

text + work



Health & Safety

Household Management

Susan Bright

Sian Bonnell

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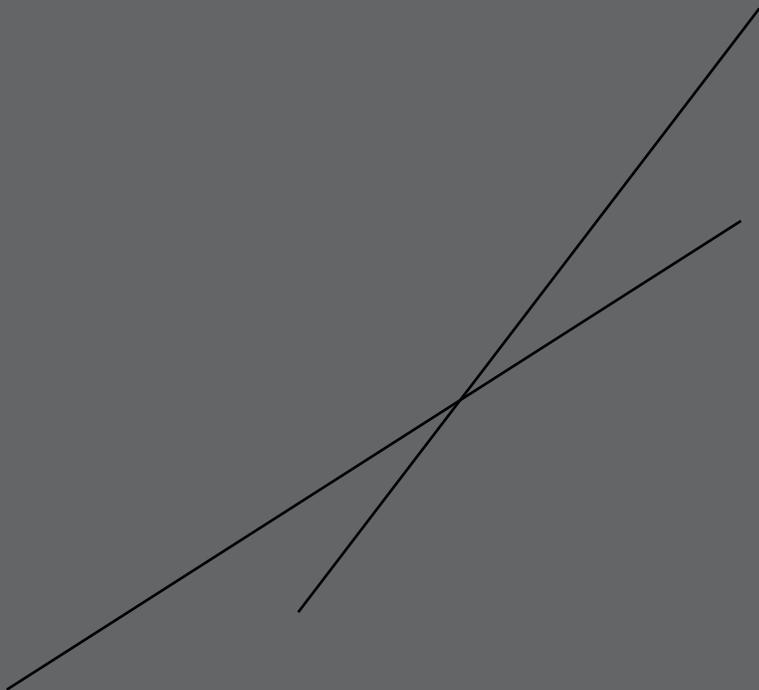
Health & Safety follows on from Sian Bonnell's previous series of work; Everyday Dada and kaput! both of which address the absurd in art. The show consists of two new series of photographs, Health & Safety and Risk Assessment; two video pieces, Assessed: egg and Assessed: bathroom, and selected images from the series kaput!

kaput! is the outcome of a commission made for The Moravska Gallery in Brno, Czechoslovakia. The Moravska Gallery houses an established collection of early modernist Czech photographs, all of which had a huge impact on Bonnell's work, which in turn influenced the concepts behind this new body of work.

"Having found my photographs over the years placed firmly within certain genres, notably those of landscape and still life, I began questioning if one could continue making images as usual but move across and through all the genres. This research year provided me with the perfect opportunity to thoroughly explore the performative aspects of my work, a prominent feature of my practice, and to delve into portraiture, a new genre for me to work with."

Sian Bonnell

Health & Safety is the culmination of research undertaken this year at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth and is presented to the public for the first time. The work on show illustrates an important shift in Bonnell's work. They tap into something much more personal and autobiographical than one might at first expect, and show her as an artist who has 'come of age' with vigour, intelligence and bravado.



Household Management

Nothing lovelier can be found In Woman, than to study household good. - Milton

In my imaginary dinner party scenario of invited characters from history I would place the poet and polemicist John Milton next to the artist Sian Bonnell. She could tell him a thing or two about the 'loveliness' of the study of 'household good' but it might well be very different from what he had in mind - she has updated the rules of housework for the litigious and paranoid 21st Century with a sisterly twist and a gentle satirising humour.

Bonnell's work, however, is more complex than a 'simple' didactic feminist critique of the domestic; for she takes pride in her house, has a respect, a love even, of housework. She couldn't have done earlier work such as *Everyday Dada* unless the surfaces she stuck the food to were spotless. She gains satisfaction and comfort from both living and working in her house. Her gallery TRACE is also her home and it's a welcoming place where you are offered tea and homemade cakes. The meditative ritual of sweeping the kitchen floor every morning is not a suppressive chore for Bonnell but a cleansing of mind as well as floor in order to start the day. This doesn't mean to say that she cannot also find housework to be frustrating and boring and it's these contradictory emotions that make her work so much more accessible than earlier work by American feminists of the 1970s such as

Martha Rosler, Judy Chigago and Judy Dater who trod similar ground albeit in a far more polemical way.

