

Elaborating on this potential of deadpan, Vishal Jugdeo's video installations offer a critique of language voiced from within genre-based conventions, revealing the habituation and transmission of power that can occur through clichéd types of conversation and address. *Square Configuration (Decorum) Study* (2009) finds a white man and black woman shuffling roles at a table and lectern; greeting the viewer as panellists would an audience; assuming the airs of the hosts of a cooking show called *Harmony & Abstraction*; reassuring a caller like phone-centre operators; and in a salient scene, placing the leg of a bed beneath the table so that "language can flow between [them] without consequence" and proceeding to speak with an unrestrained severity that would be

tempting to take as candour in any but this most stylised context. Set in an arbitrary sequence conducive to looping projection, each of these scenes readily bares its structures, from occasional intertitles such as 'Later than Night' that have no seeming purpose except to highlight the units of linear narration. Jugdeo's video only flouts, to critical points delivered in canned tones, as when one of the cooking show's hosts reads a letter condemning her condensation of "all of the darkest aspects of human experience... into something like a dressed-up chessboard", concluding, "abstraction is a process conceived of, by, and for a subject that probably doesn't have to question his relationship to power". In point of fact, Jugdeo's characters symptomise the risk of abstraction as well as the converse potentiality of resistance, channelling the stereotypically docile, masochistic qualities of the marginal subject into heavy-handed (and heavily ironised) performances of society's dominant scripts.

As in many of his other works, objects such as the bed leg operate as ciphers that Jugdeo's characters invest with particular significance. In her latest near-feature-length film, *Game Keepers Without Game* (2009), Emily Wardill presents a narrative similarly articulated by the monetary, cultural and connotative value of material possessions. After coincidentally moving across the street from the care home of Stay, the daughter he put up for adoption at the age of eight, Wardill's protagonist 'Dad' decides to "take her back into the fold", insinuating himself into her life in a quasi-stalker fashion. Stay professes to suffer from what sounds like multiple-personality disorder, and in the midst of dinner at Dad's nauseatingly tasteful pad, she mercilessly runs amok, tracking borscht with her trainers over his modernist furniture and destroying the specialty honeycomb vases and imported flowers that Wardill's camera fetishistically captures. Echoing Wardill's *Ben* (2007), which was organised around psychological case studies of paranoia and 'negative hallucinations', the film's focus on Stay's disorders carries a metaphorical potency also manifest in the tinny drumbeat illogically spliced as soundtrack throughout the narrative, as well as the sizeable cast of voiceover actors that qualifies the singular authority conventionally vested in the role.

In an elegant document accompanying *Everything, Nothing, Something, Always (Walla!)* (2009), Emily Mast describes the concerns of her performance as 'a distinct distrust of both certainty and the ideal of truth [and] the imprecision of language by means of the myriad ways it can be delivered and understood'. To illustrate the generative potential of such a relativistic framework, Mast mines difference within formal systems, demarcating a space, at the centre of a gallery, in which a cast of actors – playing characters and audience – perform a single script nine times over three hours. Conceived in the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, the piece is performed by stage actors who appear all but subsumed by their characters, each contributing to a metadiscourse on the nature of the dramatic arts from an entrenched mindset: Articulator, Wonderer, Enthusiast and Doubter. 'Right now you are you because you were written that way', the Enthusiast tells the Wonderer at one point, an acknowledgement of one of Mast's parameters that upon reiteration seems ever-less determinate – particularly as the stage actors play it loud (in one version); have a picnic (another); get increasingly drunk (throughout); and even (in still another) let an audience-actor do perfect voiceover for their lines, as they run around miming. While many of its elements contain nuanced allusions to stage history, Mast's performance also adds to an ongoing conversation – shared by the aforementioned artists, among the many – about the theatricality of the exhibition space. Her minimalist redo, however, is the discrete, quasi-sculptural field of an actual theatre, and within it a group of actor-viewers who are neither 'ideal' nor 'relational' but rather elements of a performance that leaves no remainder except what we casual viewers may take. •