

RONNIE VAN HOUT

L.M.O.K.



GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY
NEW PLYMOUTH NEW ZEALAND
9 NOVEMBER - 15 DECEMBER 1996

In search of intelligent life (within or without Ronnie)

Our species is much preoccupied with the possibility of life beyond earth. The enthusiasm of our efforts to find it (monitoring approaching radio waves, analysing meteorites, etc) led to "In search of intelligent life" as the title for this essay, a phrase cribbed from van Hout's original name for this exhibition. Such a heading would have been particularly appropriate, considering the artist's interest in anecdotes about flying saucers and visiting aliens. However for some reason, he changed his mind (one of them). Now we find out he's "OK".

The influence on this issue concerns cautious thinking.

Really, you might wonder? Do you believe him? It sounds a little lacklustre. Being "OK" is hardly reassuring or enthusiastic. There's a certain worrying tone there, especially as a very recent exhibition of his in Wellington was called "I'm not well". And on the wall here we see one speech bubble that says "I'm O.K." next to another yelling at us to "Buzz Off."

A usual positive quality that may be hindering the situation is controlled emotion.

So who, of "The Two Ronnies," is speaking here? You won't get far asking the artist. In another show earlier this year, van Hout presented several casts of his own head, lying on the floor and connected to various cassettes that played the barely audible "thoughts" of different "Ronnies". Contradictory mental states and competing personalities, none of them abandoned, all of them included.

It is difficult to track down the "I" who speaks in the titles of these exhibitions, the model for these heads, the maker of these objects. Even van Hout's artist's statement for this publication is evasive. It's a passage of tarot wisdom requested by van Hout from a computer as a commentary on his exhibition. It is as if the artist has abnegated any interest in his own thoughts on the show. Unfortunately these computer-generated "thoughts" seem to have wheedled their way into this essay as well, as if they want to take over and dominate any independent commentary.

A related challenge from the past was political ambition.

Van Hout's indifference is what makes him so strange. In some exhibitions he has indicated more interest in the thoughts of other artists than in his own mental processes. Sometimes he has let their actions affect his own. For example, in *I'm O.K.*, he has made "paintings" by stretching silver fabric over some wooden offcuts Kathy Temin abandoned in the studio when she finished her residency in New Plymouth in 1995. He has also done some drawings by gluing cord to the wall in the distinctive

style Temin is known for, just as he has knowingly used plasticine – an unorthodox material used by Luise Fong, the other 1995 Taranaki Artist in Residence, in her Govett-Brewster exhibition. And I suspect he is also attempting to make new versions of Californian sculptor Paul McCarthy's tomato-headed person (with its interchangeable plastic genitals), by making comical heads out of herb planters from the gardening supply store, and combining them with wigs, plastic carrots and party gags such as fake ears and noses.

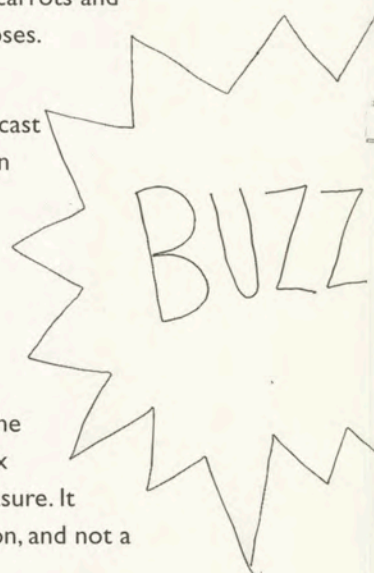
The planter that bristles with protruding carrots has the artist's cast head on top. It gives the impression that van Hout has a martyr fixation, posing as Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows. This sculpture could also be the results of the artist's weird and unsavoury thoughts, involving fun (when left alone) with vegetables. However, the impassivity of the artist's own latex face suggests neither pain nor pleasure. It implies a sort of mental penetration, and not a physical one at all.

