

FEATURES



Bababa International: Without Right Angles

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History tells of Bababa International, a (possibly fictitious) resistance group, who came together in 1928 in a quest to protest against the modernist ethos in the most foolhardy, courageous and elaborate ways. Rivals to the International Style in Architecture, ‘... Wherever and whenever a Gropius, Oud, van der Rohe or Corbusier was raised’ they would appear ‘traveling in a large, elaborately patterned Zeppelin with a zig-zag throttle and peanut shaped under carriage’ to contest the grandiose and communicate their shared vision of a world without right angles.¹

Recently, Bababa International mysteriously returned from the shadows of Modernism, finding their way back through all the rubble and detritus of its heroic failures. Since 2008, the Sydney based collective formed by Tom Melick, Ivan Ruhle, Stephen Russell, Giles Thackway and (the newest member from the United States) Uncle Eric Harrod, have been creating a series of projects

that are actively engaging audiences through participatory artworks and ingenious suggestions which still hold true to that old and splendid dream of their namesake.

Bababa International’s recent appearances have been characterised by their considerate and generous nature, where the viewer is an active individual who participates in a playful rhetoric that reveals as much as it withholds, precariously balancing naivety and intent, beneficence and critique. In their world, the habitual is brought into question by creating out of the ordinary experiences where conventions are disturbed. Through the expansive and fantastical use of familiar spaces and objects they invite us to engage in a range of activities—from the most essential ones like eating and bathing to more complex acts of exchange and consumption—to offer a momentary release from the normalised amnesia which is an inevitable consequence

Above: Bababa International, *Possible Curries*, 2009, installation view, Kudos Gallery, Sydney. Photo: [Photographer](#).

of the neoliberal global capitalism we live in. Their work often humorously defies social norms by presenting alternative systems for our consideration; ‘... their activity is fantastic and irrational, following no discernible pattern, moving towards no visible goal’.²

An example of the collective’s ingenious acts of generosity is *Possible Curries* (2008), an early work in which passers-by were invited to come into the gallery to stumble on what appeared to be haphazard installation/sculptural elements spread throughout the exhibition space. A plywood bike ramp was installed in the middle of the gallery, separating the space in two halves. To the left, a few shelves with cooking ingredients and a clumsy, hand-made, wooden shopping trolley were on display; to the right, a large map of Sydney with pinpointed locations hung next to a paper scroll with handwritten names and addresses. One couldn’t help but join a queue, which had formed inside the gallery, hoping that somehow the system would become apparent.

Participants followed the line, which led to a kitchen hidden underneath the gallery’s floorboards. Here, members from the collective were making curry and taking down the visitors contact details to deliver their meal to any chosen location within Sydney at any preferred delivery time. The rest of the crew were transcribing visitors’ details into a scroll of paper and marking order destinations onto the large map of Sydney in preparation for the bike delivery. All they were asking in exchange was the visitors’ curiosity. There is a rehabilitation of art implicit in the aestheticisation of a ‘free’ service which inflects this work toward social good, just as it underscores the usefulness of art. In addition, the invitation for the exhibition conveyed an antagonistic stance towards artistic conventions, it read: ‘*Possible Curries*, delivering you from Art’s continual disappointment’. And indeed, there was no prescriptive or elusive statement here left to be misunderstood in disappointment; instead Bababa International provided a tangible, edible benefit. In that sense, the work is a suggestion that we can no longer be disappointed by art if it fulfills our most essential need: hunger. It’s crucial, however, to remember that the altruism implicit in their work has its limits. The piece suggests a playful but provocative use of generosity. While most people were generally measured in their requests, others purposely chose difficult locations and absurd delivery times because they could. Nonetheless, Bababa International delivered.

