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Getting Even: Oppositions + Dialogues in Contemporary Art

Lewis Glucksman Gallery Cork, November 14, 2008 to March 1, 2009

‘Getting Even’ is curated by Matt Packer and René Zechlin at the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, a purpose-built art space on the campus of University College Cork. In May 2009 the show will tour in a somewhat different form to the Kunstverein Hannover, where Zechlin has recently taken up the post of director. The current exhibition is similar in scale and historical scope to an earlier curatorial collaboration between Packer and Zechlin, entitled ‘Overtake: The Reinterpretation of Modern Art’, which explored linkages between contemporary practice and the 1960s through the lens of appropriation. But rather than asserting any coherent art historical lineage, ‘Getting Even’ tends instead to highlight fragmentation and fracture. The inclusion of several works by Stephen Willats, drawn from different decades, is significant in this respect. In *Can Two Views Ever Really Co-Exist*, 1983, Willats employs crude mixed-media collage, combining text, photographs and found objects to articulate the experience of social housing from the perspective of a young female resident. By contrast, *Organic Exercise No. 1, Series 2*, dating from 1962 and remade especially for this exhibition, could be said to mimic the aesthetics of Minimalism. It consists of 48 pale plaster bricks placed on a gridded plinth, which viewers are invited to rearrange on the basis that these elements will be ‘reset’ every morning. Bricks also appear in several other works: they anchor the poles used to display Alex Morrison’s political banners and are thinly disguised as books in Claire Fontaine’s *French/Arabic Brickebats*, 2007, where they are wrapped in garish printed covers with titles such as *Les Grands Signes de la Fin du Monde*, referencing ideas about divinity and the after-life derived from Arabic thought. A third piece by Willats, an interactive computer simulation requiring two participants entitled *Freezone Year! 1997*, is also being remade and will be included in the Glucksman exhibition over the coming weeks. This addition may tip the current balance between works that invite interactions in the gallery and those that explore oppositions or dialogues in other times and places. Morrison’s banners and Nathan Coley’s *Untitled (Barricade Sculpture)*, 2008, both fall into the latter category, evoking generic rather than specific incidences of political protest. Other works are more ambiguous; Jens Ullrich’s *Plakate* (placard), 2006-2007, consists of 30 photographs of protesters, digitally altered so that each placard now bears an abstract graphic symbol of the artist’s own design, while Nina Beier and Marie Lund’s *The Archives (World Peace)*, 2008, features a series of peace posters that have been folded and framed so that their status as

evidence must be taken on trust. Garrett Phelan's installation *At what point will common sense prevail*, 2008, also operates somewhere between document and fiction. Involving the voices of 26 individuals, each performing scripts written by the artist on subjects as diverse as science, politics and religion, the multi-lingual audio component is the outcome of successive processes of recording, editing, rerecording and transmission. As a consequence, it is difficult to discern a coherent argument even when the language is familiar. In a smaller space the continual transmission of these recordings could easily generate a sense of claustrophobia, suggesting a vortex in which all meaning is lost. But an obvious escape route is offered in the form of a large black wall painting behind the speakers, which dramatically frames the corner windows of the gallery, directing attention towards tall evergreen trees outside.

Phelan's installation is not the only work to exploit the double height of the gallery; Liam Gillick's colourful *Factory in the Snow Platform*, 2006, is suspended high above *French/Arabic Brickbats*. The proximity of the accompanying labels enables a momentary misreading of the latter work as a fictional proposition involving a group of ex-factory workers that 'return to their redundant factory to re-think working methods and the orthodoxies of the workplace'. In practical terms, the decision to hang the show in this way generates additional space around the larger installations, a necessary strategy in a building where architectural features sometimes compete with artworks for attention. Perhaps more importantly, the interplay between these works enables the concept of a 'proposition' to open out into the exhibition as a whole.

The notion of a proposition is particularly relevant to Beier and Lund's eight minute video *Reminiscence of a Strike Action*, 2007, which brings together six members of a former revolutionary group. Clustered together, as though posing for a portrait, they have been asked to close their eyes for an unspecified amount of time and reflect upon the past. But most of them disobey the instructions and instead glance warily at each other and the camera, so that the tensions between them can be observed (or at least imagined) in real time.

There are interesting connections here with Artur Żmijewski's *Them*, 2007, which also presents the members of a group with a specific task – the production of a graphic representation of their collective identity. Żmijewski, however, rejects the illusion of real time and instead pointedly compresses several days of interaction between representatives of four political and religious organisations into less than half an hour. He also expertly deploys the strategies of character development found in reality television in order to amplify the conflict (and attraction) between a young man and woman on opposing sides. The exhibition features several other older moving image works, including Öyvind Fahlström's *Mao-Hope March*, 1966, which records responses to the display of placards bearing images of Mao Tse Tung and Bob Hope on the

streets of New York. It is an important forerunner for more recent explorations of urban performance, such as Carey Young's display of business presentation skills at speaker's corner in London (*Everything You've Heard is Wrong*) and Francis Alÿs's more whimsical search through the streets of Venice (in *Duet*) for the accomplice carrying the other half of his brass Tuba. The works by Young and Alÿs both date from 1999 and are structured around the completion of a specific task, yet it is clear that they articulate very different understandings of the city as a site of potential dialogue. Given the thematic focus of this exhibition, it is perhaps appropriate that superficial parallels in context, theme or form ultimately prove unreliable, so that the lasting impression is one of productive conflict and disjunction.

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