



RICHARD IBGHY & MARILOU LEMMENS

THEATRE FROM THE JUNGLE

APRIL 12 – JUNE 9, 2018

NOTES ON THEATRE FROM THE JUNGLE

Text by John G. Hampton

EXHIBITION: APRIL 12 – JUNE 9, 2018

OPENING RECEPTION: APRIL 12, 7:30PM

LUNCH AND LOOK: APRIL 13, 12:00PM

PARTICIPANTS:

Weldemariam Bahta

Mekides Belete

William Lopez Beltran

Tesfagergis Geberezagabier

Miao Yan Huang

Robel Kibrom

Jianwen Kuang

Belaynesh Mekonnen

Juan Mendez

Eduardo Rogriguez

Chen Xuhong

Yanfang Yang

INSTALLATION:

Kevin Conlin, lead

Leslie Hutchinson

Duane Claridge

This exhibition has been sponsored by UFCW Local 832



COVER: Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens, *Meat Packing*, 2018.
Single-channel video installation. Production still. Photo: RIML



Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens' work often explores labour, economics, production, futility, and the stories we tell ourselves about the world we live in. When we first talked about what kind of project they could do in Brandon, I told them all I knew about this community. The thing that stood out in our conversation was the rapid change in Brandon's demographics. In less than a decade, Brandon's immigrant

ABOVE: Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens, *"The Jungle" Reading Group*, 2018.
Single-channel video installation. Production still. Photo: RIML



population changed from 6.7% to 15.9%, and is still rising. More than one in every ten Brandonites arrived here from another country in the past ten years. This type of change transforms a city. It redefines our culture, community, and values. How we relate to and treat newcomers plays a defining role in who we are as a people and who we will be in the years to come. As the city grows and adapts to these changes, we must make economic, labour, and policy decisions that shape the real world experience of thousands of individuals and families that will reverberate through this community for generations. And to make know how we should be changing and adapting, we need to know the people who make up the community. Ibgby and Lemmens' curiosity was sparked by these social mechanisms and dynamics of immigration, and specifically in how they intersected with the unique labour environment in the region.

Most recent immigrants in Brandon have, at one point or another, worked for the same employer. Brandon's relatively recent surge of immigration was kick-started shortly after the launch of the Provincial Nominee Program—an initiative that allowed companies to recruit foreign workers by offering a fast-track for permanent residency as long as they worked for the company for two years. In the 2000's, Maple Leaf Foods set up temporary offices in El Salvador, Honduras, Mauritius, and other countries, recruiting potential employees for Brandon's meat packing industry. The two year contract with these employees helped the company address their extremely high employee turnover rates, while bringing a steady flow of ambitious individuals into our region. In the following years, new employees and immigrants were recruited through various other methods as well; recent recruitment efforts seem to

TOP: Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens, "The Jungle" Reading Group, 2018. Single-channel video installation. Production still. Photo: RIML

BOTTOM: Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens, *Meat Packing*, 2018. Single-channel video installation. Production still. Photo: RIML

focus primarily on refugee communities or individuals already living here, partially due to changes in Provincial Nominee Program restrictions.

For Ibghy and Lemmens, this predominantly immigrant-based workforce in Canada's largest hog-packing plant brought to mind the popular 1906 novel *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair. The novel follows the hardships of a fictional Lithuanian family as they move to work in Chicago's meat packing district in the early 1900's. It is a harrowing tale of exploitation, manipulation, dangerous working conditions, and the perils of global capitalism. Sinclair hoped to spark outrage over the egregious working conditions experienced by these communities, but readers were more upset about the revelations of the potential health hazards in their food, so the novel's biggest impact was on food safety regulations for consumers. Labour practices today have improved immeasurably over those depicted in Sinclair's novel, but much of his novel is still relevant today.

Ibghy and Lemmens decided to use *The Jungle* as a catalyst for conversation interrogating present day experiences in Brandon. They designed a method for working with participants that was modeled off of other recent projects where they have engaged local communities in experimental theatre workshops. They never actually perform these works for a live audience, but instead film their rehearsals, revealing the process and artifice behind such productions. For *Theatre from the Jungle*, the artists selected and edited passages from *The Jungle* to create a rudimentary script that would be read by the participants. The script acts as a starting point for a conversation about the distance between experience and



representation, between present day Brandon and turn-of-the-century Chicago, and between political rhetoric and lived experience.

What quickly became apparent to the duo after working with local participants on this project, is that there is a disconnect between the language, characters, and experiences in *The Jungle*, and the individuals it was meant to represent. *The Jungle* had very specific political motivations, which were best served by depicting individuals with no agency or voice, sucked up by the machinery of capitalist industry. Seeing this text alongside

ABOVE: Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *Interviews*, 2018. Multiple-channel video installation. Production still. Photo: RIML



ABOVE: Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *Meat Packing*, 2018.
Single-channel video installation. Production still. Photo: RIML

personal interviews with present-day factory workers however, made it apparent that the disenfranchisement that Sinclair portrays may be more of a reflection of the author's own self-importance (or the importance of social liberation movements), "speaking with the voice of the millions who are voiceless," than a reflection of reality.

In *Theatre for the Jungle*, Ibgby and Lemmens disrupt the artist/author's authority to speak for another. Like Sinclair, they are outsiders, visiting a community that they wish to represent in some way. Sinclair creates a narrative with clear protagonists and villains, but Ibgby and Lemmens provide a less tidy narrative. They embrace a complex ethical position, one that draws into question both Sinclair's motives and their own.

