

The Knitted Poo and Other Machines

Ben Leslie 'Prop Shop for Sculpcha Vulcha' and Team Textiles 'The Knitted Poo Machine,' at Feltspace June 2013

Step into Feltspace and discover art machines.

This is art which eats at the—seemingly—permanent, steel-welded foundations of modernist sculpture. These temporary, performative, anti-monumental assemblages are variously feeding off the old stuff and plugging the immense outside world into their inner workings.

It is hard to stay still in this installation. I am torn between points of colour and the hacked, restless energy of dismembered, zombie-like sculptures that (missing a leg) wrench one from somewhere else to stumble on regardless. This is sculpture that eats sculpture; this is sculpture that sings and howls. The insides of these beasts are loosely held together and assembled from prop-like collections of structural pine offcuts (cheap and temporary) shiny on the outside and ready for the cameras. Their mouths and soft bellies are carved out by high powered machines and are bravely painted.

I am told this is a prop-shop. So... not a 'walk in off the street' type of shop but rather one open only to directors, production designers and set-dressers. I am here, so I must be making a film and the Sculpcha Vulcha, is mine to command. If art provides a *Mise-en-scene* that generates its own narrative¹, then Ben's works are props for thinking and *Sculpcha Vulcha* is an action packed feature that might be made and remade in the minds of all those who visit the exhibition.

The two rooms of Feltspace gallery are connected by play, humour and, a common appetite for the tasting, chewing, spitting and shitting out of other ideas and older forms. In the back room recycled yarn is stretched around spindles, through clasps, and along circuit lines. These symmetrical woolly workings might be the abstracted insides of a great industrial knitting-machine-bird. Its threads spread out on all three walls, pooling at a central point, converging into dual work stations. It is here that the poo making begins proper. In your hands and through your fingers. It turns out that the living heart of the poo-making machine is you... which, I guess, has always been the case.

As Brancusi's column stands (invisible but endless) amongst Ben Leslie's works, so *The Knitted Poo Machine* might be the lovable, funny sibling of Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca*; a version of which is now permanently located at MONA Tasmania (on the home turf of [Team Textiles](#)). Feed the *Colaca* with a tasty meal and it processes it, through shiny mechanised innards, into expensive, shrink wrapped shit for nihilistic art consumption.

Mae Finlayson travelled up from Tasmania to install *The Knitted Poo Machine* and to instruct us in its use. This is the third time the machine has been shown and each time it moves, its accumulated outputs travel with it. The machine was certainly ON at the opening with people lined up to knit with lab-coat-clad Mae. Later experiences of the work are generally of a more distanced contemplative type. *The Knitted Poo Machine* is a work where the question of 'what is it about' might be replaced with: When is it? What is it becoming? And what are the effects of the experiences and conversations it generates?

The work is shamelessly funny. It deflects serious, white cubed arty questions by laughing at itself whilst turning out hand-sized knitted poos; each one different as the variously shaped fingers that made them. Humour deflects seriousness and in doing so makes a seriously important space for

¹ Ben mentioned this idea when we caught up to speak about his work just prior to the exhibition. We tracked the thought to Lawrence Weiner: *If in Fact There is A Context: 100 Notes, 100 Thoughts: Documenta Series 008 (100 Notes - 100 Thoughts/100 Notizen - 100 Gedanken)* Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012.

playing with big ideas around power structures and co-authorship. Meanwhile, we (the audience, the makers) are nailing our work to the wall with hammers, as if enacting a small absurd revolution.

“It needs to be an activity that everyone can take part in, regardless of skill level” says Mae, as she helps cast a poo onto my fingers... I am with my grandma and learning to crochet, held for an instant inside a half forgotten house and hemmed in by Sunday afternoon rain... The poo grows gently out of the back of my hand. I pull a thread and it magically forms. As we bag it up, Mae says, “you know, you just made the first South Australian poo” - and I feel like I have done something a little bit special.

Sasha Grbich is an artist, writer and a lecturer at the Adelaide Central School of Art. She is currently a postgraduate student at the University of South Australia.