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# OH INDUSTRY

Daniel Mudie Cunningham

## OH INDUSTRY: PISTON PERFECT

Those who are not the direct beneficiaries of its well-established technological and material enhancements can often experience modernity as an invisible, debilitating pathogen working upon them and by extension the environment like radiation or nerve gas. Coincidentally, in the 1960s noxious fumes escaped from the Newington Armory, then a Royal Australian Naval Base and munitions depot. Now a cultural precinct, this historically important site hosts artist residencies and it was during one of these that Daniel Mudie Cunningham prepared his new video work, *Oh Industry*. Militarisation and conflagration – uniformed troops, hulking ordnance, guns and explosives are among modernity's most sublime and terrifying metaphors. In much literature, art and cinema from the 19th century on they are used to represent the brutal, depersonalising forces that distinguish the world since the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation from previous times. At Newington Armory they are not just mere symbols of brutality and violent spectacle but real things that are used quite logically for their *mise-en-scène* verisimilitude. As the menacingly picturesque residue of a redundant military-industrial complex, Newington Armory possesses all the topographical attributes of a high-end video game and it works well as the contextualising agent for an artist dealing with themes like love in an age of mechanical reproduction.

Ostensibly, *Oh Industry* by Daniel Mudie Cunningham (2009) reprises the song of the same name from *Beaches*, the 1988 film directed by Garry Marshall. Similarly, the 'Oh Industry' sequence from *Beaches* sees Bette Midler performing as a ringmaster who exercises a compelling authority over several zombie automatons. Of the controlling characters allegorised in works of fiction few are more sexually or ethically

ambiguous than the ringmaster. Personalities as diverse as Charlton Heston and Britney Spears have played the role and it is with clear reference to this often camp but always manipulative stereotype that Cunningham has chosen to stigmatise his character with scarlet tunic, gold epaulettes, black tights, knee pads, gloves and top hat. The artist additionally inverts several other gestural and narrative indices of the 1988 film. More than the sum of its accumulated citations *Oh Industry* is a smack down of the original rather than a re-enactment. Corrosively fey rather than fierce, the artist takes the machine age and its modes of consumption and production and turns them in upon themselves the way a suicide places the revolver in the mouth. If this were a conscious strategy for resistance based on post-colonial mimesis the tactics locate it somewhere between Gandhi and RuPaul proving that if the road to hell is paved with good intentions then the road out is strewn with yellow bricks.

*Oh Industry* is simultaneously a critical discourse and a pantomime. The first addresses the alienation and anxiety coterminous with the relationship between labour and capital in the mechanised epoch. The second ironically brews its reductive vocabulary of attenuated, jerky somnambulism in the blood, sweat and tears disgorged as effluent by modern factories and offices. Dehumanising labour and an individual's loss of volition are some of the most expressive images generated by the 20th century and they provide the stencil used to choreograph a number of *Oh Industry*'s conveyor belt dance routines. Pantomime, like many popular cultural models is highly formulaic and one of its enduring performance conventions is the combination of an existing tune with rewritten lyrics: a device that helps position long established,

canonical themes within a framework generated by a contemporary audience's everyday experiences. Cunningham *drags* this convention in his version's salient departure from the narrative prescription of its source. At the end of the 'Oh Industry' sequence from *Beaches*, Bette Midler lumbers upstage, turns suddenly and confronts the audience by wearing the same grotesque mask worn by her minions – symbolically sharing in the despair of their abject common fate. At the same juncture in Cunningham's sequence of events he abandons his servile followers to the futility of repetitious gesturing. Liberated, he slyly moves off alone, escaping the gravitational pull of their neurastenic misfortune. For today's audience, among other things, this could be construed as a reference to the disparity of conditions between classes before and after the global financial crisis or the absurd logic of the fiscal conservatism's economic trickle down effect. The rich get richer and the poor get exploited. Cunningham reminds us that of all the things standardisation and uniformity have contributed to the idea of a level playing field for all, equal access to opportunity is most definitely not one of them.

