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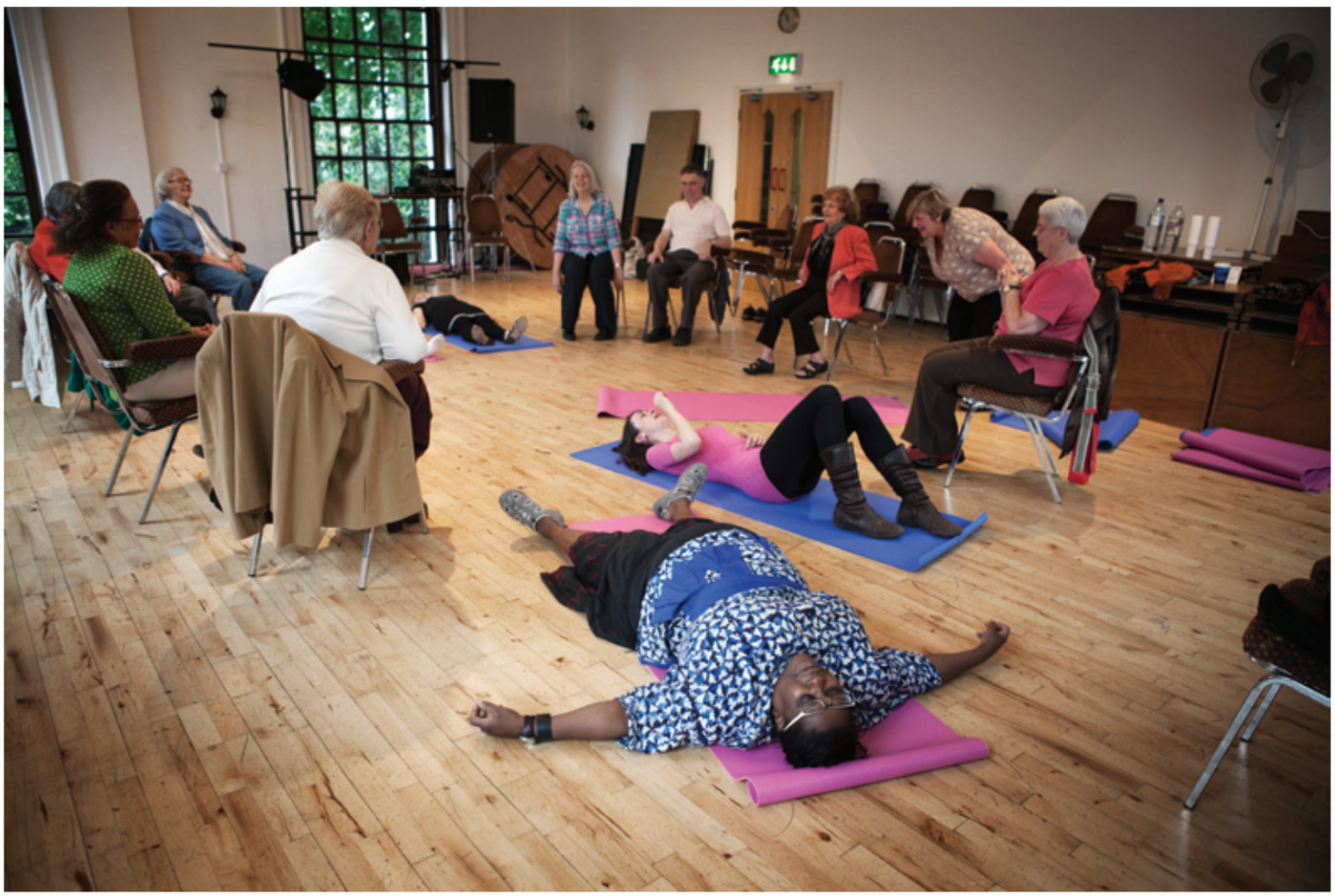

