

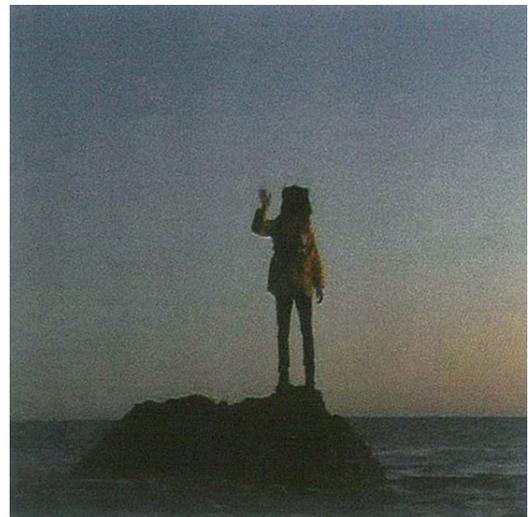
The New Honesty: A Critique of the Retreat

g.bridle

The New Honesty: A Critique of the Retreat is a big title with a big promise. It also sounds a bit puritanical, with a strong whiff of born-again Christianity. Certainly on the face of it, there are religious reverberations: 'New Honesty' is suggestive of new age beliefs, and a retreat is also a sanctuary for those seeking religious contemplation. As with most religions, amongst its followers there is a point at which fact and logic makes way for faith and belief – where fact collapses into dogma, setting up a no-mans-land of slippery tensions and unresolved truths. It is this rich terrain that g.bridle mines and folds back – like a mirror – in front of us, for us to observe the symbology, patterns and codes he has constructed in the safety and sanctity of the Retreat.

But does the Retreat exist? This question opens up an ontological discussion about its possible existence and, as such, it also tests our faith in the art of believing in myths. Though separated by 50 years, there is a similarity between g.bridle and Joseph Beuys with his creation myth of being rescued during WWII by nomadic Tartar tribesmen who saved his life by warming him with fat and felt. It is a wonderful myth but unfortunately it turned out to be an invention. In *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*,¹ Lewis Hyde suggests that Beuys was an archetypal trickster, that the creation myth deepened the ambiguity about his true self, and that his world was not about truths but about artifice. There are similarities with g.bridle. With setting up the Retreat, he has also set up his own creation myth that enables him to maintain both an ambiguity and a strictly controlled artifice. g.bridle likes to blur the facts – but he can also be disarmingly honest. Sometimes he drip-feeds both at the same time. He tricks, he teases, but in keeping with the trickster spirit he charmingly slips and slides away ...

According to The New Honesty's publicity material,² the works on show are 'acquired and selected [by g.bridle] from a number of artists'. At the artist talk, it transpires that most of the works are in fact by g.bridle – with the exception of the hair work by Ryan Chadfield, which also appears as a prop in g.bridle's three performative 'waving' video works; the photograph by Courtney Lucas titled 'Swamp', plus some 'found' objects. His hitherto position as an 'impartial' collector has suddenly morphed into a much more interesting construct: the collector as artist and curator. Certainly g.bridle is fully aware of the framing function of the art institution and the importance of these institutions in activating meaning for art objects. The artist Hans Haacke often worked on the site of the art gallery, unmasking what he described as its invisible structures. He exposed the ideology and power structures behind the selection processes that dictate what art people get to see. Haacke stated that 'the canon is an agreement by people with cultural power at a certain time. It has no universal validity.'³ And g.bridle, in his trifecta role of collector, artist and curator, has assumed the mantle of cultural power. The question must now surely be 'does the Retreat have validity?'



In many ways, g.bridle is representative of today's young artists whose interests lie in discovering new ways of re-encoding their worlds. However g.bridle has taken it one step further by setting out to build his own personal world – and within a tightly controlled conceptual framework he continues to develop his arsenal of codes and ambiguous truths, bound up in his own aesthetic language. As an observer you are absorbed and pulled not only into the works themselves, but also into the concepts – to paraphrase from Nat Trotman's essay, 'into the fantastic spiderweb of g.bridle's private reality'.⁴

1. Lewis Hyde *'Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art'*. North Point Press, New York, 1998.
2. www.physicsroom.org.nz/gallery/2009/bridle
3. Walter Grasskamp *'Hans Haacke'*. Phaidon Press, London and New York, 2004.
4. Nat Trotman essay 'Ritual Space/Sculptural Time' from *'All in the present must be transformed: Matthew Barney and Joseph Beuys'* exhibition organised by Nancy Spector at the Guggenheim in New York, 2006.