

## FU YOU: FU INSTITUTION INTERVENTION

Michele Beevors

A visiting artist is an interesting proposition for art schools worldwide. For the students, it is significant because they have the opportunity to experience another artist at work and hear other ways of doing business; for the academic staff, a visiting artist provides the opportunity for networking and collegiality; for the institution as a whole, it's better to be busy than not.

When Frank Fu and Yves Gore visited Dunedin School of Art in October 2018, one would be forgiven for thinking that it was business as usual. From day one of the six-week residency, the dynamic duo made themselves known to everyone in an act of open friendliness – they paraded around the school introducing themselves to everyone. You would have had to be hiding under a rock to have missed their arrival (as some students inevitably did). The minute they arrived, their self-promotion machine kicked in. The pair were armed with an A4 schedule of events, seminars, performances and film screenings, with mobile phone always at the ready for a selfie.

There is a lot of hoopla in the South Island about the idea of 'doing it for yourself,' and this was their chosen strategy for engagement. By the end of the first week, they knew everyone by name and they had turned over even the darkest rocks and dragged the students out ... Selfies with the artists abounded and became part of a feedback loop that fed their machine through Instagram. I wondered, as I still do – when exactly did they have any down time when they were not performing their role of entrepreneurial performances artists and publicity machines? For the most part, it was jolly good fun. The students became engaged in the frenzied activities, hullabaloo and selfie formula.

I think the success of the visit was derived from the fact that Gore and Fu were genuinely interested in the collaborative side of what sometimes feels like a one-sided affair. Most other visits by artists are a lot more low-key and are aimed at the benefit of the artist in question and not really at student engagement ... Sometimes in fact, a visiting artist will go out of their way to avoid the entanglements of coming into contact with the students, stealthily sneaking into the art school under cover of darkness, making a mess and causing havoc at night. This seems to happen quite often – not being bothered seems to be the preferred strategy.

So what does one make of the wilfully engaged duo? If you see the real benefit for the artists in a residency as a way of collecting and cultivating a fan base that is then iterated through visiting as many different art schools on the tour as possible, and boosted a thousand-fold through social media, then you might be able to get close to understanding the whirlwind that hovered over the Dunedin School of Art in October. I found myself swept up in the storm. I was somehow reluctantly talked into writing this piece on the first day of the New Year ...

Their strategy is simply to say 'YES,' to remain positive, to be polite and to follow through with 'thank you's.' This strategy was the focus of the first seminar presentation by Gore, a motivational speech, for sure – "How to get ahead in the art world." It could have been written by the king of Instagram, Jerry Saltz, and in fact it was. In a Christmas post Jerry gives advice for artists – "don't think too much."

Their films *Orange Confucius* and *Whiskey Tango Forest* provide real insight into the private lives of performance artists. In these semi-documentary-style films, the hand-held camera, pace and intimate moments, with little in

the way of a story line, leads one to confuse the actors with Frank and Yves (the filmmakers). Yet, in some of the more mysterious scenes and the doubling of shots from one film to the other, their films are shot with a nod to filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch and David Lynch. The films offer a bare-all exposé of the things that have been largely accepted as art, but not in mainstream cinema. This has to do with both the exhibitionism of Gore and a willingness to commit to film all of the ins and outs and the dumbfounding ordinariness of sex, shitting, pissing, menstruating and masturbating.

The question of downtime resurfaces in the films, because nothing is left out that hasn't already been examined by this film genre including a long sequence of Yves crying in a bathtub, where the camera is a fly on the wall. This is repeated in the second film in a similar bathtub sequence where the main character (a middle-aged male artist) is in the tub. I kept asking myself, was this real or is it film? Boredom is also a familiar presence in the films, because there is nothing as boring for an audience as watching other people get stoned. It is the equivalent of watching grass grow or waiting for paint to peel and flake to the floor.

While *Orange Confucius* focuses on the female protagonist and her journey including a trip to the gynaecologist's office, *Whiskey Tango Forest* focuses on an older male artist and his futile ramblings about not making it as far as he would have liked. The latter film contains a sequence where an argument is held over dinner, referencing *That '70s Show* or *The Big Bang Theory*. The viewer becomes another dinner guest and is privileged to overhear the inane conversations of artists – really things they should keep to themselves. However, some of the sequences in these films were very beautiful in a mundane way – ducks and random old people shuffling by provide a little relief and are beautifully shot. And somehow this is what holds the films together as art and not life, drawing attention to the formal qualities sometimes found in everyday living.

