

The Problem With Peeling Potatoes

Michael Belmore

Growing up within the Anishinabe culture taught me the relevance and role of storytelling. Narratives hold importance to many aspects of daily life, ranging from the political to the personal. The stories locate who we are, how we got here, and offer suggestions on how we might navigate our way forward.

Often humorous, or sometimes mystical, the storyteller offers insight into the makings of the world around us. Their stories speak to us in covert, yet profound ways, making the most difficult and unpleasant issues more palatable, more graspable. While Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens come from a different cultural tradition than my own, the intricacies of their work remind me of the best of Aboriginal narrative and the common nature of our lived circumstance.

Ibgby and Lemmens' work is about possibilities and the poetics of speculation; it is conversational poetry veiled in the schemata of empirical-looking charts and graphs. Through the use of video, signage and print they present and examine how we, as a culture, affect, and are affected by, language. Within the global society there exists methods of human communication beyond the principal languages of nations. The language of business, the language of politics, the language of sport and so forth, all have their part to play in how we define ourselves, and the society in which we live.

"More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly."¹

That observation by Woody Allen underscores a basic product of our evolution that separates us from many other (but not all) life forms ... reasoned thought and its product, calculated action. This daily reasoning, whether it is choosing what topping to have on a bagel or whether it is from a nation's stand-point of whether to allow a new fossil fuel pipeline, a military intervention, a subprime mortgage market or a combination of all of the above, these decisions are what drive the successes and failures, as well as the predictability of these for our species.

Utilizing mural-size graphics, works, such as *Oscillations of Faith* and *The Many Ways to Get What You Want*, express and examine the language and

aesthetics of the economic sciences. *Oscillations of Faith* is a series of three graphs that depicts variations in the exchange value of the US dollar, Chinese Yuan and the Euro over a 24 hour period. This work maps out the fluctuations felt by the financial markets, the ups and the downs, without offering a reason or rationale. We are left to ponder what happened on that day, what was in the news, what if anything is truly different

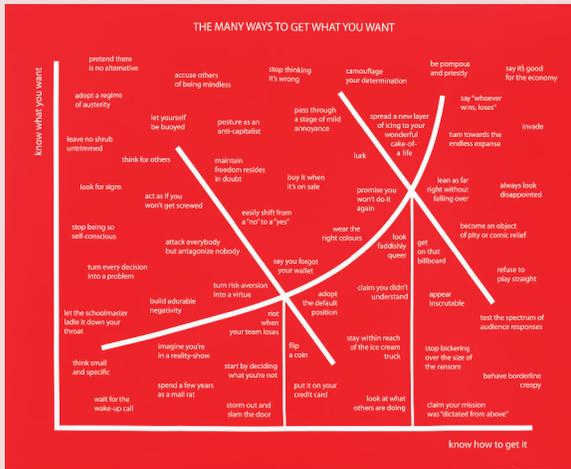
from the day before or the day after. What causes change? The reality is that the market is a direct reflection of our collective selves. It speaks to the confidence in ourselves, in the people that we choose to lead us, and the people we entrust to ensure stability, growth and comfort.

Recently, the artists have produced a series of works that locate the process underlying the less tangible and more personal economic decisions.

Acting as a foil to the more globalized installations, *The Many Ways to Get What You Want* plots possible strategies one might employ between the two variables "know what you want" and "know how to get it". The placement or plotting is subjective and witty. It traces the fears and the anticipation of reward central to decision

making, and through this is a recognition of self and others.

24 Differences and 1,225 Variations is a menu of possibilities. In this sculptural work Ibgby and Lemmens offer an examination of choice, a board with a limited number of described outcomes, some written and



The Many Ways to Get Want You Want, 2011

The Problem With Peeling Potatoes



Oscillations of Faith, 2011

clearly marked while slightly less than half sit blank. Thrown into this equation is a series of phrases that are often voiced or more often than not, kept to one's self when in a group setting. In certain situations you may not want to order first, or want to order what someone else is ordering, but perhaps they have ordered what you want, so what do you



24 Differences and 1,225 Variations, 2011

do, be a copy cat, following on what someone else has decided or do you settle for your own seconds?

