

## *Being in Two Minds*

Emma Cocker explores how inconsistency is used as a critical device or *method* in the work of Ben Judd.

Ben Judd is an artist whose work interrogates the complex ritual performances and social practices that surround various closed communities or structures of belief, through an ongoing investigation into the relationship between persuasion and delusion, skepticism and faith. Judd often attempts to gain covert entry into the various groups in question, locating himself at the fulcrum point between belonging and not belonging, between immersion and separation. His video works and performances often capture the artist's endeavour to be convincing or convinced, whilst simultaneously questioning the situations in which he finds himself. In a number of projects, the artist appears to simultaneously inhabit the position of participant *and* observer, believer and non-believer, host and guest. Contradiction is harnessed as a device through which Judd attempts to keep his options open, a way of allowing his position or role to remain unresolved, undeclared or willfully ambivalent. For Judd, remaining undecided or non-committal – 'being in two minds' – emerges as part of a critical practice intent on disrupting the binary relationship between yes/no, between either/or. Inconsistency becomes a device within his work for inhabiting more than one position or occupying dual or even contradictory roles. It is a method for resisting or rejecting consistency as the desirable paradigm, for preventing complex human experiences from becoming reduced to a single or stable position, from becoming simplified. The seemingly undesirable presence of inconsistency functions for Judd as a tactic through which to protest against or refuse the pressures of normative or hegemonic ideologies (whatever they might be), a means through which to question or unsettle the societal privileging of coherent or stable forms of identity or subjectivity.



*I Miss*, video, Doncaster, England, 2002

In his earlier video work, Judd adopted various personae in order to infiltrate particular communities, who are in turn separated from the larger societal group. Working undercover, he successfully managed to gain entry into the coded and regulated orders of various marginalised or sub-cultural collectives – a group of Morris Dancers or train spotters or a clandestine amateur photography club united by their shared fascination with f-stops and g-strings. Judd closely observes the activities of these groups, attempting to mirror their position of simultaneously belonging and not belonging; of being alienated and yet also involved; of connection (within one context) and yet disconnection (from another). Occupying the dual role of insider *and* outsider, Judd often inhabits the same space and gestures as the group that he has infiltrated but in a way that is inconsistent with (even potentially antagonistic to) their activities. In the video *I Love*, for example, Judd joins a group of middle-aged photographers gathered in an anonymous basement for the dubious purposes of a glamour-photography shoot. The 'object' of the photographers' attention remains unseen however; Judd's lens

instead inverts (or mirrors back) their gaze making them the subject of his attention. Rather than photographing the rented glamour model (presumably) like the others, Judd turns his focus towards observing the men's furtive gestures with close and relentless scrutiny. The artist's voiceover describes each recorded movement with a level of detail that is intense and yet also banal; he appears seemingly captivated yet perhaps also a little repelled by the unfolding events. Judd does not want to blow his cover and be revealed as an impostor, yet his actions ensure that he remains perilously close to being exposed.



*I Love*, video, London, 2003

In one sense, Judd's attempt to simultaneously inhabit the position of participant *and* observer might appear "quasi-anthropological", a term used by Hal Foster in "The Artist as Ethnographer?" to describe the resurgence of interest in critical ethnographical methods within contemporary art. Foster discusses the contemporary anthropological tendency in relation to forms of "primitivist fantasy", which he describes as the desire to inhabit the space of the *other* based on a belief that "the other has access to primal psychic and social processes from which the white (petit) bourgeois is blocked".<sup>i</sup> According to Foster, "The primitivist fantasy was active in two precedents of the quasi-anthropological paradigm in contemporary art: the dissident Surrealism associated with Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris in the late 1920s and early '30s, and the *négritude* movement associated with Leoplod Senghor and Aimé Césaire in the late 1940s and early '50s".<sup>ii</sup> For Foster, such movements connected "the transgressive potentiality of the unconscious with the radical alterity of the cultural other", exploring cultural otherness "only in part to indulge in a ritual of self-othering".<sup>iii</sup> Considered as part of this genealogy, the ethnographic turn within contemporary practice for Foster becomes little more than a "new form of *flânerie*", whose promise of criticality only "invites a reflexivity at the center as it preserves a romanticism at the margins".<sup>iv</sup> Curiously, Judd's work seems to flirt with aspects of the historical model of 'primitivist fantasy' criticised so damningly within Foster's argument. Certainly, Judd does appear fascinated with what might be described as 'outsider' groups – trainspotters, mystics, witches, Morris dancers – attempting to gain entry to these group and access experiences from which he would otherwise be blocked. However, the experiences Judd seeks are not those gleaned from inhabiting the space of the *other*, rather those encountered through 'exiting' or becoming dislocated from his own habitual positionality or belief structure.



