

Architectures of Improvement

Maeve Connolly

‘The art of wrestling is the art of positioning. If you want to move somebody back, you’ve got to take them above the joint,’ explains Adrian Street, demonstrating his knowledge of anatomy as he manipulates his own body and that of his sparring partner. This is the most self-consciously educational moment in Jeremy Deller’s *So Many Ways to Hurt You (The Life and Times of Adrian Street)*, a film that traces Street’s journey from unwilling coal miner to bodybuilder, glam-rock-inspired professional wrestler and costume designer. Street’s status as self-made man is integral to Deller’s project, which is informed by the legacy of artist, critic and social prophet John Ruskin. The film was originally commissioned for the São Paulo Bienal by Grizedale Arts, where it was exhibited with a recreation of a 19th-century Mechanics’ Institute, devised for the education of working-class men.¹

Although Adrian Street exemplifies the Ruskinian ideals of self-improvement, Deller presents him not as a follower but rather as a prophet in his own right, confidently leading the way toward new modes of living and working. Street’s story is told through his own collection of pin-up shots, news clippings and home movies. He is the film’s only interviewee and narrator, and he is also framed as primary audience for his own performance, particularly in the closing section, where he observes images of his physique projected onto the walls of his gym. *So Many Ways to Hurt You* clearly revisits several issues addressed in *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), such as the decline of the manufacturing economy, the representation of mining culture and the relationship between performance and agency. In this earlier work, Deller staged a re-enactment of a famous confrontation between police and striking miners, countering its misrepresentation in news media during the 1980s. *So Many Ways to Hurt You* is similarly concerned with history, but in this instance Deller uses biography to explore continuities between two apparently distinct cultures and architectures of (self-)improvement: the 19th-century Mechanics’ Institute and mid-20th-century bodybuilding.

1 See John Byrne, ‘Grizedale Arts: Use Value and the Little Society’, *Afterall* 30 (Summer 2012), 100–107.

Kevin Atherton has also produced video works that allude to the representation of working-class culture, most obviously *Television Interview* (1984), in which he ‘interviews’ a video of the TV soap *Coronation Street*. Unlike Deller, however, Atherton generally figures as the central performer in his own work, as evidenced by *In Two Minds* (1978–2014). When first presented in the gallery at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, this work featured Atherton as a live performer interacting with a recording of himself, shot earlier that day in the same venue, speaking directly to camera and posing questions about the context and form of his work. The piece was initially staged so as to emphasise opposition or confrontation; Atherton notes that there were ‘two banks of raked seating but they were facing each other so that the audience was split into two, looking at one another’.²

Other early presentations of *In Two Minds* took place within the more explicitly instructive setting of the art school, but Atherton soon devised an installation version for exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London, involving a dialogue between two pre-recorded (and manually synchronised) videos. Over the following decades, however, live performance returned as a component of the work, and, in 2006, Atherton realised a ‘Past Version’ involving a dialogue with the preserved image of himself as young man. There are many points of connection between this work and Deller’s portrait of Adrian Street, not least the fact that both involve carefully choreographed encounters between male performers and images of their younger selves. But unlike the star of *So Many Ways to Hurt You*, Atherton has never been interested in ‘building’ a body or persona. Instead, in works such as *In Two Minds*, he uses the auto-interview to contest and debate his position and practice.

If Deller and Atherton borrow from televisual forms such as the biography and the interview, then Jesse Jones’s *The Other North* (2012) is at least partly indebted to the conventions of the talk show. Jointly commissioned for exhibition at the CCA Derry~Londonderry and Artsonje Center in Seoul, South Korea, this particular ‘talk show’ takes the form of a two-channel installation. The actors, drawn from Korean television, perform a script based upon Jones’s research into a film called *The Steel Shutter* (1974), which documents a ‘conflict resolution therapy session’, hosted by US psychologist Carl Rogers with invited participants from various political and socio-economic backgrounds in Northern Ireland. Rather than replicating the audio of *The Steel Shutter* verbatim, Jones instead uses intertitles (e.g. ‘despair’, ‘the steel shutter’ and ‘the vicious circle’)

² Kevin Atherton, *Kevin Atherton: Auto-Interview*, ed. Paul McAree (Dublin: Flood, 2012), 50.

derived from the participants' contributions to structure her work. The actors also pronounce the English-language place names with deliberate precision, underscoring the status of the performed text as translation. Through these strategies, Jones engages with language as a primary form and structure, rather than simply as medium of expression. Importantly, *The Other North* also emphasises the social and institutional architecture of the therapeutic circle, through camerawork that traces a ceaseless clockwise motion, its relentless momentum overshadowing any notion of progression through disclosure, dialogue or catharsis.

It's worth noting that *So Many Ways to Hurt You*, *In Two Minds* and *The Other North* all involve responses to archival material shot in the 1970s. Yet these three works seem much more specifically connected by a fascination with architectures of improvement and instruction, which predate and persist beyond the 1970s. These architectures can take an institutional form (as evidenced by the Mechanics' Institute) or the conventions of art-school critique, but they can also operate much more informally, through subcultures of bodybuilding or self-help. In diverse ways, Deller, Atherton and Jones all bring these strategies and structures to light, while at the same time exploring how their own practices may operate in relation to the pervasive and mutable logic of improvement.