



Beth Kettel interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 24 October 2017

Paul Luckraft: The work you've developed for Invites continues your use of the structure and aesthetics of TV game shows. What is it about this format that you find exciting?

Beth Kettel: It offers interesting narrative options for the text I've written for the work, helping to house some of my ideas. For example, the rounds and sounds of game shows structure the work as chapters, catchphrases act as hooks, contestants are the characters, the colour palette sets the scene, and the host, assistants and omniscient voiceover are used as multiple narrative voices. Game shows also allow for a series of disparate ideas to come together, in many forms. The binaries that game shows usually contain, like skill/chance and physical/mental, seem really simple but relate to larger ideas that I have brought into the narrative for *The Mist of a Pessimist*. There are more philosophical ideas about the relationship between mind and matter in relation to the three characters – an animal, a human and a machine. I'm playing with their physical bodily presence, using camouflage in the costumes, for example. And I'm playing with their mental capacities in the text, which talks through aspects of consciousness, moods and feelings.

PL: The idea of multiple voices, either across a cast of characters or emanating from one person, features prominently in this work. Have you referred to particular books or texts in the fields of psychology or neuroscience?

BK: A recent book called *The Voices Within* by Charles Fernyhough has been inspiring. It goes into our inner voices and different types of thinking: how thinking can be in the form of words or more abstract, visual, circular, direct or motivational. It addresses morality and memory as well as the sometimes terrible and monstrous voices within us. Thinking is mapped out as a dialogue between a socially constructed self and

an internalised 'other'. Inner experience is multi-faceted, and thinking is a multimedia experience. I wanted the different narrative modes in the work to operate on various levels, in a similar way to how thinking shape-shifts. Parts of my text feel more narrated; other parts are more informative. They question and contradict, with shifts into abstraction and repetition. Some of these ideas are reflected out into the fabric of what I make – the multidisciplinary nature of the work as a whole, and the multiple narrative voices that make up the dialogue. My text shifts about. It isn't linear, so you have to allow yourself to surrender to the experience, rather than trying to focus too hard. This relates closely to a bit in Fernyhough's book, which talks about how difficult it is to study thought. He gives an example: that trying to reflect on one's thought is like trying to turn up the brightness to see how the darkness looks. There's something so dark and beautiful about that, about the privacy of our own thought, and its wariness of being caught in action. I've also been reading about the inner dialogue and feelings of animals, and their capacity to be emotionally disturbed. I've also been reading about the voice in relation to the digital, and how the ways we communicate with others are shifting. Does the voice still have relevancy in the twenty-first century, now there are so many other digital options? Perhaps online platforms are now taking the role of inner speech?

PL: The tone of a performance taking a more sinister turn is something you've explored in recent works. How does this sit alongside the more slapstick and humorous aspects of your work?

BK: There's a motif of shape-shifting that runs through my work in various guises. Everything is changeable: meaning, tone, mood, relationships, characters. The characters shape-shift between the contestant and game show

assistants, and eventually come together as a collective monster. The capacity to be monstrous links all three characters (animal, human and machine). Monstrous relationships between the three can be identified. Humans programme machines to pull beaks off chicks as they conveyor belt onto plates; humans hold animals hostage as pets and breed them into particular shapes; many animal species continue to become extinct. Through technological developments nature is manipulated, and human bodies and minds are robotically and chemically enhanced. Monsters lurk within us via the ugly feelings and violent moods of our own fears, which have evolved over time from being afraid of abnormal creatures or undiscovered animals to being afraid of non-native species and hybrids. Governments and the media create 'monsters' of other human races and cultures. However, the monsters of the future more likely relate to our growing population of machines: we fear that something we control will twist around and start to control us. So it does turn a bit dark at points! As you say, the tone shifts around, just as our contemporary experience does. Information hurtles towards us constantly, with abrupt tonal changes: one minute we're looking at something truly devastating; the next, we read a hilarious meme. Related to all this is the stink of the recent political climate, which has been wafting in the background of my thoughts. It's simultaneously slapstick and sinister. Political manoeuvres can be so ludicrous that they're funny, but then you realise the things you read about are actually happening ... and that's dark. Conflicting information is coming from various sources, and people seem not to know who to trust, or whether to even trust their own ideas, opinions or feelings. So, I guess – or hope – that in my work feeling sits as uncomfortably as it does in life: a bit too close, not sure whether to enjoy the proximity or not, not sure whether to trust it, not sure whether it's a

