

THE DISPROPORTION OF INFLATION OR SO MUCH HOT AIR

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Presented under the generic banner 'New Work', one might be forgiven for assuming that Angus Taylor's latest exhibition comprises a number of discreet art works, disparate but for the fact of their recent construction. Looking for commonalities in the physical appearance of the works is also not particularly revealing. Yet, when one takes the time to consider Taylor's oeuvre of the past few years, it becomes clear that this body of work is, in some part at least, an extension of his ongoing preoccupation with the self in relation to self. Commenting on his previous exhibition *Momentary Permanence* (2008), Federico Freschi writes that Taylor's power lies in the 'subtle dialogue that it proposes between the figurative and the metaphorical, the material and the spiritual, the id and the super-ego' (Freschi, 2009)¹. But there is a new theme being articulated here: the self-referential enquiry has shifted substantially and now becomes more an interrogation of the self in relation to others.

Taylor's latest concern is perhaps best revealed in the series of six bronze sculptures entitled *Disproportion of Inflation: African Vanitas* (2009–2010). The series can be broken down into two parts: three self-portrait busts counterpoised by two cows' heads with their necks tapering down to nothing. The first of the self-portraits is self-explanatory but it is the second and third that alert us to Taylor's new theme. Each bust sports a car tyre valve behind its right shoulder and busts two and three are bizarrely contorted by the imagined

effects that might be obtained by the inflation and deflation of the human head.

Taylor mentions that the series deals with the vagaries inherent in the intersection of art and commerce, so it would make sense to relate the cows' heads to modes of African currency or to the bull and bear symbols associated with modern economics. One might even read them as metaphors for the placid (bovine) way in which many artists tend to accept the economic transactions conducted on their behalf by galleries. In the context of their inclusion in the *Disproportion of Inflation* series, however, I would be more inclined to focus on the tapered, shrivelled appearance of their necks and suggest that these pieces resemble nothing so much as air-filled receptacles rapidly deflating, like balloons, through their necks.

Disproportion of Inflation: African Vanitas suggests myriad references. Perhaps the most relevant in the context of this exhibition, however, is to the vulnerability of the individual within a specific commercial system. Applying the principle to the art world, Taylor might be alluding to the process whereby an artist is singled out, promoted and ultimately commoditised for the benefit of both artist and gallery. Money, fame and power are the motivators in the development of the artist as 'desirable brand'. To this end, useful, but not necessarily remarkable, attributes such as 'mainstream appeal' may be endorsed, while more worthy, but ultimately problematic (read:

DISPROPORTION OF INFLATION

– African Vanitas

2010
155 x 68 x 27 cm
Cast bronze, metal rod
60 x 64 x 29 cm
Cast bronze



DISPROPORTION OF INFLATION

– Rock 1

2010
24 x 42 x 40 cm
Cast bronze, Belfast granite

– Rock 2

2010
57 x 34 x 13 cm
Cast bronze, Belfast granite



not commercially viable) aspects are suppressed. In so doing, the artist's value, and concomitantly his ego, is artificially inflated.

The arrangement between artist and gallery will only continue for as long as the relationship remains mutually beneficial however. And considering the abstract and mutable notions of value on which the arrangement is predicated, generally speaking, this relationship is a fragile one. One can almost hear the shrill whine as the air escapes through the valve and the structure deflates.

Not surprisingly, Taylor revealed in conversation that this latest body of work is strongly influenced by Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983)². Taylor draws comparisons between his artistic endeavours and Hyde's concept of the market economy versus a 'gift economy'. Hyde views market economies as rational constructs. They operate on the exchange of goods for cash and are deliberately impersonal. In contrast, his concept of a 'gift economy' describes the willing exchange of gifts in the form of immaterial talents – musical, artistic, scientific – for the purpose of building relationships and community; and ultimately for the betterment of society as a whole. A gift economy, therefore, is anything but impersonal.

Hyde goes on to assert that the gift he is most interested in is the 'transformative gift' – an intangible connection, often transferred in the form of psychological healing, spiritual teaching or the appreciation of an art form – which has the

power to change us profoundly. This gift cannot simply be bestowed on the recipient; rather the unbidden gift must invoke a sense of gratitude in the recipient if it is to have the power to transform. Or, to put it another way, as soon as the gift is sold as commodity, a dispassionate transaction is put in place, gratitude becomes obsolete and the gift loses its power to transform.

It is clear that the romanticised notion of the 'starving artist in garret' bestowing his unbidden gifts upon society is simply no longer tenable. Was it ever? one might ask. After all, even artists must put food on the table. Nevertheless, Taylor, like Hyde, laments the effect that the market economy has had on art and artists and believes that we have been robbed of a vital tool for the building of interconnectedness and the nurturing of society.

And yet all is not necessarily lost. Hyde suggests that it is quite possible that significant elements of a 'gift economy' can continue to circulate above the exchange of goods for cash. In relation to this, consider the irony inherent in the *Disproportion of Inflation* series. Even while each work on Taylor's exhibition has a price tag and will in due course be sold, the inherent meaning of the series seeks to undermine this very process. *Disproportion of Inflation* cocks a snook at the artist/gallery relationship and its subtle cynicism serves to remind us that the true value of art and, by extension, the artist, lies not solely in the object or creative individual but in the interrogative power of the creative process.

DISPROPORTION OF INFLATION

– African Vanitas

2010
155 x 68 x 27 cm
Cast bronze, metal rod

1 Freschi, F. 2009. *The Fragility of Objecthood: Angus Taylor's Momentary Permanence*. Everard Read, Johannesburg.
2 Hyde, L. 1983. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. Vintage Books, New York.

