

Charlotte Prodger
and The Block
Markets 2014

work based on traditional Buddhist talismans. Appearing like a chintzy ornament, this seemingly organic object is covered with colourful patterns. Ancient *ruyi* symbolised authority, good fortune and the right to speak and be heard – fitting for someone whose every word and movement is closely monitored by the state. Indeed, the entire exhibition is testament to the artist's determination to sustain a critical voice in the face of fierce opposition. As Ai himself has said: 'The art always wins. Anything can happen to me, but the art will stay.' ■

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The Block and Charlotte Prodger: Markets

Chelsea Space London 18 June to 26 July

In the 1969 Sydney Pollack film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, couples grind their bodies into physical exhaustion and annihilation for cash bonuses and prizes in a 1930s depression-era dance marathon. Exploited for audience enjoyment, the poverty-stricken participants cling to each other and their frustrated hopes. It is this obsolescence of the clapped-out, the marginal and the dispossessed that underwrites the content of Charlotte Prodger and The Block's installation *Markets*, 2014. The Block, a south London-based company run by Matt Fitts, refurbishes and distributes worn-out and discarded 1980s monitors – production having ceased due to the advent of more affordable and versatile 1990s LCD and plasma-screen technologies. The monitors themselves once represented a design and technological apex for the cathode ray monitor, with the two largest firms, Hantarex and Sony, producing sleek renderings of the monitor form encased in anodised black aluminium which continue to appear fetishistically in galleries. Prodger, in collaboration with The Block, has inserted four Hantarex monitors – more commonly used in train stations and retail display units – into specially designed cases that resemble the edit-suite-purposed Sony Cube monitor. In what might be a commentary on the subtle structural differences between the two monitors' purposes – and a labour of geek-ridden love – Prodger and The Block have polished this 'cut and shut' job to an industry standard, while producing a material synonym for the collaborative process itself. *Markets* brings these component elements to bear with an accompanying linguistically driven video work by Prodger, replete with a separate audio track which further splices into the densely produced material conditions of display the names of pedigree racehorses – introducing the notion of genetic force and its economically reproductive goals.

Markets in fact refers to the Australian racehorse of the same name. Prodger traces the horse's bloodline to reveal what makes this a goer at market. Apparently, there are several conventions



when naming a racehorse, one of the more intriguing being that when the stallion and mare's names are blended, lyrical associations between the names of the foal's forebears are made which hint at its pedigree. Some are fairly direct, Belltition was sired by Addition, while others read more like a poor crossword puzzler (such as the mythologically inspired – if mangled – Isolt and her offspring Sir Tristram). Prodger choreographs the names of the stallion's predecessors – such as Gold Digger, Raise a Native, Rolls, Sweet Life and Retail Therapy – so that they intermittently flash, blink or stretch across the four screens. These frivolous names are displayed in restrained black-and-white text and often create internal rhythms, bountiful haikus or dissonant narratives. Without the accompanying voice of a – usually male – TV sports commentator bellowing (although it is hard to read these names without conjuring it into mind) we are drawn further into the graphic arrangement between the words. In fact, it is hard not to feel thwarted by the visual absence of the thundering beast itself.

Prodger places over this the shadow of a spectral narrative in the form of a sound loop drawn from Janet Malcolm's biography *Two Lives*, 2007, which constructs a moment between Gertrude Stein and her lover Alice B Toklas. A female voice recounts the moment when the biographer finds recurring strikethroughs of the word 'may' on a manuscript. This otherwise innocent word is perceived by Malcolm to be imbued with the stain of Stein's previous lover May Bookstaver. Malcolm constructs a story where either Toklas or Stein herself, under pressure from her lover, sets to work replacing each 'may' with 'can'. This linguistic sleight-of-hand produces little semantic change, only

the jealous marks to be read as an imprint of such a possibility on the page. It is notably Prodder's fascination with the hermetic nature of marginal materiality that is evident in previous works such as *:-**, 2012, and *Percussion Biface*, 2013, which both feature young men cutting up Nike Air Max trainers, or kicking them into soil, into rocks or into each other – sequences ripped from YouTube and online sources. Fetishistic clips which are otherwise tempered by slow, overlapping commentaries upon daily life; dancing in Berlin gay clubs, the visual effect of walking past trees on a sunny day or listening to music wearing soundproof headphones on a flight. Such interfaces with modern technologies or observations to uncover subcultures therein are not only isolated in bodily depictions by Prodder but also broken down into beats, rhythms or phonemes, forming and refashioning their own characteristic repetitions.