Possible Curries is not Bababa International’s only food-related project. Taking into consideration the collective’s view that ‘food is the ultimate necessity and therefore the ultimate human invention’,³ the act of cooking is presented both as a creative and cultural act. Recently, the collective has been in communication with the cereal company Kellogg’s in a vivacious attempt to attract sponsorship for a new workshop which will focus on ‘investigating and documenting a prolonged engagement with Rice Bubbles’.⁴ The letter sent to the international corporation specifies that the methods and exercises implemented in the workshop will be in accordance with a teaching syllabus designed by artist and pedagogue Aleksandr Rodchenko and will enable participants to think critically about food. The generic tone of the template response letter from Kellogg’s contrasts starkly with the collective’s earnest and personal proposal, and exposes the reality of an individual lost in a system. Other food-related works spring to mind—Gordon Matta-Clark’s restaurant Food in 70’s SoHo or Tiravanija’s many cooking pieces—but in those works, the author is dissolved into the group and the enunciation is collective. In Bababa International’s practice, the author remains very much at the centre of the work’s transaction with its individual benefactor and collaborator.

Other works by Bababa International intersect with more complex systems of exchange. In September of 2010, the collective was part of *Friends*, an exhibition in Melbourne organized by Tom Polo, Mary McDougall and Charlie Sofo in which the premise was the camaraderie held amongst its participants. The exhibition provided them with another perfect opportunity to put munificence to the test while considering artistic practice in relation to exchange. Bababa International devised a two-part work, *Investing and Debt* (2010). For the first part of the work, *Investing*, they requested a loan from the bank to provide a considerable artist fee to every participant in the exhibition. The gift provoked a range of responses among the artists; while some politely thanked them in embarrassment, others were overwhelmed, responding in a frantic attempt to reciprocate. One of the artists, Kate Mitchell, promised to climb a mountain in gratitude. Artist Mathew Hopkins promised to draw a one-cent coin every day until he matched the value of the gift received, which will take him approximately 27 years. Garry Trinh’s response was to never cash the cheque. This work brings into question the repercussions and political implications that arise through a generous act; the motivations inherent in the act of giving and the burden of reciprocation.⁵

For second part of the work, *Debt*, Bababa International will become part of a service economy, charging money for different services to gradually pay the loan back. One of the services offered by the collective is ‘rigorously researched conceptual catering’, available for those who are interested in ‘eating the new’.⁶ Another moneymaking service involves members Stephen and Ivan developing websites and iPhone designs upon request. *Investing and Debt* unites their working philosophy, methods, and social legitimacy with those of other workers outside of the parameters of art—strapping them into the wider engines of the economy and the technologies that drive it. While the setting may still be ironic, the execution of such work frames a sincere transaction, with the priority of rendering an actual service in an attempt to rescue the act of exchange from anonymity, standardization, and indifference. The establishment of an ethical transactional gesture remains at the core of this work, which also recognizes that reciprocity between individuals should be at the heart of honest exchange.⁷

Seen in this light, Bababa International deploys its mimetic relationship to the sites and actions it replicates not to demolish with irony but to rediscover and recuperate the potential of an irrational yet unique experience. A good example of this is *The Soothsayer* (2010), a project currently in development for Locksmith Project Space in which they will transform the gallery into a large vending machine. While this machine will attempt to mimic the vehement focus and skill for presentation of the vending industry, their imperative will not be commercial. Instead their vending machine will be stocked with useful premonitions; objects, articles, devices and items that are of the present, but that might be able to tell us something about what the future will be like.⁸

Some of their works seem to directly use the service model to focus emphatically on ideological critique. Bababa International’s *Imbroglia City (unit one) 2010*, a unit housing a hexagonal tub for six bathers, a wash-station, change-rooms and a congregating deck—is an example of this approach. The unit is equipped with a fictitious computational data collection and assessment mechanism. ‘Driven by inputs drawn from the unit’s geographical location, this facility sensitively evaluates the reality that surrounds it, using the data in order to select the type of material





Above and facing page: Bababa International, *Imbroglia City (Unit 1)*, 2010, movable bathing system featuring a hexagonal tub, wash-station, two change rooms, elevated deck and congregation area. Installation view, Melbourne Central Shopping Mall rooftop, Next Wave Festival. Photos: Jorge de Araujo (above), Paul Davis (facing page).



suitable for the actual bath.⁹ Visitors are then invited to plunge into a tub full of mud described by the artists as a thickened, silky curd which is a symbolic culmination of the clean tiled floors, escalators, air-conditioning, attractively pre-processed food and windows dressed in good taste of the shopping mall where it was installed. The site responsive piece, created on the third level rooftop of Melbourne Central Shopping Mall for the 2010 Next Wave Festival, provided a humorous alternative to commodity culture, and enabled 'persons to survive this confusing mess by actively bathing in it'¹⁰. The unit invites us to consider the uniformity of standardised experience in our culture; its bureaucracy, its commercially charged insincerity, and its frequent indifference.

