

Te Adam  
Pātaka Art  
Toi Gallery

# OF SORT OF KIND OF Some Conversations Around The Future is Unwritten

AMIT CHARAN, GAELLEN MACDONALD,  
LIZ ALLAN AND THOMASIN SLEIGH

## **Proposal**

### **Braeburn Seed**

**Amit Charan**

This show was about becoming and the title is relevant here, 'The Future is Unwritten'—we are working towards something but it hasn't happened yet. It's in an undefined state. It's in process. I want my work to be located in the present. A lot of my projects are ongoing. Things that I make can be located outside of the gallery context. They are imported in and transported out for a 'showing'. The work still does its own thing elsewhere though when not observed.

This is quite a powerful position in that the work is not really circumscribed by space or time because it is in process, or like you say, a continual present. It is part of this legacy of the dematerialisation of the art object, which can be used but this seems much more active than a conceptual work which is still very grounded in its particular environment.

I was thinking about this work where I want to grow an apple from its actual seed. Did you know that if you did that, you have complete ownership of naming that apple, giving that tree, that particular type of apple a title?

But if you had a Braeburn apple seed, isn't it just a Braeburn apple?

No it's not.

Is it not?

No.

What is it?

It is whatever you want it to be. It would be a particular kind of Braeburn but not its original.

So is it a, a type of species or genus? Or is it the next level down, so that every tree that grows from a Braeburn seed has its own particular kind of genetic make up?

Something like that.

And you're allowed to name that make up?

Yeah and I quite like that, so I'm going to grow an apple tree, because I like the idea of giving apples to people. The tree will keep growing and keep giving apples. The work has its own life span so it's not limited to the duration of the exhibition. It's a lifelong project, I really like that...

Nature/the Natural can give us innumerable examples of process—interesting process that is constantly unfolding and giving and being, and in a way trees are always existing in the very particular present.

I don't know if I should give seeds. I'm not really that interested in locating the tree either.

It does become very...

Monumental or something...

Yeah, circumscribed...

And I don't really like that idea, I like the idea of something that can travel all the time.

More agile, it is about a sort of opening, I mean if you did grow a tree in a very particular space, there's still the transport of the apples, I mean people don't necessarily need to know where it came from or, have a picture of its being or its location, there's a nice mystery in never knowing its location perhaps... You could distance the receiver of the apple from where it came from...

I was thinking about the title—what name would I give this apple? I really like the idea of calling it 'Illegal Immigrant', I don't want it to act as branding though. But the project hasn't come to a point where it feels like it is resolved so I haven't really acted upon this impulse...

## **Proposition**

### **Hovering**

**Gaelen Macdonald**

Well, ok, my observations of working at ROAR! Gallery... I worked there for two years.

Yeah, you've been there for quite a while...

I came from Auckland where there was a lot of busy contemporary activity going on and quite experimental work. ROAR! is about encouraging artists but also the audience. When the public comes to ROAR! we try to establish a relationship with them which helps make

them feel like the art is accessible. Often that's done through the pricing structure. For instance work might be priced at \$20 or \$200. Almost anyone can buy or own a piece of artwork. ROAR! makes other examples of the artist's work in the collection accessible for the audience to browse, and the archives are available too. This helps the audience connect with the work, the space and get a greater sense of what this artist is doing, saying, where they've come from etc.

Yeah.

With artworks being so accessible through price, the audience can start to form their own art collection at home. It becomes something they've put together which they're connected to and can arrange and re-arrange. It's something they are knowledgeable of and can speak about, have opinions on etc. It's about an ownership of taste, preference, politics... what speaks to them, what they find appealing, what they understand. After a couple of months at ROAR! I definitely noticed a different type of artwork on exhibition. It might be referred to as naïve, primitive or childlike, but to me it was exciting and liberating, as I could identify the honesty and 'pleasure of engagement' the artist had got out of making the work. Whether it was joyous or sad, I felt I was experiencing the creator's input/role in the piece. It was refreshing to see such strength of opinions as the artists were making it for themselves, irrespective of who else might be looking at it later down the track.

