

Notes from an encounter with
Lamb's Performing Objects

grunt

Impresario, Blackie Schwarzkopf, at an
undisclosed café near Fraser Street in
January of 2013 on a Tuesday.

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Notes from an encounter with Lamb's Performing Objects Impresario, Blackie Schwarzkopf, at an undisclosed café near Fraser Street in January of 2013 on a Tuesday.

Weather: rain, verging on inclement weather.

My first few encounters with Blackie Schwarzkopf were unsettling. He was a busy, preoccupied, mildly dismissive man, who did not give me a great deal of his time. I felt as though he was uninterested in pansying around answering my encumbering questions. In contrast, Laura Lamb was more generous. One of the issues was a certain tension between Schwarzkopf and Lamb and the sense that Schwarzkopf wanted Lamb to give way. He seemed especially aggrieved at the attention this new exhibition would afford his colleague, Lotte Obratsov. "Her whole song again! Have we time for a whole song?"

There was a phrase he repeated several times during our conversation: **"What a scene! What a scene!** It has become something I may never have imagined. Go ahead if you like," he tossed, **"unravel its complications! Look out for the Artful, Affected and Drearily Complex! Halt Stop Recollect!"** It was when he began bellowing **Deduction, Induction, Cognition, Perception, Speculation, Intuition** over and over at me, that I both shrank from him and challenged him.

"Look here Blackie," I said, "I am perfectly capable of unraveling its complexity, but I will be more challenged in doing so if you continue shouting in my ear." He excused himself to the toilet. When he returned he did not seem as distressed and commenced remarking on the rain, on the changes along Main Street and his many impressions of Vancouver and the ways it and Lamb's Performing Objects distressed him. When pressed he would expand only to say he was beyond the verge of life and would accept what it served him: **The Walls, The Floor, The Fools, The Flowers.**

I had no idea what he was on about, but decided not to press him because a high colour flushed his cheeks on the word floor. He nearly spat it at me. I assured Blackie Schwarzkopf that far from reducing him, Lamb continued to find him fascinating and these new works were a credit to him. He could consider them company. He looked impaled when I used the word **Umbrella Project**. He was like that, Blackie, the kind of man who could get carried away with himself and would need to be reminded that the world could evolve beyond him and still include him. He seemed particularly threatened by the Slavs, saying he was not sure whether the trucks could support them. "How much equipment do they travel with?" he remarked on having heard of a troupe up North that took up half a truck with their rig! "Are we to be without a tent? Will we leave it behind as we travel? Are we reduced to performing in a bare field on account of this new FANCY?"

I changed the subject and asked after his family. He was pinched and quiet but then talked freely about how difficult things had been for him since the situation. The Shift. How tough it had been on them all. It's not just us, he said. The whole nation is affected by what happened. Everything has changed in the country since the shift. He conceded that yes the addition of the Department of Ornithology had given him and others pleasure. But he squeezed the word pleasure out between his two lips, as though he could only let it out hushed. An untoward secret. "Come here, we aren't talking about lust!" I said. "Sssh woman," he quieted me looking around the café where we sat. "Eros," he replied "does not sit well with my cabbage rolls."

With that he upped and said he needed to attend to some hurdy gurdy repairs and if I had any further questions refer them to Lamb, he had work to do. He left with his busy man stride while something head-heavy, silk-skirted, fell out of his suitcase on Fraser Street. He cursed it, repacked it headfirst and carried on north towards the mountains.

WHAT A SCENE, WHAT A SCENE?

Laura Lamb's exhibit Strange Songs of Trust and Treachery comprises, in the order in which the viewer will likely encounter its elements:

A street-level exhibited poster

A text installation on the grunt gallery front window

Three gallery-situated tableaux:

(1)The Century Players: stubby-armed glove puppets featuring Blackie Schwarzkopf, Lotte Obratsov & colleagues, along with pastel drawings containing slogans.

(2)The Birds or The Department of Ornithology: an installation of motorized "snotowayang" figures that generate shadow projections with incidental motor soundscape of hum and grind.

(3)The Beasts or What Other Beasts, The Great Menagerie, is represented as motorized marionette-type objects and as charcoal drawings.



Bits and Tatters, a video, (Part one of a trilogy. 5 mins) exhibited in the media lab of the gallery.