These artists needed to preach. They needed to push, challenge and disrupt the accepted norm. Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) certainly still packs a punch. A suburban woman's lot in the 1970s was one of enormous frustration and lack of opportunity. To admit that you might actually enjoy domesticity would be seen as repressive betrayal to the feminist cause. It was a time to break out of the home, not enjoy the simple quotidian chores of the day. We live in different times now, and as crucial as their work was (and still is) these are not the only references for reading Bonnell's work and it is limiting to understand her work purely in that lineage. Her references and influences are much wider ranging and diverse, including Alexander Rodchenko, Anna and Bernhard Blume, Modernist costume designs seen on recent trips to Brno and Prague in the Czech Republic and particularly the posters of Bernard and Schmidt. Of course the works also tap into very current issues surrounding contemporary society in that way that photography and video always does.

The two pieces on show *Assessed: Egg and Assessed: Bathroom* sit comfortably with the photographic series *Risk Assessment* sharing the same tone and subject matter of keeping control of her domestic environment and her own safety. These

works, Bonnell's first performances,¹ were done not for the camera but for video, a new medium for Bonnell and her audience. It makes sense that her first attempt at 'acting' would be moving for that is how we instinctively think of a performance - be it through theatre, film and television. It is something that has a linear narrative. With photography we more readily think of the subject posing rather than performing although in reality there is very little difference. The 'real' person becomes a character if only for a second.

Perhaps one of the most famous 'characters' of the Victorian era was the young Isabella Mary Mayson, more commonly known as Mrs Beeton. How little we know about the real woman who died when she was only 28. In 1861 she suggested in her eponymous *Book of Household Management* that 'cleanliness, punctuality, order, and method' were the ideal characteristics for a housekeeper (or what we might today call the homemaker for society has changed and very few of us can afford a full time servant). "Without the first"...she claimed "no household can be said to be well managed. The second is equally all-important... Order, again, is indispensable; for by it we wish to be understood that "there should be a place for everything, and everything in its place." Method, too, is most necessary; for when the work is properly contrived, and each part arranged in regular succession, it will be done more quickly and more effectually."² These 'common sense' suggestions from the young Victorian don't sound entirely different from an introduction to the contemporary government legislation that Bonnell is critiquing as she fries her egg and cleans the shower carefully protected from any impending danger that both acts might incur.

Today the home can be a hazardous place. Every year almost 4,000 people die in accidents in the home and 2.7 million are admitted at accident and emergency departments throughout the country.³ Bonnell is only too aware of this and in her most recent series of self portraits *Risk Assessment* she is not going to be one of the innocent victims - precautions have been taken. Here we see Bonnell in her home, doing the daily chores and 'deeper housework' such as unblocking drains and cleaning the windows reluctantly saved for bank holidays and the ever threatening 'Spring Clean'. Flippers protect her feet from the wet floors; a yellow mac from the water coming from a spurting blocked drain and a trip to the fridge becomes an exercise in stealth - a balaclava protecting her from the ever present threat of fridge burn. These performances for the camera poke fun at the constant rules and regulations governing how we act in spaces - both public and private - for the safety of ourselves and others. How ridiculous and unreasonable these rules have become.

If we look closely at the costume that Bonnell has chosen for the character she has created in *Risk Assessment* we see a dress. It is not the main subject of the work but it's certainly worth considering. The dress is important for it is the most obvious signifier of femininity - but like the work of Bonnell itself it gives out contradictory messages. On one hand it's 'pretty' reminiscent of the constructed advertising tableaux showing the perfect 1950s family where the woman is the centre of the home, but on the other the green and white has connotations of camouflage, with its ability to make the subject disappear but also stand out when out of context. Clothing and more significantly fashion is often

unfairly dismissed as something superficial and unimportant but here it is crucial. Bonnell's decision to choose this dress with, its ability to stand out and blend in simultaneously, chimes directly with her motivation to make these self portraits. When interviewed she said she had reached an age when she saw that she was disappearing.

The character she creates in the other new portrait series Health and Safety can be seen as a darker and more threatening side to the character in Risk Assessment. This set of portraits lack the lightness of touch we have become accustomed to in Bonnell's work and the humour here is deadpan and sardonic. They have an intimidating edge that comes across in the way that Bonnell is so obviously uncomfortable in front of the camera. They are not easy to look at and it seems that they were not at all easy to make.