*I Can and Cannot Live Without*, video, London, 2004

Irit Rogoff adopts the word ‘fieldwork’ to describe those anthropologically informed models within art practice where there is “recognition of exiting one’s own paradigms in order to encounter some form of difference and of doing so with an articulated sense of self consciousness about who is doing the encountering and through what structures and languages and interests”.<sup>v</sup> For Rogoff, the enterprise of complicitous ‘field work’ is one of attempting ‘dual positionality’ or ‘existential doubleness’, a term borrowed from Georges Marcus to describe the critical state of “‘being spatially located in an inside and paradigmatically on the outside’ – the unresolved tension of being both embedded and living out the problematic and at the same time (being) perfectly able to analyse it and see through it”.<sup>vi</sup> Judd occupies the critical position of being both inside and outside of a community or situation, of being within and yet also remaining without. He refuses to commit to any single role – to make a decision between being either/or – but rather attempts to inhabit the dual position of being ‘both’. However, the simultaneous inhabitation of both participant *and* observer roles is not exclusive to the ethnographer, for it equally described the liminal status of an initiate or novice within a specific social ritual. This shift in role from ethnographer to initiate transforms Judd’s position from being one of perceived power and authority to one of diminished or reduced status, where he often appears vulnerable and awkward as he attempts to negotiate the rules of an unfamiliar context. This seemingly inconsistent oscillation between the role of ‘knowing’ ethnographer and ‘unknowing’ initiate further complicates Judd’s work, making it more difficult to ascertain where the power resides within the relationships he constructs.

The position of the initiate has a strangely exempted status. Inhabiting the role of the *initiate* or novice Judd is granted partial access to the unspoken codes and customs of a particular community, but has not yet sworn allegiance to or been fully indoctrinated into their beliefs. For anthropologist Victor Turner, the initiate occupies an ambiguous territory where they remain “neither here nor there ... betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention”.<sup>vii</sup> During the liminal or transitional phase of any ritual activity, the characteristics and laws of the dominant social structure are momentarily collapsed as, “the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity”<sup>viii</sup> where “they are at once no longer classified and not yet classified”.<sup>ix</sup> Here then, the idea of trying to inhabit two different positions (of both participant *and* observer, for example) shifts towards the possibility of inhabiting *neither*. Particular positions are staked out only in order to then attempt to move between them. Judd locates himself at the fulcrum where one position begins to slip into another, the shimmering point where fixed positions begin to waver. This initiate status is further explored in later work where Judd aligns himself with various occult or spiritualist groups in order to try to become a *believer*. Whilst Judd remains in control of (even manipulating) the double-position he held in earlier work, here he appears to explore the point at which a position might involuntarily shift – become restless or unstable – as one way of viewing the world collapses into or is overlapped with another.



*Close To You*, video and performance, Surrey, England, 2008

Over an extended period of time Judd immerses himself in the activities of a particular form of practice, for example, attempting to develop his psychic skills as a clairvoyant or as the producer of spirit portraits. In the video *Close to You*, Judd is observed participating in an assembly where amateur spirit mediums are afforded the opportunity to test out their novice powers. As they are seated in the empty community hall, Judd appears to share the others' anticipation as they wait their turn, nervously preparing for their 'go' at conjuring communication with 'the other side'. However, unlike his fellow initiates Judd remains skeptical; he has still to be convinced. And yet as he takes to the stage, we witness him struggle with two competing positions or belief systems. His is the uneasy experience of a non-believer required to believe, requiring in turn that others are convinced by his newly found clairvoyant capabilities.

Judd's performance is not a complete sham however; he attempts to wholly inhabit or immerse himself in his designated role such that it becomes played out as an authentic experience, becomes genuinely felt. The work involves a strategic 'playing out' where the artist adopts a character or appears as a 'double', whose encounters might be partially fictionalised or staged but are none-the-less irrevocably, experientially real. Role-play affords a mode of meaningful or ethical inhabitation where actual questions or hypotheses can be proposed and tested out. The apparent inconsistency or contradiction of a non-believer practicing clairvoyance should not then be mistaken for cynicism or the empty act of the charlatan preacher. Rather, Judd's inconsistency reflects a genuine attempt to bring the notion of a single position into doubt, to rupture the logic of one position through its proximity to another. His inhabitation of a role oscillates or wavers between a *genuine* attempt to explore a particular belief system, and the rather more disinvested 'playing out' or playing within the conventions therein.

