

Out of the box: *Economy* in Perth

ERIN COATES

The exhibition *Economy*, curated by Consuelo Cavaniglia and held at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art late last year, is well timed to comment upon the fixation we have with local and global economic conditions – particularly in the context of Western Australia’s supposedly booming economy. Yet the exhibition chooses to deal with its title theme in an unexpected and indirect way. In this article I would like to expand upon the ideas generated in *Economy* by focusing on several of the artworks, all of which were created specifically for the exhibition.

What struck me as immediately intriguing about this exhibition is that it does not actually explore ‘economy’ through its more obvious meaning, as relating to the systems of exchange through which goods and services are produced and consumed. Instead, ‘economy’ – as Cavaniglia asked the nine artists to consider it – is examined as a human strategy; a way of negotiating circumstances in an efficient, economical manner. Of course, it is the artist’s prerogative to break these rules, and not all of the creative strategies deployed reflect an economy of means.

A question that arose for me when reading the curatorial statement and premise for the exhibition was the relevance of strategy. Perhaps the reliance we have on strategy is clearer if we consider how the constraints and demands of contemporary life have created a need for such niche services as life coaches, time-management plans, conflict mediators, multi-tasking training, think-tanks and office sleeping-capsules – tactics developed for the efficient management of resources and time. It is the peculiarities of our responses to the pressures of contemporary life that the artists here seem to have keenly observed and commented upon, and in one form or another, all of the artworks in *Economy* are strategies. They examine the human predisposition to problem-solve – to work inside, against or around different types of constraints.

The primary constraint in the exhibition was set by Cavaniglia, when she gave each artist an identical 60 x 60 cm wooden packing crate, and asked that the works respond to the theme of the exhibition by engaging the set space of this object. In negotiating the limitations of the crate, the artists have developed various tactics that also refer to external contexts. The theme of conflict reoccurs in the show and is explored in reference to pressures of the everyday, to warfare, and to the control and use of space.

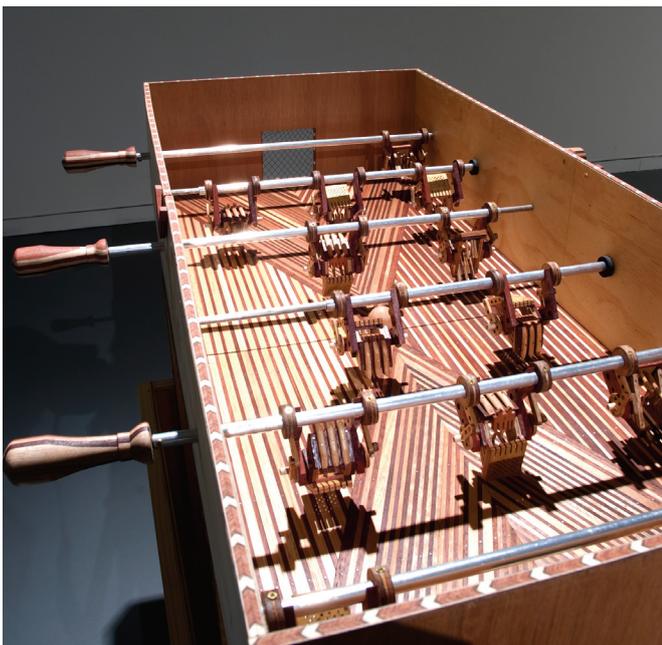
In Mark Parfitt’s *Carlisle Buffalo*, we see the artist negotiating the suburban expectation of keeping a well-manicured lawn while only having limited time to tend to it. In this ongoing project, Parfitt has carved his lawn up into sections and transplanted it from his home in the Perth



Ric Spencer in collaboration with Lizzie Delfs and Britt Salt, *Speakers’ Corner*, 2007, mixed media, installation view at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. Courtesy the artists. Photograph by Eva Fernandez.

suburb of Carlisle, into a mobile lawn-care kit created out of the supplied packing crate. Using a logic that is akin to the kind of DIY ingenuity the Goodies would employ, Parfitt’s strategy is one that defeats its original purpose. Separated into little transportable punnets of grass that are routinely watered, exposed to light, pruned and fertilised, his lawn ceases to function as a suburban yard covering and appears more like a bizarre hydroponics experiment.

