

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Double Double Land Land* by Jon McCurley with many others
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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Uninoperative Community

by Alex Snukal

In Mohammed Mrabet's story, *The Sea in the Street*, the unnamed protagonist — “a certain kif-smoker” — visits a merchant for a litre of cooking oil. As a container, the kif-smoker has brought “an old French wine-bottle with a deep depression [a punt] in the bottom.” The punt extends so far into the bottle that it cannot hold a full litre. To compensate the protagonist turns the bottle over and, using the punt as a cup, he asks the merchant to pour the remaining oil owed to him into the indentation. As the merchant pours the last of the oil into the punt, most of it spills out of the uncorked spout of the bottle “all over the counter and onto the floor.”ⁱ In his drug-induced state, the kif-smoker demonstrates a formal inventiveness and attempts to reclaim the unused space of the punt. While his formal strategy fails, what is important in the story is not whether or not the punt is an adequate secondary vessel for the extra oil but rather the sense of play and improvisation that the protagonist invests in the ordinary utilitarian form of an old wine bottle. But there is something else at work here. The inversion of the conventional use of the punt (and of utilitarian objects generally) is not just a private act but has public consequences. Indeed, by inverting the wine bottle, the kif-smoker does not simply reconfigure the everyday usage of the bottle — he also leaves the mark of his failure all over the counter and floor of the merchant's shop.

A similar kind of formal and utilitarian inversion is central to Jon McCurley's exhibition and performance at Gallery TPW. As part of *You Had to Be There*, a “series of events looking at the relation between *liveness* and images,” McCurley will present his play *Double Double Land Land* in the gallery space and will follow this up with an exhibition of objects. Both the play and

exhibition dwell on our relationship to utility and how it is directly related to the way community is formed. McCurley draws our attention to the connection between the desire for utility and the oppressive desire for social cohesion and homogeneity. Central to McCurley's work is the idea that in our constant desire for the utility of objects we threaten to turn all of our social relations into measures of use and efficiency.

The relationship between objects and group behavior also figured prominently in a 2008 performance McCurley did for *Not A Laundry Show Anymore* at Cinecycle. Here he confronted the audience with a large, flat square, roughly assembled from foam core. McCurley started his performance on the ground, with the foam core above him and continuously called out “I'm the floor.” Now standing and holding the square vertically while calling out “I'm the wall,” he pushed against the crowd, whose resistance helped to stabilize the sheet. For the finale, McCurley managed to set the square on the raised hands of the audience and climb on top, while saying “Now I'm the ceiling.” In



Scene from *Double Double Land Land*, 2009

this way, McCurley and the audience traced out the confines of a room. The space they delineated was not based on any standard or functional geometry but was instead continuously defined — and redefined — by the ever-shifting negotiations of force between the two competing sides of the wall. With its play of antagonism and cooperation, this performance informs the objects McCurley has chosen to display at Gallery TPW and the ways in which they relate to the play.

While the narrative of *Double Double Land Land* and the objects in the exhibition critique the flaws inherent to notions of productivity and community, it is ironic that the play and exhibition are themselves the result of collaborative practices. Indeed, *Double Double Land Land* is credited to “Jon McCurley with many others” and all facets of the production of the play and exhibition have been spread out among at least fifteen different contributors. For example, to decide what to include in the exhibition McCurley formed an exhibition team and met to discuss what objects would best reflect the ideas of the play. Using the general rule that the works in the exhibition “must have no purpose but be appealing,” the group came up with seventeen objects and three videos. It is difficult to pin down exactly what the group meant by “appealing” but the pieces in the show are all based on already existing everyday objects that have been slyly reconfigured so that they become dysfunctional, or what a character in the play *Double Double Land Land* refers to as “upside-down-use.” In order to highlight the conceptions of utility at work in the objects, the exhibition team, like dysfunctional animators, will perform with the objects every Saturday.

