

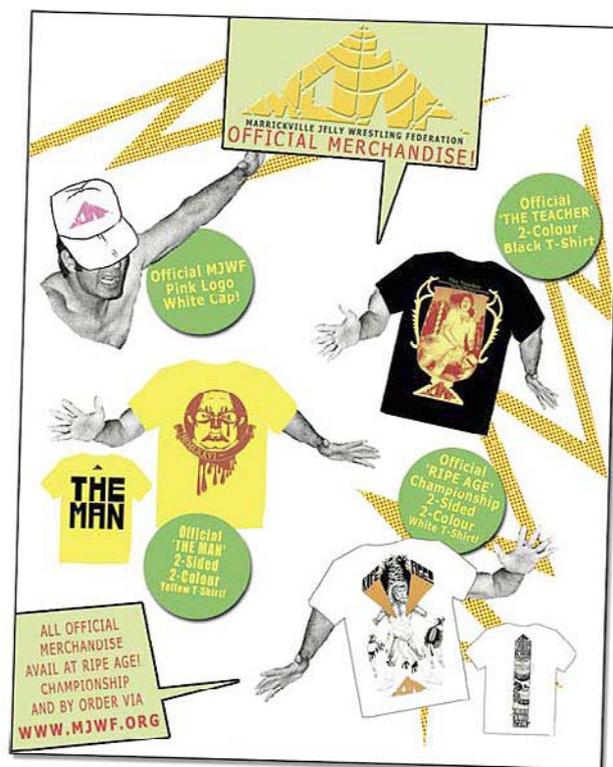
## MJWF and SquatFest – reviews for Natural Selection

The weekend of the 26/27th February 2005 was a biggie. On the 26th was the MJWF's (Marrickville Jelly Wrestling Federation) Ripe Age event at the Turrella TerrorDrome. The MJWF is a burgeoning organization which began from humble garage and backyard wrestle events in Marrickville. It's hard to really explain to someone who hasn't experienced this kind of thing before... It's something of a cross between a DIY version of WWF (now WWE) wrestling (Hulk Hogan etc.) and a very serious costume party. Potential wrestlers undergo an audition process in which they present their character, complete with his/her history, fighting style, strengths and weaknesses, etc. From this, 16 superlative fighters are chosen to participate in the event. Match ups are determined based on the entertainment and performance value of the combinations. Some wrestlers are more entertaining than competitive – “The Love Pump,” for instance, went so far as to produce his own autobiography and soundtrack for sale before the event (and then went down in the first round). Other fighters, like The Lifeguard, Syphilis, and Michael JackShit are fiercely competitive, but perhaps a little slower on the merchandising. Oh yeah, and there's jelly involved – not Aeroplane, which would take forever to make up and would disintegrate quickly in the fray, but a kind of slow release lawn fertiliser jelly crystals, which are green, and keep their shape indefinitely...

The two things which make the MJWF so interesting for me are its (1) parody/seriousness quotient, and its (2)(successful) attempt to commandeer a pop-culture phenomenon as a genuinely participatory experience. I mix up these two aspects in the following analysis:

The MJWF (“the Federation”) takes itself very seriously. A tight-knit organisational structure takes full control of all MJWF publicity material and graphics. There is an aesthetic attention-to-detail here that will tolerate no half-baked hippie ideas. We're talking corporate branding big time – tickets, website, t-shirts, even laminated “access all areas” backstage passes. Perhaps paradoxically, this rigid framework allows the creative energy of contributors (wrestlers and others) to “plug-in” – helping the event to be multifaceted and extremely rich in detail. For example, besides the wrestlers themselves, there are (all appropriately costumed): jelly-slingers, beer-swilling cheerleaders, joke-cracking MCs, a droll trio of commentators, a nerdy referee who is constantly getting too involved in the action, a genius sound-effects man behind the scenes, smoke machines, a gambling system complete with alternative betting currency, a full-service bar, an inflatable gym-standard wrestling ring, and tiered seating for over 300 ecstatic punters. All these “plug-ins” accumulate to something that the organisers themselves could never hope to accomplish alone, and which, astonishingly, is free of beurocracy and wages.

