



Dunedin

Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre
Tony De Lautour

KATHRYN MITCHELL

For those of you who have not yet visited the Blue Oyster Gallery in Moray Place, *Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre* is a project which involves and celebrates the diversity of Dunedin's thriving arts community. Curated by artist and 420 Centre Art Coordinator Adam Douglas, the project has been developed over a three year period and has now come together in the form of an installation made up of approximately 1500 350 mm. plywood panels by over 200 participants which in effect immerses the viewer in the work which has become the walls and ceilings of the Blue Oyster Gallery.

Douglas has been involved in collaborative practices previously—the project being inspired by early experiments with collaborative drawing. Collaborative practices such as these tend to remove elements of power or authority over the work and expose all contributors to the potential that this lack of control allows for.

In an interesting play on words, the title of the exhibition *Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre* references the science fiction series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. *Life, the Universe and Everything* (1982)

(above)
Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre,
installation at the Blue Oyster Gallery

(opposite below)
TONY DE LAUTOUR
Clouds, Lightning, Dots, Circles & Shapes 2007
Acrylic on linen, 1500 x 2150 mm.

is the third book in the five volume series, the title of which refers to the answer to life. The answer to this question of life, the universe and everything is produced using the hyper-computer *Deep Thought* after an extensive computation period of 7.5 million years. The answer is 42. As the title of the exhibition suggests this is a particularly large and ambitious project but unlike the book it refers to, this show is less about seeking answers than providing a forum for discussion.

The 420 Centre provides activity based services for people recovering from mental illness—an environment where members of the community can gather, talk and through art making practices create a wider dialogue in which open participation and communication are encouraged. Participants in the project have elected the way in which they will engage—many have spent time creating works at the 420 Centre where they were able to view, add to and respond to the developing dialogue unfolding on the walls of the centre. Others have chosen to work offsite and respond to the project utilising their own individual visual language.

Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre is a collaborative project seeking to project a collective voice. Identity and individual expression although present in each panel are represented only in equal importance to surrounding works. The nature of the work as collaborative and evolving lends itself to comparison with the surge of graffiti, poster and sticker art occurring around the streets and alley ways of Dunedin city. Such works often occur in alternative public spaces and are subject to constant change as contributors add to and therefore

change the reading of the initial work. Here growth and evolution of the work throughout the exhibition period is facilitated by weekly sessions where 420 centre patrons, members of the public and exhibition visitors can take part by creating a panel on site which will be added to the overall work.

It is intended that the work move on and be exhibited in a number of other spaces, including educational and health sector institutions therefore breaking free from the confines of the gallery or project space which carries its own issues of authority and accessibility. A variety of spaces assures a level of accessibility to the wider community rather than attempting inclusion exclusively from within an arts community. The traditional concept of a complete or final work is deliberately resisted as the work's intention as an ongoing and shifting conversation is asserted.

Here the notion of the individual maker/author is subverted in favour of a multiplicity of meaning. Foucault's well known text 'What Is an Author?' discusses the 'author-function' described as a function which implies ownership and fixed meaning.

The Author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within a world where one is thrifty not only with one's resources and riches, but also with one's discourses and their significations. The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.¹

Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre presents the viewer with no acknowledgement of ownership but rather encourages ideas and concepts to blend and clash, discouraging limits and the deciphering of narrative. It is interesting to note that in his text 'The Death of the Author' Roland Barthes

aligns the author with the critic who attempts to develop a process of deciphering/fixing meaning.

Each panel is an equally proportioned square positioned in the format of the grid which projects a feeling of structure, of strength and direction — of an institutional framework partial to constraint, organisation and the following of correct and controlled lines of vision. The works within these lines however do not necessarily follow suit. There is some presence and consideration given to order and cohesion but little evidence of hierarchy as established artists' works are placed randomly and anonymously.

The notion of the artist as a unique individual working on the fringes of society is deferred by anonymity and therefore the economic and authenticated value traditionally assigned to the artist's work as an individual genius or recluse is lost. The stigma of mental illness may be seen to be commonly aligned with the notion of artistic ability and with the notion of otherness. Here, a community of diverse voices stands united, seemingly unconcerned with attribution, acknowledgement, value and power but more with a desire to be heard as part of an ongoing, dynamic and critical dialogue on *Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre*.

At the recently renamed Brett McDowell Gallery (previously Marshall Seifert Gallery) Tony de

Lautour presents works both intimate and monumental in scale. *Clouds, Lightning, Dots, Circles and Shapes* (2007) appears on initial examination to be a chaotic collection of signs and symbols floating against a black backdrop. Although a seemingly random juxtaposition of images—visual clues lead one to reminisce of games of Pac Man and Space Invaders played at video game parlours and fish and chip shops of yesteryear. Nostalgia is perhaps not an authentic way to describe the experience of the work as there is little in the way of sentimental yearning for the past. Familiarity here provokes confusion, uncertainty and fear.

A deck of cards, noughts and crosses, games of chance and luck are alluded to as large club and spade symbols assert themselves against the darkness. De Lautour is recognised for a naïve painting style with purpose. With closer consideration one observes a considerable and deliberate degree of structure much like a board or video game the maker has taken control over the way in which the player moves around the board/screen. De Lautour has changed the passive viewer into an active player/gambler in his game of life. De Lautour works here are easily transferable to the notion of graffiti art or tagging where signs, signatures and outwardly random images are scrawled (generally in a hurry) onto exterior walls and buildings. Although large in scale *Clouds, Lightning, Dots,*

Circles and Shapes feels somewhat trapped within the confines of the canvas's surface.

The viewer's gaze is directed by lines of dots/spacey bombs around the work punctuated by signs and symbols of popular culture—lightning strikes and tear drops once tattooed with safety pins and ink, cobwebs, skulls and cross bones, love hearts and the crescent moon. Repetition of images establishes the artist's interest in branding, cultural codes and icons. A dollar sign formed by a pale mountain scene reinforces the implications of the sale of vast quantities of New Zealand's land and questions the value of the land being measured in terms of dollars and cents. De Lautour's game seems dark and precarious promising that choices must be made by the player between light and darkness, life and death. This sense of danger also stems from a feeling that the rules have been formulated by the artist and remain inaccessible to the player who is condemned without appropriate tactics to stumble through the maze, risking fates unknown.

1. Michael Foucault, 'What is an Author' in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwell USA 1992, p. 927.

