

Conversation between Jeremy Millar and Lisa Le Feuvre
June 2009

Lisa Le Feuvre: This exhibition *Given* is a speculative project that takes as its starting point a very specific journey by sea. Here at the National Maritime Museum our collections explore how human beings have sought meaning in the sea, time and the stars, showing how these ideas resonate through the material cultures of both history and contemporary society. In its very title *Given* has two resonances looping their way through our activities at the Museum. On the one hand it refers to the idea of exchange, trade and economics; these forces pushed nations to 'new' and uncharted places. On the other hand, you are invoking the idea of 'a given' – something that is an assumption of fact. The constructed nature of such constructs is often overlooked – for example, here in Greenwich we are at the 'start of time' – a framework that is of course built on power and subjectivity. Here the imponderables of time and space collide: this is the home of longitude 0°, where one can stand on an arbitrary line marking out the starting point of each new day, year and millennium. Every place on the globe is measured east or west from this Prime Meridian. How does this notion of 'given' operate in your thoughts around these new works you have developed for this exhibition?

Jeremy Millar: Exchange is, or rather exchanges *are*, central in much of my work, and in these works perhaps especially. I suppose any sense of exchange we have is predicated upon an assumption of two or more parties between whom the exchange is made, whatever it might be; and I am interested here in placing myself, or rather my work, in that space between them; the space created by both (or more) but belonging to neither (or none). In these works there are a number of such exchanges, and so a number of such in-between spaces. Some are these are rather familiar – an exchange between east and west (or north and south), or between cultural expression and scientific understanding – although there are others also, such as that between that which did, and did not happen; between the possible and the impossible. Given the rather bold assumptions that the word 'given' itself seems to suggest, I'm interested in the way in which its alternative sense of exchange opens up a space of speculation and uncertainty.

Lisa Le Feuvre: In Papua New Guinea there is a very particular exchange economy operating across the 18 island communities in the Massim archipelago that is known as the Kula ring. It involves a constant movement of items between people that is based on a gift economy that involves systems of symbolic value. Can you describe your interest in this system and how it feeds into this project?

Jeremy Millar: Kula is an extraordinary thing, really, and extraordinarily difficult to define. At its most obvious, it involves, as you say, the movement of certain objects of symbolic power between various Kula partners: 'soulava', or shell necklaces, which are 'given with the left hand' and travel clockwise around the ring, or circuit of islands and communities, and 'mwali', or shell armbands, which are 'given with the right hand', and move in the opposite direction. But it is important to stress that Kula involves this movement, and does not consist of it. It involves the act of giving and taking between people, yes; but this is not simply to obtain new objects, new possessions; indeed, the objects are never really possessed by anyone, but pass between them, acting as the means for creating new experiences for those involved: in particular the opportunity for their growth physically, materially, but perhaps most importantly spiritually. As John Kasaipwalova, the tribal chief with whom I stayed on Kiriwina has said, these objects were created to civilise and enrich, and in the process of exchange they gain a life, a presence, which prompts people onto a plane where they can act and react, where they can create substantial human experiences. The reasons why an artist would be interested in the creation of such objects, and of such a system of symbolic exchange, need hardly be elaborated; as Joseph Conrad, Malinowski's fellow anglophile compatriot remarked, 'The artist appeals to that part of our being ... which is a gift and not an acquisition', and that sense of a gift appeals to the artist in turn.

Lisa Le Feuvre: So these concerns feed not only into your artistic practice, but also to a wider conception, and misconception, of the status of art objects.

Jeremy Millar: Kula relates to this project in ways both general and specific. To some extent I am interested in the effect a consideration of Kula here, in a western gallery, might have upon our conception of art, and of art objects. We are increasingly encouraged to consider works of art as little more than commodities, objects the value of which is determined solely by the market, yet the poverty of such a position is obvious. Within Kula certain mwali, in particular, are held to be incredibly valuable, but not because they are made of more precious materials; certain mwali are coveted intensely over a period of years, but they can never be bought. They become valuable because value accrues to them, because they have passed through the hands of a particularly respected chief, or because of a particular historical circumstance. The mwali themselves might be virtually indistinguishable in a formal sense – the same materials, the same design – and yet one would attract a great deal of attention, and intention, while others would be almost ignored. This seems to me to be something that relates well to our actual fascination with objects of all kinds, not simply art objects, and this is something I wanted to consider here: to present an object that extends beyond itself, that is 'distributed' (as the Melanesianist Alfred Gell might have had it) even when it is no longer subject to its prior physical distribution.

LLF: In *Given* there is one very particular element, a sculpture titled 'With the Left Hand', that has a history of direct involvement in the Kula that has been reworked with other symbols of exchange.

