Biddy Livesey
The Art of Persuasion – Banner works by Amy Howden-Chapman

According to American psychologist Drew Westen, we make political decisions according to emotion, not according to fact. 'Behind every reasoned decision is a reason for deciding,' Westen writes in his 2007 book *The Political Brain*. 'We do not pay attention to arguments unless they engender our interest, enthusiasm, fear, anger or contempt … We do not find policies worth debating if they don't touch on the emotional implications for ourselves, our families or things we hold dear.' Westen highlights the failure of activists and politicians to recognise the limited power of arguing reasonably about topics such as climate change or war. In place of reason, he advocates for the use of emotive statements to really connect with people, and persuade them to change.

For her banner series (2009–11), Amy Howden-Chapman created works that played with persuasion. Her works did not reference the persuasive media of commercial slogans or advertising sometimes appropriated by contemporary art. Instead, they depicted the persuasion tactics of home-made, "grassroots" organisations, cataloguing and analysing the way groups use symbols and rhetoric in appealing to people to change, to act, or to protest. Through a series of performances and videos using colourful fabric banners, the artist examined different tactics of people and organisations wanting to influence others' political decision making. The banner works asked: what does power look like, how do we recognise it, and how do we name it?

Howden-Chapman understands the role of emotion in politics. In a publication produced alongside her exhibition 'I used to think the only lonely place was on the moon', she remembers a significant experience as a child in London in the 1980s: being dressed as a spider and marching in an Earth Day rally. She describes the power of combining an issue that people truly believe in, and the joyful, if slightly threatening, atmosphere of a parade. In the 2010 work *I UNDERSTAND THERE IS GREAT PASSION AND DISCONTENT AMONGST THOSE OF YOU WHO HAVE GATHERED HERE TODAY*, the artist explored the motivations and dynamics of community organisations. Working with a contemporary dancer and a prepared text, she reported the different viewpoints and emotional appeals of the various groups attending a community meeting. Groups

present included the Farming, Food, Future Coalition, the Mothers for Sustainable Municipal Action, and The River Runs Through Us All, Awareness and Advocacy Association. Each group had their own agenda and perspectives, creating an increasingly heated meeting:

> … And then The 6th Municipality Small Business Association started chanting: 'We do not want to be part of an uprooting hypothesis because we do not want to be uprooted.' 'We do not want to be part of an uprooting hypothesis because we do not want to be uprooted.' … this led to a lengthy discussion of minority viewpoints and thresholds for dissent, which also included many comments such as: 'No … no you listen,' and 'Wait I haven't finished, I didn't speak over you, please give me the same respect.'

The artist's narrative took place within a stage set for conflict. Photographs of the event show banners made from strips of fabric sewn together to make un-backed, striped, fabric works displayed around the side wall of the large meeting hall where the performance was held. As the narrative progresses, the viewer comes to understand that like flags at a rally, or the colours of a sports team, political party or gang, each banner represents a different group. Through repeated statements made by the artist which link an arbitrary colour or shape to an emotion or argument, the viewer begins to recognise that the banners are standing in for the bodily presence of the reported meeting attendees, and are taking on their perspectives.

Howden-Chapman's decision to create visual, abstract representations of political viewpoints reflects her interest in how information is presented, and interpreted. In a publication produced for the 2011 exhibition 'First the Announcements', Howden-Chapman quotes from John D'Agata's book *About A Mountain* (2010), an exploration of the United States federal government's plan to store nuclear waste in Yucca Mountain, about 150 kilometres outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. In the book, D'Agata lists the names of proposed warning systems which could be created to warn humans for the next ten thousand years about the buried nuclear hazard. He speculates:

> … we could see 'Forbidding Blocks'. Or we may see 'Rubble Landscape'. We may see 'Irregular Grid', 'Spikes in a Field', 'Landscape of Thorns', 'Tall Leaning Stones' … But what we are likely to see instead, according to recent reports from the

Department of Energy, is a small series of twenty-foot-high monuments at the site. They'll be carved in the shape of pyramids and made from local granite. On their surfaces will be inscriptions in English about the site, plus the date the waste was buried, the date it will be safe, and a small engraved image in the apex of each stone that reproduces the anguished face from Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

D'Agata's work speculates on how to induce fear in a far-off future population. Howden-Chapman's symbols are also aimed at eliciting emotion through a potentially universal language, by quickly adapting an audience to respond to a chosen set of random symbols.

