

FOREWORD

EMMA HART AND DEAN KENNING

Poor Things has come out of conversations we've had as friends over the years about art and social class. As two artists from working class backgrounds we've come to recognise that, although our sculptures look quite different, often the decisions that manifest in them around subject matter, materials and methods harbour questions about social class. For example, we both often relinquish aesthetic control, as we prioritise what the work does rather than how it looks. We have discovered that we both interpret this focus on doing as stemming from an anxiety about the nature of aesthetic composition, both associating it with middle class traits of privilege, control, the luxury of time on your hands and tasteful decor. We want to think of our own sculptures not as a careful arrangement of colours, textures and forms, but as machines or present tense things that are full of life – things which can speak to us about our world and leave a dent in someone else's, generating in the mind of the viewer something more than aesthetic appreciation. We are hoping for reactions like joy, pity, laughter or embarrassment which are importantly not dependent on the audience having a great knowledge of art. There are other strategies within our work that we think could be triggers for a discussion around class. These include manual production, liveness, entertainment, the use of everyday objects

and materials, dumb humour, and a popular visual graphic vocabulary of figures and gestures. We are not saying that these are fixed markers of identity, or labels of exclusively 'working class' ways of working, but that the decisions we make have the potential to ignite discussions about class.

Further to that, we believe that sculpture itself in its *thingness* – the way it occupies the same ground as the viewer and often makes use of ordinary stuff – and its relation both to manual construction and common forms of making and craft, offers a powerful means by which to question how class impacts on and is expressed through artistic practice. This led us to wonder: how do other artists' sculptures speak to and broaden class experiences and understandings? Also, how do class factors intersect with questions of race, gender, disability and sexuality which might be manifested in artists' works?

In order to explore these matters, we have brought together what we consider to be some of the best 'poor things' by contemporary UK-based artists that we have come across. We have also had a conversation with each of the artists about their work in *Poor Things* so we could fire up the opportunity to talk directly about sculpture through the lens of class, and

class through the lens of sculpture. By pursuing dialogues about class through a focus on the work, we hoped to provoke reflection and new thoughts, combining both the subjective and the objective realities of class, avoiding both an overly individualised approach which begins with personal biography, and an overly sociological approach which begins with classification and statistics. These conversations, which are reproduced in this book, form a central plank of *Poor Things*, as they reveal the multiplicity of class experiences and concerns, whilst identifying points of commonality.

Class is a social relation of power defined by inequality and exploitation. Following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we understand class not only in terms of economic capital but social and cultural capital: artists from lower-class backgrounds may be 'poor' not only in terms of money, but also time, space, know-how, confidence, availability and contacts. Whilst many of us first connect with fine art as the opening up of an exciting, unfamiliar world and the imaginative, social and critical possibilities it holds, the promise of rewarding, non-alienated work often collides with the harsh reality of low or no pay, little support, a harshly competitive environment, and lack of access to the channels of distribution and prestige. Negative affects such as shame, disappointment, exhaustion and feeling split are inevitably articulated in the art we produce, whether explicitly or implicitly. At the same time, class speaks positively to values, experiences, traditions, pleasures, attitudes and identities which can crash with a richness and appeal into the often staid and exclusionary realms of 'high art' in shapes which are, in equal measure, painful, poignant, joyous, strange and true.

And so, it is in a spirit of solidarity and good times that we have put these sculptures together and engaged in conversations with the artists to consider what impact a working or lower-middle-class background has had on what we do, and on why and how we do it; and to discover how the sculptures speak, in various ways, to class experiences and to the social forces that have shaped us. We will not rehearse here the rich multiplicity of views and experiences articulated in the conversations with the artists contained in this book. Instead, we will end this foreword by highlighting a few issues which came up, and which seem important to us.

- Class itself is complicated, multifaceted and mutable. There are levels of disadvantage and different modes of identification. People's experiences differ and circumstances change. However, we cannot escape where we come from – and why should we?

- It can take years for artists from lower socio-economic backgrounds to gain the confidence to make work about things which are important to them, rather than about things which they have been made to feel are appropriate subjects for art.
- Everyone should have the right to access art and the resources to make art but, as we know, access and resources are unevenly distributed. The wrong response to this is a middle-class saviourism which desires engagement with a working-class audience to 'introduce' them to middle-class culture, rather than enabling working-class people to be artists. This attitude can be a disguised form of class hatred directed against supposedly inferior forms of culture and pleasure.
- If many of the sculptures in this exhibition are funny, it is because artists from lower socio-economic backgrounds recognise that art is a form of entertainment whilst also being aware that making art is a vaguely ridiculous way to spend your time – so we can at least make an effort to be entertaining. Humour and entertainment offer an audience a way into complexity.
- It is always the artist from a lower socio-economic background who is expected to transform, to adapt themselves to the ways of speaking, behaving and making art which are acceptable to the professional art world – at least if one wants to have any chance of visibility or a 'career'. This one-way traffic is a clear form of symbolic violence.
- Meritocracy is a lie perpetuated by those who want to deny their own inherited advantage.
- Putting on a group exhibition as a way to have a good time is a form of solidarity and class resistance.