Behind Parfitt’s ‘solution’ to the conflicting demands of his daily schedule, I envisage a character obsessed with the organisation and efficient use of time. *Carlisle Buffalo* poignantly parodies the modern obsession with timesaving inventions (invariably sold via infomercials) while probing the compulsion that drives us to create such devices. Tracing back the logic of Parfitt’s DIY character, it is easy to imagine equations and timetables drawn up, allocating time to the various activities that constitute his life. We are reminded



TOP: Mark Parfitt, *Carlisle Buffalo*, 2007, mixed media. Installation view at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. Courtesy the artist. ABOVE: Anna Nazzari, *Untitled* (detail), 2007, mixed media. Courtesy the artist. Photographs by Eva Fernandez.

that time is a measurable, quantifiable, consumable unit like any raw material, and is easily converted into a form of currency. In his oft-quoted *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord refers to this type of 'commodified time' as a homogenous building block that suppresses any qualitative dimension. For Debord, 'commodified time' – as opposed to the 'cyclical time' of older societies – has no reality apart from its exchangeability.

Recognising the exchange value of time, Parfitt's work strives to create an optimal time-usage system. Through this economising process, Parfitt's lawn is subjected to micro-management that has left it parcel-ised and estranged from his suburban yard. In her catalogue essay Cavaniglia suggests that this process could be likewise applied to other aspects of daily life, such as finding a parking spot. It is a project that evokes pathos in its failed desire to create a formula for living.

In another work, economy is dealt with in relation to military strategy. Cannibalising the materials of the crate, Perth artist Anna Nazzari has superbly constructed a battlefield version of a foosball table. In this untitled work,

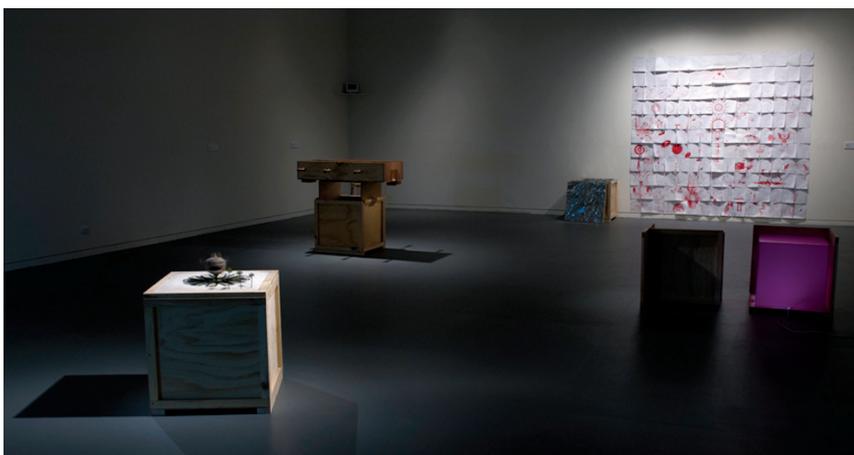
the soccer field is reconfigured as an arena for warfare, where multi-pronged, crib-like devices replace the players and the 'game' assumes a sinister overtone. How exactly the spiked wooden contraptions function is unclear, but they are strategically placed around the field like mini battle-machines in positions of offense and defense.

The sport-as-war scenario proposed by Nazzari's work is not so absurd if we consider the violence that is often suggested in sports reportage – particularly the lexicon of team sports including such terms as 'thrashing', 'slaughtering', 'obliterating' or 'hammering' the other side. Reflecting on the broader implications of sport, George Orwell referred to it as 'war without the shooting',¹ and the approaching Olympic Games have already made clear the intensely politicised nature of the international sporting arena.²

As with many of Nazzari's sculptural pieces (including her wonderfully macabre works of taxidermied and mechanised road-kill), the viewer is invited to control the mechanisms that move parts of the work, and in this case you can spin the turned wooden handles to shift each player/fighter across the field. While the two teams are pitted against each other in play/battle, there is nothing to differentiate one from the other. In the words of the artist, both parties represent identical 'ideas, strength and efficiency'.³ With equal means and no perceivable differences, the adversaries are locked in an endless and futile battle. There is a subtle critique of war in this arrangement; the military efficiency and might between two warring factions is cancelled out, thereby making victory for either side impossible. We cannot help but think here of Bush's various absurd claims of 'victory' in Iraq – a war in which binary terms such as good and evil, winner and loser have lost all relative meaning.

The suggested functionality in both Nazzari and Parfitt's artworks is continued in Ric Spencer's *Speaker's corner*. Utilising the crate as a makeshift podium, the artist has created a portable speaker's corner, complete with leather carrying straps and a little stepping stool. The space above the crate that the speaker would occupy has been defined and extended by a suspended veil of brilliant green netting, gathered and crimped in a diagonal grid pattern.⁴ The netting hangs above the crate like an empty speech bubble, drawing our attention to the space as a site for latent communicative action. Alternatively, the textured green netting could be read as camouflage, aimed at disguising the identity of the speaker – or as a mesh cage, designed for containment. Like all good art, meaning seeps out as a series of questions.