The carefully scheduled live performances were another matter altogether. Fu's loud and brash in-your-face confrontations with bogus authority figures and his shouty manner were challenged by Gore's quiet, empathetic and highly charged performances, which were personal, intimate and confronting. Fu's seminar performance gave clues about the mechanisms he was using. Protesting was a big part of his strategy. And it seemed to me that he was protesting '(no) place in the Auckland art world' via megaphone and booming voice. Being in Dunedin, we could all empathise, as we too have no voice in the New Zealand art world. It was a bit like preaching to the converted – the New Zealand art world rarely reaches as far down as the South Island.

For me, some of his interventions in other spaces were more interesting, such as his performance at the Venice Biennale involving forced shared intimacy, and I wondered how it would feel to confront your fear of public intimacy, like sleeping with a stranger in front of other strangers. Or the very interesting coupling staged at the Guggenheim in front of famous works of art. A performance where Frank and his partner (not Yves) were cocooned together in a white stretchy suit that vaguely resembled strands of cell division as they posed or performed mirrored movements in front of famous artworks – in the process interrupting their reception. What is the word for that? Is it culture jamming?

While at the Dunedin School of Art, Fu attempted to get the students involved in institutional critique through a number of daily performances. The first day involved disrupting regular classes, along with an eruption of energy and more shouting. With paper megaphone in hand, Frank urged the students to confront the academic staff about the things they were disgruntled about. "No more InDesign," they chanted, "more life drawing." However, this institution has two things going for it. The first is that the staff actively try to give the students what they want, and the second is that there seems to be 'no one looking,' so we have some freedom to act as we see fit. If the students ask for more life drawing, we tend to give it to them. So what Fu's institutional critique turned up was the fact that this institution was largely benign, that our students did not really have to struggle to achieve the freedom that others do. Shocking, I know.

After the 'confrontation,' the students and Frank wrote their demands on a large piece of paper and taped it to the big window at the front of the art school – a pale reflection of Luther's 95 Theses. The daily performances were cancelled due to lack of interest. The students' good humour quickly turned to irritation as they tried to get their own work done.

Gore's performances were altogether different, and were structured around her own (prone) naked body. In a series of performances delivered on a single day, *Comb Her Hair*, *Flower Her* and *Make Her Wear Something*, students were asked to bring things to help them participate. This time Fu, in hushed tones, ushered in groups and individuals to address, dress and perform intimate acts of giving, whispered secrets and gifts to Gore – who for her part did not respond or move. The whole thing was confronting in its ritual around death, again marked by an awkward, forced intimacy.

The other notable thing about the pair's visit was their engagement with almost every department in the school. In sculpture, the cosmic twins came to group critiques and gave feedback to students that was quite rigorous and genuinely felt – a positive thing. The students lucky enough to have been scheduled for their critique sessions felt grateful.

In printmaking, their support was manifested in a group project – a screen-printed sign for the Fu Institute a meter wide. The takeover was completed with a series of banners in which the sculpture and print students were involved, reading "The Fu Institute." The print didn't quite work out the first time so they did it again, on a different wall that they had asked permission to use in the first place. Although this seemed more like a flag-raising ceremony and less like a coup, it suggested some other, more positive extra-curricula outcomes. Temporarily leaving the newly founded institute, Fu decided to engage in some art school promotion at the local farmers market, taking with him my whiteboard which had some idle scribbles left over from a lecture. Frank tried, but largely failed, to recruit and enlighten local Dunedin marketers about art school issues.



Figure 1.

Fu and his crew joined local artists at a performance event to mark the equinox, where The Yellow Men, the legendary Adrian Hall and We Will not be Broken (Megan Brady, Ed Duncan and Rata Scott) performed around Dunedin to kick off the festival. The Yellow Men watched the tides go in and out all day, dressed in yellow raincoats and matching buckets. Megan, Ed and Rata stretched out in the carpark and Adrian created an elaborate cricket pitch with four bags of cement as stumps and proceeded to watch a pot of ice melt. Fu, bull horn in hand, yelled at passers-by.

The duo's intervention in the art school as a whole was, I think, a complete success. Simply because the Fu Institute took every outcome as a positive one (this is what it means to have a practice), regardless of aesthetics, they mirrored 'priority number one' for me. They were great at motivating sluggish students into action, heedless of failure ... their energy was boundless and they were very, very serious.



Figure 2.

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