JM: While in Papua New Guinea (PNG) I purchased from the National Cultural Commission a soulava that had already been withdrawn from the Kula some time ago (that is important). I have collected some other objects which have also been removed from their initial exchange system: a number of Polish coins from 2002, each of which is minted with the portrait of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of his death. These coins were then drilled, and tied with beaded string to the main length of the soulava, in a manner similar to the pieces of iridescent shell that adorned it already. This piece will then be displayed in a high-specification museum case, much as a museum might display any cultural artefact, but what sort of object is it? Even before my own rather subtle additions, this was an object much altered, even as it remained physically constant. In being removed from the Kula it was changed, and in being offered for sale, and then bought, it was changed again. Even to display it within the museum as it would be to display an object that was not what it once was.

LLF: And then transformed by the addition of new material – the coins removed from another circuit of exchange.

JM: These coins, readily available, after a short period became collectable, and therefore worth more in actual terms than the symbolic value with which they were cast, once they entered into a system of exchange other than that in which such objects would more usually circulate. And then they are, in effect, destroyed, or at least irreparably damaged; a circular hole violates their circular whole, and they become but a part of something else. What then, ultimately, is the value of the object, or art object that is assembled from these other objects? Greater than the sum of its parts, or less? What would be the value of the soulava now as a soulava, and how might it be received if it were to be reintroduced into the Kula? Would it have accrued value in having travelled such a distance, in having been shown in a London museum with royal patronage – something very important for most Kiriwinans – in having been altered in the way it has? Or might it have been irredeemably tainted in a way that is imperceptible, yet no less complete? I'm interested in the manner in which my rather simple acts in relation to such an object prompt us to consider its ethics rather more than its aesthetics, for all its undoubted physical beauty, and sense of enchantment.

LLF: This idea of enchantment is important throughout your artistic practice, and here in *Given* I am really interested in how mystic powers relate to photography. Alongside the sculpture we have just been discussing are a series of photographs that you took while in the Trobriand Islands. Each one is titled 'As Witkiewicz', followed by the details of the person or object photographed – named, dated and located. These are not simply documents of people and places, though; rather they are photographs taken 'as Witkiewicz'. On one register that is the performance of, one could say channelling the speculation of the images Witkiewicz might

have taken had he travelled to the island with Malinowski. There is one image where John Kasaipwalova can be seen making 'garden magic' – that is a ritual where smoke is used on plants. You described how he is interested in exploring empirically belief systems – in this case the fact that carbon dioxide helps growth. It seems that this knot of belief and empires is a central element in the very materiality of photography.

JM: Of course, photography is a medium upon which has been placed an extraordinary degree of belief and, to a great extent, that belief is magical. I believe that this magical sense emerges quite straightforwardly from what is considered its indexical qualities, that is, its trace of something, or someone, real. We seem to feel that photographs follow one of J. G. Frazer's laws of sympathetic magic, the law of contiguity, which he formulates thus: 'objects which have been in contact, but since ceased to be so, continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed'. Commenting upon this, Marcel Mauss notes, 'One might add, as a corollary: "The part is to the whole as the image is to the represented object"', which only emphasises this relationship between the photograph and its subject further. We salvage photographs, protect them, caresses them, burn them, and to a very great extent our acts are directed at those who are therein represented rather than simply the particular pieces of paper.

LLF: There are also particular exchanges and assumptions at work in these processes.

JM: There is magic in the act of photography, and not simply its outcomes, even if it has become somewhat diminished in its ubiquity. Magic is also the exercise of power, and much work has been done over the past few decades upon the power exercised within the act of photography, particularly the photographing of people; most often it is those behind the camera who possess this power, and the camera becomes a device with which to wield it. This is most obviously the case when a photographer travels from a rich to a poor country, and proceeds to photograph the people found there; 'Local colour is the poverty of others', as the saying goes. Of course, at its simplest, this is what I've done here also, but I think it's not so simple. As you've said, this piece is as much a performance as anything else, the photographs here the result of that act, although to some extent I find it difficult to determine quite what the performance was; not one of impersonation, certainly, or of following in Witkiewicz's footsteps, as here there were none to follow; an act of speculation rather than repetition, then. To draw upon anthropology once more, I think it is probably related, to some extent, to a form of possession, that is, the taking on of another identity. In possession rituals, such a state often allows the person so possessed to act in ways that they would ordinarily find difficult, if not impossible, and while I wouldn't want to overstate this, I do feel that this was largely true with regard to my making photographs on Kiriwina.

LLF: Can you explain this difficulty a little more?

