

**MARK  
PEARSON**

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**UNITED  
WE FALL**

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**ANNIE  
WHILES**



## ON STEINKRUGE AND BILLY GOATS

It's just a door like any other door, but the moment I step through it I can sense a shift in atmosphere. It's not that I've never gone to an art exhibition before. Often, the first encounter with an exhibition is a crowded meeting with the contemporary art tribes and some eye-popping search for the bar. This time, however, I'm on my own, I have a different agenda, and there's nobody there when I step through the door to the Standpoint Gallery. I wasn't there for the opening of the show and now I've come to see if I could possibly write something about it. The atmosphere when I step through the door to the gallery is therefore rather cooling and quiet but I'm soon staring right at a bar that really is eye-popping! Mark Pearson's black and red galore of pseudo-Bavarian vernacular, steinkrüge beer tankards and lobotomised ski-holiday garage-beats is sort of floating in front of me under the cryptic heading of *Bar Vug Gum*. Under the antler-covered stereo, *Dafikraft* is proclaimed in gothic letters, adding a notion of subversive counter-modern crafts to the overall timbre of the show.

Looking at the pseudo-Nazi-Viking Vuggum heading, I'm thinking, 'I'll deal with you in a minute', as if some big bad testosterone fuelled arrested-development-metal-fan in lederhosen is staring me in the face. I want to step back in order to locate the initial feeling I got when I first stepped through the door. This feeling is retrospectively hovering around the

mp

*Bar Vug Gum and R2D2*, 2008

Blockboard, timber, brass, gloss paint, german beer mugs,  
customised stereo system

Dimensions variable

morphogenetic field to my right. One of Mark's large ornamental drawings in red, black and gold (*Broken English*) occupies part of the right wall, adding to the saturated, somehow royal colour scheme of the show. Next to the drawing is a stickers-covered, paint-dabbed plinth with a big brute faceless head in brown parcel tape (*The Bronze Eye*). I suddenly know how to locate the cooling sensation that hit me when I first stepped through the door. I'm reminded of being on holiday in the English countryside and stepping through the door to some medieval castle or other. In the naked stone interior of a castle, a woven tapestry hanging from a wall or a single brass beaker on a small table really stand out as uniquely crafted objects. But looking at Mark's baroque drawing I'm quickly reminded of its material baseness, sheets of paper taped together to support the colourful but loosely executed marks. While a piece of medieval craft speaks about the investment of wealth and labour that makes it stand out from ordinary functional objects, the objects to my right gain their autonomy from a stranger sense of separation from fellow objects, with no such value base attached. I escape the somehow accusative blind gaze of the dumb and mute head that seems now like the tortured knight in armour of my quickly dissolving castle holiday.

I drift towards Annie While's video (*Not Yet*) in the room to my left. Once I'm there a curious pagan ritual is unfolding on the screen like the synchronised double spread of a Rorschach

mp  
*Broken English*, 2006/7  
Acrylic, marker pen,  
spray paint on paper  
252 × 237 cm

mp  
*The Bronze Eye*, 2008  
Parcel tape, cardboard,  
Marvin Medium,  
customised plinth





ink-blob, only not consisting of identical halves. Six youngish men of different appearances, all scantily clad, give associations to some dignified Dionysian drama given a comical edge through the bathroom-play style of the white loin-cloths the men wear. I guess we're in a field in rural England, rather than in Greece. The word pagan comes from *paganus* or 'country dweller', I remember having read somewhere. If the word pagan came to mean a heathen, non-believer or alternative polytheist, it would be someone standing outside the church, and therefore also outside the rigid order of the State. The revolutionary or metaphysical elaborations of this mixed male group seem, however, to be curiously centred on the presence of a small harmless looking dog. Rather than some Celtic wolf or mythical beast signifying wildness, we're confronted with the most domesticated of all animals. A sign, perhaps, that the revolution is always taking on new disguises, and is to be found moving under the surface of the most trivial of appearances? As the men walk off in an ordered manner, the little dog refuses their beckoning to come with them, and scuffles off the screen at an odd angle.

