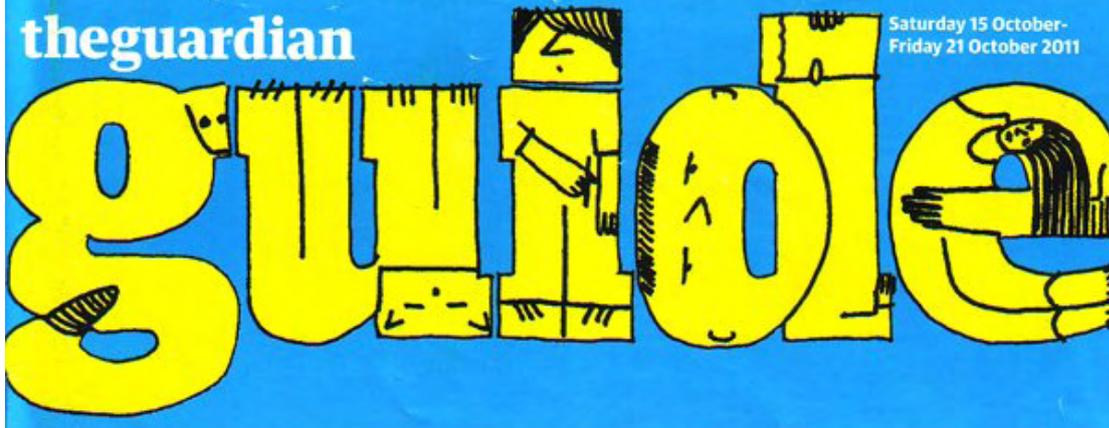


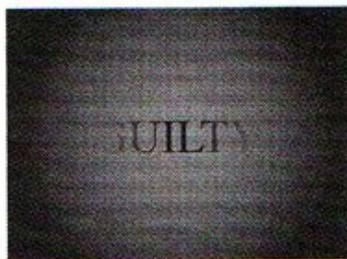
theguardian

Saturday 15 October -
Friday 21 October 2011



exhibitions

● Resident: The WITH Collective Cardiff



WITH, the art collective-cum-“time-saving experiential solutions” company, tread lightly on that slick terrain where art, advertising

and empty jargon meet. As a WITH client you can purchase services like traumaformat*, where a member of the collective will live out your worst fears, distributing the evidence through social networking sites. Most of the projects offsetting people’s misfortunes exist at withyou.co.uk, and being unsure

whether WITH has actually performed a “solution” is part of the ruse. For this exhibition, WITH has installed a cafe in the gallery, as well as a pay turnstile mid-show. Commissions will be taken from real, live visitors and woven into an unfolding yet invisible performance. **ss**
Chapter Gallery, to 6 Nov

15-21 Oct 2011

Memories... you're talking about memories*

JJ Charlesworth

The WITH Collective invents a catalogue of 'life-situations', taking aspects of our everyday lives and turning them into 'solutions' that become commodities, off-the-peg or custom-made services that we can buy from WITH, at a price. WITH's solutions aren't like other goods or services – it's not like buying a new toaster, or getting someone in to do the cleaning.

Worryingly, WITH's services focus on replacing parts of our personal lives and experiences with synthetic substitutes, where they play out some aspect of your life, on your behalf, so you don't have to. WITH's solutions take the intervention of the self-help book and life-coach to an absurd extreme, satirising contemporary culture's fascination with lifestyle choice and personal development. If you can have plastic surgery to change the bits of your body you don't like, WITH's solutions allow us to outsource the darker or less appealing aspects of our inner lives: can't get anything finished? Try **completed***, where WITH takes responsibility "for anything you've failed to deliver on". Afraid of getting old? Go for **relayge***, where a member of The WITH Collective will live your ideal age for you, as you, for a year, before passing the responsibility on to another member, who will relive the same year again, as you, for you, for as long as you want.

But The WITH Collective's funny, sometimes sinister perversion of our culture's obsession with replacing the authentic with the artificial isn't simply a gesture of social satire or critique coming from the separate world of art. Because at the heart of WITH's warped form of benevolence – wanting to help you sort your life out – lies a broader questioning of how art is itself often used to try to remould and reshape the people that come into contact with it.

Over the last decade the notion of audience participation in art has become a controversial issue; art that involves its audience in an interactive exchange, or that seeks to influence its participants' attitudes towards particular social issues and contexts, has been promoted as a form of socially active, responsible and engaged art by some, and accused of trying to manipulate and control its audiences by others. While alongside this, another type of participation-art has emerged: located somewhere between theatre, live-art, installation art and set-design, this new art seeks to immerse the viewer in a pseudo-real environment in which the experience of the work becomes almost indistinguishable from the experience of the reality it seeks to represent.

