

## **Review – Harmless**

Kunstpunkt, Berlin, Summer 2005

Text, Nick Crow, The Internationaler, Autumn 2005

The exhibition by British Artist LEO at Kunspunkt, Berlin is marked by literary allusion and a self-conscious understatement which masks a complex set of internal relationships between the shows potentially disparate elements. Two French authors, Alain Robbe-Grillet and the Marquis de Sade, provide the intellectual framework for the work. As totems of post-war existentialism and late enlightenment sexuality they are uncomfortably appropriate touchstones for a contemporary artist's exposition of harmless. Not only because many viewers will be passingly familiar with the manner in which both authors explore and re-order social tensions through structures of individual experience. But also because they point us toward an understanding of 'harm' and 'unarm' as something other than antithetical. They speak of things we do, and do not want. And reveal the way in which our articulated desire is, in fact, a form of inertia.

Taking this conversational strategy as its chat-up line the show exudes a quality of the unease which binds 'harm' and 'unarm' together and makes us consider the surface qualities of the works with an awareness of how they gently put us on our guard.

A video installation entitled Labyrinth acknowledges its relationship to a specific text although it's the textures of the nouveau Roman which are exploited here as much as any narrative drive. Over two monitors and one projection we follow the progress of a solitary figure walking around the streets and wastelands of Berlin. Our sunken-eyed protagonist is vacant without being purposeless, waiting on street corners before moving on, though never arriving at any destination. We see him returning to the same small group of locations, the same wasteland, the same street corners. From one monitor we hear a spoken text which is something between a diary and an urban travelogue, and details such vignettes as two boys chatting on a frozen lake they had cleared for a hockey game. On the other monitor we see external locations – snow falling around trees or sleet illuminated by the streetlight around which it falls. The piece serves as a template for our quotidian experience of urban space.

When our protagonist returns to an abandoned apartment the changes in the room are described as 'slight and imperceptible, like the movement of the hands of a clock'. These are not the grand narratives of cities or peoples on the move. It is the hardly-noticed whose terror lies in the mundane barely-perceived shifts which mark the relentless progress. And no matter how much that sunken-eyed protagonist stands and watches the snowfall there is nothing whatsoever he can do to stop it falling.

One might expect a sharp contrast in a work entitled The De Sade Disco and at first glance that is what you get. Six rotating mobiles create an installation of cellophane coloured shapes which play around the walls of the gallery. The projectors are made out of old fruit cartons on rough wooden legs and their subjects encompass some of the kink and gore you might expect in a Reader's Digest guide to Sadism.

One mobile depicts bound bodies whilst another shows heads stuck on poles. One has several figures that seem to be crawling around, their backsides ready for sex or beating or both. Amongst the field of changing colour which the projectors create and which does, sort of, resemble the look of a disco – albeit the kind that provided cheap diversion for hormone charged youths in the 1970's – there is one mobile which unnerves you through its mute restraint. Made out of a twig it seems more *Morte d'Arthur* than Marquis de Sade and the shapes it creates speak of emptiness and decay. It's a kind of wasteland. But unlike the kinds of wastelands that served as the backdrop in *Labyrinth* this resembles more a *Waste*, the utterly corrupted landscape of Arthurian legend. There is none of the liberation, none of the destabilizing, disruptive energy we associate, in Ken Russell style, with de Sade's

provocations. This is interesting because we live in a period which is inclined, under certain conditions – canonical literature, high art etc – to view depictions of extreme sexuality as axiomatically ethical precisely because they embody the rhetoric of liberation. The De Sade Disco however does not proceed from such ‘found ethics’. Ethically as well as aurally it is a silent work – we are required to provide our own soundtrack. Instead the installations ask us to conceive of those sentiments which precede ethics – sentiment akin to doubt, disquiet and unease. The forest of shadows cast from a mobile made of twigs requires us to imagine how this disquiet might formulate a position which eschews the self-affirming logic of ethical certainty. In doing so it creates something far darker than de Sade’s boisterous excess ever achieves.

The third room of Kunstpunkt Berlin is given over to a group of smaller works which amplify and augment the themes developed in Labyrinth and De Sade Disco. On one wall are pairs of tree branches, stripped of their bark, and arranged like animal antlers around a neon sign which reads, ‘TROUBLE’, with the phrase, ‘(I wont be any)’ rendered underneath in vinyl lettering. When we consider that trees use bark as a means of defence against insect attack, and that deer use antlers for attack, defence and sexual display and that neon and vinyl lettering – gallery lingua franca for sure – but draw from the vocabulary of consumer sales then the concerns of the work become evident. In titling the piece *United Nations (Trouble III)* the exchanges going on between the aggressive and defensive positions are presented as simultaneously personal and geopolitical. We know that the diplomacy of international belligerence is compared to the rutting of dumb mammals and that humans often ascribe malicious intentionality to an animal kingdom in which patently lacks any of the imperialising zeal to which our own species is enraptured. Isn’t that why the post-war generation set up the UN? To deflect the inevitability of conflict in a world where nations narrate themselves as lions and eagles? But this particular coalescence of geopolitics, with a ‘take me back darlin’ plea is speaks of trouble as a local as well as international phenomena. The promise not to be any trouble sets our alarm bells ringing - who’d trust an antlered stag to behave themselves? The debating chamber of the UN finds a further echo in several other works in the show. A collection of banners, reminiscent of the socialist and union banners which are common currency at the Miner’s galas in LEO’s native West Yorkshire, allude to other methods of political engagement. But here too it’s the intensely personal which is elucidated. One, a green spangly one, reads ‘*What I’m Trying to Say Is Your Not Listening*’. Near it sits an electric chair, apparently powered by potatoes. Like a classroom experiment overseen by the Marquis de Sade the chair offers up the ultimate sanction from sacks worth of daisy-chained spuds. It’s immediately comical and encourages only fleeting fear that it could actually inflict pain. But like all the works in this show it manages to dig into your consciousness and leave you wondering at the diverse way in which harmlessness can be the site of so much damage.