

## Office Gossip Bastard Venting An interview with Tao Wells

Tao Wells is a difficult artist. At least that is what I had heard. I have long been interested in difficulty as a conscious tactic or as a thematic. Difficulty was one of the many possible themes for dreamy large group shows the co-editors of this magazine discussed at length until we came up with some other idea. We are interested in the idea of difficulty itself, rather than the way difficult might be seen as some kind of problem to be solved; a kind of pure difficulty.

Wells' installation, *Winning Teacher*, part of *The Bed You Lie In*, a show in Artspace's traditional emerging artists slot, consisted of a show within a show of work based on other works in the exhibition, and asked the curator to rank the works in the order of her preference. This was apparently a difficult proposition for curator Tessa Giblin, who opted to position the works in alphabetical order, rather than to show favouritism for one work over another. I guess Wells was attempting to scratch below the surface of Giblin's curatorial politics to see what was underneath, perhaps looking for a kernel of connoisseurship, or something.

Curatorial politics have also been in the limelight in Wells' hometown of Wellington, with *Panning for Gold*, a forum for curators about issues relating to curating. After hearing second-hand about goings-on at this curator-fest I thought it might be good to talk to Tao in a casual manner about these kinds of issues, and I suggested a theme of difficulty, which perhaps resulted in an interview with Tao with his [*sure, like it is only my problem!! T.W.*] difficulty face on.

### **My co-editor said that you were writing a short story during *Panning for Gold* at the City Gallery Wellington<sup>1</sup>. What was it about?**

I wrote about the room at the City Gallery, during the *Panning for Gold* talks, I had the most detectable feeling that we, the audience, were all in on it, were an inclusive bunch; there seemed to be no individuals, only a warm exasperating sigh, a collective desire to smother by design, much better to avoid responsibility... So I just tried to put down some of this feeling as it happened. I wrote:

*A Particular Audience, (New Public)*

*Closer people, hear over my heart. The room breathed very stilly – as a group the feminine collective laughed out a giggle with the funny little man narrating. The body collective puts out its examples, spits of heads with arms and breasts, little mouths that speak squeaks, iron jaws, glass eyes stare vacant with collective momentum, another man is elevated, placed on his stool, his pedestal, his scrotum pulled his rectum exposed blathering out the insights of others staked heads, a row collected along the road.*

*She is visited. We sit together. I long for sleep her soft hit*

*sends this wave south. Now breathing is not my own, a breath escaped I did not know its name, my eyes fall back down my throat, the holes welcome the tentacle its tongue a wet smack, ripping my mask, my teeth grow out my fingers and grip this pencil in pain. The man is still speaking. I act with my 1st real thought, reach out and cut his neck sever the lump that makes him talk, put my hand down his neck pushing his head like a rock to block the flood, taping him up I seal his lump with plastic wrap and turn to face its female collective, I'm hit multiple times before I learn to move, my feet have been severed. I grip my knees and shift those thighs, to fall over roll under the table, stop hold my breath to hear over my heart the movement. The man had said something funny and the room licked his hand.*

Another righteous adolescent fantasy from a grown man. I still like it though. An alternative title is "The man who grew more handsome for every kind thing he did."

**Wow, interviews are great for minimal outlay and maximum return.**

Nice. Since I rarely entertain insults I'll take that as an affirmative; lite sarcasm. But what the hell did you think of the story man!

**No insult intended. I thought the story was great. I watched *American Psycho* again a few weeks ago, and your story reminded me of the drawings of dismembered corpses Patrick Bateman's secretary found in the appointment book in his desk drawer.**

I remember that scene, and thinking I don't want it to end, I want to look at all the drawings, and then being surprised that it did go on for a really long time so you could look at all the drawings, as if it truly was someone's little art exhibit right here in the middle of this Hollywood movie. Fucking brilliant, strange leaked moment.

