

## MONIKA OECHSLER

Site Gallery Sheffield October 18 to November 29

Monika Oechsler's 'Parallel Worlds', an exhibition comprising two specially commissioned new works, evokes the slippage between dream, hallucination and the real found in David Lynch's universe. This analogy, although not perhaps intended by Oechsler, initially seems fitting when one enters the installation *Solar Plexus*, 2003, the reversal of daytime immediately transports the viewer to a space that seems to lurk behind everyday reality. *Solar Plexus*, a densely grey carpeted space, is a condensation of a night-club scene complete with haze machine, a 'cyclone' light, a sub-woofer, and about eight speakers suspended from the ceiling at intervals in the smoky darkness. A rhythmic beat resounds in the space, hypnotically working in tandem with the lights as they switch from stars to stripes to flowers creating lunar pockets that seduce the viewer to fall in with their motion. Above a background hubbub of crowd noise, the speakers transmit fragments of speech from political rhetoric about women's rights and illegal immigrants to elliptical conversations about interpersonal relationships and problems, to isolated fragments of indirect speech commenting on interpersonal relationships. The often simultaneous dispersal of the sound in the space forces the viewer to negotiate the space, the sonic choreography creating a densely populated mental space in physical reality, the sensation of which is rather alarming and not a little confusing. At the close of the nine-minute loop, a single sentence is relayed word by word across four speakers by a male voice, the distension of each word in space giving the impression of a set of different male voices. The choreography of this sentence, taken from an RD Laing case study, turns it into a well-behaved psychotic breakdown. Here the analogy with Lynch's parallel worlds ends. In *Solar Plexus*, the surreal, as in disembodied voices, has imploded into the veneer of so-called flat reality. There is no other world lurking behind this one. *Solar Plexus* both stages the real as psychotic and simultaneously comments on this contemporary phenomenon. Taking this double position is no mean feat, but Oechsler's use of sound as a kind of moving image that circumnavigates the space, an interesting new direction in her work, did not always carry the resonance it needed to work in this way.

The capacity not only to take a double position, but also to provide one for the viewer is undertaken to great effect in Oechsler's video installation *Schauspiel*, 2003. The three-screen projection, showing the production process that took place prior to an actual theatre performance of Ibsen's *Brand*, fills the space which is constructed like a stage set, two adjoining walls being built out from either side of the gallery's back wall to stage the projection. This construction was slightly awkward, but ultimately added to the work's content of structuring views. Shots of stage lighting being tested, equipment being

levered and pulleyed into place, groups of men unpacking and unrolling various bits of stage machinery, are distributed differently across the screens. Initially, one might see this piece as commenting on the nature of theatrical performance, dismantling its illusion by showing the mechanics behind the scenes as it were. Is there a nod to the cliché of Brechtian distancing here?

However, Oechsler's piece is not simply replaying an outmoded Modernism in the space of film installation. In baring the mechanics of production, Oechsler constructs a cinematic performance that opens up another space of entertainment and pleasure for the viewer, not the fantastical pleasures of identification, but the pleasure of looking at views that would not be available to the naked eye. This pleasure is not simply to do with the camera being able to go where the eye cannot, but with the reconstruction of space that the viewer is given the opportunity to undertake given the three discontinuous on-screen views. Even when the three views are occasionally synchronised in the 23-minute duration of the loop, a slightly different tinge to the lighting or a minuscule difference in scale remind us of the fact that a view is always partial and subjective. The pleasure here resides in having this fact spectacularised. As opposed to the adherents of Brechtian distancing who misguidedly bemoan the homogeneity of spectacle, Oechsler's multi-perspective cinematic spectacle makes visible views whose partial nature enables the viewer to imagine positions other than their own, ie heterogeneity not homogeneity.

One shot in particular epitomises this for me. A close-up of a frazzled string of light striating the darkness is revealed, as the camera pans upwards, outlining one of the stage worker's bodies. The sequence culminates with a shot of wavy hair being lit up from behind like an aureole, the body itself becoming a voided shadow. Poetic moments amalgamating lights, machines, and bodies, occur though out the duration of *Schauspiel*, making the documentation of the production process a performance in its own right, one in which we participate by watching.

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