

Everything is Interesting.

Indeed, at one point, we were strongly urged to call the exhibition “Everything is Interesting” ...

Susan Ferleger Brades, Preface, *Facts of Life*

I made my first trip to Canada in November 1997. At the same time Elton John was touring the country, and it was amazing how many people mistook me for him. English accent and glasses. Late one night in a bar in Ottawa the resident pianist struck up the first few bars of Rocket Man with an idea that I would burst into song; my insistence on not being Elton John was met with a camp-conspiratorial “Of course you’re not, Mr John”.

Travelling from west to east, trawling as artistic director of the next year’s Biennale of Sydney, I had accumulated a lot of Canadian experiences by the time I got to Toronto. There I met Kelly Mark for lunch – two days after my unwitting Elton John impersonation - and I remember us being in a shopping mall laughing, swapping notes on this and that, developing a running commentary on the variety we saw happening around us. Vulgar things. Innocuous things. Graceful things. “*Everything* is interesting”, Kelly Mark said, definitely not in some portentous way, but as a throwaway line. For me, it was one of those epiphany things.

The work by Kelly Mark that we showed in Sydney – including drawings that wasted all the graphite in Castell pencils, sets of domestic lightbulbs that consumed thousands of hours and watts of electricity, and planks of hemlock wood that had been bashed together a thousand times – could not have been more poignant vis à vis the theme of my Biennale. *Every Day*. I was interested in the fascination of the unremarkable, essentially; that and the difference made by time passing, embodied in the succession of every day. Having mustered up some polemical energy, in my catalogue essay I argued against “played-out operatic tendencies and an overloaded academic (often pseudo-academic) discourse in [current visual arts practice]”. On the other hand, for me, there was Kelly Mark.

Around the corner of the Biennale office – in a Sydney district that glories in the name of Woolloomooloo – was a pub with a pool table. Every night, artists and organisers resorted to this place to talk through the progress and the problems that inevitably beset large international exhibitions. I will never forget Kelly Mark’s first time there. Soon after her arrival she fronted up to the pool table (I think wearing a red checked flannelette shirt) and proceeded to thrash all challengers, game after game. This sporting achievement, foiled by the artist’s understated panache, was breathtaking.

The Biennale came and went. I was back in the UK in time for the new millennium, with the words “everything is interesting” often recurring in my mind. It was like a mantra. When commissioned to make an exhibition of contemporary Japanese art for the Hayward Gallery (2001), and the question of a title cropped up, the answer seemed obvious to me. *Everything is Interesting*. Its recommendation of our meticulous attention to all kinds of detail, and a certain no-nonsense zen-ish-ness too, made it, well, just so Japanese ...

The marketing department of the Hayward didn't like it. Maybe, they explained, critics will abuse such a title when writing reviews – viz. “yes, everything *is* interesting, except this exhibition”. Instead we landed eventually on *Facts of Life*, but not without my sharing with some friends, garrulously, the story of our wrangling over a title. The British artist Graham Gussin – whose philosophical position is not a million miles away from that of Kelly Mark – asked me if he could use “everything is interesting” instead as the title for an exhibition he was in the process of organising. I said no, that I was saving it up.

This was a bit rich, especially as Kelly Mark had remained unconsulted. Before too long, in 2002, I was making another trip through Canada (east to west) and one of the first things planned was a reunion with her in Toronto. We met, sentimentally, in a pool hall - King (or Queen) Street, West – and caught up with each others' news. She told me about her recent work, including the Letraset drawings, then being shown nearby at the Wynick/Tuck Gallery. She showed me the tattoo on her arm for the first time, the one which is added to (prison-cell-style) with the passing of every birthday. We talked about the cocktail parties she liked to throw, her cat Rooney, and, as ever, her enthusiasms for the work of other artists. I recounted the recent manoeuvres in London around “everything is interesting”. It turned out that Kelly Mark too was rather fond of the ring of these words and felt, understandably, that perhaps it was now time for her to assert some rights of authorship.

That night, as we played pool, the plot was hatched for a sequence of projects by Kelly Mark, under the umbrella title, *Everything is Interesting*. It would happen in Birmingham, in and around Ikon Gallery where I was now based, during the following spring. Drinks, possibly, the jetlag; vaguely I remember winning a game or two. Unforgettable, on the other hand, was that night's soundtrack of heavy metal hits, the playlist of a nice guy behind the bar. A far cry from the Elton-John-mellowness of Ottawa, this thumping music struck me at the time as being a good augury, especially as Birmingham is in the heartlands of British heavy metal.

Kelly Mark's work at Ikon included a video featuring Rooney, aforementioned cat, on a sofa, sandwiched between two loudspeakers blaring out the sound of Black Sabbath. He was fast asleep, a picture of tranquillity, absolutely unaffected by this drug-fuelled local music of the devil. Off-site, we presented the artist's extraordinary *Glow House*. Through the careful placement of fifty TV sets, turned on and tuned in to the same channel after dark, a large suburban house was transformed into a pulsating lantern, a weird drive-by moment for thousands on the Wake Green Road. Back in the gallery building, on the staircase winding down to the entrance, visitors' footsteps coincided with *I Really Should*, the artist's recorded litany of things to do: “I really should get more sleep”, “I really should stop to smell the roses”, “I really should keep in touch”, “I really should go to the dentist soon”, “I really should leave my body to science” et cetera.

To this day, there are plastic bags available with purchases from our shop inscribed with a Birmingham version of *I Really Should*: “I really should risk a drive on Spaghetti Junction”, “I really should just stop while I'm ahead”, “I really should fight to save Moseley Baths”, “I really should get another tattoo”, “I really should avoid

Broad Street at night when I'm sober", "I really should stop letting Jonathan beat me at pool" et cetera.

Also, as part of the same brave new marketing strategy, Ikon produced lapel badges declaring, with lower-case black-on-white modesty, that "everything is interesting". They were very popular in Birmingham at the time we embarked on our Kelly mark adventure, and every year since then we seem to be ordering another batch of a thousand or so. Not infrequently I see someone – on the tube, in a queue waiting for a taxi, in a café – wearing one of our badges. It's nice to see the artist's message of philosophical scepticism, and optimism, out and about. I really should let her know how much it means to me.

Jonathan Watkins