Moving around the corner in my attempt to gain an overview of the show, it is soon clear to me that the dog must be a prime example of what is popularly called a *mascot*. This is because I'm now in the strangely imposing presence of the wood-carved goat *Bringer Bill*. The goat is wearing a yellow cloak with blue, red and green embroidered garden birds. Heraldry, the art of identifying individual insignia such as coats of arms or family crests would not help me to distinguish any definite origin for this coat. I remember a newspaper heading that revealed that an unruly goat, the mascot of the Royal Welsh Regiment once attempted to nibble at Prince Charles' jacket during a military parade. The convoluted history of how goats got into the army



atv

*Bringer Bill's Onshore Leave*, 2008

Carved Lime wood, canvas felt,  
embroidery silks

110 × 140 × 45 cm

and navy, if I chose to pursue it, would no doubt demonstrate something about the mascot as an object of transference. The origins and reasons why a particular mascot is allocated special properties in a particular setting get lost in time. What survives is the mascot as an empty vehicle for projections of power, protection or good luck. Apparently, a Chicago baseball team was once cursed by a man who was not allowed to bring his pet goat into the stadium. A goat has since been guided around the stadium before each match in order to break the spell. In this case, the link between the origin and purpose of a mascot is still there, but illustrates the fact that the connection between one object and another is, in terms of cause and effect contextual. Magic connects cause to effect not through the objects themselves but through the relational assemblages of objects (the Portuguese word *mascotto* means witchcraft while the word *mascoto* means spell). With its inset yellow eye and blank expression, it is hard to say whether the wooden goat is the epitome of animal indifference to human undertakings, or really is a *bringer*, somehow bringing together different worlds. It seems to me that the goat occupies a central space in this exhibition through, in this sense, embodying an idea of synthesis of disparate elements, assemblages or worlds.

I'm starting to get the impression that the objects and images in the exhibition share a type of front, a strong emblematic treatment of surfaces that supports signs or insignia. These surfaces seem to insist on their legitimate existence in the world through evoking a social territory, an idea of sub-societies. On closer inspection however, the insistence on existence is still there, but there is no coherent symbolism to these signs, only patterns of association. Some of this deception comes through looking at Annie's piece *A Week In Weeds* further into the space. I'm particularly struck by the sentence 'switch to

analytical thinking', one of the astrological quotes which all hang neatly under their allocated, beautifully cut out profiles of ornamental weeds. This must be a message to *me*, the point in my rambling notes where I should switch from merely observing to pose my masterfully critical questions. However, it strikes me that weeds are less easy to classify than garden flowers. Weeds are social outsiders, pushing a type of anarchic vitality that does not always tally with the frailty and vanity of human hopes and ambitions. We know for example, that since deconstruction swept the land, it's been common knowledge that there is no fixed link between the linguistic signifier and the thing in the world. In this case, each weed being connected to a quote, the gap between word and image seems blatant. But these works do not illustrate some strategy for deconstructing meaning. Each sentence is a performative command. If we heed these commands at some level, we take part in what seems to be going on in these rooms; *a meeting or binding together of worlds*, that is more about becoming than about analytical reduction.

Though Mark's *Flabby Wings*, a tinfoil eagle perched at the very end of the gallery, part of another of Mark's animated plinths, signals a kind of brutality where Annie's weeds signal a type of delicacy, the affinity in affective range knows no such opposition. Annie's work seem to operate through a subtle synthesis of disparate worlds. Mark's sculptures and drawings, on the other hand, seem to claim a monumental territory that is only sustained through the collapse of the ideological language they seem to front. But in both cases we are witnessing signs which, though their coherence as simple communicators is open to deconstruction, affirm a series of heterogeneous forces. The tinfoil eagle might bring up some Germanic associations, though this is not inherent in the object as such. We know that the Nazis appropriated the swastika from ancient sources,

