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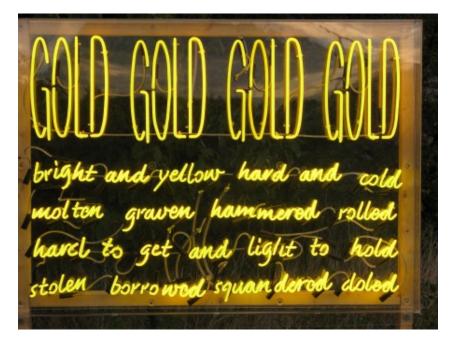
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# **Current Shows**

### Generosity is the New Political

Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, UK



### **About this review**

Published on 29/09/09 by Andrew Hunt

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#### Bik Van Der Pol, Untitled (Gold) (2009)

Purporting to examine the political essence of contemporary art embedded in a 'system that merits symbolic value over market worth', 'Generosity is the New Political' could have fallen into a trap of blind optimism similar to Lewis Hyde's 1983 book The Gift (1983) (currently undergoing a minirevival, along with Marcel Mauss' 1950 classic of the same name). With the exhibition's premise intending to demonstrate the positive aspects of generosity, to it's credit it also aimed also to 'reveal its ambiguity'; one could say that no matter how charitable or earnest the intention of an art work might be, less palatable by-products of kindness – obligation, guilt – can emerge, while the illusion of ethical integrity can always be undermined by ulterior motives. Take Bik Van Der Pol's Untitled (Gold) (2009), a gold-coloured neon piece that illuminates the theatrical scrubland arena to the rear of the gallery on Wysing Arts Centre's rustic grounds: warm, encouraging and powerfully beautiful, the work was also as phoney and artificial as it gets. As every good capitalist knows, gold is the big winner in any recession.



Celine Condorelli, *Life always escapes* (2009)

Another pastoral intervention of note is Celine Condorelli's *Life always escapes* (2009), for which a stove is installed to heat the gallery using wood from the nearby countryside. Condorelli took an old-fashioned model of collective ownership, together with the peripheral location of Wysing, and awkwardly posits the two in opposition to our all-pervading obsession with private property. Through this, and her museological presentation of postcards depicting old British commons used to graze cattle and collect, she points towards the sometimes failed potential of the marginal and the rural because the work successfully provides compelling

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White Cube









historical and contemporary ecological examples of group participation away from the city.



Freee Art Collective, Revolution Road: Rename the Streets! (2009)

Of the five new commissions in the exhibition, Luca Frei's examination of exchanging time and experience was the most genuinely munificent, while the London-based collective Freee's film and large-scale poster work Revolution Road: Rename the Streets! (2009) was the most earnest. Freee and their collaborators are pictured wearing red Phrygian liberty caps, similar to those worn during the French Revolution, as they rename various streets in Cambridge after various 18th-century radical thinkers. These include Pembroke Street, which is re-christened 'Thomas Spence Drive'. In an act that chimes well with Conderelli's work, the thoroughfare is identified with the poor schoolmaster who championed land reform, believed that all land should be nationalized, and was vilified for selling the self-published transcript of his speech Property in Land Every One's Right. By contrast, Frei learnt how to make his clock-shaped ceramics with a practitioner based in Wysing. The artist's series of sculptures, 'Untitled (...The sun is the tongue, the Shadow is the language)' (2009), ruminates on time, participation and craft. Through this, he suggests that all art works are the result of a generous act. Perhaps this is the real, or at least alternative political essence of art, no matter how 'political' works appear on the surface. Freee's performances, posters and video works could be seen as an example of this, showing as they do, group action and clearly defined upright statements with honour as direct protest, yet beyond this clarity, they also suggest the impossibility of any final resolution; simply an endless uncertainty and doubt around the production of ongoing dialogue and debate.











Luca Frei, *Untitled* (...the Sun is the tongue, the Shadow is the language) (2009)

Likewise, Christodoulos Panayiotou's work was evasive and left us equally in limbo due to the nature of its deliberately incomplete character; a poster advertises a previous performance whereby the artist interviewed the director Jean Verdeil about socially engaged art and theatre, while a photograph depicts the Bayreuth stage on which the event took place. We are left guessing as to the content of this conversation, yet the practical and symbolic combine in this work, again over time; the script from this action will be reenacted and revealed to an audience at Wysing in November.

This exhibition's examination of symbolic exchange is an interesting one, not because of its relation to the lasting effects of last year's financial catastrophe, or any naive assertion that generosity could be seen to be an effective alternative to the capitalist system. Ultimately its success is less to do with an analysis of generosity *per se*, than with affirming the potency of small acts of care against commercialisation ruthless, by presenting examples of alternative or historical acts of collective activity produced over time, socially engaged theatre, and art as protest, which intervene, problematize and jar in a direct, productive yet deliberately evasive manner with the dominant economic system.

**Andrew Hunt** 

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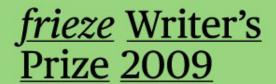
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