

## The Permanence of the Temporary

In stacks of art coffins in freeports around the world value is slowly accruing. The biggest art collections are now held in air-conditioned vaults in free economic zones outside of state control. The Geneva Freeport can hold one million artworks alone. “Freeportism” has changed the production and consumption of art more than anything else in the last thirty years.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly no one has seemed to notice. We still think of art as primarily cultural, and our anger is misdirected towards collectors who buy work for their own fetishistic desires, removing it from public view. But this is a nostalgic notion of the circulation of art which still assumes that art’s value is intrinsic. Sotheby’s was one of the first auction houses to realise the changing definition of art. In the 1990’s it offered its clients the ability to trade art without the artwork every being present. Finally art could be traded as immaterial capital. Art stopped moving, finding its final home in high-end storage vaults in freeport tax havens. Better yet, because art does not have the same governance as other commodities, it became the blue chip stock of criminals, tax avoiders and launderers. It took new forms of relational art (in this case whistleblowing and leaking) to reveal what was going on. The Panama Papers expose the extent to which auction houses were complicit in these shady practices.<sup>2</sup> By the turn of the millennium art was dead. Art became the domain of future archaeologists—a post-capitalist Sir Arthur Evans (although to be honest it will probably more likely be a post-apocalyptic *Storage Wars*).

What has this to do with Slatter & Slatter (other than the fact they sound like a law firm that would defend Sotheby’s?) Freeport art has to assume a stability of the commodity in order for value to be detached from it. Like the housing market, it relies on the material certainty of bricks and mortar to produce speculation.<sup>3</sup> Painting is the bricks and mortar of art speculation. Pushing the metaphor a little too far, Slatter & Slatter’s paintings subtly insert structural faults lines into the art market. They achieve this through methodological, formal and conceptual interventions which rupture our expectations of what painting is. They are not directly critical of late-capitalist speculation, but rather insert junk DNA into purebred painting.

Collaboration is key to understanding their work. They are not an example of artistic duos whose collaboration generates *Women’s Weekly* intrigue into disputes over authorship, love and separation (Lee Kranser and Jackson Pollock, Marina Abramovic and Uwe Laysiepen,

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Heidenreich, S. “Freeportism as Style and Ideology: Post-Internet and Speculative Realism, Part I,” *E-flux Journal*, 71

<sup>2</sup> Juliette Garside, J. Harding, L. Watt, H. et.al. “How offshore firm helped billionaire change the art world for ever,” *The Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Those interested in an art history of art theory aside could note that the rise of Speculative Realism, OOO and post-internet art is a perfect example of this. The rise of theoretical speculation of material *could only occur* because of the stability that freeport art produced.

Bjork and Matthew Barney). Slatter & Slatter's practice is more complex, revealing co-mixtures of micro and macro forces that structure their art. At the macro level their collaboration is indicative of the precariat nature of creativity in Australia. The necessities of art practice (a studio, a solo show, funding) are now luxuries that are not accessible to Slatter & Slatter despite their acclaimed exhibition history and established position in the arts. As such their collaboration represents a necessity that is born of a struggle to find the time, space and security to work. But here we find the first paradox as this restriction has produced uniqueness. Hegel argues that marriage is the way we avoid the terror and intensity of love by turning it into a bureaucratic duty (Žižek goes further suggesting a marriage proposal occurs at the point that love is gone). Marriage prevents falling *out* of love by turning it into an economic, social and political calculation. We get married so we can survive. Slatter & Slatter (not-married, but that's another story) make art together to survive. It may not be romantic, it may not be bohemian, but it is real, authentic and ultimately brilliant. What should be restrictions on their creative output has instead produced a series of paintings which are remarkable direct in their instability (note the temporary bollards, crashmats, bunting, scaffolding.) The mundane instability of their creative existence is rawly expressed. Their paintings are disconcerting, compositionally fragmented and darkly comedic. They are "coming soon" spaces—spaces which are caught between spaces. They are spaces held in a transitional state, waiting for completion and only symbolically closed off. We could easily walk around the barrier, but what is it that prevents us from entering? What stops us from the work of changing a broken state? Why are we happier to let it lie in some ephemeral permanence?

I am most interested in the micro politics of their practice. These micro elements are a product of their macro conditions. Here I refer to the microscopic collaboration captured within the painting surface. Donna Haraway uses the term "mess-mates" to describe cross-species mixing that occurs as a result of living together. Famously she describes her relationship with her dog:

"I have a dog, therefore what I have inherited in the flesh (part of the conquest) are very historically specific biologies and various kinds of terminological change... I have acquired a genome and they have acquired me. We have respect, a question of accountability in having acquiring each other's genomes in these very specific nature cultures which has everything to do with 'mess-mates'."<sup>4</sup>

Slatter & Slatter have two dogs. But that is not the point—well not entirely. The notion of mess-mates allows us to think of collaboration as a miasma. Collaboration is infection, pollination and pollution. Out of necessity Slatter & Slatter's kitchen is their studio. The kitchen is the central space of a home where animate and inanimate material meet and are

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<sup>4</sup> Haraway, D. 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

transformed, digested, spilled and reconstituted. The work of the kitchen is very similar to the work of painting. The easel is at home in the kitchen, yet it is rarely found there.<sup>5</sup> By placing the painting in the kitchen it starts to absorb (literally and conceptually) the smells, splatter, noise and chaos of that space. This liberates painting from its hermetic dependence on the heterotopic mystique of the studio. We can see this in their subject matter which slips between private and public, domestic and institutional, storage and display. Slatter & Slatter are mess-mates with painting—they have ingested it, and it has ingested them. Their work is alive with microbial investment that will continue to evolve.

What I am attempting to describe here is that at both a macro and micro level these paintings are products of the artists' sacrifice. We like the idea of artists sacrificing themselves for their work, but we are not used to seeing the mundane reality of artistic sacrifice. Slatter & Slatter's work is wryly contemporary because it shows us this reality. It displays the condition of its making, as the Modernist Proudhon put it, "above all without pose". These are paintings, which if cursed to a life in an art coffin, would digest all the art around it. This is painting of and for now. This is temporary painting. But isn't that precisely the horror of the condition of contemporary existence—we have made the temporary permanent?

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<sup>5</sup> See Kelley, L. 2016 *Bioart Kitchen: Art, Feminism and Technoscience*, I.B. Tauris for a great history of the relation between art and the kitchen.