*Oh Industry* is the refrain of art and love in an age of mechanical reproduction. Congealing at the confluence of brittle sensation and shrill thrill it productively conflates the pop music video with the pantomime. Mashing the residual industrial and military emblemata of Newington Armory with the conventions of popular entertainment forms that share their chronology with Newington's originating moments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the artist draws our attention to the paradox at the centre of the subjective experience of spectatorship. For more than 100 years the degree to which sensation has

been favoured over meaning in contemporary art and culture has increased in tandem with industrialisation and urbanisation. *Oh Industry* locates the causality of this in the tedium of repetitive labour that in turn, as a release mechanism, generates the insatiable appetite for gratuitous spectacle. Conclusively, the emphasis placed on ephemeral sensation in contemporary art will only be mitigated by a change in the relationship between labour and capital, if for no other reason than art proceeds from life.

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**GARY CARSLEY** lives and works in Amsterdam and Sydney where he is a professional agitator and occasional nuisance.

Oh Industry, 2009



Oh Industry, 2009



## THE JODIE FOSTER ARCHIVE

Oscar winner. Yale graduate. Ex-Disney Moppet. Dyke.<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Mudie Cunningham's *The Jodie Foster Archive* is a body of performance and video works produced between 1996 and 2008 that gauge the actor's sexual and political significance within contemporary culture. Playing upon the appeal and anxieties of her onscreen personas and personal life — Foster has become a contested object of lesbian, feminist and straight desire and an ambivalent image of gender in mainstream cinema — Cunningham's work takes pleasure in the sometimes oppositional points of reception and identification in queer readings of popular culture.

In *Fucking Jodie Foster* — performed at Performance Space in 1996 — celebrity culture and gay activism are lampooned for their obsession with 'outing' closeted queer (or seemingly queer) celebrities. Drawing fierce criticism for her role in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1992), Foster was the target of tabloids and activists who labelled her 'absolutely queer'. Cunningham's solo performance re-imagines Foster's 1992 Academy Award acceptance speech for this film, which occurred at a time of intense speculation over her sexuality and accusations of the film's homophobic subtext. As Cunningham masquerades as a lesbian and accepts the award on Foster's behalf, he recounts being picked up by Foster (who was dressed as k.d. lang) and their ensuing tryst on a California beach. "Was she finally making a commitment to the cause?" he asks derisively about Foster. The audience's enthusiastic reception hints at the potency of such an avowal.

Throughout her career Foster has embodied a strong point of resistance to being 'out' and 'outed'. Her determination to remain silent about her sexuality

challenges the rhetoric of minority politics that conflate visibility with wider cultural acceptance. Foster has — whether through principle or concern for her career — refused to be co-opted by dominant gay and lesbian culture, and enacts a veritable 'closeting' against its codification and commercialisation of sexual identity. Douglas Crimp has noted how her position has also prompted criticism largely from gay men, revealing the fraught paradigm of conventional identity politics: "Castigating Foster as oppressor both presumes her (closeted) lesbian identity and presumes identity precedes and determines political enactment".<sup>2</sup>

Whereas *Fucking Jodie Foster* celebrated Foster's sexual ambiguities and mock recruitment, her actual acknowledgment of long-time partner Cydney Bernard at an award ceremony in 2008 prompted Cunningham to present a more hostile investigation of her persona. Performed at the Blacktown Arts Centre, *Jodie Foster Sex Montage* (2008) restages Foster's rape sequence from *The Accused* (1988) — for which she won her first Academy Award — as a slapstick lesbian romp alongside a pinball machine and a projected video montage surveying the legacy of her onscreen heterosexualisation. Cunningham's attire offers a sinister overtone, alluding directly to Foster's early role as a teenage prostitute in *Taxi Driver* (1976). With performance artist Anastasia Zaravinov as a leather-clad dyke, the two revel in various states of sexual delirium, abandonment and mock rape. The reaction of the audience is a mix of uncomfortable cheer and laughter, echoing the gang of men in *The Accused* who ferociously cheer each other on as they take turns raping Foster's character also over a pinball machine.

The video backdrop isolates still frames from a series of Foster's onscreen sex scenes. *Jodie Foster Sex Montage (Play Me Now!)* (2008) offers a forensic study of Foster's gestures and expressions, juxtaposing and editing the still frames to a 15-year old Foster singing 'La vie c'est chouette' (Life is sweet) (1977) — an ode to carefree love and teenage crushes that alternates between English and French lyrics. Foster's voice and body have always proved somehow awkwardly masculine for critics, and Cunningham's video amplifies this tense relationship between her sometimes tomboy demeanour, her Lolita-esque sexualisation and our awareness of and assumptions about her real-life sexuality. To what extent Foster is the product of this cinematic styling or the projected expectations of viewers is left open-ended.