Howden-Chapman makes her varied banner works simultaneously, laboriously ripping bright, colourful quilting cottons into long strips and then sewing them back together in sustained sewing machine bursts. When composing the banner, she avoids any kind of representative or 'tangrammatic' reading. The collections of triangles are not boats, nor rice-harvesters wearing hats, nor houses. Historically, banners have been used to signify a person, or group, such as a monarch or army. Easily portable and comparatively light, banners or flags are carried in processions or hung in a public place. Like all flags, a banner combines specific colours and patterns designed to trigger emotion – fear, loyalty, pride – before and during events. Over time, citizens display a kind of mass cultural and emotional response to these visual cues, visible in the public outcry – and potential prosecution in many countries, including New Zealand – in response to destroying or burning national flags. Flags are seen as statements, in more ways than one. In 1989 the Supreme Court of the United States reversed a conviction for burning the American flag during the 1984 Republican National Convention in Texas, after the Court concluded that the flag burning was a kind of "free speech".

In his seminal work, *Extraordinary delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, first published in 1841, Charles Mackay describes a number of follies, schemes, projects and fantasies that have captured public imagination through history. Just one trick in a catalogue of persuasive tactics which '… show how easily the masses are led astray, and how imitative and gregarious men are,' Mackay details the pursuit of geomancy – 'the art of foretelling the future by means of lines and circles, and other mathematical figures drawn on the earth.' Visiting New Zealand in 2011, Amy Howden-Chapman presented *Chasing Losses* (2010–11), in which she exhibited a series of banners and acted as

part-geomancer, part-investment analyst. The banners were unveiled one by one, and with each work presented, the artist delivered a sentence. Like the mutterings of an oracle, the sentences are cryptic. It's ambiguous whether she was offering a title – 'Investment in Blue' – or an introduction, or a comment on the banner. Some banners were presented as 'losses', others as 'gains'. As the performance progressed, the titles became longer and longer, and began to include the colours of the stripes as caveats or descriptors. It became clear that the titles and works were not discrete, but that the sequence in which the works and their titles were revealed took the form of narrative. Howden-Chapman 'read' the colours off the banners, interpreting for the audience the language of the different lines and colours. Transmission of the message became more animated as the artist was possessed with the energy of the transactions, and she began to perform actions as well as words. Towards the end of the performance, the losses started to outweigh the gains, and the words were replaced by actions alone.

Chasing Losses is documented in a publication *Advice on Chasing Losses* which steps through the seven performances in London, Glasgow, Rotterdam, Los Angeles, Melbourne, Auckland and Wellington. Howden-Chapman has described the work as a kind of 'amateur experiment – a model placed in different places. Reactions noted.' The term 'chasing losses' originates in a gambling phenomenon where, after losing, a gambler increases the stake of their bet in an effort to recoup the loss made previously. Reflecting on the speculative buying and selling of vulnerable tulip bulbs – referred to as 'tulipomania' – which afflicted the Netherlands from 1634 to 1636, Mackay observes: 'Many persons grow insensibly attached to that which gives them a great deal of trouble, as a mother often loves her sick and ever-ailing child better than her healthy ones.' The urge to chase your losses is driven by a sadistic joy as well as misplaced optimism. Reactions documented by the artist in Glasglow included: 'It reminded me of having my heart broken,' and 'I loved it, it made me so sad.'

Michael Lewis, journalist, ex-bonds broker, and chronicler of Wall Street in the 1980s, makes an important point when he states that 'Textbooks in economics, which explain the economic purpose of money (a unit of account, a store of value, and a means of exchange), usually neglect to mention the chief role of money in America: a source of entertainment.' *Advice on Chasing Losses* advises: 'Embrace: The establishing shot, the gameshow aesthetic.' Stock market speculation, property investment and gambling are all pursuits undertaken by