All art has an ethical dimension. In figurative painting, the painter has control over the representation of their model—they control their pose, perspective, dress, and context, painting a particular picture and narrative that is imposed on the model's body. When an artist is representing an individual with a very different perspective than their own, they can easily misrepresent their subject through the artist's natural tendency to view the world through their own eyes. After all, there is no other way to view the world, than from your own position. This is a problem for all art that is not about the artist's singular viewpoint (it is also a problem shared by anthropology, documentary, and other artistic or academic efforts to understand people other than ourselves). Upton Sinclair addressed this problem by immersing himself in immigrant communities in Chicago's stockyards for several weeks in an attempt to create believable—yet still fictional—characters that he could speak through. One of the ways



that Ibgby and Lemmens address this problem, is by offering an avenue for the participants to speak for themselves via unedited interviews.

Another method is by illustrating the artifice of artistic representation by having the project participants literally speak the words that Sinclair has written to represent them. This exercise makes visible the uneasy relationship between text, author, and subject. It creates a parallel between the companies in Sinclair's "Packing Town" and the author's own use of the employees as tools. In some ways, instead of giving

ABOVE: Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens, *Interviews*, 2018. Multiple-channel video installation. Production still. Photo: RIML



his characters a voice, he wore them as a mask to amplify his own voice in his political advocacy for socialist reform. This type of relationship between author and character is quite common in works of fiction (whether socialist or otherwise), but *Theatre from the Jungle* seeks to confront these types of dynamics that we take for granted.

A third approach that Ibgby and Lemmens take to addressing the ethics of representation, occurs in *Meat Packing*, a video portraying twelve participants performing the duties typical of a hog processing plant line. Performed in casual clothing against a neutral backdrop and stripped of the tools and objects of their production, one can appreciate the performers' movement like contemporary dance. Although the premise and aesthetic is dictated by the artist, each movement is

precisely choreographed by the company. The performers' well-rehearsed motions, executed with graceful confidence and disinterested monotony, demonstrates a singular focus and precision that divorces them from their co-performers/workers. The rhythm and gestures, offer us an affective look into the workers' day to day experience. More than written or spoken language, standing and watching these performers work, without their layers of protective gear and uniforms, allows us to feel their embodied experiences as people beyond their relationship to machinery or hog.

The combination of movement, interviews, and reading group, creates a tension between different forms of representation. Each employs significantly different tactics for representation, but their combination encourages one to question each approach, and the viewer's own tendency to construct narratives surrounding the lives of their neighbours. This juxtaposition of representational strategies forces the viewer to reconsider and confront their own ideologies—be they rooted in perceived benevolence or not. *Theatre for the Jungle* places the artists, institutions, and many viewers on the outside, complicating what it means to be a visitor, a guest, and insider or outsider. It encourages us to deepen our thinking around notions of community, observation, and language. The exhibition blends physical, emotional, and mental labour in an unusual exploration of our relationship with animals, sustenance, and migration as it navigates fundamental questions underlying the systems that drive and sustain global, industrialized nations and how artists represent the stories behind these systems.

-

LIST OF WORKS:

"The Jungle" Reading Group, 2018, Installation: HD video (29 minutes), monitor, scripts, table, chairs, wall panel

The first part of *Theatre from the Jungle* presents a reading group consisting of current and ex-employees of Maple Leaf Foods in Brandon, Manitoba. The group reads from a selection of rewritten passages from Upton Sinclair's work of fiction entitled *The Jungle*, a novel which depicts the harrowing experiences of a group of immigrant labourers working in the stockyards in Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century. It is worth noting that, unlike all of the participants, Sinclair's mother tongue was English, he was not an immigrant, and he never worked in the meat packing industry.

Meat Packing, 2018, HD video (33 minutes)

The second part of *Theatre from the Jungle* presents a group of twelve individuals performing movements common to a hog processing plant, such as ushering in pigs, removing heads, slicing guts, chopping ribs, counting chops, packing boxes, etc. The piece gives a glimpse into the organization of the production line, but more explicitly portrays the patterns of bodily movements at work in the meat packing industry. By subtracting the factory, meat, tools, noise, and protective gear that employees normally wear, the piece calls attention to the singularity of the individual—not as a worker but as a person—as well as to the interaction and cooperation between colleagues. It also gives visibility to the particular form that a body and mind adopt in a highly repetitive production process designed for standardization and efficiency.

Interviews, 2018, Installation: eight video channels, chairs, plinths, headphones

The third part of *Theatre from the Jungle* presents an installation of eight videos, each featuring one participant's description of their experiences immigrating to Canada and working in the meat packing industry. The participants reflect on the motivations and circumstances which led them to migrate, and their imagination of what their future in Canada might be like. Most of the interviews were recorded in the participants' homes. Taken together, this collection of testimonies reveals broader trends about how labour and migration are connected to broader social, cultural, political, and economic realities. It also offers a glimpse into how the international mobility of workers is shaped by both local and global historical forces, and how individuals from different geographical and migratory circumstances think of, and come to live in, a single city in Manitoba.

UP NEXT:

DIANA THORNEYCROFT

BLACK FOREST (DARK WATERS)

JUNE 28 – AUGUST 28, 2018

The AGSM is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Arts Council and the City of Brandon.



Canada Council
for the Arts
Conseil des arts
du Canada



MANITOBA ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DU MANITOBA





710 ROSSER AVENUE
UNIT 2
BRANDON, MB

TUESDAY – FRIDAY 10AM – 5PM
THURSDAY 10AM – 9PM
SATURDAY 12PM – 5PM

204.727.1036
INFO@AGSM.CA
AGSM.CA