The quality of your relationship to people and circumstances involved is physical practicality.

Van Hout works rather like Frankenstein who built his creature out of organs, bones, and fleshy bits taken from disparate sources. The casts of his own (apparently) dismembered body are chucked in a heap with ears, joke noses and spectacles, plastic parts that seem to be as interchangeable as artistic personas. "Van Hout's" identifiable style now seems to be disappearing. Perhaps he has second thoughts (or third or fourth ones even) about the "artistic self" he is known for, and has arranged for intergalactic travellers to kidnap it – the same creatures who inspired many of the drawings, sculptures and paintings for this exhibition, visitors who (according to the artist) know how to take over the bodies of deer in order to speak to humans. Maybe these aliens have turned nasty and usurped the original self of the artist, to replace it with fragments of other artists' selves.

The most favourable outcome is integration.

Did you ever see Frankenstein's creature as played by Robert De Niro? His face is a mass of stitching and scars, not a smoothly homogenous intact skin, but rather one that reveals the joining up of the pieces. Compare De Niro's creature with the work of an artist like Orlan who,



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by using surgery, hopes to reconstruct her face so that she finishes up with a perfectly blended physiognomy composed of pieces of art history, such as the chin of Botticelli's Venus, the mouth of Boucher's Europa, the nose of a School of Fountainbleau Diana, and so on.

Your personal challenge in this situation is destructiveness.

Like Orlan, van Hout likes to present pieces of "self" from all over the place, but in the De Niro manner, so that the healing is seen to be incomplete, with the joints exposed and the bits not fusing together. The overtly sloppy way van Hout puts together many of his sculptures with modelling paste focuses on a sense of an improvised self, one based on incongruous

physical and conceptual elements that seem chosen by impulse, with no thought for finish. The way things are chucked together is so awful, it makes us laugh. Does he really know what he is doing, do you think?

Finally the outcome, as things stand, regarding spiritual weakness.

"I'm OK" subtly suggests he is sick. Even his silver jump suit, designed to make us think that his body and mind are ostensibly well (glittery and shiny), declares his illness with its flared legs and too short sleeves. It's patently obvious that deep down inside something is badly amiss. If there ever was a body that wore that jump suit (perhaps it has been kidnapped), you can bet its own insides are missing too – perhaps sucked away to a different location, or left on a gallery wall pretending to be "Fomofill" sculpture. Maybe that is Ronnie we can see, his guts and jump suit, hanging on the wall, the latter a sort of ill-fitting and emptied out skin. Such a skin may be a surface feature (and only that) but it is also...

deceiving... in life, one only has one's skin...there is a bad exchange in human relations because one never is what one has...I have the skin of an angel but I am a jackal...the skin of a crocodile but I am a poodle...There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have. 1

A quality that is hindering the situation is mental interference.

Van Hout's jump suit, as a substitute skin, is a failed attempt to compensate for such a "bad exchange." He seems to have constantly sought out, not so much other skins, but other body parts, other artists' ideas or materials, other identities, to go inside his skin. It seems certain forces have for some time now been resident there – taking it over, like they would a wild stag,

They needed a "self" as empty and as available as the tubs and bowls we see piled up in the middle of the room; a stack that, like van Hout's other freestanding sculptures, refers to short, mysterious, standing figures.

Your hope is about physical profit.

"Help me, I'm in the land of the Giants," say the modelling paste letters resting on the low bench. We hear the plaintive cry of the alien leader, speaking like a lost and frightened child, but it is more than size and disorientation that is worrying it. It is troubled by another source of anxiety. Each sculpture is standing in a latex puddle. The wee visitors appear to have had incontinence problems.

Van Hout's own problems can be seen as a direct consequence of alien embarrassment. Exasperated by their humiliation here on earth, the visitors have taken over Ronnie's mind, and made arrangements for the dismantling of his body, the first of many such bodies set aside for intergalactic transport and research. This exhibition reveals that there are several transportation options and, if that wonky molecule on display is any indication, they might choose de-atomisation. A much easier mode than the freighting of pieces, it would be like turning Ronnie into a thousand migrating blowflies. Cheaper than spending money on flying saucer fuel.

