

## TEACHING, LEARNING AND THE GREATEST IDIOT IN NEW ZEALAND

Marcus Williams

This paper discusses the collaborative aspects of the New Zealand projects of the 2009 Artists in Residence at Unitec, the Factory of Found Clothing (FNO) from Russia. It begins with an introduction to the practice of FNO and goes on to give an account of the project ‘they’ made while here, *The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand*. Finally, with an emphasis on learning, the paper examines the collaborative interface between eight recent Unitec graduates, the visiting artists and the *Greatest Idiot* herself.

Diffused in a variably sized and constituted collective, renouncing authorship and working across discipline and media, yet celebrating the aura of the artistic object and operating from a position of moral certainty, Natalya Pershina (or Gluklya) and Olga Egorova (or Tsaplya) engage in art-making which is a nascent form of modernism (as opposed to the idea that modernity is finished, *post-*) – highly politicised, involving ongoing collaborative projects and public interventions. The outcomes involve situational performance, video, installation and their longest running project, the *Shop of Utopian Clothing*. Their work is overtly engaged in a program of social emancipation and resistance to the oppressive and alienating forces of neoliberal capitalism. As such, their practice must be considered in the context of modern Russian history and its associated critical discourses. Unsurprisingly, FNO has a manifesto:

The place of the artist is on the side of the weak. Weakness makes a person human, and it is by overcoming weakness that heroes are born. We do not extol weakness, but rather appeal to kindheartedness and humanity. The time has come to return compassion to art! Compassion is an understanding of the weakness of others and a joint victory over that weakness.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: Clothes from the *Shop of Utopian Clothing*, Factory of Found Clothing (FNO), Pushkinskaya Art Centre, St Petersburg, 2002.

The manifesto, a phenomenon associated with modernity, is a statement of the absolute – a notion of universal truth emerging from a religious paradigm, as ordained by a transcendental entity. The FNO manifesto is characterised by utterances on morality and art. The idea that morality is a universal condition is carried over into the influential enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative: ‘Therefore, every rational being must

so act as if he were through this maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends.”<sup>2</sup> This notion of morality has been severely critiqued in the context of postmodern theory – almost to the point of theoretical redundancy. *Morality is a social construct, contingent upon the specifics of the socio-linguistic context and the protagonists involved; how can one speaking subject stand for all subjects?*

I argue that the collaborative dimension of FNO practice, which is a focus of this paper, is exactly what extricates their grandiose essentialism from such a problematic. FNO projects are context-dependent and derived from a participating public/audience. They consist of a kind of *action research* where knowledge is obtained from systemic, empirical observation, and the resulting information can form the basis for direct social or political intervention on the part of the researcher, rather than implying anything imperative.

The longest running FNO project, the *Shop of Utopian Clothing*, aims to provide, both symbolically and in practice, an alternative paradigm to the prevailing consumerism of the new Russia.<sup>3</sup> The project produces and retails reconstituted clothes and art objects made and sold by young working-class female volunteers from regional Russian locations, and typifies the way in which Gluklya and Tsaplya reclaim the sociopolitical legacy of their country's own brand of modernism. Here are some excerpts from the mission statement of the shop:

This shop was created in order to remind people (be they men, women, girls or boys) that they are free, that there is true love on earth, and that they are not obligated to follow what others say, neither their parents nor the boss at work, but rather, they can find ways to solve all problems, ways to exist in this world. Their internal world (including all weaknesses, fears, and illusions) is a treasure, despite the brutal reality of everyday life, which often argues against this tenderness.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to object production the project's young collaborators, who typically lack any art training, are facilitated in realising their own sociopolitical aspirations through workshops leading to various art projects. They are empowered to embrace alternative strategies for personal identity, free from the financially crippling consumerism of the new Russia.



Figure 2: Volunteer from the *Shop of Utopian Clothing*, FNO, Pushkinskaya Art Centre, St Petersburg, 2001.

The shop unashamedly embraces the principles of modernity's grand emancipation project. It declares itself as utopian, it is run collectively and its products are authored as such.

The things in the store try to “converse” with the observer about his or her desires, longings, unquenchable hopes and dreams. These things differ from ordinary objects in that they have already conversed with people (other people wore them, and the artist pondered over them). They are wiser than ordinary things and, it follows, much closer to the human heart.<sup>5</sup>

Like the socialist constructivism of post-revolutionary Russia, aspiring to emancipation through art, FNO's shop bridges the gap between artist and worker; glorifies objects which represent the common people, and generates art which might be useful to society (clothing instead of painting, for example).<sup>6</sup> "The FNO Shop can bravely be called a project, because it also functions as a teaching program ...."<sup>7</sup>

The *project* is motivated to reach out and spread its ideological position. It is comparable, perhaps, to the Soviet impulse for a revolutionary diaspora spreading the doctrine worldwide, to ensure the survival of the new, hard-won state.