The politics of productivity and community find their clearest expression in the final scene of *Double Double Land Land*. In this scene, the Mayor of Double Double Land — a city where “all the people with problems live” — presents a speech at the inaugural “Anti-Everything Festival Parade.” With great oratorical flare, the Mayor rails against Tuba City, Double Double Land’s gleaming other, a perfectly functioning metropolis of civic order, utility, and organization. He goes on to declaim Double Double Land’s recent efforts at civic improvement and beautification, characterized by attractions like the “longest above ground wire.” The speech marks the climax of Double Double Land’s movement towards self-awareness and celebrates the city’s identity as a dysfunctional metropolis.

The speech also represents a victory over the influence of Tuba City’s Tuba City, an award-winning urban planner who is eponymously named after his hometown. By collapsing the nominal difference between the city and its planner, McCurley presents us with a nightmare vision of community, one in which individuals are effaced in favour of the homogenous presentation of the whole. Tuba City, the planner, is entirely subsumed into Tuba City, the city. This is true in more than name alone, as Tuba City, the character, cannot speak of himself and his profession except in reference to the city:

Let me ask you a question, what is urban planning? Sustainability, health, communities, neighbourhood quality. Are you ready for me? [...] I’m Tuba City from Tuba City. Tuba City is the most popular name jealous. Tuba. The nose of the new world! Birth place on earth. [...] The most progressive place on



Dave Clarke as Bad Year in *Double Double Land Land*, 2009



Scene from *Double Double Land Land*, 2009

earth the MOST it (IN?)) spot now the whole aware-
ea. [...] Birthplace of Benjamin Franklin, Nelson
Mandela, David Suzuki, Lennox Lewis, everybody,
birthplace of the moon mission, the first train,
creative therapy, first book...

Tuba City, the planner, omits any real discussion of urban planning and its goals and effects by moving effortlessly from facile clichés of urban development to a self-congratulatory confusion between himself and the city. If the lines between identities are blurred between Tuba City and Tuba City, they also work to efface historical, racial, geographic, and economic difference in the name of a “progressive city.” To claim Benjamin Franklin, Nelson Mandela, and David Suzuki as native sons reduces their particular and specific struggles to moralistic ciphers of a supposedly open society. They become empty signifiers of the city’s image as a progressive “it spot.” Their identities and struggles are entirely assimilated into the undifferentiated image of Tuba City. This same kind of reduction and obfuscation is at work in Tuba City’s brief description of urban planning. His use of the terms “healthy communities” and “neighbourhood quality” are almost entirely devoid of meaning. The way he uses them would suggest that what was considered to be “healthy” or an indication of “quality” would hold true as universals and, as such, they would not vary from region to region or from community to community. What these terms really signify is a concept of urban space based on use-value and normalization. Furthermore, the authority to judge what constitutes a healthy urban way of life remains solely in the hands of the ‘master’ planner and the mayor.

Returning to the Mayor’s speech, his vision of Double Double Land as a city is curiously invested in the everyday objects and he issues the following edicts as a means of underscoring his new civic vision:

... I understand ours is the revolution of use! I declare Simple Machines are illegal. I declare eat your soup from a convex bowl, Niagara Falls is now “nope nothings there.” Maybe your mirror is the one who needs glasses?

In his speech the Mayor attempts to rearrange Double Double Land’s civic priorities by referencing the simplest of tools (save, of course, for Niagara Falls). In



Nika Mistruzzi as Middle of the Road in *Double Double Land Land*, 2009



Nika Mistruzzi as Mrs. Nose in *Double Double Land Land*, 2009

doing so the Mayor conflates the ideologies of the home and the public square. By differentiating itself from Tuba City, Double Double Land is forced to not only reject the technologically advanced and ordered lifestyle of its other, but it also must reject the entire spectrum of use, from simple machines to superconductors. The Mayor's rejection of Tuba City is not simply a matter of it being too perfect. The problem is that the principle of utility that informs Tuba City's identity tends towards an oppressive, homogenous, and overly planned idea of civic life. The principle of utility at work in Double Double Land on the other hand, favours contingency, improvisation, and a constantly negotiated relationship to the city. Within this framework, even the simple — but impossible — act of eating from a convex bowl takes on a personal and political meaning. In this collapse of utility posed by the Mayor politics ceases to be distinct from everyday life. It is enacted every time we use something or build something the wrong way. Like a city of Mrabet's kif-smokers, every object is open to personal improvisation, even if it tends towards the dysfunctional or useless. And in the same sense, every act of improvisation constitutes a challenge to our notion of public space and community.