For their show at Chapter, The WITH Collective push the idea of participation-art to ironic breaking point. Relocating part of the large café seating area into the gallery, WITH immediately short-circuit and highlight the fragile distinction between art-experience and non-art experience. Are we in Chapter's café, or in a participation-art reproduction of Chapter's café? Are we to encounter it as real or as artifice? It's impossible to decide.

What we do find in the displaced café area, however, are indications that other forms of delegated and displaced activity are being carried out on our behalf. Information left on the café tables explains WITH has arranged to intervene in the lives of Chapter's visitors – specifically, WITH has arranged to set up and then miss arranged meetings with people, on behalf of individuals drawn from Chapter's mailing list – or so we are told. Date-marked photographs, depicting people waiting pointlessly for acquaintances that will never turn up, hang on the walls. Further on, beyond a turnstile that forces you to pay for an 'unlimited edition solution', is a 'free' poster explaining that WITH will arrange to wake up on your behalf, at 06:57 each morning in the gallery, and just before nodding off to sleep again they will, "pretend to be you".

These uncanny and vaguely oppressive encroachments on our sense of personal identity and selfhood, (we can no longer trust what is being done or in whose name it is being enacted - there is a wilful displacement of parts of reality into simulation and fabrication, all under the designation of art) seems to suggest an unease and uncertainty about the terms by which art is supposed to be effective. Here we are presented with an interventionist participation-art which insists on manipulating the lives of its subjects, to the point of re-inventing reality on their behalf. But WITH's interventions also suggest that there is perhaps a complicity between such art and its audience: on a monitor, a string of people talk enthusiastically about the experience of an unspecified, immersive event which they have all been party to. Clearly they are all excited about having been in some form of altered reality, where actors cannot be distinguished from real people.

In the romantic tradition of aesthetics, the experience of artworks is always a tussle between being able to step back and reflect on what you are experiencing, and the experience of succumbing to the overwhelming sensation of the work, in some sense 'losing oneself' in the work. Now, however, we increasingly find forms of art which do not allow any space to 'step back' from the experience; we are either lost 'in the moment' or entirely outside of it, and the work seeks to colonise the whole of the reality in which one encounters it. Rather than being immersed in the experience of an artwork *within* reality, we're now faced with being immersed in the experience of an artwork *as* reality. While this kind of art might be made with the desire to make art as effective and as affecting as possible, that insistence on taking over and controlling its audience perhaps suggests a deep anxiety over why art should want so badly to affect, manipulate and change us. Because what is quickly lost in this situation is our independence from the work, and by extension, our freedom not to be manipulated and coerced by it. The immersive moment of aesthetic experience, which we might participate in freely, has been turned into the immersive coercion of *social* experience, from which we are not allowed to escape.

The inherent aggression of that shift is what WITH's illicit fusion of café, art gallery and uninvited life-intervention parodies and undermines. It questions the terms under which we engage with art, at a time when art seems to want to impose forms of participation which we are

not free to step back from. If WITH's darkly comic world seems to resonate, it is because the experience of forced participation – being manipulated, cajoled and engaged with – is an all too common aspect of contemporary life. And there is no artificial life-style solution that can change that.

JJ Charlesworth writes regularly on contemporary art for magazines such as Art Monthly, Modern Painters, Time Out London and ArtReview, where he works as associate editor.

The WITH Collective is represented by Rokeby, London. More information about their work and projects is available from www.withyou.co.uk

During RESIDENT the gallery will be open at the following times:

Monday – Thursday 8.30am-11pm; Friday 8.30am – 12.30am; Saturday 8.30am – 12 midnight;
Sunday 9.30am – 11pm

The Shop opening remains the same:

Tuesday – Saturday 10am – 8pm; Sunday 2-8pm

HIDDEN



POST-DUCHAMP THINKING, Christoph Büchel, flickering definitions, REORDERING THE REAL WORLD, Ryan Gander, turning criticism back onto the artworld, pretending to be you, artworld as fiction

words J.J. CHARLESWORTH

INTENTIONS

A community centre, a building-site hoarding, a sex club, a recently closed exhibition, a live radio report of a strange light in the night sky, a gallery café. Over the past few years, artists have been testing how far art can assimilate reality itself. Not content with objects, videos or events presented within the frame of the gallery, these artists have begun to merge the art gallery's space and the art it contains with the world around it, dissolving the forms that we might recognise as art into scenarios that seem indistinguishable from an everyday reality. At the core of this work is an attention to the flickering, fading definition of what it means to look at things 'as art' rather than 'everything else', when a century of post-Duchamp thinking has allowed the shapes and images of 'everything else' to conclusively invade the art gallery. But in doing so, it has begun to generate unexpected questions about how art might be able to inscribe itself on the surface of reality – not to represent reality, nor to duplicate it, but to replace it.