It could be said, that the FNO Shop sells things "inside out," because unlike ordinary clothing that hides the sensitivities of its wearer as an apparatus of the collective mindset, this clothing actually reveals it. By showing a glimpse of the wearer's soul, it manifests a relationship to the world as to an ideal lover who understands and accepts you as you are, or even as more than you are.<sup>8</sup>

These associations with constructivism and utopian idealism are quite clear; yet they might appear much more simplistic than they really are. There is a different emphasis in the shop's statement compared with the FNO manifesto, one that focuses on tenderness and the human heart rather than solidarity and class struggle. Clothing operates as a central signifier in these early FNO works, suggesting the inner being and its relationship with governing social structures such as the state. Although the Utopian Shop carried on until late in 2008, after the 1990s Gluklya and Tsaplya increasingly emphasised the political aspect of their work, as their thinking shifted to the potential of clothing as an interface with a wider range of more public collaborators than the "girls" in the shop. Performance, public intervention and video became increasingly important in exploring the role of clothing as a signifier of personal fragility in relationship to the external world. In the artist's own words:

Gluklya and I began to think that we also found clothing interesting because it's the boundary between the individual and the world. Clothing is a person's frame. This means working with the essence of individuality, with the way it's constructed. The question arose: how can we carry out this work? We did an action, "The Dress's Voyage." We took a silly polka-dot dress, made it our literary heroine, and sent it to the Crimea, where it did things we couldn't do.<sup>9</sup>

What emerged is a kind of hybrid between sculpture and performance; performing with objects from the shop, in a manner of speaking.



Figure 3: *Triumph of Fragility*, still from video, 11' 42," FNO, St Petersburg, 2002.

This mode of practice is epitomised in the *Triumph of Fragility* (2002), in which the familiar sight of St Petersburg's naval cadets marching through the streets is symbolically transgressed as they hold white fabric shapes emblematic of little girls' dresses, only coming to a halt at the eternal flame of the Soviet, which still burns in what was once Leningrad. The conceptual thread of the relationship between internal fragility and organised society or "state" is carried forward in this piece, which was performed in the streets. The iconographic power of the images from this work lies in the confluence of the openness of the baby-faced military cadets, the glory of the Tsarist fortified city of St Petersburg, elemental Soviet symbolism and the held objects themselves – objects which possess in equal quantity their own signifying content, not only as "white dresses" (femininity, simplicity, vulnerability, grace) but also as constructivist objects from the Factory (of Found Clothing), where objects are made or found and resurrected by female workers. As sculptural art objects, they can be read in the context of their production – devolving the relationship between art and labour; making objects of societal use, venerating the object as symbol of the worker (mother; nurturer; nurse) and spreading resistance to the consuming symptoms of materialism.

The appropriation and alteration of clothing within the *Utopian Shop* is part of a broader sociological action, which aimed to educate and empower through art; the object is a function of this, not an end in itself. The integration of object into performance, although deeply psychological, is ultimately political and not concerned with extending the form of contemporary art. The signifying potential of the object (the dresses) is exploited as a veneration of the role of women in the spirit of constructivism and integrated into a non-object idiom which is born of both necessity and political motivation.

This interplay between performance and sculptural object is played out again in *Garden for Businessmen* (2004), where immaculately suited professionals extemporise and perform with children's clothing in a quintessentially modern corporate environment. In both cases, the protagonists play a central role in determining the nature of the work, which again explores the complex interaction between a sensitive, internal humanity and its public face. Like the naval cadets, the businessmen in a personal theatre of "dress play," express potential layers of tenderness and even powerlessness, in spite of their costumes of authority. They are helplessly drawn into a paradigm perhaps to some degree outside of their grasp, becoming signifiers in their own collaborative morality play, narrating a perspective (cognisance of vulnerability) which is largely alien to the market-driven model of business. This strategy of directly engaging businessmen as authors of the art, symbolically and literally, challenges the widespread neoliberal accusation of essentialism commonly levelled at any critique of "free market" behaviour based on morality. This systematic indictment of any notion of universal or objective morality conveniently ignores human fragility, favouring ironically the freedom of the individual. In a subtle twist, the elegantly suited protagonists in *Garden for Businessmen* suggest that the individual, for whom freedom is so sacred, is in fact *himself* fragile – a fragility signified by a transgression of the expected codes of