The Mayor finishes his speech with a clear outline of Double Double Land's new political framework. He states:

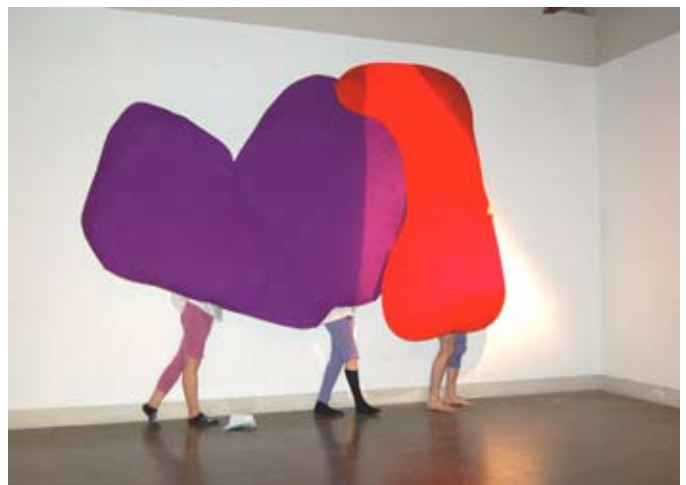
The solution is upsidedown-use and "nobody can tell you!" Because... and it's a big because... If there is one thing I think for certain it is that, people are people! In non-honour of the first Anti Everything Festival, I declare, People are not people! Not-people are people!



Amy Lam as Tuba City in *Double Double Land Land*, 2009

Here we are presented with a radical inversion of representational democracy, one in which the Mayor's own authority is undermined. In his call for "upsidedown-use" and in his twin assertions that "people are not people" and "not-people are people," the mayor suggests the formation of a community in which identity and use-value are not treated as central priorities. Just as eating from a convex bowl conveys a personal form of subversion, claiming "not-people" as "people" creates a political fissure in which there is no clear definition of what constitutes a "proper" citizen. The mayor is ultimately suggesting that his constituency is not bound by any standard of membership. Yet if the Mayor's constituency is now without a defined identity, his own authority in representing that constituency is being challenged. By refusing the proper uses and functions of objects, and by allowing our relationships to these objects to take on different forms, we can also prevent our communal relations from becoming fixed or ossified.

Civil disobedience and subversion are also woven into the structure of the play itself. While the play is underway, a wedding reception can be heard in the adjacent gallery, Xpace. The noise of the reception gradually gets louder and becomes more disruptive to the play. Ringers in audience of the play protest this intrusion and the entire performance eventually falls apart as the Mayor is delivering his speech. McCurley takes advantage of the thin walls between the galleries to stage an intervention into his own work. This intrusion of a staged real event into the world of *Double Double Land Land* can be seen as McCurley's attempt to undermine the Mayor's representational authority. The intrusion doubly undermines the Mayor's position



Scene from *Double Double Land Land*, 2009

both as a character and as an elected official. Indeed, in so far as the Mayor revokes his own representational power by radically redefining his constituency — by declaring people to be not people — he does so, paradoxically, by issuing unilateral proclamations — by exerting his authority. The disintegration of the play at the precise moment of this declaration highlights the frustration and contradiction at work in the Mayor's speech: the declared end of representational politics through the final act of power of an elected official. In his stage directions, McCurley suggests that this gesture is “anti-anti-everything?????” — a final impossible or dysfunctional act whose real purpose remains indecipherable. The interruption by the fake wedding can therefore be seen as a gesture meant to undermine the autonomous operation of the play by further insisting on the principle of contingency in all social formations, even performance. In this case, the actions of the real audience will determine the success of the final moments of the play.

