



Mynah 八哥

Ana Terry & Don Hunter
Number 8 Collective

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In Ana Terry and Don Hunter's most recent creative collaboration we are presented with the dynamic play between a sculptured structure of wafer biscuits and the consumptive activities of three live mynah birds, as they gradually destroy their edible environment and leave a black calligraphy of excreted waste. Rich in metaphors and engaging to watch, this performative installation is being exhibited during the New Zealand artists' 2-month residency at Platform China in Beijing, and is a part of a larger body of work that investigates creative practice and its relationship to the processes of cultural gentrification.

Shown within the context of Beijing, *Mynah* offers reflection upon the tenuous nature of studios and artist run initiatives in this city, as they are 'cannibalised' by their success and driven in a cyclical process that sees artists seeking spaces further out into the make-shift hutongs and semi-industrial boroughs of the city, which are subsequently developed as commercial gallery districts and annexed by larger and more powerful interests. The mynah, a highly adaptive, nest-stealing, omnivorous bird that is considered an invasive species outside of its native territories, acts as an apt metaphor for what the artist's see as "our predatory propensity as humans to consume and produce ... at the expense of others in our fervour to create and expand our territories"¹. As artist's themselves, producing work in



a prominent gallery that may soon be forced out of its current location to seek a new 'nest', Terry and Hunter acknowledge their implication in this process in a refreshingly ironic and self-reflexive manner:

By using the bird's strange dance and sporadic feasting as an allegory for human activity and will, *Mynah* offers far more than a didactic critique on the processes of cultural production and consumption. It is comical and curious, and completely engrossing to watch. As much as the glass vitrine containing the mynah birds and their wafer urban space may appear as a scientific or musicological display, there is much that has been left to chance and the release of the birds into this space was entirely unrehearsed. We are reminded that there is nothing inevitable in the processes that dictate the structure and restructuring of the cultural sphere, yet as we see with the mynah bird's rapid consumption of the wafer structure, certainly there are qualities and behaviours innate to the mynah – or moreover to our to our own human selves – that shape a creature's response to the environment it inhabits.

Mynah alludes not only to a cyclical de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation of space within the cultural arena but refers also to the much larger idea of cyclic creation/destruction. As an archetypal theme underpinning many of the world's mythologies and religious narratives, we can read the crumbling wafer tower reaching to the limits of the glass enclosure as a kind of Tower of Babel, at once symbolising our desire for knowledge – through the attempted construction of a utopic and unifying structure – and our inherently flawed aspirations in the destruction of this edifice.

Held within the spot-lit glass case and hemmed around the base by thick red velvet, *Mynah* is presented to us like an act of Vaudevillian² theatre; a small segment of consumptive entertainment (or biblical fable) presented as a living diorama by the performing animals. The sense of theatricality is heightened by the bird masques hung on the surrounding walls and the long black ribbons that dangle from the sides of the masques – are we

being invited to wear these articles of costume and further participate in the strange ritual taking place? Long, sharp beaks jut out from the masques and point towards the spectacle in the centre of the room, and our departure from the space is marked by the closing of dark, ceiling-length curtains.

Terry and Hunter have been deliberate in the ambiguous design of their wafer structure; it is malleable to both the sharp beaks of the mynahs and to our ability to interpret its function and nature. The architecture is partial – yet we are unsure if it is in a state of abandoned completion or post-use ruin. As proclaimed 'itinerant artists', temporarily residing in Beijing, the Terry and Hunter have observed the effects of massive and uneven urban transformation that is taking place in this city. Unfathomably large high-rise developments grow next to tangled hutongs that have been built by a growing workforce of rural migrants from the detritus of dismantled neighbourhoods. Beijing is a city in flux, and the dizzying rapidity of change here cannot help but affect those who visit and move through the city's spaces. As witnesses to Beijing's unceasing cycle of creation and destruction, Terry and Hunter have made *Mynah* as a reflection upon urban/cultural transformation, and furthermore as a way of understanding their own role in this process as creative practitioners.

References:

1. Taken from the artists' statement.
2. Vaudeville was a theatrical genre of variety entertainment in North America from the early 1880s until the early 1930s. The acts often included performing animals, dancers, magicians and dime museums.

Erin Coates, 2010

Erin Coates is an artist, freelance writer and curator based in Perth, Western Australia. She is currently the Exhibitions Co-ordinator at the Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle, Australia.