

that her concerns are focussed on the curvature of logic rather than self-aggrandisement. Throughout her work, Price leads us up the path and back again, as objects and images are red herrings or false documents. 'Trophy' second-guesses our accusations of hubris, while the photographs of hearses excite our tendency to imagine the worst. We are made to interrogate our understanding of the artist's intentions through subtle orchestrations of double, triple, multiple bluffs.

Price also seems to want to push the futility of art to extremes, as if to establish its position as something parallel to 'real life' that can never fulfil a utilitarian function. Her retyped version of the Hackney Gazette is a sorry, deflated rendition of the real thing. Devoid of all images and reproduced in an undramatic typeface, both the intensity of the artist's labour and the immediacy of the news is lost. The news has turned into 'olds', as Price sucks the life from a living organism of communication. The particular news story that sparked Price's interest in this edition of the paper was about a man who had committed suicide by jumping from the top of a building with a note scrawled on his jacket in black ink that read: 'dead body dial 999'. It is ridiculous, horrifying and terribly funny all at once. The difficulty is in admitting that we find it amusing. Price challenges us to

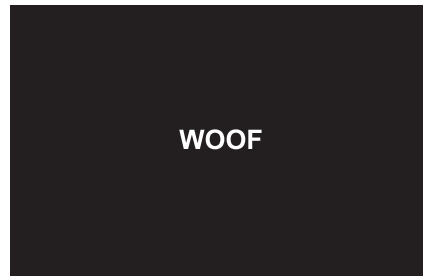
laugh, with a deadpan reiteration of the suicide's own cruel joke.

It becomes clear, when looking at the work together, that Price refuses to stick to one medium or mode of making. She flits from found objects to intricate feats of construction, from invention to emulation, from two-dimensionality to the time-based event. The binding factor is the way that systems are established just so that they can go wrong or take over or be overruled. As a joke is a self-contained system that carries all the linguistic elements and cultural references required to make it funny, Price too constructs hermetic formal or conceptual worlds with rules and processes. How to start, when to stop and the unfolding drama of what happens in between become the subject of the work, while determination, frustration or failure become the medium.

Sally O'Reilly

Image overleaf:  
**Proposal for 'Hearse attending Jerwood Space', photograph, 2003**

**'WOOF', black/white engraving laminate, 2001**



A hearse is parked outside a gallery. The car is empty, except for the driver who waits in attendance. The photograph was taken by Elizabeth Price, but what we don't necessarily know is that the whole scenario was orchestrated by her too. Until these images were shown together here, we could only guess if the photograph was contrived, opportunistic or a morbid coincidence. Just before the fifth edition of the series was about to be photographed, someone pointed out that the real morbid coincidence was that the four galleries previously featured had since closed down. It begs the question, is Price bestowing the kiss of death or merely documenting the vicissitudes of the art world?

Behind the deadpan presence of the moribund hearse lurks a mischievous intent. Price presents us with peculiarities that are not quite ridiculous but mask deep tracts of absurdity that are vaguely cruel or masochistic. Black humour is a strain of comedy that uses the ever-imminent tragedy of the human condition as a foil. The threat of failure or death is perhaps a surprising subject for jokes, but it has a long history nonetheless, from the effervescent physicality of slapstick to the bleak conceptualism of gallows humour. Elizabeth Price takes advantage of this fine balance between comedy and hopelessness, mischief and evil, and

poises her work just this side of alarming.

It might be perverse to find the trappings of tragedy outside an art gallery funny, but then perversity is a fundamental aspect of comedy, as is the pathos of failure. Price often presents us with both by performing apparently pointless or ridiculous tasks. 'boulder', for instance, has taken years of sporadic but intense activity to grow to its present size and is still ongoing. Price started making the ball out of brown packing tape in 1996 and, to begin with, the effort was rewarded with an easily discernible increase in size. Now, however, the addition of an entire box of rolls of tape is barely noticeable. It's like the joke about the man who painted the white lines in the middle of the road. When asked by his boss why he was covering fewer and fewer miles each day, it turns out that he didn't think to take his pot with him as he painted. Price's 'boulder' has become a similarly ludicrous epic, with an exponentially decreasing outcome over time. We can imagine the awful noise as she wraps the tape around the boulder for days on end. But when do you give up? At which infinitesimal point is the effect categorically obliterated by the effort?

Many of Price's projects require this sort of grim, unflinching stamina. A piece that has never reached completion involved

**'Hearse attending the 3 Month Gallery', photograph, 1997**



**'Hearse attending the Cambridge Darkroom Gallery', photograph, 1998**



collecting the corners of ten pound notes. This was curtailed by external forces when the Royal Mint changed the design – perhaps a relief from a potentially infinite undertaking. Price used money again in ‘Black Fiver’, when she coloured in a five pound note with a black pen. This is still a treasonable offence, as money is only a promissory note and not actually your property. The black ink, while relieving the money of its useful value and converting it into a distinctly physical object, has an oppressive presence like the axe man’s hood. If we can momentarily side-step political correctness and concentrate on historical usage, blackness has many associations with the unknown – death, evil, absence and so on. The all-too-human inclination to connect darkness with the underbelly of life permeates language in phrases such as black magic, black moods and black humour.