**About the story you wrote: what made you want to write it? Was there something in the air at *Panning for Gold* – was the City Gallery's air conditioning spiked, something in the morning tea?**

Remember creative writing in secondary school English? I tried it then and it was like a bad short story. This is similar but as I said before there really was this incredible atmosphere, one that I didn't want to acknowledge, it was too obvious too clumsy and burdensome, like a stereotype who is shaking your hand, so I was challenged to recognise this mood, this creature and identify its mechanisms, despite my own feelings of not wanting it to exist. I felt very much as if I was a reporter jotting down the visualisation of the air brought to life by the people breathing in that room, a room that I too had to breathe, and as a member of the audience a body to my horror was being shared. In a sense I was struggling to maintain my "adult"

identity confronted by such an all-consuming and what seemed to be [a] highly unaware or unmarked/challenged creature. I sometimes do this kind of thing, I'm one of those "poetry is really important" but hate hearing other peoples poetry kind of guy, (and I'm single and available:) somebody blow a whistle...

**Can you tell me about your work in *The Bed You Lie In* at Artspace – what were you trying to do there?**

The idea was simple enough: create a template/context/parameter/structure that would be seen negatively and take heat for it, [...] to reflect some ugly reality inherent to gallery culture and then pit this against the [artworks' attempt at] trying to communicate with each other (which is a positive generally, but hell) despite the environment in which it is received and placed. I think the relation between [their] works [and] mine is exciting and unstable; full of promise; much more interesting than the actual works; but mostly available only to those who enjoy and speak formal art qualities.

It was a sucker punch, where when I got hit I would lie on the floor and collect sympathy, which worked, only (surprise!), the gallery didn't get it, didn't want to be hit, fought me on every little thing and ultimately made me compromise the work's integrity to sooth their version of what I should be doing, as if they were a competing artist which is exactly how they behaved. Typical but unfortunate. [This] work springs from my distaste of curated theme shows, which having worked at Enjoy for so long, (52 shows/nine themes), just DOES NOT WORK! The artist's work is debased and its own integrity and contribution to a living art is undermined by devaluing the intelligence of its own framing and spitting in the face of the audience that actually gives a damn by making it serve some curator's tangent so painfully confessing its desperate appeal to the dumb and distracted. I say FUCK OFF. Artists/Curators if they know anything should know if the artist is weak stick the knife in, if they come out fighting leave 'em to it... but let the artist speak FIRST AND THE LOUDEST; at best curator [should] be a good facilitator and you too will shine, as an artist (like my rules make) you suck!!!!!!!!!!!! How many shows do we have to see of up-and-coming talent that is a selection of plucked feathers from a hundred different turkeys... How is this supposed to matter... Work is made in succession, and it needs that context to gain traction. NZ art destroys this, and has done it particularly effectively to a generation. How's them sour grapes!

**Pretty sour. Do you think the problem is necessarily the form of the group show? I was thinking that the form of the group show manifests a crowd in some way, a political potentiality, or at least a nice idea. At any rate group shows don't always suck do they?**

No brain teaser here, group shows are samplers no butts about it, theme or no theme; artists wanting to be noticed over any other concern [is] in this way perfectly justifiable, from a public point [of view] as well. But all things in moderation, one spoonful of sugar is sweet, a truckload is an environmental hazard. I think artists are used as a crowd, as gap filler, basically as a muted, dispirited audience, knitted into a blanket to throw over the heads of the movers and



Tao Wells' installation *Winning Teacher* (2004) involved a number of artists being invited to make better versions of the work by the other artists in the Artspace exhibition *The Bed You Lie In*. Here, Kaleb Bennett, *You'll Grow Out Of It*, after Daniel du Bern's, *Wandering Jew*

shakers to keep warm in a cold landscape, breathing everyone else's breath... Yeah crowds can make you sick, especially when a flow is being indicated, and we're all expected to flow with it. Alternatives, hmmm. Too much is determined by personalities having to get along. What if I disagree, or think you're an arse, should that mean I can't like your work or find the issue "engaging", We all know examples of this – so what, it's a tough business, get over it right? Individuals standing in a crowd, stand out because of what they believe in, debase this belief by not hearing it, and that individual is just an annoying personality that doesn't fit in but works great as a number to thicken the crowd.

Somebody wins both ways, the other body misses out. The nature of power, sure, keep it mysterious and they win, make it clear and we win, a stupid war on and on. Safe dead artists, and cute girly curators, it is difficult to even try to find this attractive. A crowded sports club after a game would have more sympathy/empathy, and attention!

