

Issue 173

## Pavel Büchler

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Pavel Büchler, *The Castle*, 2005–15, installation view

Passing through double sliding glass doors that trapped you between vinyl extracts from Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (1953) (*Inside Watt*, 2010), you see an exit sign from which a fly can be heard trying to escape (*Fly*, 2009). Welcome to the laconic existential undertow of '(Honest) Work', Pavel Büchler's largest UK survey to date.

The spirit within can be summarized through the show's most and least physically substantial pieces. The most multitudinous is *Work (All the cigarette breaks)* (2007–14), which filled a wall and much of the exhibition's accompanying catalogue. Made up of 1,156 photographs taken by Büchler and various others during the installation of his shows over an eight-year period, this formed a kind of retrospective within the retrospective. Every photograph includes a cigarette, and many show the charismatic pony-tailed artist, who has been based in Manchester since he was expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1981 for showing the

subversive spirit still apparent in his art. Büchler is making work out of not working, and he's perfectly honest about it. The biggest physical presence here was *The Castle* (2005–15), an installation of 150 horn loudspeakers. It uses the Marconi sound system patented in 1926 (the year in which Franz Kafka's eponymous book was first published) to broadcast an excerpt from the text, as filtered through a first-generation text-to-speech computer program. The passage was heard in English and German, reflecting previous international presentations, and is one in which Kafka says that strangers will always remain unwanted. The many voices built to a suitably impenetrable bureaucratic babble.

On a much smaller scale, Büchler played on the rather frustrating presentation of the show. The wall labels were groups of titles only – Büchler requested that the usual listing of materials be excluded – making it quite a puzzle to sort out which title accompanied which work. You might have thought to approach an assistant for clarification, but *Secondary Information* (2011) requires that 'the gallery invigilator sit at a small typist's desk with a mechanical typewriter. Every time he/she is approached by a visitor, the invigilator types the words "silence please" on a piece of paper and hands it to the visitor'. Having first enquired as to why the labels were so plain, I amused myself by asking a second question, already suspecting the answer: 'Do you always type the same thing?' There was also what might be termed a visual silence: a toy projector, with its slide carrier removed, placed on the floor to project a circle of light at ankle height. Here, the title-search game was rewarded with the realization that this must be *Nothing in its Place*, (2010).

Büchler's sense of mischief is apparent whatever form the final piece takes. You could describe his typical process as finding materials to be repurposed – be they objects, other art works, literature or old technology – locating a potential for paradox and then doubling it. John Cage appeals to the artist and the show included a stopwatch paused at 4'33" during a live recording of the sound of a 1950s vinyl cutting lathe – silence silenced. This linked neatly to a sound piece incorporated in Simon Morris's film about Büchler, screened alongside the exhibition: *3'34"* (2006) is a collage of the lead-in tracks on John Cage records, would-be-silences preceding would-be-silences. I felt a little more for the fly by the time I'd made my own perplexed circuit of a show that, you could say, goes nowhere. Not that it would worry Büchler, who has stated: 'If the work becomes a little bit circular, that's fine by me.' This is, after all, a man who writes his diary on top of previous entries, meaning the 70 pages that fill a gallery with *Idle Thoughts* (2003–ongoing) are close to black monochromes. Nowhere, I suspect, is exactly where he wants to get.