

MU\$CLE

Introduction by Loni Jeffs

When Lady Gaga says I am her inspiration, you reach kids between 12 and 18. Now I am like a brand – jeans, Coca-Cola.
— Marina Abramovic

In 1977 George Paton held *The Money Show*, a group exhibition which elicited 60 responses to:

*'The Money Show
Or
Who's got it
Who wants it
How to spend it
Where to keep it
How to escape it
How to use it or abuse it'*

Framed by an opposition to the traditional arts economy of rarity, previousness and privilege, *The Money Show* inquired into the social and economic structures which maintained such values.

The subject of *MU\$CLE* is not money, but the individual artist's attempt to succeed within capitalism's stronghold. The question here is not how to use it, but rather how it uses us.

Western culture's new-found love for all things design sees our experiences, sensations and desires turned into commercial products. As the barriers between art and design fall away, the consumer world is homogenised. Consider the recent MOMA exhibition at the NGV, where correct movement through the shows sees the audience exit through not one, but two gift shops. As well as a restaurant and market (should you happen to attend on a Sunday).



Biennial culture, luxury business sponsorship, and the amalgamation of fashion and contemporary art has turned art into a kind of entertainment. Large museum shows become spectacles, a site for social activity, documented attendance of such events a symbol of social status.

This is the new audience for contemporary art; those seeking a design, commodity hybrid. As Naomi Klein reveals in her 1999 text *No Logo*:

*'The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multinational corporations over the last fifteen years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980s: that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products.'*¹

That is, what is sold, advertised and distributed in the marketplace is now branding itself. That is, artists are no longer required to be creators or designers, but essentially CEOs of their own personal brand. And with online support from articles such as "How to build a brand as an artist, 7 tips for success" (which contains only 5 tips, and is sponsored by paint supplier offering free samples), can it really be that hard?

*'You are not just an artist. You are an artistic entrepreneur and your art is your big business. As CEO, it's time to take a note or two from the owner's playbook of art business and marketing on developing your brand identity.'*²

The commodity then, is not the art, but the artist. This is the environment - political, social, and economical - that contextualises *MU\$CLE*. Bringing together a varied cohort of artists at different stages in their arts practice, *MU\$CLE* invites the viewer to consider the relationship between contemporary art, the human body and capitalism.



The money-orientated society of western culture has a long history of exploiting the human body. White, western money-makers consistently ship their labour overseas to where working conditions are deplorable. Intense, prolonged, physical labour at a meagre pay rate - capitalism employs and operates bodies as if they are machines on hire. Røy Esther Ether's *Demented Jukebox Circa 1954* engages the idea of labour. When 10 cents is inserted into a cage, a bird will sing. And at such little cost to the payer - why not hear a song?

The foods and substances which fuel the body are dictated by money. Even drug use is linked to income. Consider Vera Jasevski's *Cigarella*, a look at the way we have been motivated to tobacco: the socially accepted, tax-paying, carcinogenic addiction. Drugs which are more expensive and less detrimental to health, on the other hand, remain luxuries afforded to the upper class.

In the same system the marketable woman is thin, attractive, a mother. Reproduction is the creation of the next generation of consumer. As such fertility is celebrated with consumerism: think baby showers and parties for infants who are incapable of remembering them. Jade Burstall's *Precious Little Nugget* considers the body of the young mother. She navigates objects, weights and her gold-coated child, in order to reassert her appeal and relevance post-reproduction.

Nico Reddaway's video installation *MU\$CLE Hu\$\$LE* fetishises the muscular forearm, exemplifying the need to appear strong and desirable to the art world in order to compete. Phil Soliman's *Belly Dancing* critiques the group expectations of both the Egyptian Christian family and masculinity-obsessed gay online culture. Natalya Maller's *I couldn't afford an air dancer at \$695* forms a jaded reflection about the plight of the artist. The air dancer (artist) calls for attention from any buyer who may be driving by. Remembering, it is not the art to be marketed, but the artist.

Stretch, exhibit, tweak, compromise, sexualise, exaggerate, perform. These are the requirements of the human body under capitalism.



Via digital technologies such as social media, virtual reality - the online avatar in general - it is possible to achieve these performed identities. For artists to maintain hype, to show multiple times a year, to purchase and build their firstname-surname.com, requires a carefully constructed persona. An online identity as a means for generating sales.

Amie Anderson's *Hexa Flexa* provides an object representation of fluid online identity. In a non-fixed state these objects are dictated by each viewer's desires. Familiar online language becomes vapid in a print form. Giordano Biondi's *Homes of the Lucky Few* further exposes the falsity of the digital environment, taking imagery from online videos which promise users instant money. In Rose Staff's video installation *The Informed Body*, visual languages of the analogue (body, flesh) and the digital amalgamate, their interdependence expressed. Both the artist and the market become digital, always active.

With this global digital economy there is no reason not to 'be in it'. On every platform. In every gallery. All of the time.

In *MU\$CLE* the artists are forced to compete for space and attention within the gallery. Sounds overlap and combine as the viewer navigates the works. This is the contemporary art environment: works are frequent, space and resources less so. Multiple performance pieces on closing night reinforce the requirement of the artist to command attention, make noise and create space (a market) for their product.

This is the contemporary art market. Artists, in all their bodily and digital forms, prepare to deliver themselves to the voyeurism of the consumption society.

References

¹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs*, Random House. 1999.

² Artists Network Staff, artistsnetwork.com