These are Bonnell's first series of photographic self portraits - and her discomfort is obvious. Coming in front of the camera forces her to relinquish control of the camera and change her usual working practice. She is ill at ease, posing with obvious trepidation. She is on one hand determined but also vulnerable. Added to this she is also in an environment that is alien to her; the monological studio is far removed from the comforts of her home where she is at her best. The black background and hushed atmosphere of the studio are not so very different from that of a theatre and in many ways the series can be read as an audition for the larger body of work Risk Assessment. Her tension, self consciousness, fears of failure and rejection are as palpable and as raw as any auditioning actor facing a panel of judges.

Again Bonnell wears the clichéd signifier of femininity - pink - but gone are any mixed messages about domesticity and femininity. The boiler suit and its obvious concealing of a feminine body is an aggressive act of defiance and appropriation of male working attire. She is a woman on the 'edge' morphing into a demented automaton; the very nemesis of the 'Domestic Goddess' personified by television 'angels' such as Nigella Lawson whose television persona oozes a clichéd and stereotypical view of female sexuality which is both intimidating and lamentable at the same time. The woman Bonnell presents here does not love her home; she does not care for the washing up or take any pleasure in a shining kitchen floor. She does not welcome you in but threatens the home and in turn its associations with safety and warmth. Bonnell has created a character which cuts to the core of something quite primal.

Her frustration which is so born out in this series can be seen with more humorous effect in kaput!, a crucial series of work which lured Bonnell out in front of the camera to perform and away from the anonymity of being the 'the author'. These works highlight her sculptural background and you could imagine her creations working just as successfully as objects as they do photographs. They remind me of the British sculptor Richard Wentworth's photographic series Making Do and Getting By where he finds on the street little human interventions which make life easier and make the everyday 'work'. A fork used to prop open a window for instance is just the right length and width to fit perfectly in the gap and allow a gentle breeze in.

Bonnell's scenarios however are not random acts of other humans' intervention, nor really do they

have obvious use or function. They are carefully constructed attempts to make things 'work' but the viewer is left asking why and what exactly. Many are doomed to fail where Wentworth's succeed and as such they tip into the ridiculous and absurd which is a characteristic of Bonnell's work to date. So where they might remind me of a 'Wentworth' they have deeper resonances with more conceptual traditions of contemporary artists such as Fischli and Weiss, Gabriel Orozco and Erwin Wurm all of whom encourage us to look at everyday objects in new and different ways by creating or performing 'sculpture' or 'still lives' rather than finding them as Wentworth does.⁴ Bonnell's love of the absurd makes for succinct picture making which celebrates both the oblique and obscure and follows a strong tradition in European sculpture and photography which revels in shifts of scale and environment to give objects an unexpected visual charge.

The work on show here illustrates an important shift in Bonnell's work, and none more so than the portraits. They tap into something much more personal and autobiographical than one at first might expect and show her as an artist who has 'come of age' with vigour, intelligence and bravado. The fact that Bonnell used to work in the theatre is no coincidence; it just took time for her to be lured out from behind the scenes, take centre stage and enjoy the limelight. As the curtain comes down on her first performance I await the next act in anticipation...

Susan Bright
October 2007

¹ In fact her first video was done whilst on residency in Brno and was the inspiration for these two mentioned here. Being her first attempt at video it is not 'successful' as a finished body of work but is a crucial part of the artistic process. The videos featured here came conceptually before the photographic series Risk Assessment but were made afterwards due to logistics. Despite the chronological order of the creating I feel they are her first self portraits as they were conceived and planned before the photographic work.

² From Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management, 1861, Chapter 2, Section 55 "The Housekeeper"

³ Statistics supplied from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. (RoSPA)

⁴ It is interesting to note that in Wentworth's sculpture he creates absurd and obscure juxtapositions but has a far more 'purist' vision when dealing with photography. When recently interviewed he was genuinely shocked at the suggestion that he might move something to make a better picture. For his photography it is crucial that it is anchored to the real world - an essential counterbalance to his sculpture.

Susan Bright

Susan Bright is a curator and writer. She has taught extensively and convened major conferences and seminars on many aspects of art and photography both in Britain and abroad. Previously she was Assistant Curator of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, Curator at the Association of Photographers and Acting Director for the MA Photography (Historic and Contemporary) at Sotheby's Institute, London. She is an interviewer for the Oral History of British Photography project at the National Sound Archive and a member of the AHRC funded research team investigating 'New British Photography' at the University of the Arts, London.