As a host for an alien, "van Hout" lived in New Plymouth for about three months, fooling us all. The more "Ronnie" told us he was unwell, the more convinced we were that he was joking – exactly as "he" hoped. By using the minds of Temin, Fong and others to form its replacement identity (Ronnie used to be such a difficult character), the alien was able to present a more convincing picture of itself as an earthling artist. Now it seems it is preparing for its big trip home, with its booty of bodies, to be reassembled and then experimented on, like monkeys in a lab.

A future challenge is arrogance.

So confident is the creature that, besides using this exhibition to boast about its body-collecting activity (after all, there's nothing we earthlings can do about it), it has even affected to show vulnerability, by displaying its "seepage" problems. Furthermore, it has pretended to

have sympathy for its host, stating in a wall drawing that Ronnie will be "OK" in 2022. That means that in 26 years Ronnie will be given his body back, to be reunited with his mind (wherever that is). A present for his sixtieth birthday.

After that date, during his subsequent exhibitions, art

historians of the twenty-first century will be feverishly comparing descriptive data on the different "Ronnies", seeing if their styles (pre, during and after mind-replacement) differ. If I were you – and I wanted to get my name in the history books as a credible witness – I'd start taking detailed notes and photographs, now.

John Hurrell

1 From *The dress* by Eugenie Lemoine Luccioni. Part of a text read out by Orlan during her operations. See *More*, July 1996, p.37.

I'm O.K.

Computer generated Tarot reading, Tarotworks 1.41
Thursday 17 October 1996 12.51am

The influence on this issue concerns cautious thinking.

A usual positive quality that may be hindering the situation is controlled emotion, while the most favourable outcome is integration.

A quality that is hindering the situation is mental interference.

A related challenge from the past was political ambition, while a future challenge is arrogance; your personal challenge in this situation is destructiveness.

The quality of your relationship to people and circumstances involved is physical practicality.

Your hope is about physical profit. Finally, the outcome, as things stand, regards spiritual weakness.

The result when the question "I'm O.K." was asked – Ronnie van Hout 1996

RONNIE VAN HOUT

1962 Born Christchurch, New Zealand
1980 - 1982 *Ilam* School of Fine Arts, Canterbury
1994 Residency, ELBA Art Foundation, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
1996 Artist-in-residence Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Taranaki Polytechnic, New Plymouth

Selected solo exhibitions

1985 *More for less* City Limits Cafe, Wellington
1986 *The true cross* Southern Cross Gallery, Wellington
1987 *Believing is seeing* Southern Cross Gallery, Wellington
Paintings Manawa Gallery, Christchurch
1987 *Maginnity St/the big sleep* Gregory Flint Gallery, Wellington
1990 *Multiplying personality* Gregory Flint Gallery, Wellington
1992 *Return of the living dead* Gow Langsford Gallery, Wellington
1993 *Installation* Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
When art hits the headlands Cubewell House, Wellington
Band embroideries Gregory Flint Gallery, Auckland
1994 *Room to let, the deathland panels* Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
Detour ELBA Art Foundation, Nijmegen, the Netherlands
1995 *Skin problems* Teststrip, Auckland
Mephitis Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch
I forget Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
New photographs Darren Knight DKW, Melbourne
1996 *Father, son, holy ghost* Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North

You stink Teststrip window, Auckland
I'm not well Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
Mephitis Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Selected group exhibitions