How do you find these people who are doing these amazing things quite privately?

Organising and putting the call out for group shows, meeting and talking to people. Going to different community group events, it's talking to people on a grass roots level and listening. Just finding out what they do and when they do it and how they do it etc. For instance, Sue Soo is an 85 year old Chinese woman who produces 3 or 4 paintings everyday. She operates out of her room in an Island Bay rest home. The staff have become accustomed to her ways, and the other residents like to check in on her and see what she's producing that day. She lost her husband in the early 70s. She turned to painting as a way of coping. She always paints happy couples or ballerinas, animals and some plantlife... she paints to keep herself happy. She was discovered when she lived in a flat in Kilbirnie as she was running out of wall space for all of her paintings and so she started hanging them on the windows too. Passers by would stop and would ask to take a better look inside her painting layered flat... and so word spread from there. It's just so great that she's still painting.

Yeah, it's interesting, just thinking of the term 'grass roots' there, I wonder how, if you are hovering in this high culture realm whether it is possible to re-connect to those grass roots. I feel like that place of one to one, individual experience is where political or actual change might take place. I wonder whether it is possible, you know high culture is hovering above that realm, and whether it has lost that or if it operates in a way that ignores, or doesn't value that exchange.

...

I guess around the time I came to work at ROAR! I was beginning to question the point of making a whole lot of work... I didn't see it having much of a life after I was finished with it. And I guess the point I'm trying to make is that there's some value in the doing for doing sake and then if you choose to share it with an audience then it becomes another thing, but the work is not necessarily made with the audience in mind first.

You have that compulsion inside of you somewhere.

Yeah, and if it's that strong it comes across. I have a lot of faith in that audience being able to pick that up without having to know a lot about the work or the artist, or the ideas behind the show, there can be immediate connections either good or bad.

Maybe I'm just really sceptical about the audience's power you know, people's power to connect or understand. There's that disconnect that happens. Nothing more so than contemporary art has the power to annoy and confuse and alienate people...

If you have too much information, it runs a risk of not inspiring the audience to think for themselves and come up with their own questions because it's all presented, it's all given out. And understood and articulated and re-constituted.

Going back to discovering someone's jewellery box or treasure trove is not really a role you can play because it's all been thought about and written about and vigorously gone over. I can think for myself and I know what I want to extract from something and I don't always need a lot of supportive information to go with it.

I think high culture definitely does have its place, but perhaps the audience just needs to be quite clear about what kind of experience of engagement they are signing themselves up for before they go into the space. I remember at art school one tutor said to me, "Gaelen, you can't worry about the audience, if you worry about the audience you won't make anything because you're too busy thinking about the result before you even start".

### **Reflexivity**

**Malcovich Malcovich Malcovich**

**Liz Allan**

And I, of course I will, when I, so that's recording...

Now you have to say the time the date where we are and ask me what I had for breakfast.

Liz Allan, Thomasin Sleigh, I don't even know what the date is, March sometime.

23rd or 4th?

23rd of 4th?

Tuesday.

March.

It's Wednesday!

Fantastic.

Unspecified on all counts, free flow, yip, Olive Cafe, brownie, tea, flat white, yup, art and politics. GO!

Go! Ahhh! But um, of course, I will talk to you guys particularly about what I do with the text, so I won't be taking your words out of context or, I will definitely run it by you guys when it comes to the editing process as well, um...

Mmmm

But the kind of intention is to shift, kind of, the response, kind of, from a straight forward analysis or discussion but to use the discussions as a way to spring into other kinds of realms and also to use that conversational language to kind, to maybe, as a kind of raw material, um, to provide a kind of structure...

Mmmm

Does that sort of make sense?

Like a conversational structure or an argument structure? Or?