If Christoph Büchel's *Piccadilly Community Centre* at Hauser & Wirth was one of the more remarkable art events in London during 2011, it was only the most high-profile manifestation of a growing fascination for art that abolishes the containment of the work by the frame by suppressing any evidence of the frame itself. Büchel's recent projects, while developing the strategies of claustrophobically theatrical, immersive installation pioneered in the 1990s by artists such as Mike Nelson in Britain or Gregor Schneider in Germany, have focused on dislocating art's usual relationship to representation by collapsing representation into sheer presentation. So with *Piccadilly Community Centre*, a supposedly fully-functioning community centre, complete with café, drop-in sessions for pensioners and dance and yoga classes transplanted into an apparently defunct art gallery, Büchel set up two realities: one, the actually functioning social centre, populated by real organisations and their members, apparently either oblivious or uninterested in the circumstances of the centre's existence; and the other, of course, the slowly leaked knowledge in artworld circles that this was in fact an 'artwork'.

That the work turned on the visibility or invisibility of the work according to whether one knew it had been initiated by an artist is a key



this and facing page: **Christoph Büchel**, *Piccadilly Community Centre*, 2011. All images courtesy the artist



issue in this evolving area of practice. In Büchel's earlier 2010 project, involving the installation of a swingers-club environment in the basement of the Secession in Vienna, the installation of a functioning organisation was demarcated more conventionally: while the sex club's interiors could be viewed by an art public by day, its function as a venue for Vienna's hedonists operated only at night, and then only privately, members only. The project caused a scandal, with right-wing politicians assuming moral outrage and decrying the use of public funds on such a project (though the use of such funds was strongly denied by the Secession at the time).

As a provocation, it worked well enough, but it was in a sense the least interesting aspect of the work. The real difference and impact of *Piccadilly Community Centre* was the relative invisibility of the artist's intention within the manipulation of a bit of reality, and the tension around it about how its meaning was supposed to be interpreted once that manipulation was revealed. In the art press, much critical attention focused on what Büchel's manoeuvre was supposed to represent or symbolise: with its odd inclusion of a promotional stand for the Conservative party in one space, and what appeared to be the remains of an anarchist-socialist squat in the attic, much was made of whether Büchel's project was a comment on David Cameron's 'Big Society'. In these terms, *Piccadilly Community Centre's* transposition of

the institutions of civil society into the art gallery could be seen as also decrying the attack on such institutions by current right-wing politics. But what this revealed, perhaps, was an anxiety about whether the project should be understood as representation – using fictional space to comment on the 'real' world outside – or as intervention – actually reordering the real world.

This distinction between representation and intervention perhaps reveals the problem of being an 'art audience', and comes back to the intriguing and troublesome question of what happens when 'we' see ourselves seeing something from the vantage point of a particular cultural position, such as that of contemporary art, looking outwards. In this,

ONS



left: **Matthew Darbyshire**, *ELIS*, 2010, digital print on Dibond, wood, paint, light fittings, 5000 x 244 cm. Courtesy Herald St, London

below: **Mike Nelson**: *I, IMPOSTOR*, 2011, installation, British Pavilion, Venice Biennale. Photo: Cristiano Corte. Courtesy British Council, London

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British artist Matthew Darbyshire's interrogation of the cultural iconography and visual language of contemporary urban 'lifestyle' identity is perhaps more acutely sensitive to what happens when the audience for art is presented with an object which cannot easily be distinguished from some other aspect of common experience. Darbyshire's 2010 London projects at Herald St gallery and Frieze Art Fair were brilliantly judged in this respect. *ELIS* took the shape of the kind of building-site hoarding for new residential developments that conceals the demolition work while advertising the exciting future property in marketing speak and shiny pictures of youthful professionals enjoying their shiny new kitchens and open-plan lounges. *ELIS*'s hoarding concealed the apparently closed Herald St gallery, and with its frighteningly accurate rendition of the aspirational vocabulary of urban 'creative' lifestyle designators ('cutting edge', 'unique', 'funtime', 'sanctuary for the senses'), it appeared to pronounce the arrival of one more gaily coloured block of IKEA-styled regeneration to the relentlessly gentrified and yuppiefied East End of London. And for Frieze Art Fair, Darbyshire subtly remodelled the fair's ticket kiosk to appear, according to the press material, like the overly designed retail space of a contemporary mobile phone shop. Yet the design was too generic and too seductive to be easily identified and excluded as something that had been brought in 'from outside'; rather it lulled the visitor into accepting its smoothly encouraging colour scheme and generically 'arty' background video sequences.

