FIRST TAKE

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev on

Stuart Ringholt

WHEN I WAS INVITED to attend a "curatorial clinic" last year in Melbourne, Australia, I anticipated that the event, organized by curator Juliana Engberg, would satirically treat the primary psychological illness among curators overwhelmed by the excess of information in the art world: superficiality. In fact, this daylong therapy session featured a number of artists making earnest PowerPoint presentations about the state of contemporary art, seeking to help their curator colleagues gain deeper self-understanding. Standing apart, however, was a young artist from Perth, Australia, named Stuart Ringholt. Tall and skinny, with deep, penetrating eyes, he seemed both nervous and oddly calm and assured—a paradoxical person with traits of both analyst and analysand. Instead of giving a lengthy lecture, he pulled a number of things from his rucksack, like a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat. There was a strange, sticklike object, a newspaper, and a number of books. Particularly striking was *Circle Heads*, 2005, an altered volume of portraits by a relatively unknown photographer: Ringholt had literally "defaced" the found work, switching people's heads, joining others together, creating new relationships among them. To me, this endeavor seemed at once compelling and problematic, not so much a critique of the mass media or popular culture (in the modern tradition of artistic collage) as a deflected self-portrait registering both a kind of violent confusion and an attempt to work through it with small, poetic acts of reconnection. It made sense when Ringholt handed me *Hashish Psychosis: What It's Like to Be Mentally Ill and Recover*, 2006, a book about his own breakdown years before, after taking drugs once too often in India—an experience that eventually led to his involvement with art.

Ringholt's artistic production today ranges from books and performance to painting and sculpture, but I do not know whether saying so is sufficient to describe what he does. One would do well simply to read *Hashish Psychosis*, in which the artist explains, for example, a work titled *Celebrity Twins*, 2001—a performed "regression reenactment" of his illness, during which he adopted the personae of an Australian Football League umpire and Superman (whom he once imagined himself to be) in the presence of a pair of twins and a security guard. While the notion of celebrity implies extreme individuality, the twins ironically suggest the opposite, because they are not unique, while the security guard represents the institution (psychiatric or artistic) designed, Ringholt says, to protect the public from the unaccounted likes of Superman. Most powerful, however, are the works that take the lessons of Ringholt's private world into the public one, beyond the gallery confines, whose insistent themes of social maladjustment bring to mind an odd mixture of Lygia Clark, Bruce Nauman, and Jean Dubuffet—in other words, a relational therapeutic practice marked by a phenomenology of confusion and Brutist pleasure as well as the evocation of regressions to childhood. For *Conceptual Art Improved My Embarrassing Life*, 2003, Ringholt ran an advertisement in a newspaper inviting readers to request materials on a clownish series of actions he had performed in the public realm, each one intended to cause self-embarrassment for the purpose of overcoming it: spending twenty minutes in Florence with toilet paper stuck to the rear end of his pants; walking around with snot in his beard; chewing a pen until the ink went all over his face in a train compartment. As a subsequent project, Ringholt organized *Funny Fear Workshop*, 2004, in which he led a group of people in conversations and exercises meant to overcome their sense of embarrassment. (After narrating personal experiences such as "pissing all over a household toilet because a hair had stuck itself over the eye of my dick," Ringholt sent the participants into the public with the task of embarrassing themselves.) Much of what Ringholt does might seem childish or foolish, and irrelevant to contemporary art, but his apparent naïveté in fact forces a reevaluation of what we consider appropriate. He opens a vertiginous void between exhibitionism and modesty that forces us to become aware of our place at the intersection of isolation and social interaction— and to reconsider our sense of self in the world.

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At times Ringholt makes works primarily for himself, becoming in effect his own therapist. The artist has quietly (and disquietingly) been exhibiting a white monochrome painting mounted on a table. There is color hidden from view under the picture plane; even Ringholt does not know the underpainting's hue). On the back of the work, *This Painting Improved My Life*, 2004, Ringholt marks the date every time he looks at the canvas. "When I look at the white rectangle with a hidden color," he says, "I am reminded that I don't know everything. I am reminded not to fight for my opinion, which is important, because my mind then becomes quieter. The dates on the back provide the history of a quieting mind." This funny self-help approach to the spiritualist underpinnings of abstraction seems an endeavor parallel to Ringholt's clumsy deflations of conceptual performance, which, for all their modesty, draw the principles of high art closer to a lived life. Ringholt is a paradox: Nothing he does seems legitimate as art, let alone arguable as important art, and yet he claims it as art, and positions it with tremendous assurance. In a world of fragility, disempowerment, and fear, Ringholt—a fool—finds a way for us to claim and reclaim territory for the self, and he makes this his practice. □

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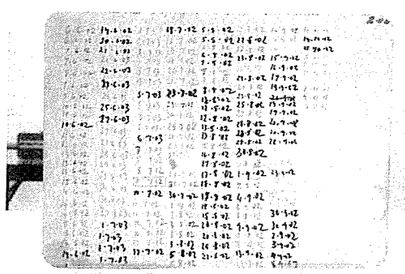

This page, clockwise from top: **Stuart Ringholt, *Circle Heads* (detail), 2005**, book, 8⅝ x 11¾". **Stuart Ringholt, *On Thursday He Wore a Booger*, 2002.** Performance view, Centrelink, Perth, Australia, 2002. Stuart Ringholt. **Stuart Ringholt, *This Painting Improved My Life* (detail), 2004**, acrylic and ink on wood, ink on paper, and Laminex table, 59⁷⁄₁₆ x 35⅝ x 38⅛". Opposite page: **Stuart Ringholt, *Celebrity Twins*, 2001.** Performance views, Arthouse Gallery, Perth, Australia, 2001. Left: Stuart Ringholt and Mathew Grigsby. Right: Chrissy Nanos and Vasila Nanos.