Unfamiliar positions become inhabited as a form of *dépaysement*, a way of momentarily escaping one's habitual belief structure and gaining a different perspective through the performance of another's. Judd's refusal to commit to any single position is a tactic for keeping an open mind, which requires an empathetic or ethical approach, the capacity for being able to recognise and respect the alterity of the *other*. The inconsistency presented by the co-existence of contradictory positions is a refusal to synthesise difference, or to reconcile incompatible registers of meaning or belief within one model or structure (by deeming one as irrational). The work does not attempt to prove or disprove any particular doctrine or belief, rather in bringing two contrasting systems into dialogue, Judd demonstrates how both are constructs that are perhaps equally delusional or dogmatic, deficient or restricting. During a residency at Lugar a Dudas in Cali, Colombia (2007), Judd further interrogated the tensions between belief and non-belief, attempting to radically bring into question his own skepticism by visiting a witch for a cleansing ritual. In the resulting video, *I Will Heal You*, the artist is

witnessed as he participates in an intense staged ceremony in which he is required to strip and rub his body with limes and eggs, before being circled by a ring of flames fueled by the witch's application of pure alcohol and broken incantations.



*I Will Heal You*, video and performance, Cali, Colombia, 2007

Judd appears distinctly unsettled by the ritual; undoubtedly, there are moments when his performance of a role or character (performing *artist*) begins to slip and the event – and its potential threat – is experienced for real. Though the ceremony is entered into voluntarily within the context of an artistic practice, there are moments when unexpected things appear to actually happen. Here, inconsistency is experienced as a rupture (the emergence of the singular or unexpected), an occurrence that resists or exceeds existing explanation. The encounter with something inconsistent with one's beliefs reveals the limits of one particular system of classification or knowledge, jeopardising its authority and proposed omnipotence by creating an anomaly (a singular event) that momentarily exists outside or beyond its territorialising grasp. As with his experience of practicing clairvoyance, Judd describes a sense of not being able to know for sure whether certain indefinable or unnamable sensations were the work of the occult or of persuasion.



*I Will Heal You*, video and performance, Cali, Colombia, 2007

Inconsistencies (like the fluctuation between belief and doubt) do not confirm either position however but rather complicate the possibility of arriving at a single answer. Judd's performances oscillate between authentic engagement and pretence, between the desire to create a fiction of mythic proportion and deflate it in the same instance. In his practice, the question of belief is not perceived in binary terms (from the perspective of the believer or skeptic) but rather becomes occupied as a site of paradox, of synchronous and potentially contradictory possibilities. Judd's work seeks to produce and explore the indeterminate gap or



fissure created by the simultaneous presence (or friction) of conflicting or incompatible possibilities. His quest is for something beyond (or inconsistent with) the terms of what he already knows or believes, which can only be apprehended by bringing the familiar or habitual into doubt or crisis. However, Judd appears to simultaneously want to believe and also *not* believe; his quest is perhaps one that he hopes in turn will fail or remain thwarted, for any quest dissipates at the moment that its goal is reached. The inconsistency of wanting and *not* wanting (to believe) corresponds perhaps to what Slavoj Žižek describes as, “the subject’s inability or unreadiness to fully confront the consequences of its desire: the price of happiness is that the subject remains stuck in the inconsistency of its desire ... Happiness is thus ... dreaming about things we do not really want”.<sup>x</sup>