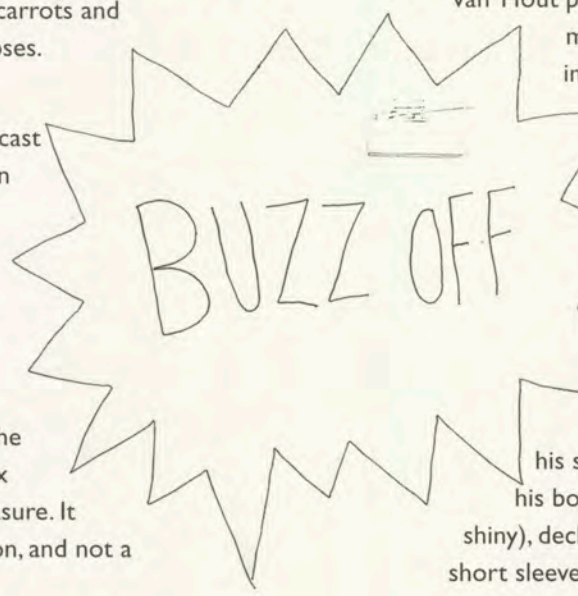
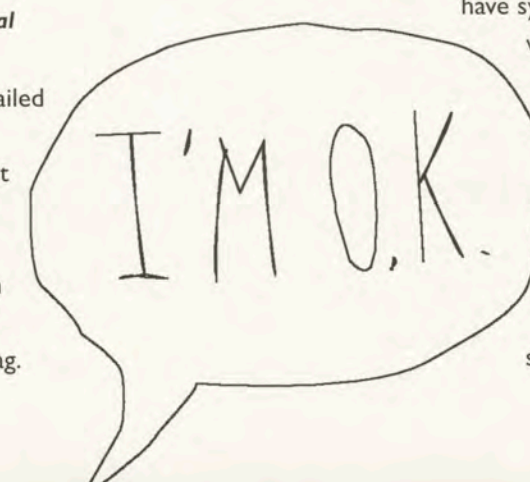
1992 *Four southern artists* Gow Langsford Gallery, Wellington
Shadow of style Wellington City Art Gallery; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth
1993 *After, after* McCahan Cubewell House, Wellington
Suffer Teststrip, Auckland; Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
Paintings from the future Teststrip, Auckland
Visa Gold Art Award Wellington Public Library
1994 *Rock'n'roll art show* Teststrip, Auckland
Sad sketches Teststrip, Auckland
Photography show Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
Darren Knight DKW, Melbourne and Sydney
Elvis in Geyslerod Rotorua Art Gallery and Museum
150 ways of loving Artspace, Auckland
1995 *Sculpture* Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
Easter show Darren Knight DKW, Melbourne
A very peculiar practice City Gallery, Wellington
Everyday pathomimesis School of Fine Arts Gallery, University of Canterbury, Christchurch
Hangover Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton
1996 *Flying Nun anniversary art exhibition* 23a Gallery, Auckland
Hangover Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch; Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Road to love Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney
Failure Linden Gallery, Melbourne
Nostalgia Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
Exactly Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne

