

A LABOUR OF LOVE ARDIT HOXHA

An essay to accompany *No More the Fruit*, by Deborah Rundle
RM Gallery and Project Space
May 2021

A neon blue radiates across the gallery space. It's *Happy Hour*, a humble treat after a long day's work, courtesy of half priced drinks, a sedative like no other. Signaling the transitional ritual between work and home, this short reprieve punctuates our daily rhythms. Deborah Rundle signposts the occasion, the contemplation of leisure and play. Contained by a rectangular skirting board, a robotic vacuum cleaner tirelessly works, promising to release us from the drudgery awaiting us at home. Diligently gliding across the floor, it whistles while it works,

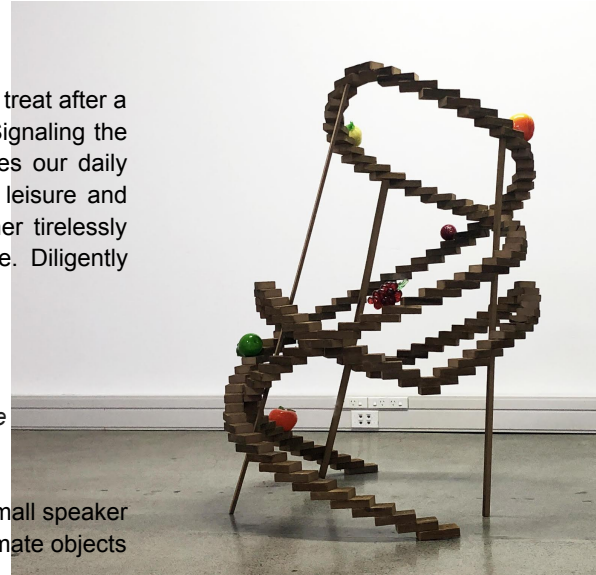
*My old desk never needs a rest
And I've never once heard it cry
I've never seen it tease, it's always there to please me
From nine to five*

Both anthem and sentimental ballad, Harry Nilsson's lyrics echo from a small speaker placed upon the vacuum. 'Good Old Desk' serenades labour, while inanimate objects are anthropomorphised.

Rundle sets these uncanny figures against petrified fruits, nature congealed to glass; sealed and cast into a fixed state. Reduced to ornaments, these objects adorn a wooden structure resembling Tatlin's Tower. Spiraling into the future, the unbuilt *Monument to the Third Internationale* is re-imagined by Rundle. Reaching out to the hand-blown glass placed precariously on the structure, with its promises of utopia; nullified. Elsewhere, a pencil frottage brushes the contours of an elementary circuit board; an artefact, crop circles and fossils emerge. A negative image haunts the technologically possible, ghostly imprints - *the new as always the same*. Rundle declares this our driver's seat, one which is 'agnostic in respect [to] function'¹ and ambiguous in its direction. As a spectre of the future and past, it finds its home in our daily appliances, providing not only convenience but also the extension of our working hours. Made remotely contactable, we are at the company's disposal at all times.

A spotlight cuts across the blue, framing a perspex window with vinyl markings that cast shadows along the wall. *On a Clear Day* reinterprets the Overton Window of Political Possibility, a frame of reference that appeals to the politically palatable. This neoliberal tool appraises policy initiatives according to mainstream appetites, measuring them against the socially practical. Rundle's lighting shifts the narrow parameters of this framing with shadows extending beyond its reach, casting aspersions on behalf of the unrealized. Ideas that remain outside of our horizons, existing beyond our present imagination.

A clean veneer, a smooth and sheeny finish, embodies Rundle's hand. Appearing absent, there are no traces of her touch, replaced instead by the work of automated labour.



¹ Rundle, Deborah. *No More the Fruit*. RM Gallery, 2021.

Happy Hour

For Freud, in infancy our primal drive is directed towards pleasure, a pursuit that avoids discomfort and tension. In other words this instinct aims for a 'zero-point' in friction, a release of energy that steers clear of *displeasure*.² Paradoxically, if this drive was to remain uninhibited; it would lead us ultimately to death.³ Fully satisfied, it would amount to the expenditure of all the energy we have stored, resulting in 'the inability to repeat pleasure'.⁴ The destructive destination of this instinct requires its deferral and re-direction into socially useful activity that prolongs life. Socialisation tames the *pleasure principle*, first through the family and later by society. These external forces encourage the repression of our pleasure for the purposes of extending life itself. In sublimating this drive we ward off adversity and minimise our discomforts, allowing us to meaningfully contribute to our communities; fighting off scarcity and the pain that it inflicts.⁵ Our labour is exchanged for intermittent periods of leisure and release. In return for this libidinal sacrifice our society protects us from the harsh conditions of nature, we postpone our pleasures for the promise of security.⁶ Freud understood this discontent as a prerequisite of our social contract, for the resources of pleasure are scarce.