Lost choices. The work is a closed system with a finite amount of results, many of which are either closed off or not available. What are the blank panels? Are they a reference to the potential, or

possibly lost, variations of the already identified possibilities that are no longer offered. The use of colour, like paint chips, alludes to these subtle alterations.

Peter Pete Systems: A Post-Fordist Love Story is a video installation projected on the front and back of a suspended screen. Upon entering the space one immediately syncs the audio to the text being projected. Written in hot (red) and cool (blue). The audio is broken up in scenes between Peter (written in hot type) and a series of different people (cool type) who he attempts to navigate around in order to achieve a stated objective (the sale of a product) as well as an implied infatuation that

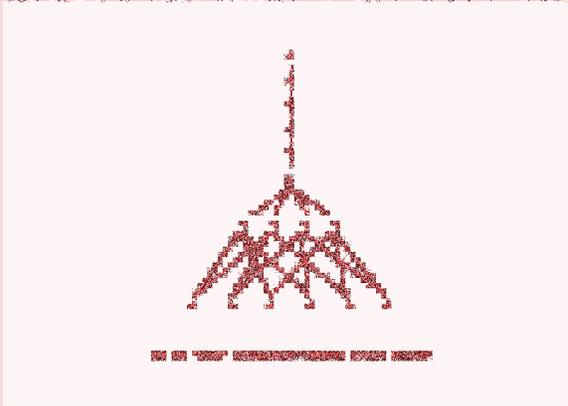
arises during the course of his inquiries.

The situations Peter faces are familiar to us all, having had to negotiate our ways through voice message systems as well as a barrage of intermediaries, be they secretaries, clerks or associates of business. Is it the journey that makes us, or the other way



Peter Pete Systems: A Post-Fordist Love Story, 2011

around? How do these constructs, of business and culture, help or hinder our endeavours on a personal, as well as a societal scale? Does this dis-



The Revolutions of Capitalism, 2011

connection that we are feeling about our purpose and place start with the isolation that we have created for ourselves through our technology and codes of conduct in a socially networked, but physically dis-associated, population?

In the series, *The Revolutions of Capitalism*, Ibghy and Lemmens present us with diagrams, numbers and language that appear to offer

definitive answers to pressing concerns. In *How the broom configuration tightened airport security* there is a forked image that one discerns is a scientific or mathematical diagram. How does this tighten airport security? In another, *A polynomial solution to the potato-peeling problem*, you

are yet again left to ponder the original question, not unlike a visual game of Jeopardy. The works feel like drafts or layouts, working copies of ideas that may or may not be based in reality. The sources of a potato-peeling problem are readily imaginable. One can likely recollect moments, standing over the kitchen sink with a potato, trying to effectively and efficiently remove all the skin with little to no waste, only to be done in by those yucky black bits. One can also extrapolate the implications of such problems for larger corporate interests such as McCain



Golden Rules, 2010

or McDonald's. Around the world industry endeavours to find solutions to difficulties that, on a micro-level, are a mere annoyance, but at a macro-level, can be crippling to the bottom line.

As a punctuation mark to the other works in the exhibition, is a succinct silk-screened piece titled, *Golden Rules*. While they incorporate tenets of inspirational sloganeering, they play on the purpose and form in their presentation of layout, colour and font. How we motivate others and ourselves through the mechanizations of choice is examined and toyed with through a recognizable format. It could be scaled up to billboard size, or re-framed within the context of a mug or t-shirt. We seem to crave constant reminders of these codes of conduct or perceived greater truths which function like a cheat sheet, or Coles Notes, to life itself.

Focusing on challenges, choices and outcomes, from personal and communal, corporate and national standpoints, Ibgby and Lemmens depict the mundane in a dynamic, often humorous fashion. By doing so they imbue the everyday occurrences of our lives, such as deciding what to eat for dinner, with global relevance and an analytical approach usually reserved for scientific analysis.