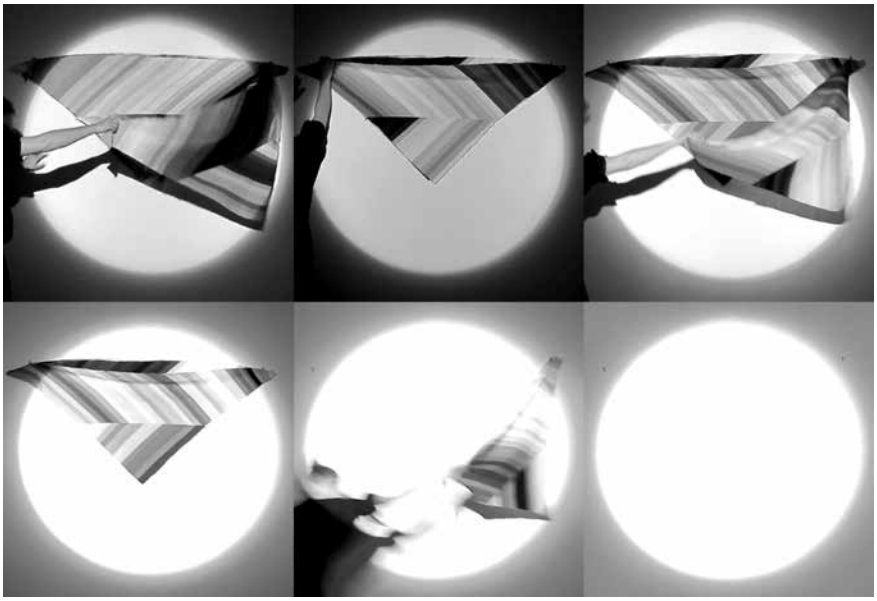
people who profess to either understand the mathematics, to have a unique insight into the market, to "feel lucky", or all three. When she made the banner works, Howden-Chapman was living in a bungalow in Los Angeles owned by a man who had borrowed against the house to buy a second as an investment property. During the 2008-9 recession, he had been unable to meet his mortgage payments and both houses were repossessed and sold. People feel more certain about their bets after they've made them, which illustrates the role that emotion – especially hope – plays in financial decisions. This is despite the fact that speculative success is unrelated to emotion and is considered by some people to be, in fact, random. In his 1973 book *A Random Walk Down Wall Street*, economist Burton Malkiel insists that success in the stock market is '… no different from success in coin-tossing contests in which those who toss heads are declared winners.'

> The contest begins, and 1,000 contestants flip coins. Just as would be expected by chance, 500 of them flip heads, and these winners are allowed to advance to the second stage of the contest and flip again. As might be expected, 250 flip heads. Operating under the laws of chance, there will be 125 winners in the third round … and eight on the seventh. By this time crowds start to gather to witness the surprising ability of these expert coin-tossers. The winners are celebrated as geniuses in the art of coin tossing – their biographies are written and people urgently seek their advice. After all, there were 1,000 contestants, and only eight could consistently flip heads.

The abstract nature of Howden-Chapman's banners remove the concept of speculation from any particular scale or context, reminding the viewer that the same emotive speculation experienced by her ex-landlord is visible in the actions of countries within the Eurozone over the last ten years, and in the battle in the United States Senate to borrow or not borrow more money to pay off the country's debt. Winning or losing is not a science. What counts is the ability of the person who serves to gain or lose by a decision, to influence decisionmakers in the government and wider society.

In a more recent work, *On Names and Naming* (2011), part of a larger series titled 'First the Announcements', Howden-Chapman extended her interest in emotion, information and abstraction towards abstraction and authority. *On Names and Naming* comprised a video and accompanying soundtrack. Howden-Chapman has described it as an on-going project

Raised by Wolves (Amy Howden-Chapman and Biddy Livesey) perform *Chasing Losses* at Half Juni, Sils Project Space, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2010



Performance stills, Amy Howden-Chapman performing *Chasing Losses* at Gambia Castle, Auckland, 2010

to produce and allocate crests for each name that occurs in political journalist Jane Mayer's article 'Covert Operations – The billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama,' which appeared in an August 2010 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine. The article focused on Charles and David Koch, so-called 'kingpins of climate science denial,' detailing their rarely-recognised 'under the radar' influence throughout the United States' civil and political society. An excerpt as example – '[F]rom 2005 to 2008, the Kochs vastly outdid [United States oil company] ExxonMobil in giving money to organizations fighting legislation related to climate change, underwriting a huge network of foundations, think tanks, and political front groups.' Howden-Chapman notes that as it is catalogued on *The New Yorker* website, '… the article's keywords are listed as: Charles Koch; David Koch; Koch Industries; Libertarians; Tea Party Movement; Rich People; Environment.' The *On Names and Naming* video displays a ritual presentation of coloured banners similar to *Chasing Losses*. The banners appeared one after another on the screen. But the accompanying text, and its delivery, was quite different to the interpretative and descriptive titles from *Chasing Losses*. In this work, each banner is a short-hand – a modern-day heraldic shield or flash logo – for a powerful American citizen or organisation.