mp

*You're Just a Pair of Flabby Wings*, 2008

Aluminium foil, timber, gloss paint,  
German beer mugs, brass, customised plinth



aw

*A Week in Weeds (horoscopes from Burgess Park)*, 2008

Coloured card, black pencil crayon  
65 × 53 cm each



perhaps from Eastern religion, so we know what can happen to symbols. The power and affect of standing next to a bonfire is there whether we are at a piece-camp or at a Ku Klux Klan gathering. Benign, brutal or banal, there is a vitality to the DIY craftsmanship I'm surrounded by, a pure affect, but also a sense of social territory. I'm lead to think about the many traditional and new sub-societies of Europe that quietly live their own lives like so many rural or urban social monads. I dimly remember the individual school-banners that only came out every independence day in Norway, where I grew up, the pathetic badges I was given when I was in the scouts, but also the coded stickers advertising club nights I attended in my teens. The need to create rituals and insignia to designate social territory is a need to harness the powers of affect through a normative form. Yet if a territory is the sum of all the material, psychological, spatio-temporal processes that constitutes a society or group, territories are hardly zones of permanent stability. Perhaps the goat that attempted to chew Prince Charles' jacket really is a revolutionary within the ranks of the military itself? Not just totalitarian regimes, but any state apparatus, any normative majority makes attempts at stabilising history. This does not mean that all minor societies are anarchic or revolutionary. It is not the case, as some critical theorists seem to assume, that we can simply define a normative centre as the oppressor of all good marginal causes. The most minor kids' 'club' of bows and arrows, the most well-meaning animal rights group might exercise the most brutal regimes of conformity. But the forces that bind a thing together do not themselves have any nostalgic, xenophobic or idealist alliances. Just as the composites of a physical body eventually depart and become the nourishment for weeds, social bodies decompose and transform as well; territories are transitory states. Any assemblage consists of constantly changing heterogeneous elements. The goat that bit

Prince Charles is a revolutionary only as far as biting represents an impulse of a different order or regime to human discipline. But while some insignia are designed to keep the stability of certain territories for as long as possible, the emblematic assemblages of the space I'm in seem constructed to deliberately invite in elements foreign to the ruling orders.

In this end of the room it is words and sentences that are aliens or are themselves given the alien treatment. So turning around to face Mark's large drawing containing a silver version of the letters *Bad Vug Gum*, another richly ornamented surface, I face again different regimes, systems or orders inhabiting the same surface. The title seems to me like the pseudo-Norse lingo that might adorn the covers of a Norwegian black metal band (gothic Viking would-be-fascism). In contrast, the ornamented patterns have the seductive intricacy of medieval tapestry, while the tape and paper that strings the whole thing together forms another a DIY regime. Like the combination of garden birds, coats of arms, animal kingdom and wood carving that make up Annie's *Bringer Bill*, Mark's drawings and the eagle plinth inset with stickers, bits of steinkrüge and stray bits of wood bring together different territories. In the Deleuzian sense of 'deterritorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation', different histories and milieus are broken up to reform in new constellations. The moment we think we have some idea of which group or society these artefacts could possibly belong to, we also notice that something is jarring. At the moment of looking, the celebratory vitality of these pieces are already marching ahead of their reference points. In two round and dense panels of broken steinkrúges and tankards, Mark's *The Hierarchical Landscape* and *The Man Who Couldn't Afford to Orgy*, the process of merging and melting is taken to the extreme. But like with the other work here, something new emerges, a type of direction



mmp  
*The Hierarchical Landscape*, 2008  
German beer mugs, tile grout,  
gloss varnish on plywood  
38 × 55 cm



mmp  
*The Man Who Couldn't Afford to Orgy*, 2008  
Ceramic figurines, German beer mugs, tile grout,  
gloss varnish on plywood  
48 cm diameter