In his essay, *The Paradox of the End* (1995), philosopher Iddo Landau explores the inconsistency inherent within the act of striving for something in the hope of not achieving it. He argues that whilst goals provide individual purpose, achieving the goal can result in, “A sense of insignificance and emptiness (where) we feel that in attaining the goal we have lost the meaningfulness and balance we experienced while we were striving toward it ... the struggle is more gratifying than the achievement of the end”.<sup>xi</sup> Landau suggests that the solution to the paradox of both wanting and *not* wanting something might be to stipulate a transcendent end that would be impossible to attain, or alternatively that, “we ought to try and not try to achieve our ends, at one and the same time ... We should try, then, both to realize and not to realize our goals”.<sup>xii</sup> Judd exploits the push/pull dynamic of the *try/not try* paradigm further during his residency in Colombia by founding the contradictory movement, *I Will Heal You*, in part as a response to his various encounters with Verónica Mardel, a local woman who had already initiated her own one-person quasi-religious organisation called ‘The Ministry of Universal Culture’. The movement – echoing Judd’s position in other work – embodies his attempt to occupy the duality of simultaneously saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Judd slavishly works to make his prospective movement convincing – commissioning the design of buildings, clothes, artefacts and objects for the movement’s inaugural public launch – before deflating his own rhetoric. The movement’s manifesto is overtly inconsistent. Judd promises a glimpse of nirvana at the same time stating that the movement is nothing but a construct or sham; simultaneously urging people to join his community, ‘to come’ whilst warning them to stay away. For Judd, the movement encapsulated the idea of “setting up the possibility of something otherworldly or magical at the as same time dismantling the possibility of this ever happening”.<sup>xiii</sup>



*The Symbol*, video and performance, Banff, Canada, 2009

More recently, Judd’s role has shifted further from initiate to initiator, where he has increasingly begun to occupy the point of slippage between being the guest and the host. As part of his recent residency at the Banff Centre in Canada (2009), the artist invited further ‘guests’ to help facilitate his encounter with the institute. Judd asked a number of individuals – including a shaman and a spirit medium – to respond to the Banff Centre, offering their alternative interpretation of the site in contrast to the sanctioned and authorised perspective of the centre’s staff and publicity brochures. Most compelling perhaps is Judd’s encounter with

the shaman in *The Symbol* (2009), where both practices (artistic and shamanic) appear to circle one another, testing out each other's logic whilst trying not to break the 'spell' that enables both to momentarily suspend their suspicion or disbelief. Judd is shown how to tune into an ancient frequency of communication at Banff: he is required to walk barefoot across a snow-laden forest before being instructed to place his head firmly against one of the trees in order to hear its *message*. It is unclear whether this initiation is a genuine shamanic ritual or simply a game in which Judd's commitment and supposed belief is tested to its limit. At times, roles become blurred or begin to fray – the official or ceremonial language of the shaman periodically slips to reveal a sense of the individual therein; his own doubts and questions about Judd's project become ventriloquised through the voices of the spirits that he is purporting to mediate. Judd is interested in this slippage, in the multiplicity of positions that an individual inhabits daily, even when they are appearing to perform a rather fixed or predetermined role. Here then, Judd's interrogation of inconsistency shifts from a mode of refusal (of the tyranny of consistency) to one of possibility (a form of affirming multiplicity and productive heterogeneity). Inconsistency becomes a way of flagging possibilities.

For Judd, inconsistency is interrogated through a form of role-play in which different positions or situations are tested out, in order to bring the notion of a single or stable sense of 'self' in doubt or crisis. Judd's attempt is one of challenging or disrupting situations or systems of representation and knowledge that appear limiting, restricting or which only propose the possibility of one way of doing things. By temporarily inhabiting a peripheral or marginal position, Judd pushes his own belief system beyond its habitual limits, in turn enabling other peripheries or horizons to come into view. Inhabiting another's position reveals the presence of different realities or questions that perhaps could not have been perceived from a single standpoint. Judd's capacity for inhabiting inconsistent roles or states in a way that appears authentic (or alternatively as either disinvested or acted out), demonstrates the fluid and interchangeable manner by which divergent (or multiple) positions can be adopted and then relinquished. Over a number of projects, Judd consistently points towards a critical and affirming form of mutable subjectivity that harnesses the potential of inconsistency as a mode for increasing one's spectrum of experience of and *with* the world.

Emma Cocker 2009

- 
- i Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer?' in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, (eds.) George E. Marcus, Fred R. Myers, (University of California Press, 1996), p.303
- ii Foster, 1996, p.303
- iii Foster, 1996, p.303
- iv Foster, 1996, pp.304-305
- v Irit Rogoff, *Field Work in Visual Culture*, Berlin / February 2004
- vi Irit Rogoff, *Field Work in Visual Culture*, Berlin / February 2004
- vii Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Chicago: Aldine. 1969), p.95.
- viii Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre, The Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), p.24
- ix Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage' in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, (Cornell University Press, 1967), p.96
- x Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, (Verso, 2002), p.59
- xi Iddo Landau, 'The Paradox of the End', *Philosophy*, Vol. 70, No. 274 (Oct., 1995), p.555.
- xii Landau, 1995, pp.560-64
- xiii Unpublished interview with Ben Judd, 13.3.09