

this is tomorrow

Contemporary Art Magazine



Pavel Büchler: (Honest) Work

Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

13 May - 12 July 2015

Review by Harun Morrison

(Honest) Work, the title of Pavel Büchler's expansive survey show; is a pairing of words that eats its own tail. The phrase is one of many threads that dart from work to work across Ikon's three floors. Evoking both the 'good works' of Catholicism and the notion of the Protestant work ethic, we are prompted to consider what might (dis)honest work look like? Would we recognise it? Is it to be found here?

Appropriately enough the gallery was formerly a Victorian school; the notoriously disciplinarian culture of those environments is not explicitly referenced, but institutional and bureaucratic oppression is consistently parodied.

On the second floor, not far from the entrance door an invigilator sits at a desk with a typewriter. On approach you are solemnly handed an A4 sheet scribed with the words SILENCE PLEASE, the act of creating the instruction disrupts its own rule. The inherent absurdity of this work, titled *Secondary Information* (2011), is complimented by *'The Castle* (2005) in the adjacent room. Named after Kafka's unfinished novel published in 1926, the installation features an overbearing array of antiquated public announcement speakers (patented by Marconi in the same year). A synthesised voice is broadcast. We hear excerpts of the novel, fragments of a Chinese military choir, snippets of 70's Greek film music, a polyphony threatening to buckle under the weight of its own references.

Many of these works emerged through Büchler's receptivity to happenstance. A chance find, raked over and repurposed until new meanings blossom. This knack for making obsolete technologies a fertile site for ideas is particularly evident in 'I am going to use this projector' (2013); sparked by the random gifts of an audio-cassette enticingly titled 'The Visual Is Beyond Description' and a Sanyo Memo-Scriber - A professional typist was employed to transcribe this tape, after which the sound of the tapping keys was recorded back on to the original tape. The transcription (which features Terry Atkinson of Art & Language) partners the Memo-Scriber fixed to the gallery's wall.

Such processes raise the question of the nature of artists' work in general. There is the physical labour of affixing pictures to walls, constructing objects, activities we easily recognise, but what about the work of waiting for something to happen, to present itself, without knowing what is being waited for? The act of recognition of a sign to be pursued? Is this honest work? Samuel Beckett famously foregrounded the act of waiting. Another Beckett text is used at the entrance/exit of the exhibition, overlaying the two sets of automatic doors for the piece 'Inside Watt' (2010) - 'Here He stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. Here he lay' - The text's circularity and repetitiveness is neatly mirrored by the doors' continuous opening and closing, the presence of the viewer activating sensors which in turn disrupt any smooth reading. The relationship between language and architecture is touched upon again in 'Revised Architecture' (2013); a sculptural work made by folding the pages of a paperback edition of The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture until it resembles a slice of a Doric column, or a 1960s concrete high-rise. Again and again the written word is toyed with, made illegible or obscured.

'Work (All the cigarette breaks)' (2007 - 14), mischievously presents a collection of informal photographs of Büchler, often with co-workers, on various cigarette breaks from installing exhibitions of his work. It's a privilege afforded by his practice that this documentation of his physically less active moments, can be productive as art. Yet this cheeky gesture might deeply appeal to the factory manager trying to eek every last drop of fiscal value from a situation. The photographs which have the spirit of stills from a home-video call to mind a film shown at Ikon two years ago, 'Bann' (2012) by Nina Könnemann. It featured city-workers furtively puffing away in the shadows of office blocks. Like smoke itself, the notion of work is easily blown around by gusts of party political rhetoric. It has never felt more honest to be idle.