where the objects find a surprising new autonomy. Looking again at the Tudor crazy *Bar Vug Gum*. I can definitely say that if this is the bar of some club or society, it is one where I would rather not want to be a member. Dense gathering of male testosterone in combination with loud bravado, drunkenness and cultural chauvinism is a heady mixture in any context, even as the structural references for an artwork. At the same time, there is a joyful process or vital line present here, where something continues, where references are left behind in the birth of something new. It is as if the bar in this sense could be the mirror for that dynamic process of cultural becoming where the origin of customs are forgotten, foreign elements stick to local ones as to a snowball, and new territories emerge. Within this process, it's hard to claim a stabile totalitarian order even where pathetic masculine heroism abound. Mark's sculptures seem like monuments of redundant empires, but are just as much reflections of a monstrous vitality of self-genesis. Whenever we think we belong to a church, a club or an art-tribe where the rules are based on commonality, chances are we'll sooner or later discover that that very society is infiltrated by a foreign body or is on the verge of dispersing or becoming something else. I recall passing a church the other day that had a title outside so long I can't picture it clearly. The name was something like the Reformed-Latter-Day-Pre-Pentecostal-United-Suburban-Church of Christ's Brother. It strikes me that the title *United We Fall* perfectly describes the illusory unity of a composite body consisting of disparate elements ready to go their own way as soon as it topples. The notion I get from

mp

*Bad Vug Gum*, 2008

Acrylic, marker pen, spray paint on paper

252 × 178 cm





**Have that conversation  
you are dreading**

anv

*A Week in Weeds (horoscopes from Burgess Park)*, 2008

Coloured card, black pencil crayon

65 × 53 cm each

Annie's ritualistic video *Not Yet* or from *Bringer Bill*, is that perhaps in a society of transitory territories, it is possible for bold souls to use the leftovers from the past to form their own magical rituals. Perhaps it's not even a matter of controlling these rituals, but of calling forth the unknown or use the cracks in everyday reality in to allow miniature new alliances to form between the human and the non-human. Multi-national pharmaceutical companies may right now be splicing goat genes with spider genes to make the latest bulletproof vests. At the same time, in a disused clubhouse in East London, some people are trying to telepathically call forth the stubbornness of a wooden goat to synthesise it with the flight of garden birds. They aim to evoke the gods of the Ancients to destabilise the government. Across the road, a neo-punk teenage goth-girl garage band has taken over the clubhouse of the Germanic football society. The girls are spraying themselves with cans of male sweat, and the air-splitting music drones through the empty Sunday streets like a parcel-tape-monster with no eyes or ears, paving the streets for what is to come.

OLE HAGEN

mp

Mark Pearson completed his MA at Goldsmiths College in 2000 and has shown widely in the UK and internationally since then. Recent exhibitions include: *Intoposition* at Bauernmarkt1, Vienna; *Drunken Boat*, Colony, Birmingham; *Circle of the Tyrants*, a Moot curated project at Southwell Artspace, Nottingham (all 2007) and *Metropolis Rise: New Art from London*, curated by Anthony Gross and Jen Wu, CQL Design Center, Shanghai, 2006.

aw

Annie Whiles is a lecturer in Art Practice at Goldsmiths College. Her solo show *Cuckoo* was at Danielle Arnaud and toured to the Grundy Art Gallery in Blackpool in 2007. Recent group exhibitions include: *Fabric of Myth*, Compton Verney, Warwickshire; *Textile Transporter*, *Art Transponder*, Berlin; *Metropolis Rise, New Art From London*, Shanghai and Beijing, 2006; *Thy Neighbours Ox*, Space Station 65, London, 2006; *Cloud & Vision*, Museum of Garden History, London, 2005; *Death is Part of the Process*, Void Gallery, Derry, Northern Ireland, 2005.

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Published by UWF on the occasion of the exhibition

Mark Pearson and Annie Whiles

*United We Fall*

23 May – 21 June 2008

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ISBN: 978 0 9560164 0 9

Photography by FXP

Design by Fraser Muggeridge studio

**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