Car advertisements in newspapers have been eerily coloured in, again with a black pen, so that the cars are converted into ominous shapes to be read as the absence or abstraction of form. Science fiction uses blank abstraction to represent malevolent forces, such as the black monolith in Arthur C. Clarke’s ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’ or the large, murderous white ball in the television series ‘The Prisoner’. It is the process of dehumanisation that instils fear.

On the cosy newspaper page, however, the black blob is more comical. It acts as a formal counterpoint to neighbouring images or design elements; in one instance a masked Renault Megane accentuates a caricature of a bowler hatted business man whilst also throwing into relief the obituaries opposite.

Defacing newspaper advertisements or five pound notes seems a rather tame subversive gesture compared to, say, beheading a sculpture of Margaret Thatcher with a cricket bat. But the ridiculous imbalance between Price’s over-inflated efforts and the minimal outcome is the point here. She employs an opposing seditious tactic in another series of paintings, ‘Instructions faithfully followed’, by elevating the banal to a venerable status. Found scraps of paper with scrawled messages have been meticulously copied and recreated in gouache. Contingent snippets of information – such as ‘Desperate male and looking for a date. Please call me on 07985 366 473 as my birthday is coming up. EBENEZER’ or ‘VERY HOT WATER. Please be careful.’ – found in telephone boxes, toilets or train stations, vary in tone from emotionally charged to blandly officious. Price reiterates them, painstakingly tracing to retain every wobble of the handwriting, every possible clue to the character of the person that wrote it. Again, the labour is

unnecessary – we could always just look at the original – but a new value system is brought to the ephemera of the underdog.

Colouring in, redrawing and rewriting are ways of marking time. Early video work is notorious for this sort of gruelling experience, which the artist imposed on the viewer rather than keeping it to themselves. Price rarely puts us through her travails, however. She shows us the tangible results of her deeds without asking us to share the journey. The boulder is an enjoyable object – we think of Road Runner and Wiley Coyote – while the black fiver has a delicate, sculptural presence. The calm within the gallery is the point of arrival after intensive labour with skewed priorities.

The video ‘HELP – that’s what it says’ is the closest we get to sharing Price’s pain as we watch her writing out, by hand, the names and addresses on invitation cards to a private view. By the time the addressees turned up to the gallery, they were too late to help with the task. In fact, their appearance was evidence that Price’s ordeal was over; it was only when they saw the video footage of the gruelling 5 hours 23 minutes’ work that they realised the meaning of the message ‘HELP’ in the title. Here the punch line is a function of the joke and vice versa but, separated by time, they both fail. The repetitive act compounds the

gag, as a Victorian commentator once wrote: ‘the invaluable peculiarity of pantomime wit is that it weakens nothing by repeating, for a pun tells only once, but it is not so with a poke in the eye.’

‘WOOF’ hinges on the comedy of elevation, of the hobo who pulls himself up by his bootstraps. The childish word ‘woof’ is written in formal, black and white signage that might have been found in some municipal institution. Price reminds us of the weird economy of language: ascribing to a sound the noun ‘bark’ is a function of language, but a further translation into the onomatopoeic ‘woof’ is a great linguistic short-circuit. Inscribing the verbal romp into a patrician-looking text piece is to play panto with a straight face.

Charlie Chaplin pointed out the role of false pride in slapstick: ‘An old man slips on a banana and falls slowly and stumbles and we don’t laugh. But if it’s done with a pompous well-to-do gentleman who has exaggerated pride, then we laugh.’ Price’s ‘Trophy’ is a silver-plated cup engraved with the name of the venue and the dates of the exhibition in which it is shown, so that over the years it becomes a celebration of the artist’s achievements. It could be a howling display of self-congratulation, but the brag is so transparent that we know the artist must know that we know. We can be sure

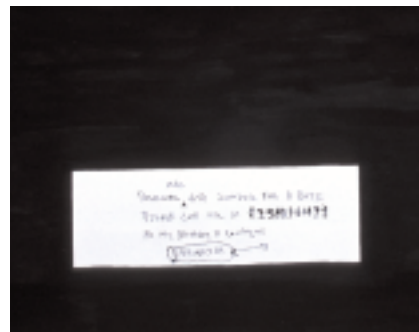
‘boulder’ (as at April 1997),  
packing tape, 1996 –



‘boulder’ (as at October 1998),  
packing tape, 1996 –



‘Instructions faithfully followed:  
Desperate...’, gouache on paper, 2003



‘HELP – that’s what it says’,  
video, 5 hours 23 minutes, 2001

