

'LOCATE'
Jerwood Space, Union Street, London
August 2010

1100 words

By Paul O'Kane

Perhaps it is significant that, when I met curator Sarah Williams at the Jerwood reception after viewing the first two rooms I asked 'if the show continues'. She looked a little exasperated and pointed to the space I was already in. 'Locate' –the current exhibition at Jerwood, Union Street London is a sophisticated but concise thesis, carefully turning over the question of *where* art might *Be* today. This is not a geographical or anthropological question, it doesn't concern globalisation, nor is it a question of the *zeitgeist*, it's a critical enquiry into the phenomenology and ontology of art. Meanwhile, a certain historical leaning in the show reminds us that the question is perennial, it must be asked again and again as art becomes subject to new influences of technology, revised critiques and perspectives.

In 'Locate' we see the artwork subjected to photography, to the gallery space itself and various curatorial traditions of display, we see it respond to video, to criticism, documentation, museology and the market, to Cubism and to Deconstruction. Admirably, Williams has distilled all this into three smart and modest-sized rooms, and, though she has selected three artists to represent her ideas this, I think, is really *her* show; as I say, a curator's thesis.

Personally, I'd welcome a revolution in which the curator's thesis was allowed to usurp the primacy of the 90s style art star as this is a sincere and well formed mode of exhibition that can clarify a lot about how we should approach and judge art, bringing to the fore the often under-appreciated mechanics and subtexts of exhibitions which otherwise drag out a well-worn notion that the featured artists create all discernible value.

If Williams reveals the various influences on art listed above, she seems to do so with the aim of artfully avoiding 'putting her finger on' art itself. i.e. art itself is only revealed here as a kind of negative space defined by the range of influences, ramifications and accoutrements on display.

In Gallery 2 we think we are being reassured when artist Aura Satz hangs a musical-looking brass cone in the centre of the space and asks us (via a figurative representation and instructive wall-text) to stand with our head shoved up into it. Now we seem very firmly 'located' and yet elusive sounds, half-understood words and mysterious sonic frequencies buzz around our head quickly dispelling any sense of security and leaving us with little choice but to move on, looking further. A wax coil of the type used in early sound recordings is firmly placed firmly on a plinth in the same room but its form and tone are not enough to justify this grand elevation, and so we are forced to imagine whatever sound, of whatever event might be engraved into its surface –perhaps the 'art' is there?. Again, the value of the object seems to reside elsewhere while the artist's aims and motives remain just beyond reach.

A dubious black curtain welcomes us to proceed to Gallery 3. Here we can sit and watch a 30 minute looped video by Mel Brimfield. A wide horizontal image is broken into four simultaneous performances (reminiscent of Bruce Nauman's clowning phase) given by thespians apparently hired for the piece by the artist. We see and hear them –at varying degrees of preparation and rehearsal- recount a particular perspective on a notorious performance art work. From the varying snippets of description (one read as the frustrated stock-broker husband of an art-loving wife, another as a florid, bitchy critic, yet another as a Brummie arts technician etc.) we get the impression that a Paul McCarthy-like free-for-all has taken place in a theatre setting for a *haute bourgeois* audience. Entertaining and well-scripted as it is, seasoned art lovers and academics may find this a rather familiar illustration of Peggy Phelan's famous thesis concerning the possibility of 'marking' Performance. But given the rest of the show as context, the curator's purpose in including it here seems to historicise and broaden the Phelanist argument, suggesting that the question of 'location' can be extended to every genre and medium of art, to art *per se* (not just Performance), and furthermore that we can apply this question of 'marking' retrospectively, to the entire history of art if necessary.

Once I had drifted back out to Jerwood's reception, bumped into the curator and been directed to the space I was already in, Gallery 1, brightly day-lit, revealed a range of all-too-familiar (and hence almost invisible) pictures in frames, objects in vitrines and sculptures on plinths, all signalling art as an over-determined, self-conscious tradition still caught up in a self-reflexive postmodern critique of institutions we inhabit and narratives by which we live. Once again the 'art' is hard to place here, even when it

seems to be staring us in the face and pointing emphatically to itself. The works have been provided by Sarah Pickering but are invariably 'works' which contain and represent other 'works'. We gain a sense of varying cultural perspectives; the artwork as fake, as 'antique', as Lo or Hi cultural artefact, as documented and subject to varying kinds of photography, provenance or historicisation. In one vitrine art history books are propped open like magnificent moths showing a variety of ways to contextualise a Gauguin sculpture. In another piece a Cubist painting -attributed to the constructivist Popova- is photographed at a sharp angle which wittily compounds the arch-modernist question of placing and representing 3 or 4 dimensions on a 2 dimensional plane. Here in Gallery 1. all the paraphernalia of the curatorial and historical tradition seem to bear upon images and objects, nominating and underlining them *as* art, and yet paradoxically undermining any hope that what we are looking at can confidently be called 'art' after all.

Williams provides a *coda* or full-stop to her show with a piece she seems to attribute, not to any of the artists but only to the V&A who have loaned it for the show. We are confronted with a heavy black drape accompanied by a sign warning us the image framed beneath is too sensitive to be exposed to light or long periods. However, we are invited to lift the veil, and as we do we see a 19th century photograph, a 'salted paper print' of a sculpted female nude titled only *Egyptian Princess*. In this moment of revelation, the enigmatic quality of the anachronistic photographic process conspires with the grace of the original crafted object, making us believe, for a moment, that, like a thrilled archaeologist or a child enjoying the outcome of hide-and-seek, we have 'found' the art at last. But the weight of the veil in our raised hand soon comes to represent our

responsibility to respect the curator's expressed concern about the sensitivity of this image, so that soon we hide it again. And as we do we become momentarily more aware of *our own* responsibility for the finding, naming, placing and preserving of whatever and wherever 'art' might be today.

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