Figure 4: *Garden for Businessmen*, FNO, still from video, 6' 58," Stockholm, 2004.

behaviour bestowed upon him by his social position. A transgression, yet at the same time his own expression, subliminal to a certain extent and played out in *the garden*. This bivalent psychosocial expression is perhaps akin to the notion of *semanalysis* in the writings of Julia Kristeva, where meaning is conceived as a signifying process rather than a sign-system. A theory of meaning where "the speaking subject (is) a divided subject (conscious/unconscious) ... simultaneously exposed to the types of influences ... extraneous to the logic of the systematic ... but at the same time to the constraints of social structure. Within this process one might see the release and subsequent articulation of the drives as constrained by the social code yet not reducible to the language system."<sup>10</sup>

In the context of the overall FNO project, operating as it does within the framework of a highly didactic manifesto, this collaborative dimension is the mitigating consideration in a neoliberal, postmodern critique of essentialism:

The artist is not a mentor or tutor; but a friend; not a genius, but an accomplice. Rather than enacting didactic social projects, we must help people to stop fearing themselves, help them to accept themselves and grow better. Society is made up of people. Only by helping these people follow the path of self-transformation, do we change society. There is no other way.<sup>11</sup>

As curator and, in many respects, collaborator; it has been intriguing to observe this intersubjective, collaborative process at first hand in the place-specific project *The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand*. An FNO project developed with eight young New Zealand artists, the project involves searching for "New Zealand's greatest idiot" – an idiot not in the sense we might think, but instead based on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's enigmatic character Prince Myshkin, from his novel *The Idiot* (1868). In the national call for nominations for the greatest idiot, Gluklya and Tsaplya described their task as "to find and identify New Zealanders who embody the qualities of Myshkin and apply those traits in order to solve contemporary social problems."<sup>12</sup>

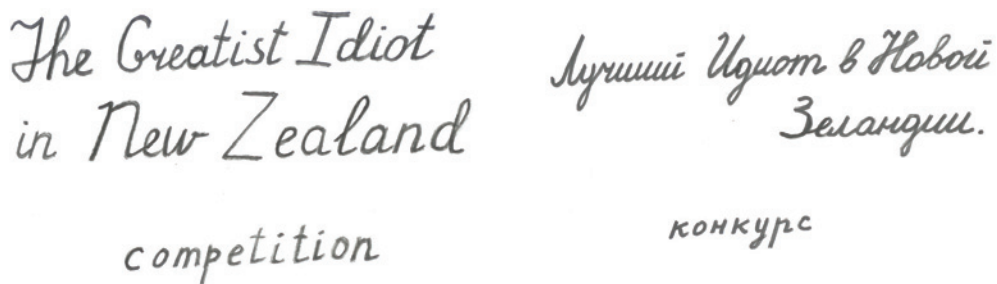


Figure 5: Text from *The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand*, FNO, <http://theidiotproject.blogspot.com/>, FNO, 2009.

In Dostoyevsky's damning critique of Russia's nineteenth-century ruling class, Prince Myshkin is a dreamy, guileless character who arrives onto a self-serving aristocratic scene penniless and without object. His belief in truth and beauty and his open and direct speech soon land him the title of "idiot." Yet even as he is ridiculed, he is privately respected and some seek solace and advice in his company. Although a complex and ambiguous character, he stands for compassion, tolerance, love and friendship amidst a bitter contest for wealth and status.

FNO and their young New Zealand collaborators collectively decided from the 25 nominations on who would be New Zealand's greatest idiot, shortlisting five people before choosing the winner: "Since Myshkin's New Zealand heirs are constitutionally incapable of identifying themselves, we call upon you to nominate your own candidates for your country's Greatest Idiot."<sup>13</sup>





Figure 6: Collaborators from the *Shop of Utopian Clothing, Idiot Branch* – Hannah Thompson, Rachel Bell, Emily Clarke, Leanne Williams, Dina Arakelian, Olga Egorova, Yael Gesentsvey, Natalya Pershina, Snowwhite Gallery, Unitec, Auckland, 2009 (photo: Marcus Williams).