She has curated a wide variety of photography exhibitions and writes for a number of journals and magazines. She is a regular contributor to *Source*, *Tema Celeste* and *Contemporary*. She has written texts on Guy Bourdin and Rineke Dijkstra for *100 Greatest Photographs* (Folio, 2006) and entries for photographers for *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Art Photography Now (2005) was published by Thames and Hudson and she is currently working on another on photographic self portraiture also to be published by Thames and Hudson (2009).

Recent curatorial projects include:

1+1=3 Collaboration in Recent British Portraiture for Fremantle Arts Centre (2006) in Western Australia and the Australian Centre of Photography, Sydney (2007); Face of Fashion for the National Portrait Gallery, London (2007); How We Are: Photographing Britain for Tate Britain (co-curated with Val Williams, 2007); and Something out of Nothing for Fotogalleriet, Oslo, Norway (2007).

Sian Bonnell

Sian Bonnell is a UK based artist living in Dorset. Her highly individual work fuses the boundaries between still life, landscape and sculpture. In so doing, she creates playful yet provocative depictions which heighten our perception and pleasure of both our domestic and natural environments.

She combines her art practice with running TRACE, an artist-led curation and publishing project, and lecturing regularly on photography in universities and institutions throughout the UK. She was a research fellow for the University of Sunderland holding the 2005 ACE/IPRN Commission at the Moravska Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic and has currently just completed a research fellowship at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth.

Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is in many public and private collections notably the V&A, London, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Ransom Centre, Texas and the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.

Recent publications include from an elsewhere unknown (Ffotogallery, Cardiff 2004) with essays by Mel Gooding and Mark Haworth-Booth, Dr Clock's Handbook (Redstone Press, London 2006), Everyday Dada (Dewi Lewis, UK 2006, USA 2007) and most recently Food (Alphabet City & MIT Press, USA & Canada, 2007).

Event

Health & Safety

Susan Bright + Sian Bonnell

29 October - 30 November 2007

The gallery invites you and your guests to the text+work event and private view on Thursday 8 November 2007.

from 4.30 to 5.30pm, Lecture Theatre One
Followed by a Private View in the Gallery from 5.30 to 6.30pm

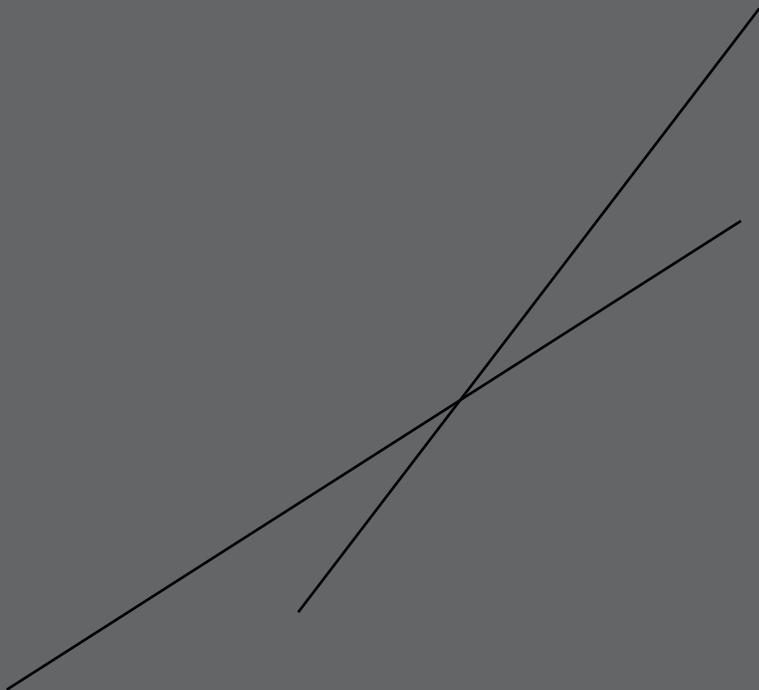
For further information and to book a place for the event please contact:

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text+work is the concept which underpins the exhibition programme at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth. text+work promotes and provides a forum for challenging dialogue between innovative contemporary art, design, and media practice and its theoretical context.

There are text+work gallery events, critical texts, shared and networked exhibitions and a text+work website www.textandwork.org.uk. The creative practice exhibited within text+work is thus made available to a wide audience, many of whom may never visit the gallery. It provides a platform for practitioners, writers and curators who wish to examine and extend the boundaries between contemporary practice and critical discourse. A text (essay) is published by text+work to accompany each exhibition in the programme.

www.textandwork.org.uk

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