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'Telling Tales'
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I've been told that the secret of the confidence trickster is that they give confidence in exchange for money. It's not just one-way traffic and the theft is never straight forward as both parties get something out of it. The trickster has the advantage, of course, because he has control over when the warranty will expire, when the dupe's wedge of confidence will crash.

You may remember the story of the *South Sea Company*, originated in 1717 with the view to restoring public credit. It started a financial frenzy in which people were buying shares, sometimes in the full knowledge that the companies had no means of delivering on their promises to shareholders. People just wanted to cash in while the going was good and let some other sucker pay when the crash came. This story has endured as a fable of human folly, but it also has a deeper meaning - we love telling tales. The story illustrates how much ground can be covered if we all have confidence in something, even if that something isn't there and how, like Wylie Coyote, we can keep running long after we've passed the edge of the cliff. We have this knack of serving up souffles of intrinsically immaterial, insubstantial notions which are validated exclusively by a community's belief in their efficacy and efficiency (this is a trait of both the business and art worlds). We also like to eat the soufflettes together, sharing our confidence in the validity of a particularly tasty notion. Our appetite for stories seems to be inexhaustible.

We can see in some of the art in London over the past few years how the joy of telling stories has taken an interesting turn with the establishment of institutions which present a corporate image which draws on the narrative potential of corporatism and a type of visual art which wraps a story around a body of work.

Two institutions which used the narrative potential of the corporate Logo were the *Independent Art Space* and *Factual Nonsense*. The *IAS* logo resembled a motor manufacturer from the 1950s, dependable and true; *Factual Nonsense's* logo created a disjuncture between the logography of the far right and the curatorial content of the liberal art institutions. It produced a double-take, fusing the narrative claims embodied within the logo and the content of the accompanying images and text. Both logos required, as all logos do, a high degree of ideological faith; faith in the products they were presenting and faith in the gallery's image of itself. The artists and curators might be signing on, trying to catch the eye of a dealer, but that isn't how things appeared and the fact that we knew that things were not as they appeared seemed to add a greater degree of credibility to the enterprise. We could read them as we wished; as aspirants within a fluid art market or as critical embodiments of the problematic of power.

Both of these institutions sprung up at a time when the art market was recovering from a big dip and the big galleries had to instil confidence by flexing their corporate muscle. It was then that the advertising for the *Lisson Gallery* had taken a decidedly corporatist turn. The gallery listed the blue chip artists it represented and the territory it covered (Kassel, London, New York, etc.) in bold white letters on an austere black background. This display of corporate overkill was parodied by Nose Paint (later to become Beaconsfield) who organised a show called "The Lisson Gallery", taking out an almost identical ad to the Lisson's own bombastic efforts in many of the glossy art magazines. The show caused a great deal of confusion and some mirth but the fault line appeared at its inception because of the fault within the structure of parody itself (something which Frederic Jameson has written a great deal about). Parody, it can be argued, loses its punch for a very simple reason: the jester is tolerated because the jester will never become the king.

We see a shift both in the presentation of gallery spaces and in the art produced for them. This can be characterised by the way in which works serve a story operating within the gallery space but, importantly, also by the way in which the gallery's and that of the work itself operate in tandem. In the case of Michael Landy's *Scrapheap Services* the narrative exists in the form of a fictitious waste disposal company, in the case of Gregory Green the institution is that of the fictitious country of Caroline, Mike Nelson's *Trading Station Alfa* houses an environment within which a man has been driven mad by isolation, Jake and Dinos' "Chapmanworld" goes the furthest in closing off any of the material contingencies of reality, creating an hermetically sealed world of libidinal anarchy.

In all cases the gallery provided an entry point to a pre-existing narrative structure, a point of annunciation for an ongoing story. The gallery became the cover of the book and the artefacts within the gallery the material embodiments of the fantasy. The relationship between the work and the viewer also changed here; the viewer became reader and an invisible membrane formed around the show, circumscribing its narrative boundaries.

Bank recently created a subsection called Dog before embarking (no pun intended) on a series of forays into the virtual institution. Bank TV, Dogumental [a Documenta lookie-likie] and *The Bank* newspaper have consolidated this tendency. Bank now fits into a frame labelled Dog which in turn fits into a frame labelled Bank TV which, alongside *The Bank* newspaper, fit into their 'media empire' frame. We encounter a series of stories within stories, virtual institutions within virtual institutions. These, as with the examples instanced above, form a baroque complex of worlds which are meaningful within the setting of a constructed place. They form a mutated pastiche of the 'real media' and the 'real art world'. Their critical relevance comes at the point where the realness of the real media and art world are brought into question and lead us to ask to what extent the 'real' institutions are also fictions.

But virtual institutions are beset with problems. They might seek to simplify, to make visible, to gather together that which has been scattered, to create a conceptual package which is more readily accessible in an era of fragmentation, but in doing

this they might suffer a paradoxical fate and run inevitably to greater and greater complexity without commensurate effect. As each institution seeks to create a greater gravity in order to sustain its conceptual centre, more and more detailed references which are interior to the constructed place must be made. The virtual institutions require more narrative links, more detail to fill up the narrative space, a proliferation of variants on a theme must then be undertaken in order to follow the dictates of the aesthetic logic.

We are then confronted with the Baudrillardian spectacle of institutions having less and less to do with the material conditions from which they have sprung, relying more on an allegorising fiction, rising from the ground in an ecstatic fictionalising cloud. The narrative, whether institutional or work-based, inevitably starts to follow the same course as its literary counterpart and move towards a receding horizon which has appeared within the narrative space. This problem may be familiar to artists who have constructed web sites where their own institution is something of a painted billboard depicting an infinite horizon and for this reason the literary comparison is worth pursuing.

The device of the recursive narrative is an ancient form; the story within a story, a frame within a frame, can be seen in the works of the Roman Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, the Persian Tales from *One Thousand and One Nights* – in which Shahrazad tells a series of recursive tales, the fables of the Panchatantra and Pilpay (which passed from India to Persia), and Renaissance Man Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The two great modern practitioners of this genre, both well versed in fable, Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino test the limits of the baroque seam that runs through the history of story telling.

At its most reductive level the recursive narrative would be the story of a mirror held up to a second mirror, producing the reflection of a mirror - ad infinitum. William Burroughs famously wired up this closed circuit in a story where a man in a waiting room reads a story about a man in a waiting room reading a story... etc. The logic of the aesthetics of recursive narratives leads us to either do as Burroughs has done, create a Mobius strip which folds back in on itself, a virtual sign of infinity in story form, or to up the ante and attempt to create more and more levels, moving from the 'real story' through the many levels of the virtual stories. Much fun is to be had when a writer attempts to confuse the categories, or to test the reader's ability to retain the thread if the mechanism is over used (as in Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*), or to create labyrinths of the virtually infinite (as with Borges).

Artists in recent times seem to have wandered into the Garden Of Forking Paths, into a territory not dissimilar to their wired colleagues, and the choices appear to be similar for both. The choices are to test the limits of the game by playing it to its extreme, testing the areas where the categories break down or, like the Urboros of legend, be condemned to eat their own tails - forever.