

# FRANCES BARRETT THE 12-HOUR REVOLUTION

What is it to endure? To bear with tolerance suffering, physical strain and humiliation? And what is it to *repeatedly* endure: To travel under the burden of the same strain, under the weight of the very same laborious action over and over? Is it noble to bear this repetition in the hope that its very undertaking is not empty but instead part of a ritual, or that there is a political import to its completion? And if it's registered only by a sound associated with slapstick style failure and an ignoble form of comedy, does the threat of emptiness return?

In *The 12-Hour Revolution*, Frances Barrett will endure a repetition of the same act: crawling on her hands and knees in a circle on the floor of the Sydney Guild gallery space. Her pace might vary according to her enthusiasm for the action, her level of fatigue, her physical and mental capabilities and the passing of time. But the action will remain the same. It will be repeated over the course, as the title indicates, of twelve long hours. As each circle is completed, the artist will honk a horn. The sound of this horn will be recorded and relayed on the hour, every hour, from the time it is made, to the end of the 12 hour period.

What is suggested by this act of endurance, which will certainly result in considerable discomfort for (and perhaps injury to) the artist, are two seemingly opposing modes of engagement. The first is deeply serious. It speaks to the physical and psychological commitment required to repeat a basic though physically demanding act over and over. It suggests that meaning has been invested in the simple action, necessitating its repetition, or, that its repetition makes what was simple much more significant.

This seriousness might be read in terms of ritual, or an invocation of sacred, whereby the invested repetition is tied to belief. In the monastic tradition prayer and chore are repeated until the sacred appears in the everyday. In Daoism repeating a circular movement plays a role in acquiring higher consciousness. The ritualised act of walking in a circle, for example, is a means of focusing, concentrating, driving meditation and raising insight.

In this regard Barrett's twelve hours of circling might be read as an ordeal endured for the sake of spiritual consciousness, transcendence, and self-transformation. On this basis, a claim can be made for its relationship to an existing tradition of endurance performance and to figures such as Marina Abramovic or Joseph Beuys. Like much of the work of Abramovic, Barrett similarly treats the body as subject and medium. Barrett places the same emphasis on duration and tests limits of the body in sustained and painful activities.

But where Abramovic has claimed that her work was less engaged with the political than with the transcendental, *The 12-Hour Revolution* does not back away in this regard. The title, while also making reference to 360 degree movement, implies broader consequences of the repeated action than an individual's improved awareness. It implies that the action is politically engaged. More specifically, it aligns the repetition with a movement of momentous political and social change, usually produced through violent rupture, i.e. revolution.

What is suggested in this sense is a singular body repeating the same action for a larger social body. It implies an individual laboring towards an outcome that might benefit the collective: toiling as means to a grander end. That this singular body is a woman's body - *this* woman's body - suggests that the change, the coming liberation, might concern women. It connotes a very specific revolution, and one in which a woman's body is the subject, tool and expense. It is reasonable to assume that the revolution concerns women's liberation, that it is engaged with a liberal feminist project.

But there is a second, just as present, tenor of this work of endurance. And it was one that is much more difficult to receive in relation to a rhetoric of transcendence or motivated, self-activating political triumph (whether individual or collective). Compare that quintessential image of revolution, Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) (Figure 1.) to Barrett's *The 12-Hour Revolution* (2013). Where lady liberty steps over the fallen to claim victory, Barrett's 'heroine', wanders in circles amongst them on her hands and knees, like an infant or an adult in submission.

Just as present as the gravitas of the sacred and political in Barrett's endurance is the suggestion of failure, farce and dark humour. It is signalled by the use of the only prop in the exhibition, the vintage clowns horn, as well its delayed registration in the form of the recorded audio. The sound suggests outmoded comedy, slapstick and the misjudged squeezing action of a weird uncle who wont leave your nose or your cheeks alone. There is something pathetic about this sound and this part of the action. As its relays build to a crescendo, so too does the intensity of Barrett's action. At the point of her greatest discomfort or pain is the most imposing part of the soundtrack. But rather than supporting or bolstering, the soundtrack by nature seems to undercut the achievement of the endurance performance. Worse than that, it interrupts it and implies it's ridiculousness.

This sound, this component of the work, seems to ricochet the performers body from the possibility of transcendence, the meditative, and the triumphant and right to back to immanence (in the sense of 'woman's immanence' outlined by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1)). In a week where Australia's powerful female politician to date was reduced to meat on a menu (also in the name of humour) the suggestion of women's bodily immanence is difficult to receive. So too is the suggestion of a cyclic feminist action, a loop that goes nowhere, or a period of change that lasts for twelve hours alone.

But this is too cynical a reading. It suggests that what I earlier framed as co-presence between seriousness and farce is no longer co-presence, but instead the triumph of farce alone. It ignores the fact that even the clown can challenge, make parody, articulate irreverence for the seriousness of characters and systems, and produce new perspectives through play. As Charlie Chaplain once stated "to truly laugh you must take your pain and play with it" (2). To play with your pain and your frustration is to recognise its existence, to communicate it, and in the case of comedy, offer it for the enjoyment and consideration of someone else. The recognition of the likelihood of failure in the form of a honking horn does not empty out the impulse to try. A repetition of an act where the body is foregrounded – as mere body, as barrier to transcendence, as what is at stake in gender politics - does not imply a failure to invest, to signify, or to hope for something different, something more.

**Natalya Hughes**



Figure 1. Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830

1. Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Press. 1949.

2. Charlie Chaplain as quoted on web resource Goodreads < <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/245052-to-truly-laugh-you-must-be-able-to-take-your>>. Viewed 16th June, 2013.