

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

CHRISTOPH BÜCHEL, PICCADILLY COMMUNITY CENTRE

Hauser & Wirth, London, Piccadilly, 13 May–30 July 2011

Reviewed by Helena Reckitt

The Pay Day Loans branch in the lobby of the Piccadilly Community Centre had closed. 'For Rent' signs directed potential tenants of this prime West End real estate (across from Piccadilly Circus and a few shops down from the luxury grocer Fortnum & Mason) to the property consultant Christopher Cock. But making my way past the defunct ATM and the out-of-service bank counters, the mood inside perked up. A bemused staff member offered me tea while I signed in and ticked the appropriate boxes about my gender, ethnicity and age ('are you over 60?'). Across the hall an office crammed with new PCs hosted a computer class for older people. Upstairs, next to a sunlit ballroom where senior citizens enjoyed a tea dance, I booked a free aromatherapy treatment in the art and exercise space.

In summer 2011, as the United Kingdom reeled from the deep cuts to higher education and the public sector announced by the Conservatives, Hauser & Wirth's Piccadilly branch opened its doors to local volunteer and non-profit organizations. Over the course of eleven weeks, the gallery hosted everything from fencing for seniors to 'Baby and Me' post-natal yoga, 'Lunchtime Laughter' sessions and 'Knit and Natter' socials. This well-resourced venue, staffed by gallery employees, included a ballroom with sprung wooden floor, a basement lounge with DJ tables, a stage and bar offering 'Free Drinks on Thursdays for the Over 60s', and an inter-faith prayer room. The entire community centre was the work of Swiss artist Christoph Büchel, although neither his nor Hauser & Wirth's names were visible. Even the website had been cleverly transformed to mimic the

homely aesthetics of a volunteer-run organization and was updated with a changing programme of events.

Refurbishment in reverse, scuffed stairs and corridors replaced the elegant halls of the former bank building. The decor matched the ambience, with affirming posters – ‘If you judge people, you have no time to love them’ – dusty dried flowers and potted plants, an Evacuation Plan and a noticeboard displaying community fliers, amongst other signifiers of public space. Embodying Roberta Smith’s (2007) characterization of Büchel’s art as displaying ‘a sense of horror vacuii’, every space was occupied. Behind a basement door marked ‘Private’, a caretaker’s office/crash pad evoked the obsessive psychology of a Depression-era hoarder, each surface filled with decrepit utilitarian items, thrift store chotchkas, postcards, diagrams and lists. The musty smell enhanced this oppressive atmosphere. The second-floor Geranium charity shop for the blind shared a space with the Conservative Party, whose display included mugs commemorating the 1978 election slogan, ‘Labour Isn’t Working’, the brainchild of former ad man and Young British Artist collector, Charles Saatchi, which won the Conservatives a landslide victory.



Piccadilly Community Centre (2011). Photo: Courtesy Piccadilly Community Centre.

Every detail spoke of charity, volunteerism and thriftiness – the language of Prime Minister David Cameron’s Big Society in which acts of communal goodwill are claimed to replace public funding. Both an exhibition *about* and an example *of* the Big Society, the enthusiastic participation of community members embodied the spirit that Cameron both celebrates and exploits. But not all was bustle and buoyancy in Piccadilly. Evidence of rough sleepers – in a squalid attic squat and in sleeping bags on the roof – recalled Piccadilly’s location in the Borough of Westminster where, in the 1980s, Conservative leader Shirley Porter initiated the mass sale of council housing into private hands and the removal of homeless people from the borough.