One of the most striking aspects of the objects on display in the exhibition *Double Double Land Land* is the means by which naming is used to convey the conceptual underpinnings of each piece. Just as McCurley called the piece of foam-core a “wall” to dictate the terms of audience participation, many of the pieces in the show rely on the gap between the name of an object and the way in which it is used or presented. For example, in *24/7 Dresser* McCurley and the exhibition team took the idea of an always-accessible dresser and rendered it useless. By nailing open the drawers of a dresser, they ensured that the dresser was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Yet in doing so,

they had to sacrifice the dresser's original utility for storage and privacy. *Additional Cords To Put On Top of Your Cords* functions — or dysfunctions — in a similar manner. The group produced a nest of electrical cables that do not connect to any object and are impossibly tangled. The cords are meant to be placed on top of the already existing mess of cables you have under your desk. In this way *Additional Cords To Put On Top of Your Cords* are a group of powerless power cables designed specifically to get in your way. And *Liberated Floor*, is merely a sheet of linoleum suspended above the floor of the gallery which has a trompe l'oeil picture of the basement drawn on it in chalk. *Liberated* is perhaps a misnomer here because the sheet of linoleum was never actually part of the floor. Suspended above a floor it was never a part of, the linoleum embodies, like the other objects in the show, the same type of conceptual inversion as Mrabet's kif-smoker. The fact that the newly invented ways of using these objects fail so disastrously is not important. Their importance lies in the attempt to reinvent or refashion. Like eating from a convex bowl — or trying to eat from a convex bowl — these objects try to undo the work of fixed behavior and proper use, and in doing so gesture towards a more open conception of community.

In *The Sea in the Street*, as the kif-smoker leaves the merchant with as much oil as he managed to salvage from the upturned bottle, the kif “flowers in his mind” and he becomes stoned in the open air of the street. The drugs cause him to confuse the street for the open sea. Stripping down, the kif-smoker ties the wine bottle to his head to protect it from the waves and dives into the water, which is in fact “piles of excrement” next



Lauren Bride as The Mayor in *Double Double Land Land*, 2009



The wedding party crashes *Double Double Land Land*, 2009

to “a cactus fence.” When he finally arrives at his home, still fully hallucinating and covered in cuts and poop, his horrified wife cleans him up and puts him to bed.ⁱⁱ The kif-smoker’s drug-induced encounter with the wine bottle and street is neither productive nor entirely sanitary, but it does underline the restrictions governing our interactions with objects, public spaces, and communities. For McCurley, the primary means of investigating these relationships is through the play of utility and dysfunction. The point is to re-conceive or re-imagine what we demand from objects and communities in order to move away from the strict confines of utility. In the kif-smoker’s case, the most efficient route home is not nearly as important as the free access to use public spaces and objects, even if they are covered in excrement.



24/7 Dresser, 2009

i Mrabet, Mohammed. “The Sea in the Street.” *M’Hashish*. Trans. Paul Bowles. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1969. pp. 37-40

ii Mrabet, 41

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jon McCurley is an artist/performer who has been organizing large scale theatre nights in abandoned buildings around Toronto as well as regularly performing and presenting at Toronto’s Extermination Music nights. He is part of the collaborative duo *Life of a Craphead* with Amy Lam, who perform high concept comedy, and puts on the *No Face No Problem Performance/Reading Show* with Laura McCoy. *Life of a Craphead* were included in the exhibition series *Toronto Free Library* at the Toronto Free Gallery in 2008 and *Double Double Land Land* will be McCurley’s 8th staged play.

Jon McCurley worked in collaboration with Amy Lam, Zoe Barcza, Nikki Woolsey, Matt Smith, Xenia Benivolski, Robin Fry, Sarah Richardson, Bonny Poon, Matt King, Miles Collyer and Cameron Lee.

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