Um, I'm really not sure, I'm going to transcribe, because you know how there's always that distance from conversation to seeing you know, the transcription is always you know slightly strange and it feels like, it definitely feels like there's a remove from from the moment, it becomes this kind of material or something, so I'm going to see what sort of comes from that process of transcription, um, yeah, um yeah, I'm slightly, I don't really know what is going to happen. So, yeah, but I was thinking of speaking with Amit maybe as well as another artist, and I haven't quite decided on the other person, but I brought Laura's curatorial essay for the show and she has this structure thing, her kind of curatorial brief is 'Another Form of the 3 Act Structure', so she has 'Proposal', 'Proposition' and 'Reflexivity', so I was thinking of maybe using that kind of three that kind of tripartite structure for the text, the critical response as well, maybe, just sort of mirroring it, as a, as form, but yeah, um, yeah, so um. What I kind of um, what I wanted to talk about is, ah, from the impetus that Laura gave us of the show, is this kind, as this kind of potential experimentation of what art and politics might mean now, or last year, so it was last year in July or something, um, and also coming from quite a deep set scepticism about art and politics, I kind of go through these ebbs and flows of

kind of what I feel is the political efficacy of art, and I'm kind of at an ebb at the moment. I think I went into an ebb after being in Venice and seeing the kind of massive, bombastic structure of the Biennale and feeling like quite disillusioned with its kind of conceptual underpinnings and outcomes and everything about it really. And I'm waiting for my kind of re-investment...

Yip

Moment to come...

That's not surprising. I think that the yeah the Biennale structure or Venice, I've only experience it once, but it was the great European Art Summer thing and so the tour for me consisted of, I think it was first Munster Sculpture Project and then Documenta and then um, then lastly the Venice Biennale. And yeah, that was definitely the most kind of Garden Party way of approaching a big collection of artworks and it does, it does still seem a little bit like a trade fair in that nationalistic kind of a way, um...

And the interesting thing about it is that so many of the projects turned in on themselves and there is, and what Laura talks about in her, her kind of argument in the essay, she talks about, she briefly touches on, if art can't be, if you are gonna kind of measure usefulness, it can't be as useful as say, I don't know, being an activist or a scientist who discovers for example new ways to recycle plastic polymers or something, if there's kind of a spectrum, maybe the political efficacy of art is in its self-reflexivity or in its, or, also its reflexiveness of the societal structures from which it is born. But, in Venice so many of the projects were reflexive about Venice, like there was a Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster project which talked about all the times she had been asked to show at Venice, and it was kind of a video of her, kind of self-grappling with what Venice is and why she should show there, and then there was the Steve McQueen project in which he shot, um, the Giardini in winter time, and showed its kind of desolation...

Yip

And it's like if artists are so aware of what Venice is and what is represents, why does it continue, how and what does it continue as a system?

Yeah, there's plenty of systems that are not corrupt per se but are perhaps out of date that continue because they do serve a function, and it might not be an avant-garde, political function, but, and in this case it's probably a nationalistic, touristic, capitalistic function that serves many people, and I mean those two self-reflexive, critical projects were self-reflexive and critical but only speak so far as they are part of that system by attending. And yeah, the self-criticality um, approach I think can end up turning into a full circle narcissistic project, um, self-reflexivity is good I think but only in so much as it allows some kind of agency outside of itself or reflects on something outside of its feedback Malcovich loop.

Malcovich Malcovich Malcovich.

Yeah, that it creates. Yeah, um, yeah I guess that there's a, I was talking recently with Caroline Johnston, who was a, who is a good person for a quote on the relationship between politics and art, but um, I think, I can't remember who we were talking about but, um, it was basically, I think perhaps a reflection on the, you know the role of the artist as opposed to perhaps the role of the scientist or the activist, is ok, creating an environment where you model this idea of self-reflexivity so that's a good example, um, but also I think the um, maybe it's also that potential to speak up and to say things that people don't usually say, whether that's about politics or not about politics, whether it's about some personal, political situation, whatever theory is personally important at any given time. But um, I think sometimes what could be kind of interesting in relationship to the difference between an artist and an activist is potentially a critique of the mode of language used, um...