Symbols of bankruptcy and loss proliferated, including a floral and candle memorial outside the entrance with the handwritten note ‘Gone but not forgotten, Love forever’. Over-spending was woven into the fabric of an installation that seemed to spare no expense, either in hard costs or affective labour. Büchel has a reputation for demanding big budgets. His planned 2006 installation for MASS MoCA in Massachusetts ended up in the courts, with the project unrealized and the gallery suing Büchel for the right to exhibit the \$300,000 of materials that they had purchased for his piece.¹

Georges Bataille saw the potential for political liberation in excessive spending. In his ‘The Notion of Expenditure’ (1933), published in the wake of the 1929 Wall Street crash, Bataille speculated about the orgiastic revolt that could emerge from catastrophe and loss. Citing traditions of potlatch in West Coast First Nations societies where extravagant gifts by individuals or families put adversaries in their debt, Bataille celebrated extreme acts of generosity that risk self-annihilation. He hailed the ‘delirium of the festival’ in potlatch, where social divisions were strengthened but economic divisions shattered, to urge the working class to mock the bourgeoisie by appropriating and then rapidly dispensing its wealth. Skeptical about public welfare, Bataille thought such ameliorative efforts would trap the poor in abject dependency and push them towards revolution.

The Piccadilly Community Centre carries seeds of Bataille’s polemic, from its performance of extravagance to its critique of charity and its presentation of surplus human energy. Like the triumphant chiefs of potlatch, Hauser & Wirth gains in reputation for sponsoring an artwork that they can hardly expect to sell. A week after Büchel’s project closed, London erupted in riots. The rioters’ orgiastic looting, coupled with attacks on their own neighbourhoods, again brought Bataille to mind. As the Situationists argued when analyzing the 1965 Watts Riots, ‘real desires begin to be expressed in festival, in playful self-assertion, in the *potlatch* of destruction,’ and where ‘in the act of self-destruction a challenge is thrown down for the dominant powers to respond to’ (Bataille, cited in Noys 2000: 110).

Beneath its veneer of benevolence, *The Piccadilly Community Centre* is a deeply critical artwork. It raised numerous timely questions – about the state of public funding and communal resources, the gift and the charitable donation, participation and volunteerism, political agency, social relations and exchange. Büchel’s provocative intent was not lost on one gallery visitor, a self-styled veteran of the voluntary sector named Leslie Barson: she demonstrated outside the gallery for three days with a

1. Although MASS MoCA won the case, they eventually decided not to exhibit the materials for Büchel’s project.

2. *The Londonist* announced it as an 'interactive exhibition [...] created in response to voluntary sector and arts funding cuts, and arts funding cuts, and bank-related art installations will be scattered among the participatory sessions' (Jemma 2011).

placard reading 'This is NOT a community centre' on one side and 'This is an art installation' on the other. In a blog posting titled 'Famous Artist Exploits the Vulnerable', Barson (2011) denounced the artist and gallery for duping innocent community members, and urged readers to demand that they donate to CRISIS, the charity supporting homeless people and squatters who the project had 'disdainfully misrepresented'.

Whether participants were tricked or exploited, I'm not convinced. Announcements of the project made its status as an artwork clear, even if this context was not apparent in the gallery.² In any case, most people seemed to be having too much fun to care. But in other respects Barson's attack hit the mark. For the irony of Büchel's piece is just as she described: a seemingly thriving community centre, dedicated to the socially marginalized, would suddenly disappear. Like the UK public sector, all that seemed solid, melted into air.

References

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- Noys, Benjamin (2000), *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, London: Pluto Press.
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MOVE: CHOREOGRAPHING YOU – ART AND DANCE SINCE THE 1960s

Curated by Stephanie Rosenthal, Hayward Gallery, London,
13 October 2010–9 January 2011

Reviewed by Milena Tomic

Given the ongoing interest in histories of action-based art, *Move: Choreographing You – Art and Dance Since the 1960s* is another ambitious exhibition that transforms the visitor into a participant by emphasizing the embodied aspect of participatory practice. Somewhat aggressively, the title compels movement. But why submit? In those cases where visitors are called upon to dance in the context of a historical work, are they to copy the documentary models or to disregard them in favour of choreographing their own entry into the lost work? Far from presenting untouchable relics of actions past, curator Stephanie Rosenthal proposes