JM: As a rule, I find it extremely difficult to photograph people and so the thought of travelling to such a place in order to do just that was a troubling one indeed; in fact it remains one, even now, after the photographs themselves have been made. This sense of acting 'as Witkiewicz' certainly made these photographs possible, and not because they provided a formal model to follow (that is the least of it), but rather because it enabled the act of photography itself to take place, enabled a camera to be placed close to a stranger's face and for an exposure to be made. And who, at that moment, is the person making that exposure? I find it difficult to say, and difficult, also, are the ethical consequences of this uncertainty. The act of photographing a native Kiriwinan is markedly different for me in 2009 that it would have been for Witkiewicz had he done so in 1915, and not necessarily in a good way (not at all). As the identity of the photographer himself remains somewhat ambiguous, so does his moral position. This is why I like the portraits of Gumakawai Sitautau, the first I made on the island, so much. His expressions are similarly ambiguous, seemingly caught between emotions, states, or sensations that we might find rather more legible. They are certainly questioning, but also rather confrontational, albeit in a way that suggests uncertainty rather something unpleasant. I think that what one is also aware of here is the act of photography itself, and that that uncertainty is the one found in the negotiation of a portrait. These are photographs that seem to acknowledge their own position within an act of exchange, an act in which both parties are uncertain of its equality, or what exactly is being asked of them. They do not sit back, satisfied,

in the humanism of a shared smile; what is shared, instead, is a concern, for themselves and for one another.

LLF: The other repetition in *Given* is the two films, each one displayed in a separate room inside The Queen's House. Both document the performance of a particular play by Witkiewicz, importantly not directed by you. The content of the play here is not the most urgent issue that you are drawing attention to. Instead, it is the assumptions, or indeed givens, that inform the realisation of the play; such socialised subjectivities are automatic, often taken for granted. Only when scrutinised are they possible to identify. Here in this historical museum we deal with such givens constantly – perhaps most explicitly in the Prime Meridian that starts global time here in Greenwich. That this is point zero is a fiction based on historical power relations.

JM: The subject matter of the play, 'Metaphysics of the Two-Headed Calf', is not irrelevant, but as you say, this is but a part of it; it is how the play itself is adopted by the two groups – one in Australia, one in PNG – how they perform it and, in doing so, how they activate certain elements within the play that is more interesting. Adrian Guthrie, who directed the performance in Adelaide, said that there the play was seen in relation to Australia's troubled relationship with its own indigenous peoples, and to immigration to some extent, also. It is perhaps not Witkiewicz's greatest work – which might explain why it seems that we have organised only its fourth and fifth performances in the nearly ninety years since it was written – yet like all good and interesting works it is meaningfully transformed – and transforming – with each genuine engagement. And the engagement with the play has been genuine, I feel; the enthusiasm with which the amateur actors in Goroka have approached this work has been extraordinary, particularly when we consider that their usual improvisatory practice means that they are hardly used to working with scripts, let alone ones as lengthy and as strange as this particular one. This is hugely gratifying, and suggests that they recognise that the performance is an opportunity to establish something, perhaps a position within a work in which they are in some sense present and yet have been kept absent. And given the 'one-way traffic' in the 20th century between what we might term traditional, indigenous cultures and the European avant-garde, I must say that I find it immensely satisfying that a theatre group in the Eastern Highlands of PNG are here staging a work not attempted by any of Europe's most radical companies, and that they doing so in their own language too.

LLF: So really important here are the ways in which this curious play is claimed, or even possessed by those who become involved in it. This is of course also the case with *Given* – as an artist you are transforming the play; here it is material made into something else. There is another transformation taking place with all of the elements of your work: by being placed in a museum it becomes a part of a museological discourse. The National Maritime Museum is a very particular museum in terms of its focus – the sea, stars and time – and its location – The Queen's House in historic Greenwich. How do you feel the specifics of this showing will feed into the complexities of this body of work?

JM: Of course, the National Maritime Museum is a very specific context, quite different from a traditional 'white cube' art gallery, but this is something that appeals greatly to me, and it is why the museum was the first place I considered when starting to think of this project. One shouldn't forget that the first major work that Malinowski wrote on his work in the Trobriand Islands was called 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific', which quite clearly places the project within a sea-faring tradition, and the Pacific explorations of Captain Cook and others are richly represented within the displays of The Queen's House. These paintings, and the voyages they so heroically represent, act as our cultural memory, and in doing so help create meaning in this project. What I find interesting is that in providing such a strong context, these earlier works, these earlier histories, help create the means by which my later project can come to engage critically with them; they provide a language with which their assumptions can be questioned. A work such as 'With the Left Hand' is greatly concerned with the value of objects, and their meaning also: what persists when this object is removed from its circle of exchange and comes to rest in a display case on the other side of the world? Its display in the National Maritime Museum – museum that celebrates travel and exchange – is part of the very *meaning* of the work, its very *making*.

The Prime Meridian in Greenwich acts as a guarantee that any movement through space is a movement through time, and so a shift in geography might be considered an historical shift also. This is not the belief – still held by many in Malinowski's time – that to travel to remote islands such as Kiriwina is to travel back in time to an earlier stage of human development; rather, it is an anachronistic Western approach that is being explored in contemporary Kiriwina, the intellectual and artistic avant-garde of the early 20th century that I was there to excavate. I hope that the work in these two small rooms can encourage us to reconsider our own – that is, the West's – place in the world in relation to other people, and that such an attitude might persist a little longer into the wider expanses of the museum as a whole, and perhaps even beyond it.