Dale Carnegie – guru of inter-personal skills and author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) – urges aspiring business leaders to '[r]emember that a man's name is to him the sweetest and most important sound in any language.' In *On Names and Naming*, the names of oil billionaires (who prefer to keep out of the public eye) are mentioned again, and again. The article is an exposé and Howden-Chapman's work methodically visualises the exposure, repeating the names as the associated 'crest' is shown. The number of times each name is repeated reflects the frequency of its use in Mayer's article. Howden-Chapman's father reads the names which accompany the video. A personal and public voice of authority, he leaves no question about the names attached to the banners. They are spelled out in the primary-coloured stripes as unquestionably as their names are spelled out by the letters of the alphabet. The banners create a lasting visual symbol for the 'invisible' Kochs. Whether the work is a brain-washing exercise, or a desperate attempt to remember names for a visual learner, the viewer does not forget the names of Charles and David Koch.

Reflecting on Gabriel García Márquez's epic intrigue of politics and emotion, Argentinian author Alberto Manguel writes:

> For me, words on a page give the world coherence. When the inhabitants of Macondo were afflicted with an amnesia-like sickness which came to them one day during their hundred years of solitude, they realised that their knowledge of the world was quickly disappearing and that they might forget what a cow was, what a tree was, what a house was. The antidote, they discovered, lay in words. To remember what their world meant to them, they wrote out labels and hung them from beasts and objects: 'This is a tree,' 'This is a house,' 'This is a cow, and from it you get milk, which mixed with coffee gives you cafe con leche.' Words tell us what we, as a society, believe the world to be.

In these three works, the artist offers a kind of bet – that reality is how she depicts it. It's the kind of bet offered by politicians, but in line with Drew Westen's argument, emotional connection matters more than rational conviction. If a viewer follows the logic of the work, they will develop a visual image for something that has not been visualised before – a community group, a cultural trajectory, a political figure. In her banner works, Howden-Chapman tests our receptivity to persuasion. Can we accept the images she gives us as symbols around which we can base broader discussions? Given these simple props, can we better see the mothers railing against environmental injustice? Like the believers and converts of Mackay's 'moral epidemics', can we bring ourselves to believe in an abstracted financial crisis, depicted by banners, and better understand the battle of red versus blue? Can we train ourselves to respond to the banners of America's most famous as they flash up on the screen, and recognise them for who they are and the power they possess? Amy Howden-Chapman's banner works explore the emotional potential of abstract colours, shapes and words. Her development of specific grammars and systems of meaning through colour and shape leaves the viewer aware again of the many signals in our environment. Her banner works do not transmit a political message but look at how political messages are given and received. These works flick through various components of media – the appeal to community, the use of the symbol, the voice of authority – and build them up into a series which illustrates and criticises the art of persuasion.

1 Drew Westen, *The Political Brain*, Public Affairs, New York, 2007, p. 16
2 Amy Howden-Chapman, *I used to think the only lonely place was on the moon*, Newcall Gallery, Auckland, 2009
3 John D'Agata, *About a Mountain*, Norton, New York, 2010, p. 178-9
4 United States Supreme Court, *Texas v. Johnson*, 1989, 491 U.S. 397
5 Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, Random House, New York, 1980, p. 3
6 Ibid. p. 94
7 Amy Howden-Chapman, *Advice on Chasing Losses*, 2011
8 Michael Lewis, *The Money Culture*. Norton, New York, 1991, p. 154
9 Burton Malkiel, *A Random Walk down Wall Street*. Norton, New York, 1999, p. 185
10 Jane Mayer, 'Covert operations – The Billionaire Brothers who are waging a war against Obama' in *The New Yorker*, 30 August 2010, accessed online http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer?currentPage=all
11 Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1936
12 Albert Manguel, *Into the Looking Glass Wood*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1998, p. 3