The sequence in which the viewer encounters the elements is set up to mimic that of a circus sideshow. A wander. A tentative approach. The firm suggestion. The Anticipation. A wilting or crushing disappointment. First, we encounter the promise of what we are to greet; it is promised through language. The language gives rise to appetite, to anticipation, which permits the imaginative gears of fear and trepidation or salivation. Classic circus sideshows since the beginning of circus art would proffer a freak or some freakish element. The prospect of the freak is the highlight. The sight of the freak or freakish act can never match that which we've imaginatively anticipated it to be. Lamb plays with and contorts anticipation. Anticipation is employment and currency in Lamb's Performing Objects.

Lamb employs this anticipative device to return us to Lamb's Performing Objects most recent iteration: Strange Songs of Trust and Treachery. Lamb's Performing Objects is an umbrella project, sans fin, which some viewers will have previously met. Previous episodes, What Other Beasts at Not Sent Letters (2011) and What Other Beasts (2010) at Alexander Lamb Antiques, established impresario Blackie Schwarzkopf, as its centre. A fictional presence, who, in this iteration, is present-absent (sans fin, sans centre).

Strange Songs of Trust and Treachery intersects theatre, text, sculpture, drawing, video, and musical elements with questions of tradition and *motion*.

WHAT A SCENE! WHAT A SCENE!

My second encounter with Blackie Schwarzkopf came as I sat in a second innocuous café, Room for Cream, further east on Kingsway, typing the word *motion* in the above sentence you have just read. I was about to place a full stop after it, when Blackie's voice gravel-crunched into my ear. (He had stood, reading over my shoulder.) His breath was warm and strong, like Turkish coffee.

"That's a complicated, longwinded way of saying it's a layered collage," he said. "What is it about these essays that your brain cells must ferment to candy floss? You wish to sound marvelous and confuse the reader into believing that you are marvelous. You don't make any sense woman!"

It was not a great hello, but I indicated he should sit and resisted the urge to box him between his eyebrows. We eyed each other painfully, playfully and finally a tad dubiously. I held my tongue before he confessed the city was perplexing him. He didn't expand on why, except a mutter about loaf of bread and laundry and anger over money owed to him by Lamb or the PNE. He seemed to mix up Laura Lamb and the PNE. He accused her of wasting money on fire-flaming motorbikes. *Who's she trying to extinguish?* he huffed. I pointed out it was the PNE he meant and Lamb's Performing Objects did no trade in flying motorbikes or uneven-legged, wobbly-bellied pigs.

He put his hands either side of his ears and rotated them three times like he was screwing in small light bulbs. *Read it*, he demanded indicating my screen. *Read me it aloud before you ruin my appetite*.

It was not a transaction I cherished, but since I longed to extradite a few details out of him about the old country and the new country -- I let him have it.

(I read it, I confess, in a monotone. I did not make eye contact. Though I tried not to pay attention, I did catch him actively wince and contort his face in disgust, two, if not three times)

Bits and Tatters

The opening of Lamb's video piece reveals a fairly barren landscape. A hint of mountain, green grass. A relationship is established between sky, grass and mountain that could curiously place us locally in Vanier Park. We could be local and yet we are not local. Lamb has told us that. The Big Top or performance tent sits to the far right of the frame. A sense of dislodgement. Perhaps a seismic shove made the tent hop right. There's a silence to it.

Embrace it, embrace it wholly. Lotte Obratsov's song instructs us in its lyric. These are the first words we hear in or from this exhibit, suggesting or pre-empting a resistance to the material and its chosen form.

The Slavs, a troupe of Trapeze artists, appear, interpreted or represented as a selection of assemblages. *Upset it and loosen the pieces*. A double-pointed snipper-found object dangles over one of the sculptures. It connects in a dot of a move and the sculptures begin to animate. Quickly there is a glitch in their movement, a missed step, slippage. We are aware that these sculptures move crudely before we are transferred visually to a more lush, settled sight. The second assemblage, the goldfish, moves with something of a bounce. Shaped like an avocado pit, this goldfish character again moves with a jerky, flouncy but jolly bounce, interspersed with images of the two-bolt sculpture. This third sculpture is utterly redolent of two peg or stumpy legs. We have shift, we have bounce, we have possible malformation.

