

ANNEX

State of the Art

The Condition of Liberty & The Art of Objection

Artists: Charlesworth, Lewandowski & Mann
Charlie Coffey
Richard Hards
Ilias Poulos
Mark Titchner

Date: 18th - 28th May 2009

Venue: Berlaymont Building, Brussels

Curator: Sami Jalili

This exhibition forms part of and is supported by the European Commisison Framework 6 funded project, CHALLENGE: The Changing Nature of Liberty and Security in Europe and the project's partners, CEPS, Sciences Po, and the Department of War Studies, King's College London. Its focus is on the implications of security-centric policies for the liberal democratic polity, and more abstractedly the conceptual connotations of such processes. Its aim is not the dissemination of academic research through a simplistic aesthetic realisation of the problematique, but rather to reveal engagements with these issues in the wider public sphere of discourse.

The conventional tendency is to conceive of security and liberty in terms of a balance, a formulaic representation that often legitimises the curtailment of liberties in the name of security. The metaphor of balance also suggests that each element has a distinct and quantifiable value that may be directly measured against the other. Alternatively, the concepts of liberty and security might be conceived of as being mutually constitutive, so that neither has meaning without the other. Questions then arise about the 'politics' of security and about how it acquires contested meanings in the space of the public sphere. It is then no longer a given, taken for granted value, or even end-product, but is rather central to the formulation of politics, to the construction of threat, to the production of unease and anxiety and to the play of power within society.

The artists here seek to provide a space for exploring exactly the contested terrain on which we approach these issues in a context that is constantly being framed by discourses of threat and danger. Their contributions may not be seen as political in any conventional sense; there is no crude appropriation and politicization of the art form. Instead, the works pose abstract and hypothetical questions about the state of being and conditions of existence within the free world, and in turn about the production and nature of art and culture in such an environment. Through systematic repetition and semantic dilution the notion of liberty has been rendered anodyne. The aim of this exhibition is thus the exploration of new approaches to representing what is more than ever a fundamental concern, both in life and art.

Charlesworth, Lewandowski & Mann's bold and ramshackle watchtower stands conspicuously in the centre of the room, the harsh light thrown from its industrial lamps casting the other works into sharp relief, dividing the space into territories of light and darkness. As objects, watchtowers commonly exist in the zones in which two boundaries meet. They conversely protect those within from threats outside, and prevent those within from escaping to the outside world, sometimes preventing them from coming to harm, on other occasions ensuring that the individual remains captive within the territory demarcated by the tower's scope.

In its unoccupied state, the tower forces the viewer to confront not only the narratives of human interaction that brought the structure into being, but also to address the unanswerable question as to the purpose of such an observation platform; who is it watching, for what reason and under whose authority?

It further seeks to analyse the tension between freedom from harm to the nation and the freedom from (passive and active) interference with the individual. Its zonelessness proposes a re-interpretation of personal space, whilst its sheer presence asks us to take a side in a silent, unending and ultimately undefined war. It rejects authority. It becomes authority. The artists' accompanying text sheds light on this apparent paradox.

Charlie Coffey's installation is the culmination of a project based around the idea of a fictional micro-nation. Built entirely out of found materials and employing a scavenger aesthetic, the work comprises a series of drawings, maps and makeshift structures resembling an abandoned settlement. Drawing on the history of Esperanto and a host of now obsolete utopian enterprises, the work concerns itself with the sense of promise and nostalgia often imbedded in discourse on collective models of living. Ranging from flimsy cardboard simulations to sturdier architectural forms, the work is at once the relic of a failed venture and crude prototype for a future outpost of human settlement; a hybrid form caught between the artificial and the real.

Richard Hards' two-part installation incorporates a private residential closed-circuit television recording. The sound occupies an area and the video plays silently in another. The constant sound of children playing and static interference is threatened by the proximity of very real violence. Indeed it is the fact that the material is real which is perhaps the most disturbing element of the work, transfiguring this security-centric documentation into the realm of spectacle. Especially apt in an environment in which the idea of a surveillance society is discussed with the detachment of academia and policy-formulation, the work transforms its audience from passive cultural observers into voyeuristic spectators of an ultraviolence that otherwise only exists in statistics and hypotheses.

Ilias Poulos' has produced a series of portraits with an accompanying sound-piece. The audio work takes the form of readings selected to represent ideas in philosophy or fiction that capture or have shaped the reader's conception of freedom. These sombre, disembodied voices haunt the portraits, which have been biopolitically manipulated, mathematized into sets of biometric facial contours barely distinguishable from each other. As free as our abstracted and received notions of liberty may be, once grounded in the real world of regulated freedom, they become strained voices issuing from the confined spaces of social interaction.

Mark Titchner's bold banners restage in fragments the cannibalisation of revolutionary and liberating political and artistic languages. He draws on these covert reference points in a renegotiation with the progressive spirit of modernism. Art can be an instrument for transforming the larger culture - in the right hands. There is an overt recognition within Titchner's work that knowledge and power are inextricably bound. They are situated

amongst a cacophony of social practices and situations. Through the excavation of referential discourses an estranged epistemology is forged. Visual impressions succeed one another. Time becomes solvent. Everyone and everything is implicitly bound to grand narratives and specific ideologies. Exhausted political systems, tired revolutionary ideals and empty zealous doctrines mingle in a decisive provocation.

Brought together, these artists address the issues of authority, self-regulation and self-surveillance, biopolitical conformism and the retrograde co-option of what once constituted radical ideology. The problems surrounding the perceived tradeoff between liberty and security are not limited to policy formulation or ethical constraints, but are rooted in deeper discursive traps. At a time of such socio-political ambiguity, the paradoxical nature of our search for a free means of artistic expression must necessarily throw up work that eludes the traditional categorization of 'political art'. Through its self-awareness of the problems and contradictions facing artists working in the Liberal Democratic world, it is hoped that *State Of The Art* proposes an alternative and effective illustration of these dilemmas.

The following images are taken from the 'State of the Art' exhibition. Permission to use the images has been given by the various artists involved in the exhibition.