Smooth Interpersonal Relationships (2009) is an earlier work by the collective which was also responsive to a particular social situation of a site. The work was part of the exhibition *Horn Of Plenty: Excess and Reversibility* at Para/Site Artspace in Hong Kong. During their residency, Bababa International learnt how to manicure and pedicure in order to create a 'temple dedicated to the maintenance and serious beautification of humanities most vital appendages (the hands and feet)'.¹¹ In this case, the service was aimed especially at migrant communities employed as domestic workers living in Hong Kong, who were invited to the

space by the collective. Although unfortunately, the attendance of this community wasn't in the numbers they expected, their performative interplay sought to challenge an established commercial relationship of inequality by inverting it; in their work, the seller of goods (the supplicant of a transaction) became the buyer (the master of a transaction). *Smooth Interpersonal Relationships (2009)* brings our attention towards generosity, social conventions and consumerism, key concerns which reoccur in the collective's practice.

A similar considerate and altruistic intent can be seen in much service/relational aesthetics work, which as a form of art can be traced back to the social activism of the 60s. Not far from Joseph Beuys' Social Sculpture where 'every human being is an artist'¹², the artifacts built by the Bababa International consciously engage in DIY processes to emphasise that anyone who puts their mind to it could do as they do. For a 2009 residency at Firstdraft gallery, the collective set up a laboratory in their studio in which they would teach themselves how to produce soap. A map was then transcribed into the soap bars that were given away to visitors to indicate the location of a nearby clandestine rooftop showering unit and water tower built out of wood, pipes, and a converted wine barrel. Once again, the option provided was an unlikely alternative to art, to the act of bathing and to the same languid



stupor of experience in a capitalist order that revolutionaries like Guy Debord from the Situationist International so avidly opposed. Many of the attitudes, which Bababa International articulates through their work, are evocative of the ideals of visionaries who critiqued the power of the State and of capital by emphasizing the power of the collective. Yet the work of Bababa International seems to fluctuate between these imperatives, offering a different way to define artistic work in relation to social praxis without intending to educate and enlighten with critical discourse. The collective urges us not to live in another man's utopia¹³ creating work that moves across cultural borders, class borders, work borders and aesthetic borders. Bababa International does not present us with an enlightened option to move forward but rather with the humble possibility that if we return to ask ourselves the most basic questions, the towering structures, the systems of cities, and the right angles will come undone.

'Ah, the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!'¹⁴

1. See www.bababainternational.com
2. *ibid*
3. Bababa International in a letter to Kellogg's, 19 September 2010
4. *ibid*
5. Tom Melick, conversation with author 26 September 2010
6. Bababa International poster for *Conceptual Catering* 2010
7. Steven Henry Madoff, 'Service Aesthetics: personal transactions in art' *Artforum*, September (2008)
8. Stephen Russell, email message to author 03 October 2010
9. www.bababainternational.com
10. *ibid*
11. See www.bababainternational.com
12. Sol Lewitt 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', *Artforum*, June 1967
13. Tom Melick, conversation with author 26 September 2010
14. Samuel Beckett quoted by Tom Melick, conversation with author 26 September 2010

Above: Bababa International, *Soap City*, 2009, showering unit and water tower made with a converted wine barrel, installation view, clandestine rooftop, Sydney. Photo: [Photographer](#).

Facing page: Bababa International, *Smooth Interpersonal Relationships*, 2009, functional nail salon and pedicure facilities, installation and performance, Para/Site Artspace, Hong Kong. Photo: [Photographer](#).