POST-DUCHAMP THINKING, Christoph Büchel, flickering definitions, REORDERING THE REAL WORLD, Ryan Gander, turning criticism back onto the artworld, pretending to be you, artworld as fiction

words **J.J. CHARLESWORTH**

INTENTIO

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,

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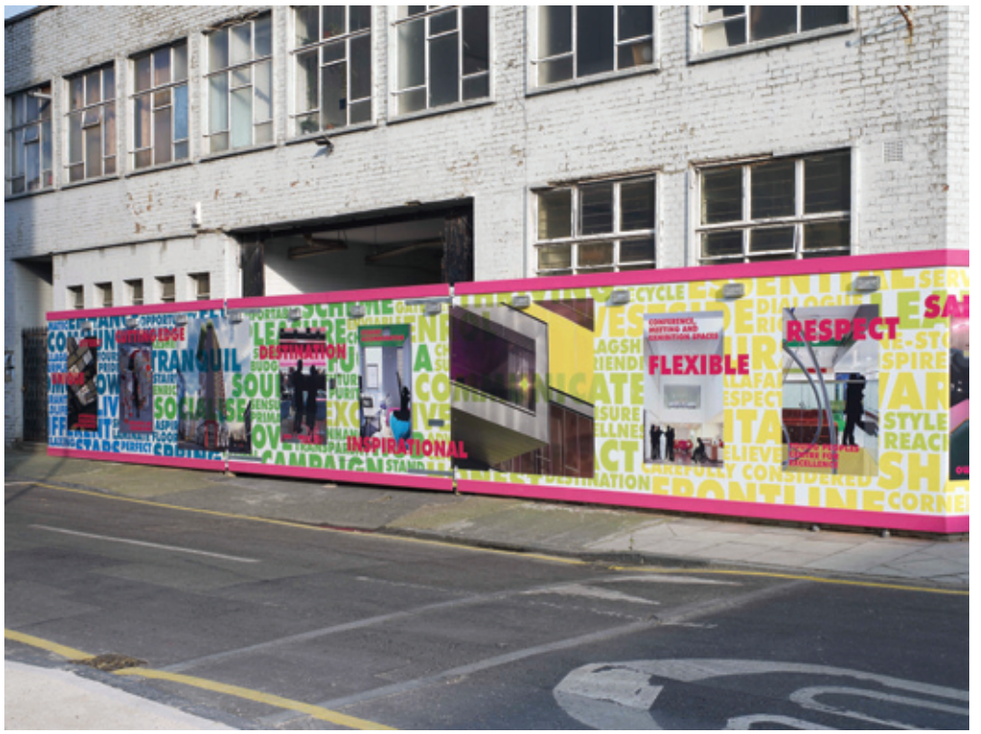


left: **Matthew Darbyshire**, *ELIS*, 2010, digital print on Dibond, wood, paint, light fittings, 5000 x 244 cm. Courtesy Herald St, London

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

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.

ONLY THE FADING TRACE OF THE ARTIST IS PROOF OF THE WORK'S REALITY AS A SORT OF IRONIC GESTURE

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.