Sure.

And, um, especially in terms of media although that's of course, I mean, there are plenty of art activists out there that blur those boundaries, but there is also perhaps an opportunity where artists can be seen as operating in a way that is outside of a political sphere so in order that they can, because they are perhaps not aligned to a certain political group, um, they can step slightly back from it, although, always acknowledge through that self-reflexivity their implicitness in those systems. But, I mean if you're perhaps, if you are an activist you adhere to a wider group that you, that you argue with and from... Whereas, I have, perhaps more of a traditionally individualistic notion of an artist, even though that is questionable...

Do you think it's possible to, if you are suggesting to be kind of outside of a particular ideology that, that, that kind of prescribes your political movement, is it ever possible to be outside of that?

No.

No.

Yeah.

But there are attempts to dance around it.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And um, perhaps poetics has a lot to offer politics.

...

Mmm, sure, yeah, I don't know. What happened in the 60s or the 70s or when they were all 'utopia is now' and they all felt a certain, you know, because there are plenty of arguments to suggest that art has agency in ways that politics, like it affects people a sensual level and that's a deeper felt effect than say a political or philosophical argument, and that it talks straight to the humanness of us.

Yeah, I think that's, I haven't read much Rancière, but that's his thing isn't it? That through its tangible objects, its form is the power, that sort of transmits itself on a completely different kind of cognitive level. Um, which I believe...

Zizek says something interesting, because he talks about how um, how the Left has kind of co-opted him as a speaker and when they come and listen to him talk there's, there's a conscious or unconscious desire that they have that they want to answers from him, that they want, it's like the Left has a project, to not um, has a project to not just create rhetoric but to um create ways forward, so that when you go to activist meetings or whatever, there're always still points of action so that's there's a you know, a clear pathway, um, and he says that's not his job and it's not philosophy's job, and his job is not interested in politics, and his job is to help his audience understand what their desire is from him, understand what their understanding is.

So this is a kind of benevolent project in a way.

Well...

Giving people...

I wouldn't call it benevolent.

He doesn't sound very benevolent.

He not very at all.

He's more malevolent.

Ha, yeah.

It kind of has a religiosity.

I think it...

To it, a kind of self-understanding...

Yeah, totally, but I think it's more frustrating that desire, rather than perhaps...

Or revealing it, revealing the sort of undercurrents of why you are coming to this meeting.

Yeah, that's right.

And maybe in doing so revealing, revealing that weight of that.

...

Yeah, um, what was I just thinking just then, you know, you go through the 90s and read things like 'No Logo' and you do think about corporations and you think about institutions and, you know, when I was going through art school there was a really clear relationship between, you know, student as, um, as operator and institution as power structure and I think there's a, it places you in a, really

interesting position as to what it is that you are perhaps able to resist so there's a, there's a whole lot of ideology that they articulate, and is implicit with that education. One of the first books that I read that kind of was an interesting political door opening for me was Bell Hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* which basically looked at the school system and the relationship between teacher and student and the power structure inherent in that and the spoken and unspoken um, types of ah, yeah, struggles that go on within the classroom. So she's a pop, or she uses pop references a lot, and this is what Zizek does and they both, they both have this attempt to speak in a more plain language, so all the, you know, those things have been really interesting. But um, I think that given ... yeah, that was like a really good guide to understanding my position in that institution but coming out of it and being an artist in the market or in the kind of gallery system, then you've kind of got this changing relationship with these different galleries and different curators and power figures and the selection process and then a lot of the work that I've done has kind of directly related to those um, to those ideas, um, but I think it's yeah, it's interesting when, because I think practices, as I think mine is at the moment, isn't directed towards a particular institutional outcome then you start, it's also kind of like, there's a kind of 'choose your opposition' or define yourself in terms of your resistance to some kind of institutional other.

**Amit Charan, Gaelen Macdonald, Liz Allan and Thomasin Sleight July 2010**

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