

## Saim Demircan

### *The Affirmation*

curated by Andrew Hunt

Paul and Steven Claydon, Kajsa Dahlberg, Chris Evans, Robert Garnett, Babak Ghazi, Goshka Macuga, Mark McGowan, Elizabeth Price, Mandla Reuter, Jamie Shovlin, Matthew Thompson and Tris Vonna-Mitchell

CHELSEA space

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How does archival material function in the same instance as contemporary art practise? This could be a premise with which 'The Affirmation' attempts to respond, and contribute to recent characteristics within work that has a relationship with history, be it fictitious or factual. What this exhibition proposes therefore is an invitation to artists to select material from the Chelsea School of Art & Design Library and to use an archive as a resource to inform new work. The other element to consider is the novel from which the exhibition takes its title. 'The Affirmation' by Christopher Priest, published by Faber in 1981 is the first work of fiction curator Andrew Hunt uses as a model for an exhibition following previous shows 'Like Beads on an Abacus Designed to Calculated Infinity' (2004) and 'Writing in Strobe' (2006). As the story deals with notions of duality it is an appropriate choice of literature for artists to acknowledge historical artefacts alongside their own.

Chris Evans' misprinted copy of 'The Affirmation' is displayed next to a letter to its publishers in which he points out that his edition, that begins to repeat itself halfway through an already disjointed narrative, has deeply implicated his life. "I just wanted to let you know things are not going well for me at the moment" writes Evans as an ironic reflection of the isolated and introspective central character in the novel. Evans himself is a natural contributor (providing the stimulation for the title of the show) as 'The Affirmation' – the novel - relates to the notion of the remote and suffering artist in his recently completed project 'Militant Bourgeois: An Existential Retreat' at Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, 2006.

It is interesting to trace a physical presence within an exhibition that relies heavily on materiality. The individual, like the one at the heart of the novel, is prevalent within several pieces beginning with Mandla Reuter's film *Untitled* (2007). A figure approaches and stands in front of a public fountain for exactly the duration the jets of water shoot into the air before walking out of sight. It's indiscernible as to whether this person may have triggered the fountain to start or was merely witness to it, 'affirming' its transitory presence. Using the body to confirm or accentuate an existence or ideology is also present in Mark McGowan's *Artist To Set Himself On Fire* (2007), a video and related paraphernalia documenting his attempt to set himself on fire in front of the houses of parliament. McGowan has expressed before his desire to self immolate as his final performance yet behind the media attention-seeking resides the context of politically charged and historical protest. In this case declaring one's belief, and being through violent self-destruction. Appropriately enough an image of McGowan holding a petrol-can appears in a clipping from The London Eye amongst a variety of disparate images. One of these is a picture of Tutankhamun's ancient mummified head that resembles the hidden faces to be found in the trees and rocks in Goshka Macuga's black and white photographic series. Macuga's work also involves a sense of physicality, but rather one that is implied literally. Does one really see a face in *A Face in the Water* (2007) before or after reading the title?

In previous work Macuga has relied on juxtaposing archival with natural source material so her selection of audio works, which can be listened to from neatly positioned chairs near the centre of the space offer different viewpoints on her photographs but also surrounding work. Whilst listening to Vito Acconci's *Now Do You Believe, the Dirty Dogs Are Dead*, a sound installation of barking dogs in front of Paul and Steven Clayton's installation *The Clash Of The War Droids* (2007) the incongruity of these works together creates a refreshingly bizarre encounter amidst the surrounding perplexity of other works. The Clayton's conjures up another reality – one of teenage reminiscence, science fiction and comic books with their appropriation of Vorticist material. A geometric painting hangs high upon the gallery wall with an archival folder stuffed full of paraphernalia on top of it. Below vitrines hold literature including *Blast*, the Vorticist publication published in indignation, and emulation of futurist manifestos and the European avant-garde, yet only produced in two editions. *Blast* also inspires the Clayton's own journal, the aptly titled *Explosive*, which features a suitably Wyndham Lewis-esque manifesto, and which like the other work by the artists, will be included in the libraries collection at the end of the show. It is perhaps pertinent then to consider how *Blast* found a place in history even though it was so short lived? In this sense, the Clayton's contribution is one of the most successful as it is here wherein that the relationship between the 'affirmative' concept and the nature of the archive suitably correspond. The archive serves as preservation and here materialisation of materials and objects that might, or could be easily forgotten or lost.

Another work that provokes the question as to whether text informs its reading is Elisabeth Price's *Monument To Dematerialisation* (2007), a single drum with an inscription on it that invites visitors to strike it. The reference to writer Lucy Lippard is in tribute to early conceptual practise that attempted to abscond the art object in favour of text-based work. Yet this piece is also twofold in its methodology as both a sculpture that refers to itself as a monument and one that refers to the redundancy of the 'object'. The overtone of solemnity that emanates from the sound of the drumbeat however resonates like an epiphany does in the instance that it occurs. It is perhaps why this declaration feels particularly affirmative in a room crowded with material as it oscillates between sound and object, negative and affirmative criticism.

The layout of this show feels more like a reading room or a salon, or even an art fair booth considering the small gallery space and within this the 37 different artworks and artefacts collected here eventually creeps up on you. So it is timely that *Bioguarde* (1982), an audio-work by Uwe Layslepen & Marina Abramovic, has a calming effect within the show as the artists repeat alternately between them the words "Everything is going to be alright/Everything is going to be all light" softly and slowly. This is only enhanced as it becomes dark outside and the large glass windows that make up one side of the gallery reflect oneself immersed within this crowded show. This is a good point at which to consider the potential of aesthetic experience in terms of resonance. Although the techniques of this exhibition are effective, it does not quite have an affect, which is where a comparison to say reading a book might yield criticism of using literary subject matter as a basis for exhibition making. Yet it is perhaps pertinent to consider this usefully given the shows aim at encouraging 'overtly positive' works and its relationship to this particular novel; one which seeks to create another, new world in place of reality. Suitably the accompanying publication provides a parallel presentation of the artist's work that continues as a reminder that while nevertheless not deeply disruptive 'The Affirmation' perhaps leaves your own world temporarily distorted.