The whole event is a hoot, and the wrestlers are at their best when they combine the identity of their character



with a “signature move.” Key examples include “The Horse’s Arse” – who has an enormous buttock implant which he uses with a backwards motion to smother his opponents – or the Somnambulist – who incorporates the famous “Sleeper Hold” to make his enemies drowsy, thereafter force-feeding them sleeping pills from an oversized medicine bottle. “The Teacher” (our champion), of course, is in a league of her own, and has even been sought after for other (non-wrestling oriented) performance events and publications (Gurlesque, Kinky, Slit Magazine) in a sort of cross-(sub)cultural promotion deal. Beyond the sometimes superficial posturing of the other wrestlers, The Teacher has been developing an entire philosophy based (quite alarmingly) on crushing those of lesser moral strength. It certainly seems that so far, everyone she has come up against has fit that category.

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SquatFest happened the night after the MJWF showdown. I had expected the vast wrestling turnout to dampen attendance, but it wasn't that way at all. An estimated 200 people showed up at the beautiful Iceland squat in Balmain, with views across the water to the harbour bridge. It was the most blissful venue yet in the five-year history of SquatFest.

SquatFest happens every year, same time, same day as the corporate cock-sucking Tropfest. It began in



2001 as a critique of the mania generated by what the SquatSpace collective regarded as the “Tropfest formula” – i.e. seven-minute films which feature some sort of moral/existential dilemma as faced by privileged white eastern suburbs twenty-somethings. Tropfest films follow a quirky narrative style, and inevitably finish with a joke or twist. Often the production values are quite high, which fails to make up for their dearth of good ideas. What we objected to originally (and having seen some 2005 Tropfest shockers, still do) is the prioritising of ambition over concept – the idea that with the right exposure, some dude with a video camera and “undiscovered talent” will “hit the big time” and get a Hollywood deal – that fairytale story with about the same odds as winning lotto.

In contrast, we envisaged that SquatFest would provide a focused event for independent artists, activists, and filmmakers to share their work with each other, in a night which was celebratory but where the art could also be critical. Oh, and there were no ads.

Looking back over five years of SquatFest, how has it panned out? Well, as an “event” it has undoubtedly been a success every year. People love coming to a different and wonderful squat each time – Sydney has been generous with gorgeous abandoned architecture. There’s never been any trouble getting enough films to screen, just from the contributions of the audience. There’s always been “live feedback” (heckling) manifesting systematically in 2004 with a “gong” system, which enabled punters to stop transmission of films they didn’t like. Fortunately, the gong itself got the gong in 2005, and we returned to a more (I hope) respectful atmosphere. (Much discussion had surrounded the fact that the gong disadvantaged those films which were more subtle or which took longer to build up to a “point,” than the zazzy, poppy ones). In my opinion, if an audience member has a problem with a film (and I am a big fan of heckling myself) they can always take the law into their own hands and yell out, with whatever consequences that might entail (debate, suppression, supportive cheering). The gong was just too... inarticulate, and I felt that somehow it dumbed things down. If SquatFest were to exist as a critique of TropFest, then surely it should give space

to difficult films too, ones that might otherwise be considered “boring.” It’s a moot point: what’s regarded as boring and interesting varies between individual viewers, right?

This year there was some discussion afterwards about the issue of “quality.” Since SquatFest is an open event, and anyone can bring along a film, how can we control the quality of submissions? This was a leading question from someone who obviously felt we should have exercised more “curatorial control.” How should we deal with that kind of criticism? While I too thought that the quality of contributions was patchy (based on my own ineffable criteria) some other folks who came along described the selection as “top-notch eccentric films,” so who is to say what is crap and what is great, anyway?

On reflection, I decided I was, after all, comfortable with SquatFest’s lack of quality control. Since the filmmakers are in the audience, it is up to them to take responsibility for their work, and there is often “live feedback” anyway. We have plenty of other opportunities to be “curators” and programme exactly what it is that we want to show. SquatFest stands as one time when we can dip our finger in the waters of DIY filmmakers, artists and activists, and see what’s going on right now.

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MJWF: <http://www.mjwf.org>

SquatFest: <http://www.squatspace.com/squatfest>

Tropfest: <http://www.tropfest.com>