

frieze

Current Shows

Material Presence

176, London, UK



Mark Titchner, *When We Build Let Us Think That We Build Forever* (2006)

I seem to have been visiting a lot of shows after dark recently. Surprisingly often, this is quite appropriate: the limited hours of daylight and wintry weather outdoors naturally lend themselves to the exhibition of spooky art, of things that go bump and clatter in the night. The latest exhibition at 176, the former Methodist chapel now employed as an exhibition space by collector Anita Zabłudowicz, seems to deliberately exploit these seasonal atmospheric conditions.



Graham Hudson, *On Off* (2008). Photo Courtesy: David Angus. Copyright: Graham Hudson (2008)

Even before the first art work comes into view, noises reminiscent of wind whistling through windows fill the gallery's café space; not remembering any such exaggeratedly gusty weather on my way in, I imagine that the building itself had engendered its own microclimate. I follow my ears past Katja Strunz's wall-mounted sculpture *Fall into Space* (2008), through a door into the building's main gallery (once the church's nave), where a towering wood and scaffold construction looms out of the darkness, creaking and whirring with intermittent lights and sounds from within its planked interior. The installation, a specially commissioned work by Graham Hudson, is titled *On Off* (2008) – a curt description of its *modus operandi*, which simply involves a number of record players and lights switching themselves on, then quickly off again, apparently at random. The windy sound effects are produced by the records coming up to speed and immediately slowing down again, an effect that also allows disturbingly distorted snatches of voices and music to emerge from the hubbub.



Frieze Magazine Online

7 January 2009, 2/2

By Jonathan Griffin

As if that wasn't unnerving enough (particularly in an unlit empty church at night), a winding and uneven staircase invites the viewer to ascend two storeys to a platform near the ceiling. Once entered, the construction becomes a berserk and disorienting environment, a skeletal and precarious house of horrors. With all its wires, bolts and electrical mechanisms exposed, it plays on the cinematic device so often used in scary movies: when the source of the eerie noise or ghostly apparition is revealed to be nothing more than a radio left on or a dust sheet in the breeze; rather than diffusing the initial sense of alarm, the hitherto innocuous object is imbued with a supernatural sense of foreboding. I hasten next door, where James Ireland's delicate assemblages of found objects and images reveal, when seen from certain perspectives, sudden flashes of Romantic landscapes – mountain panoramas, sunsets and lonely trees – before dissolving immediately into their constituent parts: steel brackets, panes of glass and twigs. Like *On Off*, Ireland's work relies on a physical engagement from the viewer, who crouches and peers to catch the fleeting alignment. Perhaps it's my mood, but the uncanny qualities of the sculptures seem to evoke a chilly sense of unease – though more Alfred Hitchcock than Wes Craven – through which the objects emphasise their own deadness by their brittle allusion to natural landscape.

Mechanical Poem (2007) is an installation by Laura Buckley, comprising four works that variously play with the reflection and refraction of light from DVD projections and lightbulbs through, over and across plywood and acrylic constructions that double as supports and housings for the light sources. The result is simultaneously enchanting and banal; one element, titled *At the Summerhouse* (2007), includes a film of a figure arranging and rearranging small squares of Perspex, glass and mirror on a bench outdoors. Scenes reflected from off-camera – sunlit trees, sky, clouds – dissolve over the geometric formations with an unexpected melancholy.

The tone is far sterner in the neighbouring room, occupied by Mark Titchner's *When We Build Let Us Think That We Build Forever* (2006). The impressive installation, involving animated projections (of Tate Modern being consumed in flames), runic panels, sculptures, lighting devices and films on monitors, seems to aspire to the graphic cohesion and purposefulness of a cathedral, although the meanings of the objects and images were obscured (perhaps as religious imagery would be to the uninitiated) by aesthetic stylisation and linguistic arcana.

176 is a difficult space to show art in; the dilapidation of the building's fabric and its evident former life as a church does not suit all types of work. Titchner's and Hudson's installations succeed particularly well for thematic reasons, and also owing to their theatrical bearings. Strunz's elegant *Fall into Space*, whose rusty surfaces and dramatic arrangement I can imagine looking quite striking in a white cube, fares less well here. In two smaller rooms tucked away upstairs, a strange poltergeist seems to have been at work, pressing institutional furniture into perverse agglomerations or unhappy feats of levitation. These are in fact sculptures by Alexej Meschtschanow, which, like Myriam Holme's spidery and materially eclectic installation next door (combining thread, glass lumps and sticks, amongst other things), seem perfectly at home in these abandoned spaces.

Bringing life to inanimate objects – an ambition at the core of the traditional sculptural impulse – is recast by 'Material Presence' as a paranormal concern, an alchemical practice of almost sinister implications. Wrapping a scarf around my neck, I scurry out into the night. The wind has risen, and it's started raining.

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