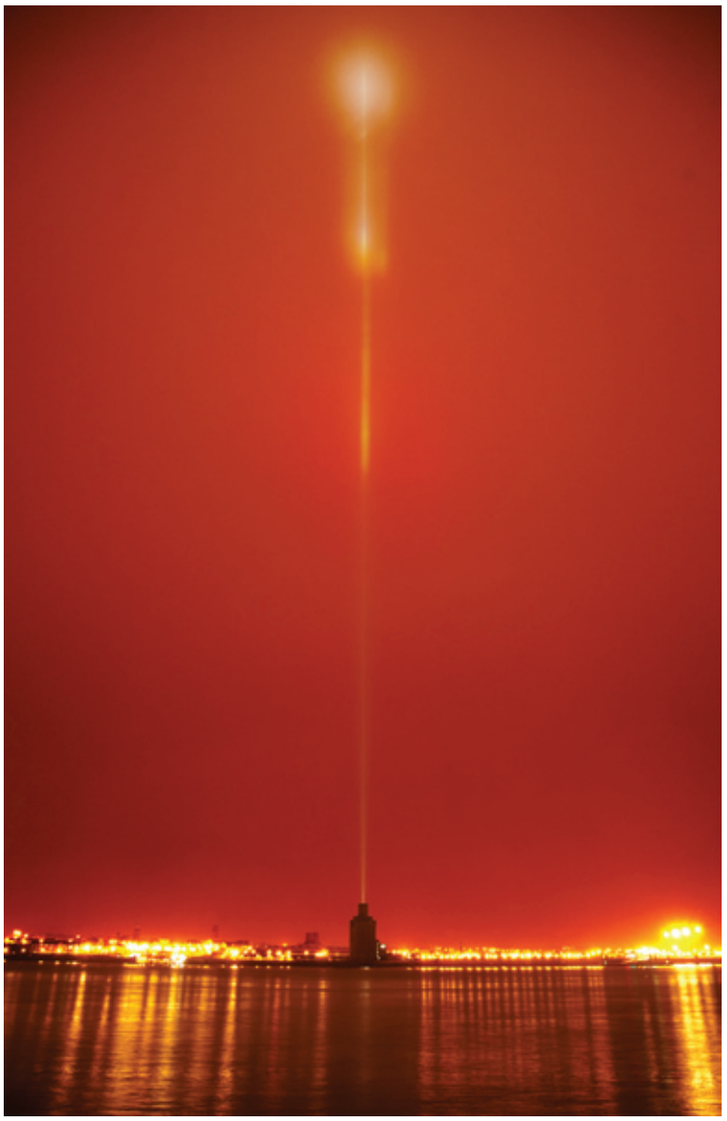
That these works should direct us back to the position of art as a potentially critical gesture nevertheless turns that potential for criticism back onto the artworld itself – an issue played out in a number of recent projects by artists working in the UK. Ryan Gander's Artangel-commissioned *Locked 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.

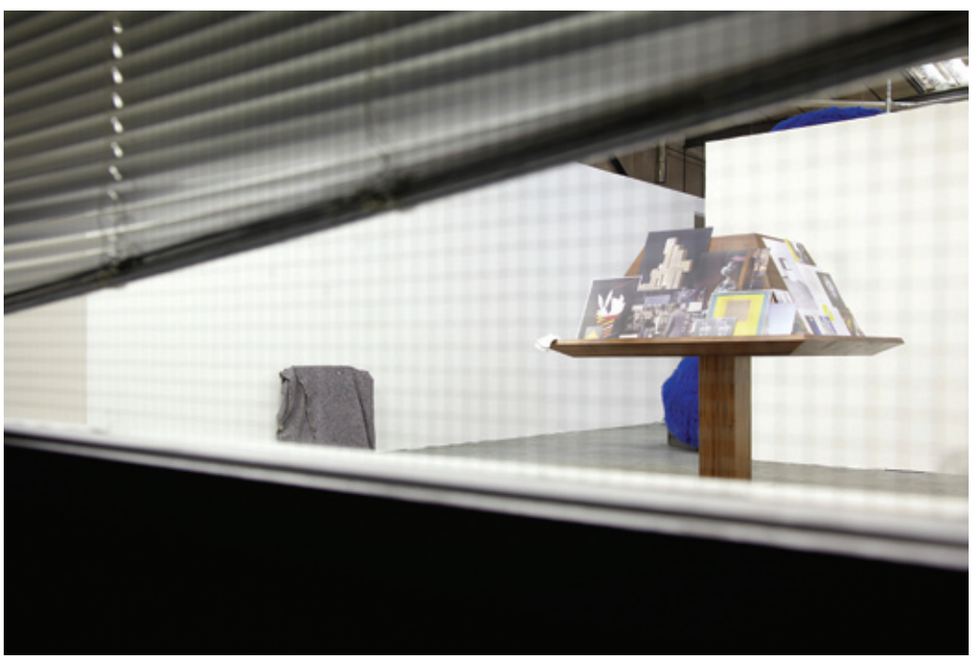
Taking the issue of the collapsing boundary between art-experience and reality-experience with more overtly satirical intent, the WITH collective's recent show *Resident*, (2011) at Chapter, Cardiff, blended both fictional deceptions and displaced institutional functions. Shifting half the café seating 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