ELIS is interesting because, like Büchel's community centre, it points backwards to interrogate the capacity of the viewer to recognise the gesture as ironic. Because irony always implies a 'double audience' – those who accept the gesture

at face value and those who realise the gesture is simulated intentionally – it also implies a form of superiority, which is often couched in terms of criticism of another. But Darbyshire's *ELIS* succeeds in allowing the knowing spectator to recognise the criticism implied by the simulation of the visual language of contemporary lifestyle aspiration while turning it back on us, the cosmopolitan, urbane trendsetters who make up the audience for contemporary art – because, in the end, that aspirational visual language of loft-living, of stainless-steel kitchens and open-plan, laptop-and-a-latte leisure culture was pioneered by us.

This is art that writes itself into the fabric of everyday life with only the fading trace of the artist as proof of its reality as a sort of ironic gesture, and in which the work's audience is made complicit with the artist's manipulation of the world of others. It goes beyond the theatrical, fictional, actorless dramas of artists like Britain's Nelson or Poland's Robert Kusmirowski, and asks us to examine further how the theatrical and the fictional can be easily distinguished from a normal reality. Of course, it still needs the institutional frame of the artworld to allow it to happen, but in doing so, it takes to an extreme the postmedium scope of current artistic possibility, where in the end, the only thing that is distinguishable is the discursive setup of the artworld itself.

That these works should direct us back to the position of art as a potentially critical gesture nevertheless turns that potential for criticism back onto the artworld itself – an issue played out in a number of recent projects by artists working in the UK. Ryan Gander's Artangel-commissioned *Locked Room Scenario* (2011), for example, took the apparently lost history of a forgotten group



of artists as the starting point for a situation in which visitors found themselves arriving too late to see the 'exhibition', which had already closed, while encountering individuals who might or might not have been actors. *Locked Room Scenario* turned both the processes of curatorial intervention and art history into metanarrative devices, suggesting that artistic practice is now excruciatingly self-aware of its own historical origins and of the institutional procedures behind its production in the present. This was the real artworld being confronted with artworld-as-fiction.

Taking the issue of the collapsing boundary between art-experience and reality-experience with more overtly satirical intent, the WITH collective's recent show *Resident*, (2011) at Chapter, Cardiff, blended both fictional deceptions and displaced institutional functions. Shifting half the café seating area into the adjacent gallery, WITH's show then presented evidence of one of the collective's characteristically mischievous, unsolicited 'life solution' services – in this case, arranging and then missing meetings with people on behalf of members of Chapter's mailing list. A further work promised that members of the collective would wake up in the gallery each morning 'pretending to be you'. Confusing the rhetoric of self-help and self-transformation with a pernicious and invasive version of participatory art or relational aesthetics, WITH's show effectively denounced the idea of art's privileged status as a form of progressive social intervention, which would take on the forms of social life in order to ameliorate them, while retaining its distinction as art.

That such works exploit forms of subterfuge and dissimulation is perhaps a necessary condition for their success, and the revelation of their bounded status as artworks invariably pulls them back to the safe limits of the artworld. They work when they are allowed not to be art, in other words. But what they also expose are the various prohibitions that stop artists trespassing on reality too much. In their current project *Romeo Echo Delta*, collaborative duo Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard have reworked Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast of 1938. Broadcast on BBC Radio Merseyside on 31 October, *Romeo Echo Delta* was a scripted radio chat-show, featuring a presenter and a former *X-Factor* celebrity guest, on which the chat was interrupted with reports of a strange red light appearing over nearby Birkenhead. The difference between Welles's broadcast and Forsyth & Pollard's project was that the strange red light was real – a powerful laser hidden in a remote location. Here the connection between event and news report was simulated, but the event itself was real. Overly anxious about listeners becoming distressed at such a manipulation, the BBC hedged the broadcast with clear indications that what was about to be heard was a 'drama'.

Screwing with reality, then, seems to be a logical next step in the debate over art's effective intervention in reality and everyday life, when the limits of medium and institutional context have become almost terminally irrelevant and mobile. If art risks disappearing in the process, then perhaps that would be the final, ironic fulfilment of the old avant-garde desire to wholly integrate art and life. And yet it might also undermine the distinction between what is symbolic and what is real to the point that what constitutes a 'normal' reality is increasingly up for question. After all, if life can so effectively be manipulated, it suggests that all of social reality is, in a sense, a creative work-in-progress. And who, or where, are the artists then? •

right: **Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard**, *Romeo Echo Delta*, 2011, red light above Birkenhead accompanying BBC Radio Merseyside broadcast. Photo: Soup Collective

below: **Ryan Gander**, *Locked Room Scenario*, 2011. Photo: Julian Abrams. Commissioned and produced by Artangel with the support of Londonewcastle, London, and Lisson Gallery, London