Alienated labour is necessary in the logic that follows; one which positions work and pleasure as mutually exclusive forces. Working is painful, repetitive and arduous. The fruits of such labour are divorced from our toil. It is a competitive endeavor, dreary and lacking creative recourse. Seamlessly absorbed into the rationale of capital, this logic reinforces our mode of production and the subsequent alienation it requires.⁷ For Herbert Marcuse, Freud uncritically accepted the illusion of scarcity promoted under the banner of productivity.⁸ Increasingly, technological developments undermine the need for alienated labour with automation offering us the opportunity to reduce such hardship.⁹ In an ecological environment facing its limits, resources are far from scarce. The shortages and suffering we face are not the result of nature; they are the product of an unevenly distributed surplus which remains in the hands of a select few.¹⁰ As it stands, we no longer work to fulfill our needs; instead we toil for the profit of others.

Consumerism reconciles an alienated subject with commodities that offer release in exchange for our remunerated wages. Writing in the mid-20th century, at a time when consumer society was massively expanding, Marcuse understood that the working class had more to lose than just their chains.¹¹ With comforts cheaper than ever, the production of accessible goods now relieves our *surplus repression*.¹² On our time off, industries of leisure supply instant gratification, as discounted drinks sedate the tension of our working hours. This repressive release tames pleasure through commodity production, containing its force in regulated environments that permit the exchange of commodities.¹³ Fleeting and trivial, leisure stupefies, all while justifying our alienation.¹⁴ Refusing this proposition, Marcuse offers a vision of labour relations transformed, a communism where work itself is pleasurable and pleasure, in turn, a social good.

² Daniel Cho, 'Thanatos and Civilization: Lacan, Marcuse, and the Death Drive', *Policy Futures in Education* 4, no. 1 (2006): 18–30, p 20.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (2002) p 34.

⁵ Ibid 27.

⁶ Ibid 28.

⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros & Civilization* (1969) p 84.

⁸ Ibid 36.

⁹ Ibid 87.

¹⁰ Ibid 92.

¹¹ Daniel Cho, 'Thanatos and Civilization: Lacan, Marcuse, and the Death Drive', p 23.

¹² Herbert Marcuse, 'Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation', in *One-Dimensional Man* (Beacon Press, 1964), 56–83, p 72.

¹³ Ibid 75.

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros & Civilization* (1969) p 48.

Viewed through the fruits of Rundle's labour, these mutually exclusive forces are reconciled and made complimentary. For Marcuse, the labour of art is a labour like no other, an existing example of work liberated from alienation.¹⁵ With the output of such production remaining in the hands of the labourer, their toil is their own to bear, while the value they produce remains principally under their name. Creative and spontaneous, artmaking remains unassailable to the logic of capital.¹⁶ Otherwise 'capable' of providing the goods, here the private market draws a line in the sand. Since the industrial revolution, artists have remained poor and destitute in their pursuits, with only a select few edified and glamourised.¹⁷ A vagabond and layabout in the public's imagination, the bohemian is neither bourgeois or proletariat, resisting productivity as we know it.

Differing not only in production, the consumption of art offers an alternative form of pleasure. Unlike the commodity, with its instant access to satisfaction, the art object invites contemplation. Reconciling the sensuous appraisal of beauty and aesthetics with intellect and reason, making 'sensuousness rational and reason sensuous'¹⁸. Such kernels provide alternative redirections and expressions of pleasure, the seeds of a life prolonged for creativity rather than profit.¹⁹ In aestheticising labour and teasing at the potentials of technology, Rundle encourages us to imagine a world within our reach, where automation has transformed our day to day. Here, nine to five is the proverbial happy hour, the gallery, a space where such exceptions are made. The work lies in expanding the parameters of this non-space, the carnivalesque of bohemia; stretching its borders across our workplaces, transforming them into sites of contemplation, poetry and play.



¹⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros & Civilization* (1969) p 85.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Willson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (2003) p 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid* 72.

¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros & Civilization* (1969) p 186.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 195.