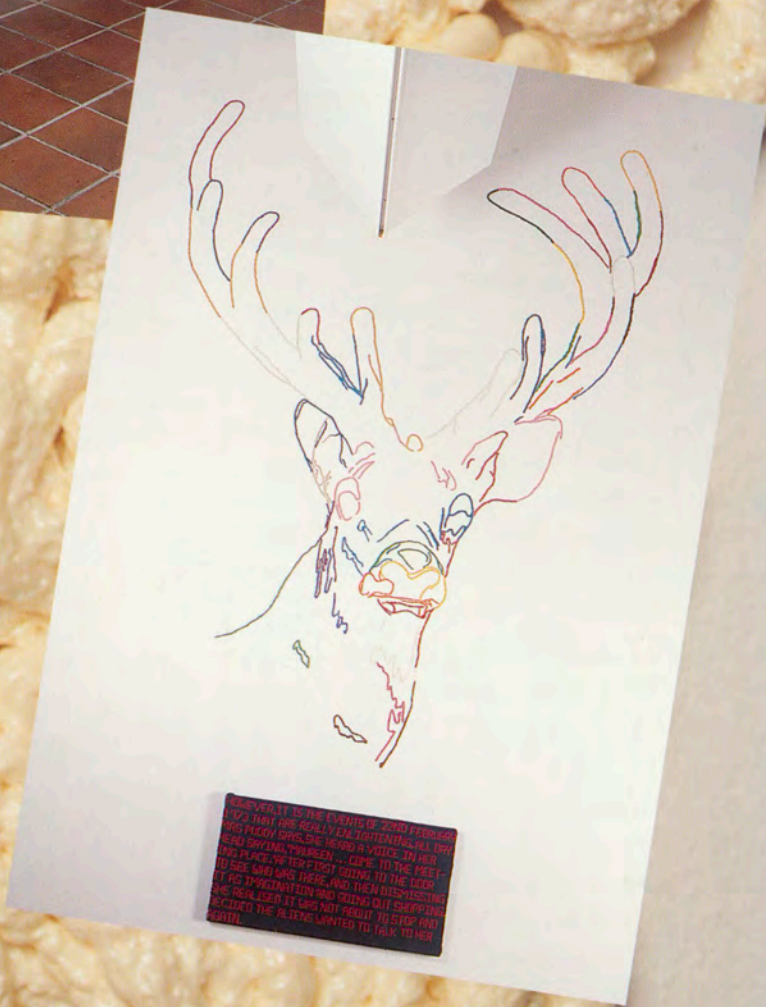
Published works

1991 *Illusions* page art, pp 22-25.
1992 *Midwest 1*, cover.
Sport 9, cover.
1993 *When art hits the headlands* Cubism, Wellington.
1995 *Mephitis* in association with Darren Knight DKW, Melbourne.

Selected bibliography

After, after McCahan Cubism, Wellington, 1993.
Exactly Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne, 1996.
Failure Linden Gallery, Melbourne, 1996.
Susan Foster "Wellington" *Art New Zealand* 44, 1987, pp 49-50.
Blair French "Model images: the recent photography of Ronnie van Hout" *Art New Zealand* 56, 1990, pp 58-59.
Good movies ed Martin Rumsby, New Zealand Students Arts Council, Wellington, 1984.
Hangover Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton, 1996.
Tessa Laird "Skin problems" *Craccum* April 1995.
Stuart McKenzie "Junk joint" *Artforum* February-March 1995, pp 39-40.
Stuart McKenzie "Stupid as a photographer" *Shadow of style: eight new artists* eds Gregory Burke and Robert Leonard, Wellington City Art Gallery, Wellington and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1992, pp 18-19.
Robin Neate "Ronnie van Hout" *Art and Text* May 1996, p 91.
Nostalgia Monash University, Melbourne, 1996.
Road to love Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, 1996.
Sculpture Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, 1995.
Jim Speers "Father, son, holy ghost: an installation by Ronnie van Hout" *Monica* June-July 1996, p 33.
"The king of comedy: the cinema, Cezanne, Nazis and sausages: Ronnie van Hout interviewed by Robin Neate" *Midwest* 6, 1994, pp 24-30.
"Values and heroes: Ronnie van Hout interviewed by Sarah Hillery" *Stamp* 28, February 1992, pp 14-15.
A very peculiar practice City Gallery, Wellington, 1995.





GOVETT IS THE HEAVEN OF 20th CENTURY
 AND THAT ARE REALLY CALIBRENTAL ALL THE
 READ BOWERS FORWEN . . . COME TO THE FREE
 AND PLACE, WE'RE FIRST GOING TO THE FREE
 TO SEE WHO WAS THERE, AND THEN INTERESTING
 IT AS REPRESENTATION AND GOING OUT SHOPPING
 AND COLLAGE IT WAS NOT FEEL TO STOP AND
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 MATH.

The exhibition and publication *I'm O.K.* resulted from the Taranaki Artist-in-Residence programme, a partnership between Taranaki Polytechnic and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand.

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