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“The Real Affects of Change”: A Review

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The subject of this project is organizational mergers – portrayed in terms of human experience (not the management, financial and organisational processes that we normally observe, and have endlessly explained to us, as the three categories of merger). Human experience *in toto*, of course, is not a stable object of inquiry, or if it is, it only becomes “stable” (open for scrutiny) through the imposition of scientific procedures of theoretical dissection and analytical methods. Yet, there remains the question – what about human experience as “a whole” or “as such”? What about that huge world of near-existential feeling that suddenly opens up on losing a job, having one’s career buckled, or becoming the inadvertent victim of some corporate shift in priority? The realm of the “subjective” as so often dismissed as relative, endlessly variable and mutable, and not scientifically significant (unless it is made concrete in some way, through the imposition of scientific theory or method – as it has with neuropsychology, or even confessional religion, or literary tradition and its fine conventions of diction and articulation). Rationalised theory and analysis – like archaeology – destroys its object in the very act of interrogation. How does experience itself become both subject and object of inquiry – where the experience is preserved in the act of analysis?

As an artistic project, this sculptural inquiry into corporate mergers, both defines and preserves something of the human experience of mergers – in a way that is coherent and explicitly pertaining to a set of objective conditions (the total reconfiguration of the context and thus value of one’s job and labour). And as a participatory project (12 participants, all of whom experienced the individual impact of a merger), the artists (researchers) maintained a sense of the complexity and individuality of each instance as expressive of forms of human experience to which we can all relate, whether we are familiar with the organisational change of a merger or not.

The challenge of achieving “art” – an enigmatic and visually engaging balance between generality and specificity (the whole and the part, the universal and particular, and so on) – is not easily attained. Further, the role of art in a research project can be a precarious one, as the demands of art often require a subjugation of visual “enigma” to the demands (or theoretical aims) of research (and usually, the source of the funding). Intellectually, an artist can all too easily be inclined, even if subconsciously, to form their understanding of visual form and aesthetic meaning around a project-relevant “theory”, effectively rendering the artwork as conduit of an already agreed or available theoretical understanding. Artistic expression can become less of a conduit of human experience per se than an illustration of a theory of human experience; in fact, all too much contemporary art – particularly art-as-research, conceptual art, information art, and so on – can be defined (pejoratively, of course) as “symbolic theory” (a conceptual organisation of visual signifiers so as to intimate a determined expression of theoretical rationality).

But, I would maintain, this is not the case with "The Real Affects of Change" project. Each sculpture does indeed utilize objects that maintain an empirical-semantic meaning – and thus can be "read" semiotically and sometimes as a symbol – and yet, they are always more than just visual text or visual referents to rationalized thought. They exude "affect", in this case the curious collision of emotions that, we can only infer, are involved in the cognitive disorientation experienced by a worker in the context of a corporate merger – being attentive to the detail of their unfolding processes of affection and meaning, this entails rapid structural change and enforced shifts in the material conditions of work, the dislocation of individual validation and position, dispossession and enforced new belief systems, values and loyalties, and need for solidarity and resistance (in the face of the dissolution of such).

A basic assumption of this project, it seems, is that while mergers are accepted as a routine method by which companies grow, expand, extend, and thus promote the economic growth that supposedly benefits us all, the human cost of mergers are nonetheless masked, suppressed or simply find no means of expression. But that such an expression would find significance through sculpture is a surprise. Is this a task for sculpture? Indeed, sculpture – whose Western traditions of verisimilitude revolve around the morphology of the human body – seems something of an outdated medium; perhaps video installation, performance or the sonic arts would be more adequate to the task? Yet the sculptures here, while all using the generic form of the human head, are surprisingly arresting, unpredictable, vivid and nuanced – as the head of a mannequin, appropriated, readymade, a subject that becomes the object of imposition, de-individuation, a subject that loses its expressive personality by being "subject to" a range of other external forces. Nuance is not contrived by vagueness, the strange or eccentric, as they indeed might seem on first view. The sculptures, rather, exude a tension between the self-evident semantic content of representation (head as the symbolic site of thought and emotion – the visual additions to which are easily readable in terms of statements or descriptive additions to the stated subject), and the enigmatic impact of the head as image, as an aesthetic whole, as differentiated individuality but unidentifiable generality. An individual without a name, effectively de-faced, in an agony of self-expression, without the particularity that makes it a specific person, i.e. the subject of a sculptural "bust" or three-dimensional portrait. The narrative of the merger – not so extreme to be defined as de-humanisation as such, but in looking at the sculptures this can be described as a process of de-individuation – extracts that person from a chosen work environment and situates them into a prepared template, whose working conditions emerge from strategy and instrumental rationality not an evolved state of labour. How the sculptured head-form and its modification through visual additions, speaks or makes evident statements on the subject of the project – the mergers – presents us with a boundary over which we only traverse by taking leave of the conceptual (the head as worker as messed up by a merger). Indeed, we need to traverse the boundary in order to move beyond the generic social factuality of the merger, to the sensuous particularity of the individual pain and disorientation of the individuals whose emotional complexity finds its only expression in this static hopeless head of a mannequin.