**Is there an issue here to do with problematic thematics? (A list of previous Artspace emergent artist shows: *Come, Flesh and Fruity, The Bed You Lie In, the emergent artist as fuckable youth perhaps? Prospect* as a title suggests this also. *And Panning for Gold, I keep mentally changing***

**this title to Digging for Gold, which in turn reminds me of Dennis Cooper, who uses the term to describe finding desiccated poo in a junkie's bottom. (Come to think of it, a recovering curator introduced me to Dennis Cooper. Not personally, but you know, his books.)**

Yeah, I remember something like that. Seems to fit. Fuckable youth, nice, make great 20 minutes of prime time. I really don't think galleries have any idea on how to position themselves in relation to ideas of public (of course I know, but they'd have to pay! I give enough free advice as it is)...

**Yours seems quite a negative view of the crowd, perhaps of one that is controlled from outside. From what I saw of your Artspace work, there seemed to be an idea of the crowd as strength in numbers, the crowd as revolutionary potential. I thought this because of your strategy of meeting the idea of being placed in a crowd with a crowd of your own. You make reference to alternatives, in a dispirited kind of way, but I think your work presented one possible way of resisting.**

I can repeat really the idea above of the crowd of adults. I enjoy the idea of making a population whose structure demands [that] they are in opposition, but aren't always. I respond to your "dispirited" comment because I think this is the crux of perceptions about my work, that the conceptual form of it shuts people down cause once you get the punch line, why look at the mess it made? And even if it is relative it is [so] in some historical/faded/academic way. All of which is true; I don't try to thwart those perceptions – but I try to put the "dispirited" element on the rules of production, not the content. In my case the rules that structured the work reflected the gallery's involvement, and were to me a rendition of nothing new, just what we all joke about, just here it is. All I did was say "this is it; this is what you are doing." This formalisation is to be bounced against, leaving the discovery of a lighter side leaking out. The not knowing whether this quality is valid or real, outside of the projected outcome, is where personal meaning is formulated and invested in, simulating Adultland, where adults live. I know this because of the amount of fuss it kicked up on one side, the constructive/positive effect it had on the other. Somehow it mattered. I have been criticised in the past for thinking that I think (yeah!) I can orchestrate or manipulate the audience's response to such a level, but to me it is parallel to the way an author uses the elements that comprise a metaphor to specifically refer to other established ideas, to weave a subtext, a back-drop of partially defined murkiness that pushes connections made by the reader in a very determined way. I want to use this subtext. I reckon there is some mileage in this, like a newspaper bothering to include which corporation employs the "scientist" quoted for "facts". It all relates back to the search for [the] adult, and the responsible behaviour maintenance programme, for short, education, that I want to reflect in my work. Just a few things...

**Are artists being childish expecting to get their way all the time?**

Wow, I read that once in a book that artists were childish, feminine, mentally unstable, dirty, insular, extroverted, extreme, banal... We're so bored with the

detail we're amused by the pattern. Hypothetically, when you're rushing by in a car and there is a nice view, who can be bothered driving? Well I can, and I will, with or without any one else saying so. If you want me to drive in your direction you will have to talk to me as someone who is driving not a passenger. Here is an idea, in a democracy founded on the principal of the broadly educated citizen, someone who can think and act independently of immediate financial gain, what school/university in the present world actually does [says] that? I live in this world. I teach at these institutions, do I expect anything to change? No and yes. Change never happens, but when it does it is instant, one year the government paid me to go to Uni, the next it didn't, then the next the word "mankind" no longer represented women; fantastic! A revolution that I was part of, you might have been there too, someone must have just woke up that morning knowing today is the day when "mankind" ends. I know I'd like to be one of those people, we all are in a way, bla bla bla...

**What about those adult, masculine, sane, expansive, introverted, passive, trying to be interesting artists?**

Right on! I'm directing a search for contact with a real balanced adult – responsible, mature, intelligent, capable etc. Not in the ideal but one that exists. Where does one find one, what circumstances to they come to be unearthed, how do you become one, and why is it good to be one? Why is it one and not many? A group of adults is almost a contradiction. To me the term makes a mockery of the hard-won identity of an adult. And of course it takes one to know one, though! This is I guess like some kind of structuralist approach to identity art, though I don't feel any knowing affinity. I think stereotypes [can be] helpful, [but] they become a burden when they are abused. White trash can be an affirmative.

