

## No Exit Part 2

Ronnie van Hout

Closely following *No Exit Part 1*<sup>1</sup> and *I've Abandoned Me* (Van Hout's nationally touring masterpiece) this exhibition further highlighted a certain public institution's<sup>2</sup> neglect for one of its native sons.

*No Exit Part 2* opened with a life-like-life-size figure, track-suited and spread-eagled in the middle of the gallery floor. A replica of Van Hout, his glazed imitation eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. A stuffed Magpie silently observes the inert Van Hout. On the wall, beneath a distorting reflective surface, play-dough lettering spells out I'VE STOPPED TRYING. Nearby a small DVD screen, set into a fake rock, depicts a similar scene only this time played out in the middle of a park. In the first instance it appears we are being asked to observe the artist abandoning his ego; in the second, abandoning his mind. The latter the result, perhaps, of a long Saturday night ending with consciousness regained in some park, somewhere, early Sunday morning. Or, are we being shown the artist after the parade has gone by, the jokes stale, his career finished, down and out, a homeless person abandoned by those who once coveted him. A kind of art world Norma Desmond or given Van Hout's alien fixation; Newton has finally fallen to earth.<sup>3</sup>

*No Exit Part 2* is despair laced with the comic. Not that either of those pursuits have ever been mutually exclusive. In fact we only have to think of - Larry David, Woody Allen, Bob Newhart or Tony Hancock's famous Bed-Sit sketch (and of course Hancock's demise) to appreciate how closely they can interweave.<sup>4</sup>

According to Van Hout a more serious underpinning for this exhibition is the 1945 play *No Exit* by, existentialist, Jean Paul-Sartre. In it three dead people gradually come to the realisation they are in their own personal visions of hell - locked in a room together for eternity.

Van Hout alluded most directly to the play in the installation consisting of casts of his own head arranged with logs to spell out, in large three dimensional letters, NO. An opening in one log houses a DVD player in which Van Hout sits on a couch giggling and bitching with two characters that seem to represent his alter-egos. Van Hout's vision of hell, it would appear, is to spend eternity with himself. Yet, other aspects of Van Hout's interpretation of Sartre tended to read more like a Samuel Beckett play. Well, Beckett crossed with Benny Hill that is.

In the DVD projection, *Backdoorman 2*, Van Hout stands outside a house knocking on the door, waiting, calling out, knocking again, repeatedly over several minutes with no answer. Eventually the disgruntled Van Hout leaves. A few seconds later Van Hout's doppelganger opens the door, steps outside, looks around expectantly, then quizzically, assumes he must be hearing things and steps back inside. At first, it's a straight Benny Hill gag but the longer we look the more it seems like a forgotten Beckett play. Is the real Van Hout on the outside or on the inside. Is he waiting for an answer or is he hearing things? Will he ever be able to answer the door to himself? Will he ever confront his own identity? Like that cul-de-sac of chess (and the title of a Beckett<sup>5</sup> play) it's an unsolvable endgame.

It's ironic then, that it's Van Hout's continuing ability to keep his art open ended that allows him to consistently renew himself. And, in turn, make his art steadily move beyond its, supposed, hybrid-pop-slacker beginnings towards mature universal themes.

### Robin Neate

1 Linden Gallery, Melbourne.

2 Nationally touring major New Zealand galleries (as well as two in Australia) *I've Abandoned Me* was not part of The Christchurch City Art Gallery's programme.

3 The sci-fi novel, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, by Walter Tevis, 1963, or the film directed by Nick Roeg, 1976.

4 For a more obvious connection between art and humour see *The Rebel*, 1960, starring Tony Hancock.

5 *Endgame: a play in one act*, 1964. For even closer similarities see Beckett's only film - *Film*, 1965. Not only does it star, silent comedian, Buster Keaton but his character, who cannot bear to be looked at, is finally confronted by his doppelganger. (Interesting too that a doppelganger is also referred to as a wraith - a person's double or apparition supposedly seen shortly before or after death).

Ronnie van Hout

Image: Rachel Brunton