Of course, individuals who experience personal hardship or psychological issues during or after a corporate merger situation can, of course, seek therapeutic help and so forth, sometimes even provided by the employer or corporation. But this sculptural project is not therapeutic as such, or at least not in a clinical sense. It is a critical articulation of human pain as the inherent cost of economic growth and an artistic intervention – an insertion of art between the worker and corporation, asserting the right to art and the right of the worker to art as a means of open acknowledgement, in the space of change management, leadership, organisational learning, that there always remains a concealed human truth of struggle. For a humane management, leadership, organisational learning, we need labour rights to affective representation – at least, this is the worthy implication of this project.

The title of the project is significant – each term of “The Real Affects of Change” signifies our need to inquiry, equally, into “the real”, the affective, and the economics of change. Each is related. The economics of change (and the concealed politics of economics) all too often seems to insert itself into the realm of the self-evident, rational and logical, necessary and inevitable. Critical traditions of thought rightly question all claim to “the natural” by any social formation or enterprise, and also alert us to how contemporary forms of capital have colonised forms of exchange, labour and markets, which pre-date capitalism and were all essentially forms of social relations not capital accumulation. Our affective life is substantially determined by these new conditions. By investigating the “human” of the corporate merger, we begin to peel back the realm of the social on which the “economic” is parasitic, and how the supremacy of the economic at once promises huge future rewards at an immediate (often morally unacceptable) human cost. In terms of sculpture, the “real” indicates the historical artistic question for the true, right and beautiful, even at the cost of asserting its opposite (the imagined or fantastical, the unacceptable or boundaries of the moral, and ugliness or defaced). These sculptures traverse the space between these poles — where the perfect human form of the mannequin as blank de-personalised and incommunicative representation of the human, yet where this remains a necessarily generic shape and surface by which to create the personal, individual and meaningfulness itself.

Classically, an “affect”, is both physiological and mental and yet also social in terms of how the experience of affect is emitted from outside the person, the external environment in which others live and thus where others share in the common understandings, interchange or dialogue on the source of affect. On the subject of the merger, within the changing corporate environment, information, discussion and shared understanding circulate as a context in which individuals are receptive and responsive to affect. And yet in identifying the realm of the “affective” in a corporate merger, we are driven (as are the sculptures) to locate the destination point of affect in the mind or “head” of the person (the psychological, the subjective or personal, the emotional sense of self). The sculptures, in this sense, are both individual worker and collective self, or representation of the workforce as in the state of being re-created in a “surreal” sense of representing a corporate imaginary. A merger is an act of imagination in the sense that the forced integration of different entities (such as separate companies with their own organisational cultures, and so on) is never wholly predictable, where the emotional landscape it generates as a process of change along the temporalities of that change, cannot possibly be wholly planned. The artists’ reference to the “surreal” quality of the sculptures could be understood in terms of the “irrationality of the rational” of the merger (the unplanned of the plan, the fragmentation of the corporate act of unity, the individual degradation of successful corporate evolution, and so on). This is the conundrum articulated by the sculptures — together as a series that look contiguous and evolving, but are repetitive, unpredictable, with no emerging visual reason. Classical theories of affection, as a dimension of what became philosophical aesthetics, tend towards the notion that the visual can impart truth as experience. In the case of these sculptures, affection can be understood as an applied aesthetics of corporate critique, where a representative human head is continually masked, de-faced, concealed, and re-formed by the processes of material change inherent in the merger. And these are as indifferent as the corporate process as to how they distort or makes baroque the natural symmetry and balance of the human person or worker — as registered in all of us, as visage, our face, our assured self-presentation of something of value beyond the position of work and power we currently occupy.

Finally, on the third term of “change” — the conclusion of the sculptural project points to how the apparent successes and adaptive genius of corporate capital nonetheless leaves a trail of emotional wreckage, disorientation and disillusion in the superhighway of its progress. One cannot be traded off against the other, or the latter crassly accepted as a necessary cost of the

former. Both need to remain objects of scrutiny, representation and expression, and so an ethically-charged acknowledgement. In the permanent revolution of late capitalism, change is endured as a necessary, even existential, condition of the economic growth, and financial flows as the oxygen without which we would expire. And yet, we remain all too lacking in the languages required for articulating the concomitant change in the human self, the material de-constitution or de-formation of experience itself – the psychic, personal and emotional orientation and balance we all share, which a visual, affective, mode of communication could serve as a principal means of inquiry.

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Jonathan Vickery is Associate Professor in the Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, at the University of Warwick, UK. He was co-editor and art director of the journal *Aesthesis*, and has since established three international masters degrees in creative industries, was Chair of The Art of Management and Organization, and continues to advise arts organisations on strategy and creative development. From 2017 he is co-Editor in Chief of *The Journal of Law, Social Justice and Global Development*.