To think through these ambiguities, let us further consider the speaker's corner; a specific area in public space (traditionally allocated and defined by the authorities) in which any member of the public may speak freely. As Spencer has pointed out, implicit in this logic is the notion that if this space is for free speech, other areas outside of it are 'not for free speech'. By its presence, the speaker's corner hints at an invisible opposite; a larger, undefined space in which freedom of speech – and therefore legitimate protest and potentially other civil liberties – cannot be assumed. The reassurance that all of this only operates symbolically is seriously undermined when authorities act, as they did during last year's APEC Summit in Sydney, to divide public space and annex areas as 'restricted zones'. In Spencer's



TOP: *Economy*, installation view with (foreground) Brendan Van Hek's *Hotbed*, 2007; (left, plasma screen) Tarryn Gill & Pilar Mata Dupont, *Heart of Gold Project 4: an excerpt from le triomphe de l'amour*, 2007; (back, left) Ric Spencer's *Speaker's Corner*, 2007; (back, right) Mark Parfitt's *Carlisle buffalo*, 2007; (middle) Bennett Miller, *Romancing the rhino*, 2007; (far right) Tom Müller, *Life in space*, 2007. ABOVE: *Economy*, installation view (left to right) Bennett Miller, *Romancing the rhino*, 2007; Anna Nazzari, *Untitled*, 2007; Anthony Kelly, *Overplan 6103*, 2007; Brendan Van Hek, *Hotbed*, 2007. Images courtesy of Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. Photographs by Eva Fernandez..

artwork, the diagonally gridded netting shifts from abstract geometrical patterning to a figurative reference if we conjure imagery of recent large summits, where a lattice of chain-link barricades and razor wire has been so extensively erected that it appears to surround the encamped protestors.

The authoritative strategies used to demarcate public space and to control what is, and is not, admissible within it are countered in *Speaker's corner* by the tactics of mobility and disguise. In the opposite corner of the gallery to where Spencer's work sits, there is another stepping stool and high above that on a ledge, a TV monitor plays a long, looped video of the artist carrying the crate and walking around the streets of his neighbourhood. We never see the speaker's corner being set up and used, but that doesn't seem important. The act of conceiving of and making a mobile safe-place for speaking asserts the right to *any* space as a site for free speech, whatever the form or content of the oration.

In the absence of a speaker, space is left for the viewer to complete the work – both mentally and in a literal sense. The vivid colour and elaborate folds in the netted veil give it a theatrical appearance and suggest it could be used as a prop or costume by the speaker. It implies some transformative process could take place and offers the potential for different modes of engagement with the work. The veil is a protective

covering, providing a degree of anonymity, but it also extends the spaces around the body and emphasises speaking as a visual, performative act. Although the participatory aspects of the piece are understated, this work is reminiscent of the wearable artworks created by Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica in the 1960s. Oiticica's *parangolés* were constructed of brightly coloured fabric and matting, which were worn as a kind of mobile sculpture intended to modify the wearer's sensorial and spatial experiences in a public space.

Spencer's work suggests, but does not rely on, participatory interaction, and while in many ways it functions as a strategy, its use is non-prescriptive. *Speaker's Corner* reinforces the importance of public space as a channel for communication and emphasises the central role and the agency of the individual within this domain. The speech bubble is left empty, and expectant.

Economy provides other such moments of real interest as well as a sense of dialogue between many of the works – owing in part to Cavaniglia's curatorial prowess and to her having exhibited the majority of these artists together previously. All nine artists share an involvement with the Department of Art at Perth's Curtin University, either as staff or graduates, and doubtlessly they have influenced one another in their approaches to art making. Pairing the crate with the theme of economy draws obvious references to the nature of economic globalisation and its reliance on the transportation of goods. Yet the artists have resisted any easy interpretation and instead use the crate as a

point of departure. The crate becomes a set of circumstances to work against; a box to think outside of.

Notes

1. George Orwell, *The Sporting Spirit*, first published by Tribune. GB, London, December 1945.
2. As an interesting aside, one of the origins of soccer can be traced to the ballgames of ancient Mesoamerica, where it is believed different city-states sometimes used this game as a proxy to real warfare. The stakes of the game were such that the losing team was often ritually sacrificed.
3. Anna Nazzari in the exhibition catalogue essay, written by Consuelo Cavaniglia.
4. The netting component of Ric Spencer's work was made by Perth fabric designers Lizzie Delfs and Britt Salt.

Economy was at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art from 1 to 25 November 2007. The exhibition was curated by Consuelo Cavaniglia; the artists included were: Anthony Kelly, Bennett Miller, Tom Müller, Pilar Mata Dupont, Tarryn Gill, Anna Nazzari, Mark Parfitt, Ric Spencer and Brendan Van Hek.

Erin Coates is a Perth-based artist and lecturer.