What's complementary in all of this is the immediate sense of it may be, or it could be. Nothing is insisted, nothing is confirmed, all is inferred. It could be or it may be, but then again it might not. It will become what and where I, as the viewer, lace it. The narrative is mine now.

We are given to imagine (see could be and may be) the Slavs as a troupe of trapeze artists, whose flavor and style is something of a flat-footed belly-dancing jolt. The catch and release of trapeze is represented in the odd slip and glitch within the objects' motion.

The video ends with a catastrophic shift, all the bits of the tent now destroyed on the grass. The grass is proportionally higher than the sky in the frame. There has been a Shift. An Event.

Whatever has happened, it's a seismic shift. It suggests a societal change whereby the circus, the performer, is reduced or unwelcome. We are thumped to consider where we are, where we live, a city where any glance over your shoulder to a past is weekly reduced by bulldozers and property speculators whacking up or whacking off towers.

Stop! Stop! Stop! I can't have whacking off in there, shouts Blackie. Scrub it out. You're lowering the tone. What about the window text? Read me that part. Hurry I am getting cold.

The Artful, Affected and Drearily Complex! Halt Stop Recollect!

Poster and Text Installation on Window

Lamb employs a sesquipedalian text style popular during the renaissance of circus at the turn of the 20th century. Low visuals. High letter count. It recalls or refers to a more auditory time, where the public ear was attuned to language in a way that contemporary audiences are, perhaps, more attuned to visuals.

Such circus posters' main objective was to use a grandiloquent lexicon to entice viewers inside. Nothing was concise about language on these posters; the enticement was in their excess. Less was not more. In posters circus would even attack other circuses. (Redolent of today's online comment forum barbs? Cocksucker! Bitch! Suck it! WTF.) What's distinct in these posters is the heavy emphasis on typography: they might contain a small drawing, but their purpose/instruction is letters, words, that must be sampled, deciphered and digested by the reader/viewer. The instruction in one example:

Something to see
Something to talk about
And something to think of

By this same token, Lamb is asking her viewers to inflate, to assume some imaginative authority or agency and input into the space around the cracks within which Lamb's Performing Objects exists. The onus is on the reader/viewer to insert a narrative. The narrative is inferred. It is not provided. It is not polished. It is not "perfected".

Juxtapose the circus poster and window level text with the absence of active narrative imposed in the exhibit and we can see these advertorial elements are an invitation to the subconscious. A prompt. A poke. She is telling you everything and telling you nothing.

"Chickenshit!" shouted Blackie Schwarzkopf and stormed out of the café.

*

I did everything possible to avoid Blackie Schwarzkopf. He caught me exiting the toilet at the Kranky Café on E. 4th Ave, which an equally cranky left kidney had sent me into. *What are you doing in here?*
My prim and reserved nature being such it was out of me before I could censor it.

"Oh I just popped in to spend a penny." His eyes flailed, a near retinoic stiffening. *"What are these window decorating terms you offer me? What an answer! Why this baroque constipating? (Do you bite your thumb at me?)"*

I explained the origin of the term. I had heard Mrs Punch utter it once during a Punch and Judy show on Brighton Beach. She had warned me to watch that Mr Punch did not drop the baby when she went to spend a penny.

There's no other way to describe it: Blackie Schwarzkopf was, officially, beside himself. *Lamb*, he fumed, *had gone poultry on him and he was on his way to have it out with her. And you put only more fire in my exhaust, you, who demean all that I do with this sneering smelt of Punch and Judy.*

"You rather reduce Punch and Judy? N'est-ce pas?"

Give me Guignol! He was now incanting and the edges of his ears were reddened, which looked rather comical in the confines of Kranky Café.

"Same sideboard, same shelf, different ornament. Punch & Judy, Guignol, Commedia dell'Arte, amen."

"No," he corrected me, *"Guignol gave us horror. Punch and Judy is merely a frumpish Nationalistic horror; that those who know it would forget, not embellish."*

But, as with each of our encounters, Blackie Schwarzkopf's sail was now rattled by his wind and instead of expanding his confused objection, he tacked off in another direction.

Had I heard that he and Lamb were going to trial? He was on his way now to serve her papers. *Michael Fried was willing to testify*, he reported airily, again being forced to stop and deal with a sock that had nabbed one corner of his trouser-leg making matters, at the bottom of his legs, uneven.