**What do you think a curator is? What do you think a curator should do? Do you have a list of ideal curator qualities/archetypes?**

Polite, overly courteous, honest when they need to be, manipulative/cunning, ambitious, a sense of adventure, brave/courageous or a little sloppy... Just all the obvious stuff I suppose. What do you think, is it OK to talk about ideals? Doesn't that make you an idealist?

**I think ideals are important to have at some point along the way. Ideals help to figure out what it is you are looking for. But having said that, it is important to find ways of moving towards them in the real world. I don't expect necessarily to achieve every ideal, but I do expect that if I have an ideal and put it in to a practice of moving towards it in the actual, then the actual becomes a little better. If you think about it in the right way your attempts might link up to others attempts, our experience of the actual might get a little more interesting, not in the future but now, in the process of doing. This magazine might be an example.**

Making the kind of work that you do, which I am assuming relates to the common topic of "difficult" you mentioned earlier, it seems to me that some how there is an adaptation going on, but of the most awkward kind. Are you looking forward to the most painful birth in NZ art history? What is the ambition we "difficulters"



are wanting to achieve... or are we really over already, never will be, never was, never wanted to be, which is a stupid question, anyhow there seems something painful in what “we” are doing, what is it...

**Being difficult here is a difficult proposition. I get the feeling, most of the time, that people in general don't have the critical tools to deal with work that doesn't fit in to notions of figurative representation or established models of formalist abstraction, which can be frustrating when you are trying to get away from these models (good reasons to want to start a magazine or a project space?). I have found that if you work outside of these models in this context then, for the most part, work either gets read figuratively, or as a formal thing, or stupidly literally. I guess the gallery functions as some kind of “fictional field” that combined with an idea that people can revert to “childlike” state, or check their brains at the door in readiness for some cheap wonder. There is a lot more work happening in dealer spaces. This is not a bad thing but it does change my reading of work; I guess it carries a concrete notion of value, which when applied to more difficult work adds a new political/economic difficultness that I kind of like. It just doesn't happen very often, if ever. What do I want achieve? I just want to make the sort of work that I like, which always seems to change as soon as I get closer to something. Difficult work? I really don't know. I ended up in Auckland. Wherever you go there you are. And it's always happening somewhere else. Going overseas to make it is just as much as a modernist myth as**

Tao Wells' installation *Winning Teacher* (2004). From right to left: Kaleb Bennett, *You'll Grow Out Of It*, after Daniel du Bern's *Wandering Jew*; Ryan Chadfield, *Sluagh(sic)*, after Louise Tullett's *I can't help my self*; Matthew Couper, *Untitled*, after New Artist's *Proposal of a New Artist*; Shay Launder, *Untitled*, after Rachael Grant's *Family Dump*; Genevieve Packer, *Genuine Imitation*, after Finn Ferrier's *Tourist Souvenir #3*; Terry Urbahn, *Untitled*, after Marnie Slater's *I can take your place*; Wendyhouse, *Untitled*, after Eve Armstrong's *Adaptives*; Richard Whyte/Wayfarer Gallery Presents, *The Successful Organisation of Space for the Modern Artist*, after Kim Paton's *Time Will Break the World (Edition two)*

**anything else I was taught at art school. Maybe I'm just being passive-aggressive by hanging around.**

Good to hear that passive-aggressive is out of the closet; I'm still in denial, looking for a big pay off, a cover or something. Who is your agent, can I ask how much you got, what percentage would I likely get, if I flexed it a little? You mentioned “people” as in “people in general don't have the...”. When art is really cool is when it eliminates this idea of people in general; I want to be really cool, I am not interested in people in general, just people with particulars. The idea that people check their brains out at the door is a cool idea, so is “cheap wonder”. I think curators have something to do with the framing of this “child-like state”. The difficult position is with the coolest adults. I think difficulty is cool and so is the way that it questions the political/economic function of culture, but we weren't supposed to agree. Most idiots want to agree, look at any political party rally: Vote for me, YAY!!... It is like the whole history of art is