comfort or not, enjoying some bits but not others, following some bits but not others. A general instability.

PL: As well as contemporary art your practice feels in dialogue with the stranger fringes of entertainment forms such as stand-up or TV documentary. Are there examples you can give?

BK: I definitely feel more inspired by things that aren't art. When I can make connections between ideas that go across categories, that's when ideas start to ignite for me, when things start to coincide and interconnect, which is why I make multidisciplinary work and why I enjoy using formats from elsewhere. I've been looking at gestural movements in old game shows as well as TV documentaries, and also more DIY examples, like crowd conductors at football matches and YouTube DIY presenters. In terms of stand-up and comedy, Stewart Lee, Limmy (Brian Limond) and Tim Key are influences. I started appreciating experimental comedy via my brother. I enjoy it for all sorts of reasons but, in relation to my practice, I'm not trying to make work that is outright funny, so it's not about being influenced directly by jokes. But I borrow other tactics, like experimental structures, using literary devices in disguise, the manner of delivery, and having more abstract or incongruous ideas coming together.

PL: Are you always the lead performer in the work?

BK: Usually, yes. But this work, *The Mist of a Pessimist*, is the first time I am not necessarily leading the performance. It's also the first time I have other physical characters: usually other performers are backing singers, dancers or musicians. Multiple characters are usually metaphorical.

PL: The idea of liveness mixed with pre-recorded elements seems key. Is this to do with liking the tension between

fixed things and changeable things, and the energy of things potentially going wrong?

BK: Yes. It's another reason I'm interested in game shows and games in general, especially team sports. There is a set structure with parameters to work within, but then no end of possibilities within that. Also, it's a space where thinking is live and active and operating in multiple ways: intuitively, spatially, and making decisions that relate beyond the immediacy of themselves. Team sport is one of the most beautiful partnerships between mental/physical, mind/body and theory/practice. Today, with how things are produced, perhaps there is less chance for things to go wrong. But sometimes the mistakes are the best bits. Live performance is immediate and present and unable to be edited – it just has to be what it is. The performances I make are still very structured and choreographed, but often things don't work out as I imagined. There's something dark and funny about putting loads of effort into something that could completely flop. And, of course, the liveness is good for my anxiety: it keeps it alive and strong.

PL: Is this project for Invites something you expect to develop, exploring the script further? What is your next big project?

BK: I'm working on a series of these works that take their starting point from game shows, each one focusing on a different element. Eventually I want to bring them all together, each connecting up to make a larger piece of work. Think of the zones in *The Crystal Maze*, for example, which has themed parts of a bigger whole. Coming up, I have a video commission with Phoenix, Leicester and the ICA, London, as part of the Art and Screen Network.

Reverse: *The Mist of a Pessimist*. Courtesy the artist.

Artist's presentation Sunday 10 December, 3pm, free. Please see website for details

Beth Kettel (b. 1988, Leicestershire) completed her BA (Hons) Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University in 2013, and lives and works in London and Nottingham. Kettel has recently presented solo exhibitions at Two Queens, Leicester (2016), Hutt Gallery, Nottingham (2016) and Telfer Gallery, Glasgow (2015). Recent performances include those at Caustic Coastal, Manchester (2017), Eastside Projects, Birmingham (2016), Jerwood Space, London (2016), (it's all) Tropical, Art Sheffield (2016) and Trace Programme, Nottingham (2016).

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