

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Richard Dorment, "A triumph of shock and awe," *The Telegraph*, July 17, 2007.

A triumph of shock and awe **Richard Dorment**

'In consideration of the bull's well-being, please refrain from making any startling noise whilst he is in the theatre.' When I read this programme note while waiting for the curtain to go up at the Opera House in Manchester, something told me this wasn't going to be a run-of-the-mill theatrical experience.

In fact, *Il Tempo del Postino* ("Postman's Time") was an art exhibition, an international group show of 14 artists selected by celebrity curators Hans Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno. They commissioned works of art to be presented sequentially on stage, accompanied (where appropriate) by music, just as in a play or opera.

The element of time, intrinsic to the theatre but surprisingly irrelevant to the way we usually look at visual art, was to play a major role in the proceedings. Each artist was allotted no more than 15 minutes to present an art work, film, or performance before the interval.

The entire second part of the evening was given over to the night's star attraction, the staging of a new work by one of the most influential artists in the world today, Matthew Barney. Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with his art will have guessed that it was he who required the live bull.

Things got under way with a delightful "overture" by performance artist Tino Sehgal, who made the Opera House's heavy, red velvet curtains dance, swing, shimmy and shake in time to music provided by the orchestra. Then the lights went down and Los Angeles-based installation artist Doug Aitken wowed us with a performance by two auctioneers from the American South patrolling the aisles with torches, taking bids so fast that we were all hypnotised by that singsong unearthly sound, hardly noticing that what they were auctioning off wasn't tobacco or cattle, but members of the audience.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Albanian-born Anri Sala made me melt by staging an aria from *Madam Butterfly* in the darkened theatre using four sopranos in full Japanese costume who stood both on stage and in the amphitheatre illuminated only by lights concealed behind their fluttering fans.

They sang their hearts out, but only one at a time, tossing the aria back and forth to each other across the theatre while the villain Pinkerton ratcheted up the emotion by singing while walking slowly backwards down the central aisle. This was spine-tingling stuff, and also a deeply felt homage to all those lushly romantic moments the opera house had seen over the years.

All these works used the architecture of the Victorian building where the event took place to explore themes of theatricality and that was true too of Olafur Eliasson's *Echo House*. The curtain rose on a mirror in which the audience saw its own reflection. Then a conductor silently mounted a podium to face the (real) audience and proceeded to have the orchestra imitate every cough, snuffle, catcall, joke, or whistle we made - in fact, to "play" the audience back to its own reflection.

The great Douglas Gordon had a torch singer in a black dress come on stage, then turned the lights off while she broke our hearts with the ballad *Love Will Tear Us Apart*, sung without accompaniment. It's been a long time since I've lain in bed at 3am, listening to the wireless after a lovers' quarrel, but Gordon made me remember what it was like.

Best of all, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster created the most moving work of the evening out of a piece of music. First, she asked 50 or so players from the Orchestra of the Royal Northern College of Music to play a Beethoven symphony. Gradually, one-by-one, each player picked up his or her instrument and slowly left the pit, walked up on to the stage, and then disappeared into the darkness of the wings.

As this happened, the orchestral sound became thinner and thinner until at last, with violins, horns and flutes gone, the melody was lost. Then the conductor exited, leaving a lone cello, and the orchestra fell silent.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Gonzalez-Foerster had created a simple metaphor for what happens in life, as each generation starts with hope and talent and promise, and then slowly breaks up as each of us dies and at last the generation passes away. Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, Koo Jeong-A and Rirkrit Tiravanija: all staged work that was just as inventive and entertaining. But the best was yet to come. After the interval, Matthew Barney came on - and made everything we had just seen look like child's play.

Barney is the real thing. When he brings his boundless imagination to a subject he goes down to its depths to create images and implant ideas that stay in your mind for ever.

Guardian of the Veil seems to be about nothing less than the psycho-sexual origins of Islamic fundamentalism. As the curtain rises, four pallbearers dressed in paramilitary fatigues place the corpse of a woman wearing a sequined, Western-style cocktail dress on the roof of a crashed car. Barney then enters wearing a Masonic leather apron and a headdress containing a live dog to represent the Egyptian god of the dead, Anubis. He then symbolically "embalms" the woman and the values she represents, by opening the car bonnet, and removing parts of the motor which he deposits in Egyptian funerary urns at the front of the stage.

As balaclava-wearing terrorists roam the stage playing a haunting score composed by Barney's collaborator Jonathan Bepler, a series of symbolic actions take place: a naked woman who stands motionless throughout the performance and whom we see only from the rear is ritually "veiled" in black plastic of the sort used to make bin bags; a female contortionist, naked apart from a veil over her face, stiletto heels, and claw-like nail extensions bends over backwards in such a way that all we see of her are her legs and vagina, then urinates spectacularly and copiously over the stage; a ritually garlanded bull is escorted on stage in too-close-for-comfort proximity to the still-exposed vagina, then urged to mount the crashed car, which, as we saw, Barney uses as a symbol of the female body. At the stomach-turning finale, the naked woman we see from behind defecates on stage.

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Shocking as some of this is, nothing that goes on in Barney's dream-like, surrealistic performance is gratuitous. He is meditating on the psychic catastrophe that is Islamism, whereby men who possess power over women express their fear and disgust at the sight of the female body by forcing their daughters and wives to cover themselves completely. Drawing on Freud's writings, he shows that women who are made powerless express their rage in the only way they can - by using their own bodies to urinate and defecate.

The corpse we saw at the beginning is that of a Westernised Muslim woman, embalmed and replaced by women made faceless by men who deny their existence as real people. This breakdown of human interaction is completed when the men then cover their own faces in balaclavas, losing any sense of themselves as individuals and allowing them to be subsumed in their sick ideology. Barney seems to be saying that the horrors we see nightly on news bulletins from the Middle East have their origins in sexual dysfunction.

The cause of Islamists' hatred of the West has nothing to do with Israel or Iraq but with fear of the other. They hate everyone who isn't like them, beginning with their own mothers, sisters and wives. And orchestrating this perversion of human nature is the god of death.

At the end of *Il Tempo Del Postino*, I felt I'd been present at a historic occasion when the ambitions of the curators were perfectly matched by the quality of the art, and when we saw the première of one of Barney's most profound and powerful works.