Throughout *The Jodie Foster Archive* Cunningham appears to implicate his own identity within the spectre of Foster's appeal, a process that reinscribes his own queerness in and through the ever-changing relations between Foster, her onscreen sexualisation and her political significance. Not surprisingly, in the large banner *Meeting Jodie Foster* (2001/2009) — a snapshot of the artist's close encounter with a Madame Tussauds wax replica — Cunningham's proximity makes explicit that, ultimately, his identification with Foster announces his queerness, not hers.

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JOSE DA SILVA is Associate Curator (Film, Video and New Media) at the Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art.

1. Caption accompanying a flyer distributed by the anonymous OUTpost activist collective following the release of *The Silence of the Lambs*.

2. Douglas Crimp, "Right On, Girlfriend!" in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 311.

*Fucking Jodie Foster, 1996*

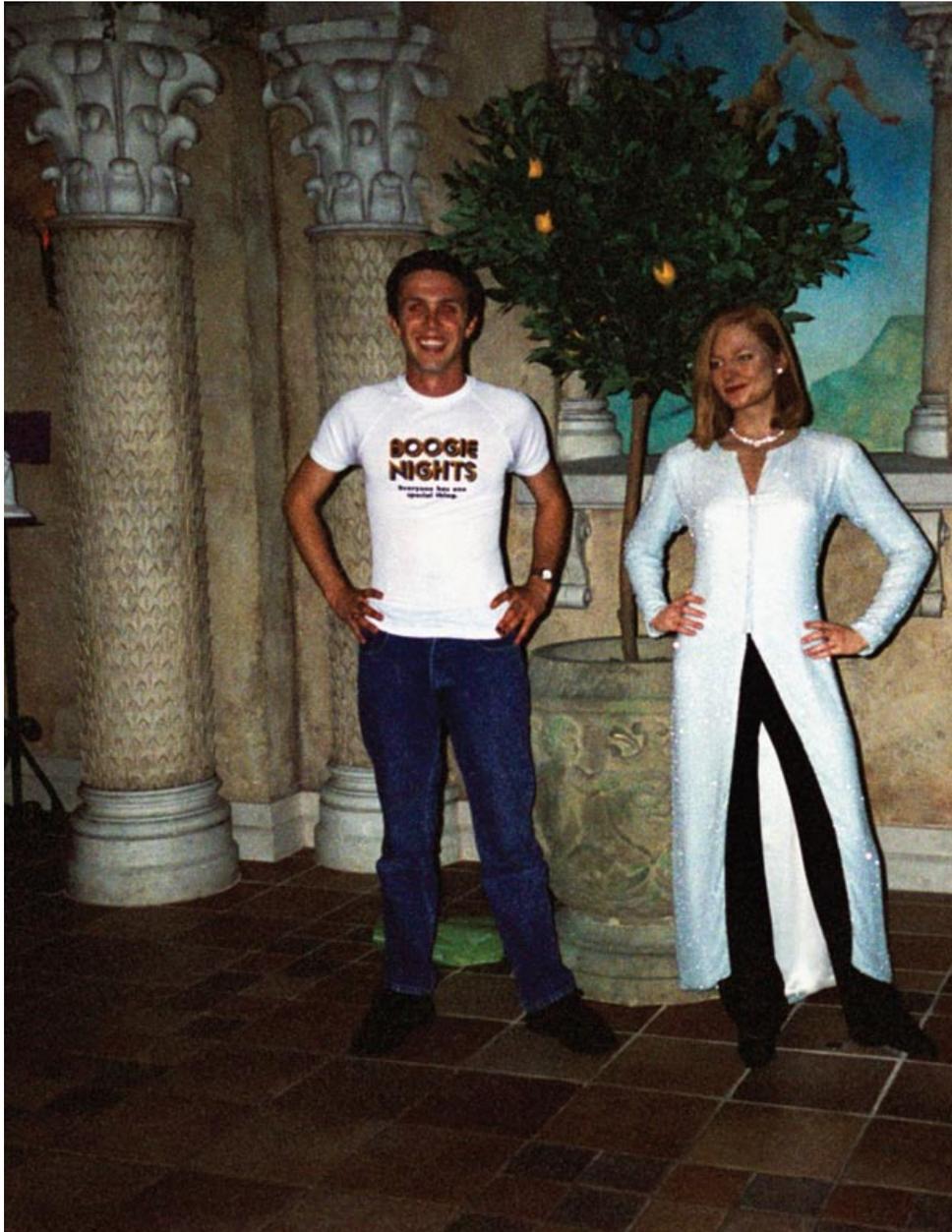
Photography: Heidrun Löhrl

*Jodie Foster Sex Montage, 2008*

"She was so great, so convincing, I'm so happy for her; it was like a fucking documentary, she was so real in it".  
 - Sandra Bernhard on Jodie Foster's performance in *The Accused* (*Without You I'm Nothing*, 1990)

Photography: David Silva

Meeting Jodie Foster, 2001/2009



Photography: some random tourist

Almost Met Jodie Foster, 1996

Daniel Darling,  
 Thought I'd pop this back to  
 you. It was mad.  
 I have Brandy Foster's phone  
 number. Jodie's Mommie. My  
 filmmaker friend Pam Tom who  
 I've stayed with in L.A. went to  
 school with Jodie. They all had to  
 speak French. We rang Brandy  
 looking for Jodie as I was  
 screening NIGHT CRIES at "Fox"  
 (as they call 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox).  
 Jodie was away making Silence of  
the Lambs + Brandy had just  
 come out of hospital + couldn't  
 make it.  
 So that's my almost met  
 Jodie story!  
 Love to you  
 Ms Moffatt

