

## Bring on the beautiful

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**Nicki Wynnychuk: *Fidelio*, performance and exhibition at Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington, October 20 – October 26**

The premise: 4 good-looking women were hired by the artist to attend the exhibition opening and behave detached and impassively. They were given two films – *Lost Highway* and *eXistenZ* – as reference points, and they were to initiate no conversation themselves, merely respond to others. A video was made of the project, which was subsequently shown at the gallery as the exhibition. [The following is an email exchange between Emma Bugden and Wellington artist Kaleb Bennett – ed.]

-----Original Message-----

**From:** Emma Bugden <Emma.Bugden@wcc.govt.nz>  
**Subject:** Hey  
**Sent:** 29 Oct 2003 02:36:38

I keep meaning to ask you about the Nicki Wynnychuk performance at the Enjoy project, and how you felt about ending up in the resulting video. Charlotte from Enjoy said that one of the guys included in the video came along to Nikki's artist talk and was really upset and angry. I guess he felt his privacy had been invaded, so I would love to hear how you felt about it.

I thought myself it was an interesting work... and funny how effective it was. Women will never talk to other women who are aloof and posed, men will be drawn to them like a moth to a flame... this is a binarism but seems to be born out by the performance. Did you feel upset by your inclusion, were you embarrassed? I thought it was great, and nothing to be ashamed of, we all like to perve at beautiful people.

I posted something along those lines on the Enjoy discussion list cos I thought someone might object, but so far no one has.

cheers, Emma

-----Original Message-----

**From:** Artbruit [mailto:kb@artbruit.com]  
**Sent:** Thursday, 30 October 2003 6:57 a.m.  
**To:** Emma Bugden  
**Subject:** RE: Hey

Yeah, it's been on my mind. Not having seen the final video I'm unsure exactly, but my gut reaction is both favorable and not. Usually I hate being filmed and will avoid it furiously. At the opening I saw Tao with the camera and decided, in the interests of ART, to go along with it. Also, I was recruiting for my Art Box project so wanted to stick around.

I feel somewhat the fool for not picking up that something was going on. Seems obvious now— weird looking people acting strangely, man filming diligently, extended drinking time at huge expense. More than

anything I feel angry that when I was talking to the girl (I think I know the conversation you mean) she was simply acting a role designed to manoeuvre me into a particular (stereotypical, demeaning) position, while I was attempting to communicate an idea with no inkling of this... although, I remember feeling that there was something pretty fucken weird about how she was acting. And on another level, we're all acting all the time anyway; power games, etc. A normal part of life, but usually we don't like to talk about it.

I think the idea is excellent exactly because it is so hard to deal with. Ending up on film acting like an idiot is never cool, but probably an important lesson. No one likes being manipulated, and maybe this is the heart of the problem. A devious exercise planned to expose human fallibility, and as such it worked fine, from what I hear. A learning experience? But I think as a lesson it will lose its strength if it doesn't show sensitivity to people's, er, feelings. (Holy shit! he said that?) If you humiliate someone enough, any point you wished to make will likely be lost. Also, exposing human weaknesses is only effective for me if you are prepared to face up to them yourself. I'm getting self righteous as fuck here, but you see the point. It's a good idea if we can all laugh along together, not if people are randomly strung up, sniper fashion, and pissed all over for the sake of ART, of all wretched things.

The issues of manipulation and guerilla filming during personal moments seem to me the most offensive. Personally I feel like a fool for being taken so easily. Always seems you get fucked when you let your guard down. "Oh, there's a camera, but it's for art purposes, probably innocuous; documentary footage or something..." And then bang, you're on screen in a show in a public gallery, without your permission, acting like a fucken idiot with your dick out in precisely the manner that they hoped you would when they staged the thing. Good and bad. The (recognition of) loss of control over your own image is problematic for many people, including myself, but almost impossible to avoid these days. I like the ruthlessness of it, and the inability to hide from your own bullshit, but perhaps there's a point where that becomes counterproductive.

But some fascinating stuff in there. I liked it and am enraged at the same time. Don't know if it's better to see it or not to see it. Can't say how I'll react if I do.

Also, it makes me think of information manipulation to achieve a predefined goal: selective presentation, propaganda, etc. Did Tao film people during ALL dialogue with each other, or only with the 'beautiful' people? If yes, was the footage of people talking to regular folks presented alongside that of the actors? Can we be sure that the filmed results of the event were not manipulated or formatted to make a particular point, regardless of whether or not the raw, unedited footage (or events of the evening that never made it to film) suggests such a conclusion?

I do find it disturbing that I am supposedly



**Above:** Nicki Wynnychuk, *Fidelio*, performance shot, Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington, 20 October 2003. Photo courtesy of Tao Wells.

capable of giving more attention to an expensively dressed actor than to others in the room. But is this even true? Is the resulting anxiety justified? Would you prescribe Prozac or Ritalin?

-----Original Message-----

**From:** Emma Bugden <Emma.Bugden@wcc.govt.nz>  
**Subject:** RE: Hey  
**Sent:** 32 Oct 2003 10:17:45

Thanks for your email. I hope my email didn't freak you out though, the video's fine, you don't look like a total plonker. I think the thing is; they diddled everyone who was at the opening, even those of us who didn't end up in the video. And they edited it to create an event which wasn't really there, or certainly an event I didn't know about.

I knew there must be a performance going on: the physical work in the gallery was really dull and just couldn't have been the point. And I saw Tao filming and someone said something about a performance coming up later in the night. But I couldn't work out what it was, the whole evening unsettled me but I couldn't work out why.

When you see the video it's weird. Everything has been taken out except the four women, who pose really vampily around the gallery, glowering beautifully at nothing. There is no sound at all, and it's all in close up. Just the women alone by themselves, and then the women standing there silently, while men perform at them, talking away animatedly and closely. One poor man is videoed talking to two of them in quick succession, he obviously thought he was getting lucky that night!!!

It's strange because it is obviously the same opening I was at, but I don't recognize it at all. And that's why it's interesting, cos it gives you the impression (which I'm not saying is right or wrong but it's obviously the impression that the artist was trying to communicate) that men somehow view events differently to women—

predatorily—like wolves stalking prey. It's interesting even if you disagree with it. And I felt just as silly as you might feel, even though I'm not in the video and not male, because the whole event was playing out in front of me and I was oblivious somehow. It made me feel not very savvy and somehow taken advantage of. Which is almost the best aspect of the whole thing, cos he managed to make both men (who were drawn into the performance unawares) and women (who were completely excluded from the performance without knowing it) feel manipulated and made fun of.

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yeah I agree. Because the thing is, Nikki gets off scott free and uninvolved, which doesn't seem right. He is complicit within it, but somehow removes himself so that he becomes invisible.

And anyway, what's the lesson we are supposed to learn? That men like beautiful women? That people desire things which seem unobtainable? His work is not only stating this, but also seems to be implying that acting that way is therefore bad. And I don't think it is. It's inevitable anyway; we are all drawn to people who seem beautiful and glamorous and offer us something more than what we have. We all consume beauty, we consume those people around us who are beautiful. Perhaps beautiful people have more power because of this, or perhaps in doing so we render them vacuous and facile. And beauty is also fleeting. Bring on the beauty I say!

cheers, Emma

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**Emma Bugden is a curator based at the City Gallery Wellington. She is known to frequent Enjoy gallery openings.**

**Kaleb Bennett is a Wellington-based artist.**