Ultimately, these cumulative associations are suspended in cool abeyance in *Markets*: reminiscent of the Stein-like strategy of forcing us to reconsider how language constructs the world by postponing or striking out recognisable images we know. *Markets* speculates on the endless drive towards rearing successes, placed against the childless union of Stein and Toklas, one that brings to mind Lee Edelman's 2004 book *No Future*. Edelman argues that the inherent 'reproductive futurism' of childbirth, which increasingly bestows ultimate societal power to the protection of the child, overrides queer sexualities which provocatively enact a 'negativity' or 'no future' political narrative. The fact that a winning cup of Northern Dancer's gene pool cost \$1m in the 1980s – a record only broken in 2009 – underlies the rampant financial impetus towards the need for a thoroughbred in form and reproduction; *Markets* suggestively asks us to knock that winning cup over. ■

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Whitstable Biennale

various venues 31 May to 21 June

Walking along Whitstable's busy seafront, packed with tourists washing down the ubiquitous oyster with a local brew, it would be easy to miss the 7th Whitstable Biennale, hidden away in the depths of this suburban town. The exhibits are cryptically located in remote and unexpected buildings, often derelict or disused. Any expectation of experiencing a picturesque day out would be misleading; instead the art crowd is offered a dislocated, at times disturbing vision of a place that is not what it seems.

Whitstable has recently been the destination of a mass exodus from London, especially by artists who could no longer afford studio spaces in the metropolis. In fact, Kent's overall regeneration has been particularly visible in its engagement with the arts, notably with the emergence of Turner Contemporary at Margate but also in a cluster of alternative artists' spaces such

as Crate and Limbo in Margate, Stour Valley Arts in Ashford or Dover Arts Development by the famous white cliffs.

This year both the Whitstable Biennale and the Folkestone Triennial (30 August to 2 November) are showcasing work from this thriving regional art scene. This summer's exhibits are particularly poignant as the South East's sinister shift towards UKIP in the recent European elections looms grimly in the background, reminding us that this remains an area experiencing significant deprivation and flux.

The main programme of live arts and moving-image work includes 45 artists and premieres 25 works, and this does not include the satellite component, which runs all year round. Funded primarily by ACE, the Biennale aims to set up collaborative works, notably this year the CRG (Collaborative Research Group), which is based in Kieren's Reed's commission 'From the Ground up (A) Social Building', a temporary space on the sea front humbly housing the Biennale's HQ.

Director Sue Jones, head of the Chisenhale Gallery during the latter half of the 1990s, is renowned for seeking out new artists. Along with curators Emma Leach and Kate Phillimore, she aims to commission works by emerging practitioners, both within and beyond the regional context. The Biennale is known for supporting and showing artists who have gone on to be nominated for major awards, such as Artangel Awards and the Jarman Award, and the Biennale also hosts its own open submissions awards, won by Louisa Martin and Rachel Reupke this year.

Louisa Fairclough's sculptural film installation has impressed many early viewers. Her 16mm installation *Absolute Pitch* (co-commissioned by the Biennale and ICIA at the University of Bath) is sited at the back of the Whitstable Museum and Gallery. To access the work, the viewer must walk through the museum's eccentric and anachronistic exhibits. A motion sensor triggers five projectors intricately looped across the space. *Absolute Pitch* is a melancholy tribute to the artist's deceased sister and a moribund medium. Each projection offers a block of colour, which is screened out of focus, while the sound is of a musical note sung by a chorister. As I leave I wonder if the installation will stop when I have gone.

The Biennale's reflexive use of place is evident in several works. Rosa Ainley's *Building 519, and other Pfizer tales*, located in a community cafe, is a ten-minute sound/text-based piece which documents the memories of people who worked in the now defunct pharmaceutical company outside Sandwich. Sitting alone in the far corner of this empty, twee cafe, these displaced audio narratives transform it into a remembrance site for a lost community. The viewer is offered a pretty memorial booklet containing a fictionalised account of the impenetrable building.

Margaret Salmon's 16mm black-and-white film *Oyster*, 2014, nostalgically pays homage to the community's most distinctive inhabitant. But beyond this direct address in terms of the specificity of its site, the curatorial focus on place is