Tao Wells and new friends at the *The bed you lie in* after party. Image courtesy of Artspace.

a career infomercial. Do it your way, minimum fuss, save time, etc... I mean we are only talking because we have similar products to push... I tried to get T.J. McNamara, whose review of the show and my work ("Most gross of all") was wonderfully well intended, to revisit my work and write more about it, but the gallery "didn't get it", got all childish on me and it didn't happen... This whole interview is just office gossip bastard venting, which I think passes for quite high cultural status. I just want the galleries if they want my work to work for me, to take cue from my own beat, if that beat is what attracts them in the first place, otherwise I'll keep looking. There may be some perception that my relative obscurity is not purposeful, well these people should stay away from the stock market.

#### Notes

1. Co-ed: (The only reason that I knew he had written a story was that on the way out of the gallery we were discussing a sort of sexualised atmosphere we had picked up on during the proceedings. He had said something about a sort of vaginal

mist emanating from the podium and audience both, a sort of becoming-female, and that he had started to write, maybe overcome by the gas?

A sexualised atmosphere had been in evidence also the day before at the Spark artist-run spaces symposium at WINTEC. Here, the "thickening" of the Auckland art scene had been discussed as if it were erectile tissue, which was pretty funny – new galleries were described (following a recent curious newspaper article) as cropping up "like a proliferation of female genitalia on mutant fish".

Then one panel was introduced as featuring, in reference to the artist-run scene's supposed incestuous-ness, "people you have slept with or want to sleep with or who may be sleeping with each other" or something like that. As a panellist, I was blushing too hard to write it down.

By the next day this waning impression of sexualisation was restimulated by the Christian Jankowski video playing while the professionally naughty Tobias Berger gave his keynote speech at the City Gallery. For this work the artist had coopted an existing Greek media commentary TV show. In it, the artist walked around libidiously, pausing behind the seated guests as they talked about art, his hand resting on the backs of seats strokingly, his gaze drinking up each of the attractive speakers, his pleasure prolonged uncomfortably past the TV viewer's threshold for expected narrative progression.

All these emptily sexed up factors sort of tumbled together in my imagination with the *The Bed You Lie In* invitation featuring all the artists collaged onto a big bed. Suddenly the word emergent started to connote a pooh coming out, or the way a growing hard-on starts to peak out through its foreskin's little jersey neck.

Maybe, I thought, all this has something to do with the way that many people want art to pleasure them passively while they lie on their backs. Thinking about it now, I wonder if some sort of short-circuit of the general libido has taken place whereby it is more immediately awakened by strangers than by intimates, and someone else is supposed to do the fucking?

Or maybe the sexualisation of these curatorial confabs was a kindly reassertion of the life of the body into an area of cultural production notoriously stuck up in its head; a systemic corrective measure somewhat like the mysterious curved graphs of hawk/rabbit population controls... After all, I think most people were aware that there were no artists invited to speak on panels on either day. And everyone on them, myself included had at some point been art institutionalised.

(Recently I was sent a Negri-esque paper about adultery by a colleague which might shed some light on this phenomenon. In it the subject of cheating on your spouse at conferences, an apparently rife practice, was treated. The analysis went something like this: academic drudgery plus marital drudgery equals agony, and the lack of thinking space left results in poorly judged flurries of sexually acting out with anyone who represents not-work and not-home just to feel alive again.)

Anyway, this sexualisation made it a little difficult for me to concentrate, and this was not the only reason. Very early on in the proceedings I was "outed" as being an essentialist for writing that artist-curators tend to have a larger range of ideas to bring to the task of curating than non-artist curators. I spent much of the day feeling misunderstood, then, I realised that my accusers were right. Rather than something to be ashamed of, it is A-OK, important even, to be an essentialist in the Spivak/strategic essentialist sense of the word – whereby groups of disempowered people identify as kin based on shared historical experiences of being and being-treated as a cultural type, for example, artists.

Later I realised that it was not surprising, given that the post-structuralist imperative to not identify as anything plays right into the hands of those holding the power, that the curator-centric discussion on the day avoided the question of why artists are allowed so little agency in institutions like the plague. (GP)