

Seeing things, feelingly.
Amy Budd, 2013-14

Here's a simple question: act four, scene six of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, wandering on the heath Lear asks Gloucester "How do you see the world?" and Gloucester, who is blind, provides an enigmatic answer: "I see it feelingly." Denied of sight, his increasingly tragic world is apprehended through sensation, learning of the thing-in-hand through the hand itself, grasping into the void, seeing things *feelingly*. Prefacing any text with a pithy snippet of Shakespeare always runs the risk of augmenting following statements to the realm of the grandiose, the overblown and academic. Especially given the particularly epic source material. But there's something worth fleshing out here, to expand upon this quiet starting point and momentarily reflect upon this line of prose. How, if at all possible, can things be seen feelingly? Particularly in the realm of aesthetics, what are the possibilities of intuiting tactile objects and sensual images beyond the limits of vision?

Mathew Parkin's solo exhibition *One Touch* provides the somewhat unlikely catalyst for this literary reference. Taking its title from the debut album of millennial pop act the Sugababes, *One Touch*, through syntax alone, brings Shakespearean sentience to mind. Although appropriated and rearticulated by Parkin to encapsulate a new body of work, *One Touch* primarily exists as the title of the only album produced by the formative line up of sultry girl band the Sugababes, the fluid, collective title for a malleable group of women who have since regenerated into numerous combinations and configurations. The 'original' trilogy of edgy songstresses now operate under the moniker of 'MKS, a mainly digital entity', while their original collective namesake continues to exist with new members. Yet the chop-and-changed narratives surrounding 'redux' versions of Sugababes also carries conflicting ideas around originality and authenticity, and as such provides a useful, and for Parkin, apropos strategy to think on the way in which authenticity, individuality and desire can be constructed, and therefore applied by the artist to art forms, objects and images, aggregated under a single 'touching' title.

While the background story here is undeniably kitsch, or at least willfully retrograde, Parkin's penchant for 1990s ephemera belies a more serious consideration of 'one touch', which as a title and thematic premise offers an effective strategy for evaluating contemporary states of desire, authenticity and identity in our digitally saturated, corporeally pixelated and pervasive screen-based culture. Parkin recuperates *One Touch* from the archival wastelands of pop culture to repurpose the Sugababes brand as a catchall term under which fellow outmoded popular motifs can be collected, and reconstituted into specific, yet fragmented, material constellations. A repeated process of aggregating and elevating objects for scrutiny is evidenced across the installations *When Passive Aggressive Strategies Fail to Get Results* (2012) and *Losing You* (2013) where a catalogue of Nike ticks, smiley faces, plastic dolphins and car air fresheners, sport socks, souvenir coffee mugs, Athena poster pin-ups, and other seemingly adolescent artifacts are gathered and placed in precise sculptural assemblages. Commodities are collected and mapped out with precision, producing a network of associative meanings across field array of objects. In *Losing You* and *Looks Good with Trouble* (both 2013) wooden structures reminiscent of high-school bleachers provide platforms for amplifying the status of everyday objects of a certain provenance: mementos and cheap trinkets suggestive of pocket-money in size and scale, collectively reminiscent of a certain economy and experience. Placed together, they give off a certain feeling, these tokens of teenage desire. A bricolage of cheap plastics, production processes, technologies and exchange values, each loaded signifiers of taste and class, rendered retrogressive through contemporary assemblage, signalling the cheap end of queer kitsch.

Adept at combining ephemera culled from adolescent experience and pop culture, Parkin's practice of collecting, combining, assembling and fragmenting is reminiscent of the post-conceptual sculptural processes of artists such as Sean Edwards and Cathy Wilkes, both also predominantly working in sculpture and installation, who similarly use the gallery as a site for scrutinising the domestic and everyday by imbuing discarded materials with new meanings and semiotic potential. Parkin's installations are meticulously pieced together, to the extent that captions for works function as recipes of their making, reeling off incongruous lists of ingredients: *One Touch* (2013) exhibited at The Telfer

Gallery includes: wooden structure, cut vinyl, digital video, trainers, burberry nova check wall painting, three stripe curtain, netbook, spotify playlist, glazed ceramic oil burners, rubber mats, digital prints, blackberry on charge receiving intermittent texts read aloud by the invigilator and a website. Within these composite collages, online and offline visual information also converge. Installations frequently include videos elements, from filmed footage to found YouTube videos screened on monitors, or broadcast via online platforms or websites. Although drawn from disparate sources, there is a consistent homoerotic quality to these videos, each displaying the objectified male body in action, captured in workout regimes and dance routines. Acts of seduction play out through the eroticism of these images, replete with supple skin and luxuriating muscles, while visual hardware also provides the tangible surface on which queer desire is made manifest. Transmitted through the computer or television screen, technological provides the permeable membrane through which scopical desire can be experienced and satisfied. Nevertheless there's an opaqueness to these sexually suggestive elements of Parkin's work. These videos may be explicit in their representation of sexuality, but they are somewhat covertly displayed, limited to the screen or embedded within the long tail of the Internet and its chain reaction of keywords and search terms.

To return to the Shakespeare quote, of seeing things *feelingly*, is to finally draw attention to the experience of touch in Parkin's work. In title alone, the *One Touch* of pop songs recalls the delicate, tender physical relations and intimacies between friends and lovers. But this can also be extended into the visual field, through the perceived intentional touching of objects, where limits, edges, surfaces and skins of singular forms rub up against one another. Aligned together across installations, multiple textures and materials come into unavoidable contact. Stepping sideways for a moment to think on the phenomena of touch one can turn to the artist Mark Leckey, who suggests 'we touch things in order to know them, to see them properly'.¹ Touch is a mediating and intuitive physical tactic, produced by an innate need to feel, hold and handle objects, to manipulate 'so that I can know them better, grasp them, fully apprehend them, 'grok' them'. Coined by a science fiction writer, Grok illuminates the potential for touch 'to understand [an object] profoundly through intuition or empathy'. For Leckey 'it's all about grokking; trying to know something intimately... And once you're done with that you can point to these manipulations; to emphasize the object's thingness, its objecthood'. To see things *feelingly* in Mathew Parkin's work, or indeed any constellation of objects, to see them properly and understand them profoundly, therefore requires the metaphorical touching or handling of forms, if not physically, then at least cerebrally, intuitively feeling for meaning between the gaps. It through the resulting quick fire round of associations that latent aspects of desire are evoked, desire that not only reflects the contemporary thirst for accumulating commodity objects and images, but also the need to reconcile differences between real and virtual experience, between contemporary trends and retro culture.

¹ [Chrome and Flesh: An Interview with Mark Leckey](#), 17 December 2012, www.rhizome.org