The newly assembled collective then developed works in honour of the nominees and the Greatest Idiot for two Auckland galleries, MIC Toi Rerehiko and Snowwhite at Unitec. This collective process was complex, as the group explored their own cultural and generational differences in defining “the idiot;” differences were also apparent between Dostoyevsky’s nineteenth-century morality and the very different morality of today. This complexity increased as the art began to be produced. As with *Garden for Businessmen*, the idiot nominees, who unsurprisingly turned out to be strong individuals themselves, increasingly provided significant conceptual and aesthetic content as the project evolved. For example, Ivy Smith and her extended family of fostered teenagers wrote rap songs and choreographed performance and dance for the video work. In addition, Ivy’s “kids,” who had been variously abandoned and sometimes brutalised, manufactured a series of masks which ended up as an integral storytelling device in the video piece and were later shown in the exhibition.



Figure 7: Ivy Smith – *The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand*, MIC Toi Rerehiko, 2009 (photo: Marcus Williams).



Figure 9: Modified clothing of “Dr Robin,” idiot nominee, Snowwhite Gallery, Unitec, Auckland, 2009 (photo: Marcus Williams).



Figure 8: Two of Ivy's foster children masked for video shoot, Pt Chevalier, Auckland, 2009 (photo: Olga Egorova).



Figure 10: Hannah Thompson printing on found clothing for the *Shop of Utopian Clothing, Idiot Branch*, Snowwhite Gallery, Unitec, Auckland, 2009 (photo: Marcus Williams).

In the *Shop of Utopian Clothing, Idiot Branch*, exhibited at Unitec's Snowwhite Gallery, FNO and the students procured clothing from each of the shortlisted nominees, and the New Zealand artists then modified each item with texts and symbols related to their specific stories of compassionate idiocy. In addition, right up until the exhibition finished and after FNO had left the country, the collaborators continued to modify old clothing and sell the work in the shop. All the profits from the sale of the artworks went to support Ivy and her household of rescued souls.

Located within this collaborative milieu, the essentialism of a statement like “Only by helping these people follow the path of self-transformation, do we change society. There is no other way”<sup>14</sup> is somewhat mitigated by such an artistic strategy. The delineation or definition of authorship, authenticity and even privacy becomes unclear. The most poignant question arising from this situation, I believe, is, when the above statement is chorused by such a collective, what possible mutations have occurred to the weave and weft of essentialism?

The calling into question of essentialist knowledge has concomitantly played out in the educational arena. Broadly speaking, this is evidenced by a shift in importance from the top-down delivery of knowledge to a mode of actively engaged discovery with greater emphasis on the process of learning rather than on the knowledge itself. This is a phenomenon that we are very familiar with and is the keystone of education's modernity. Perhaps the apotheosis of this educational dimension of "humanity's great emancipation project" is English educationalist AS Neill's experimental school, Summerhill.<sup>15</sup>

Equivalent alternative and experimental schools all over the world include Auckland's Metro and Christchurch's Four Avenues in New Zealand.<sup>16</sup> These schools withered and died in the 1980s and '90s. Metro became a dumping ground for students repeatedly rejected from the mainstream, literally expelled by an education system which had reached the limit of its ability to deal with those who fall outside the circle of the useful – a system which cannot reasonably be blamed for the faltering and ultimate collapse of modernity's long-term historical trajectory, modestly characterised as the emancipation of all mankind. This was something of a tough call for the New Zealand Ministry of Education. What Jean Francois Lyotard describes as an increasing scepticism toward the grand narrative of humanity's emancipation provides the conditions for an incongruous blend of Continental philosophy and radical monetarist reform<sup>17</sup> – strange ideological bedmates which, to a significant extent, ended or at least seriously curtailed the development of this modernist trajectory.

Jeff Koons – the quintessentially American neoliberal stockbroker and futures market player turned artist – is in many respects the most succinct artistic signifier of this time. Taking Andy Warhol's factory into mass fabrication, Koons's eighties junk-bond version of art production churns out the kitsch objects of an unapologetic materialist idolatry, typifying Hal Foster's notion of an art of cynical reason.<sup>18</sup> Why offer an American exemplar in a discussion of New Zealand education, you might reasonably ask? The eighties uptake of junk-bond trading and the liquefying of people-owned assets in New Zealand were unequalled anywhere else in the world. Overseas, Reagan and Thatcher were paradigm-shifting politicians; here they were the messiahs of an evangelical church.