## DANIEL MUDIE CUNNINGHAM **OH INDUSTRY**

### MOP Projects

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DANIEL MUDIE CUNNINGHAM is an artist, curator and writer whose work negotiates the queering of visual histories, popular cultures and oppositional identity politics. His work incorporates performance, video and installation and has been exhibited or performed at spaces including MOP Projects (*Funeral Songs*, 2007), Firstdraft Gallery, Performance Space, Blacktown Arts Centre, Parramatta Artist Studios, Inflight, Hobart and Linden Arts Centre, Melbourne. He has curated 15 exhibitions in Sydney since 1995; was profiled on Andrew Frost's ABC TV series *The Art Life* and is curator at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre. Contact him at [www.danielmudie.com](http://www.danielmudie.com)

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## LIST OF WORKS

### **OH INDUSTRY**

*Oh Industry*, 2009.

HDV video transferred to SD, 16:9, 4 min 11 sec.

Conceived & Performed by Daniel Mudie Cunningham  
Dancers: Elizabeth Ryan, Emma Saunders, Mirabelle Wouters  
Choreography: Emma Saunders  
Director of Photography: Don Cameron  
Editor: Vera Hong  
Stills Photography: Pete Volich  
Production Assistant: David Wheeler  
Wardrobe: Catherine White, Jessica Olivieri  
Music: 'Oh Industry'; vocals: Bette Midler, songwriter: Wendy Waldman, from *Beaches Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Atlantic Records, 1988  
Filmed on location at Newington Armory, NSW, 24 April 2009

### **THE JODIE FOSTER ARCHIVE**

*Fucking Jodie Foster*, 1996.

Performed at cLUB bENT, Performance Space, 21 February 1996. VHS transferred to DVD. 4 min 27 sec.

*Jodie Foster Sex Montage*, 2008.

Performed at *Bent Western: Live on Stage*, Blacktown Arts Centre, 12 April 2008. Featuring Anastasia Zaravinos.  
Music: 'La vie c'est chouette' by Jodie Foster, 1977.  
Camera: Lisa Andrew. 4 min 18 sec.

*Jodie Foster Sex Montage (Play Me Now!)*, 2008.

Digital slide show for performance backdrop at Blacktown Arts Centre. Music: 'La vie c'est chouette' by Jodie Foster, 1977. 2 min 46 sec.

*Meeting Jodie Foster*, 2001/2009.

Snapshot taken on disposable Kodak camera at Madame Tussauds Wax Museum, New York, printed on PVC.

*Almost Met Jodie Foster*, 1996.

Note sent to Daniel Mudie Cunningham from Tracey Moffatt after viewing *Fucking Jodie Foster* on VHS.

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