Health and education were next in line, remaining in the public domain only by a quirk of history – the emergence of a pragmatic politician from the centre-left. The cynical reasoning of this time saw the systematic squeezing out of progressive initiatives such as the roving education adviser, the introduction of student loans and the framework "tick-box" educational model with its risks of highly prescribed learning experiences. The notion that education might be an end in itself, a process of self-development, empowerment of the individual – a cultural equaliser, which ultimately improves the fabric of society, became as non-de rigueur as the language of the FNO manifesto: "only by helping these people follow the path of self transformation, do we change society. There is no other way..."<sup>19</sup>

The neocon looked at you through her Dolce and Cabana sunglasses and said, "user pays, honey; to hell with emancipation." The poststructuralists said in intertextual code, "it is a subjective universe; whose version of emancipation are we talking about, anyway?" Yet ironically in the postmodern era, a mode of actively engaged exploratory learning would seem to have even more relevance – where the half-life of knowledge is exponentially accelerated and so short that knowing how to get the fact is of far greater significance than knowing the fact itself. Furthermore, the application of facts to an individual's situation is radically fluid. The US Department of Labour estimates that today's learners will have had 10-14 jobs by the time they are 38. These situations make educating toward a consistent, durable knowledge set, or a stable vocational structure, clearly redundant.

Art education has generally, due largely to certain necessities essential to the business of making art, utilised the most progressive forms of pedagogy – forms which, taken for granted in the art room, have been inducted into other disciplines with a degree of revelation that amuses the art teacher. Active learning, various collaborative models and critical pedagogy are some examples. The emergence of the ready-made and pop art in the twentieth century saw the themes of classical antiquity and Christianity swept aside, bringing art closer to everyday life. The large, plastic hamburger of Claes Oldenburg replaced the idealised human form rendered exquisitely by Michelangelo in Frantiscritti marble. The ubiquity of relational aesthetics in contemporary art pushes the boundaries further as



community-based actions, public interventions and interdisciplinary collaborations gain kudos in arts infrastructures. Engagement with the rapidly expanding public domain of hyperspace and new, highly accessible media further blurs the fine line (more than 50% of 21-year-olds have produced content for the web). Art education must also rise to this emerging new paradigm. Teaching is fundamental to the practice of the Factory of Found Clothing – helping people “follow the path of self transformation”<sup>20</sup> sounds awfully like the facilitation of constructivist learning to me. *The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand* was an experiment in experiential education as well as a contemporary art project.

**Marcus Williams** is an artist, curator and teacher born in 1962 and educated at the University of Auckland and RMIT University in Melbourne. He lives in Auckland and is an associate professor in photography and new media in the Department of Design and Visual Arts at Unitec. Williams has a cross-disciplinary art practice, working in a wide range of media with a strong emphasis in photography. He makes artists' books, videos, photographic prints and Internet projects, often combining these strategies into “total installations.” He has an enduring interest in collaboration and has collaborated with a wide range of artists in New Zealand and in Europe. Williams has exhibited throughout New Zealand and internationally.

- 1 Olga Egorova and Natalya Pershina, *Factory of Found Clothing*, manifesto, 2002.
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W Ellington, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993/1785), 43.
- 3 A term commonly used to describe post-glasnost Russia, specifically alluding to the unfettered capitalism characteristic of this period.
- 4 Egorova and Pershina, *Factory of Found Clothing*, manifesto.
- 5 Olga Egorova and Natalya Pershina, *Shop of Utopian Clothing*, manifesto, 2000.
- 6 Initially described as an industrial, angular approach to art, Russian constructivism was first identified in Naum Gabo's *Realistic Manifesto* of 1920. Aligned with revolutionary ideas, the movement became integrated into the Bolshevik government's teaching academy and spread into other areas of expression such as design and architecture. In theory, and instrumentally through industrial design, fabric design and public art, constructivism came to be an important material embodiment of socialist ideology and in some cases a mechanism for its implementation.
- 7 Egorova and Pershina, *Shop of Utopian Clothing*, manifesto.
- 8 Egorova and Pershina, *Factory of Found Clothing*, manifesto.
- 9 Anjelika Artyukh, *The Labor & Breath of Romanticism*, 2008, <http://chtodelat.wordpress.com/>. Egorova and Pershina, *Factory of Found Clothing*, manifesto.
- 10 Egorova and Pershina, *Factory of Found Clothing*, manifesto.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Olga Egorova and Natalya Pershina, *The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand*, <http://theidiotproject.blogspot.com/>, 2009.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Egorova and Pershina, *Factory of Found Clothing*, manifesto.
- 15 AS Neill's Summerhill School, a co-educational boarding school in Suffolk, England, is the original alternative “free” school. Founded in 1921, it continues to be an influential model for progressive, democratic education around the world.
- 16 Two alternative New Zealand schools influenced by AS Neill's ideas on experiential learning and the empowerment of children. Metro was state-funded.
- 17 Jean Francoise Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G Bennington and B Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984/1979).
- 18 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
- 19 Egorova and Pershina, *Factory of Found Clothing*, manifesto.
- 20 Ibid.