

On Joana Bastos *Ecaps A/A space* (2008)

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Imagine you are walking through a fun fair; crowds of people are slowly carving out their path passed a merry-go-around with alternately flashing light bulbs, a shooting stand where someone has just won a pink dinosaur. The soundscape is punctuated by the delighted wails of people plummeting to the ground on the free fall tower half a mile ahead. The delicious smell of caramelised popcorn tickles the nostrils.

This is not a work by Joana Bastos. It might seem an easy, or at least quixotic, choice to begin a piece of writing about an artist's work by describing precisely the quality of experience, in an art context, it calls into question. In this particular case however I would like to propose that negation, (which is not simply a reversal of it's opposite) might be a useful starting point for investigation.

There is not much there; in fact so little you could miss it. A makeshift wall constructed of plasterboard and a nearly invisible door with an announcement poster, parodying the bland administrative style of a health and safety warning, promising 'real stuff' inside. Reality is a slippery subject when it comes to art and the note deliberately seems to toy with this ambiguity, as it remains unexplained as to whether the 'real stuff' is referring to the art spreading across the surrounding spaces or to the world outside. Stepping passed the rambling dare, inside one is greeted by an immaculately clean white gallery space. One might smile or get annoyed at the officious build-up for such an anti-climatic experience, especially seen within the context of an MA degree show, geared to showcase individual practices to a wide audience. It clearly is a refusal, but the question is of what kind. The room is empty apart from a few nondescript chairs, which certainly are past their prime, nevertheless inviting enough to have a little rest. Their arrangement reminds of a waiting room set-up or a rudimentary seating facility in front of a projected image, only here the projection has been replaced by a home cinema screen sized window, taking quite literally the classical "window onto the world" which representation through painting promised. If this is a pun, it is one torn between irony and hope, that by becoming conscious of that which frames such a view, our ability to perceive is altered if not improved. The room is not empty, because it houses a proposition-a proposition to really look.

Meaning in this case does not rest in the work in isolation but accumulates through a reflection on the context in which it is shown. Thinking about context in a physical sense the room holds attributes of a traditional sculpture, which has received equal amounts of attention from different angles; there is no front or back, no good side or bad side. When one is standing in front of the side entrance of Tate Britain looking across Chelsea's newly paved piazza two windowpanes catch the eye. The large one on the right is a significant architectural feature of Chelsea Space, a gallery established and run by Donald Smith. To the left next to the main building is a smaller window, which has recently acquired a new make-over, dressed in orange and grey vinyl lettering, it seems to impersonate the older brother a few doors down. *ecaps A* reads the titling, once the folds of the brain have reversed the script into *A space* it seems a non-specific, matter of fact description, possibly displaying a heightened awareness of the framework of the art institution, the space in which art is produced and shown. So on first glance one might get the whiff that this is some form of institutional critique but the mirror image of the text complicates this reading. If we think ourselves inside the room again, which is where the artist apparently wants to lead us, and look at the label half obscured by the radiator the implicit ambiguity of *ecaps A/A space* comes to the fore. We are lured inside 'a space' loaded with expectations, just to follow her directions and look at the world. There is however another more confrontational dialogue created through the relationship of inside and outside, when the human presence is taken into consideration or to put it more directly between those who look and those who are being looked at.

Some historic references to 1970's Conceptual Art Practices might spring to mind and the affiliated notion of the 'dematerialisation of the art object' discussed by curator and critic Lucy Lippard. What does it mean to make this kind of work now however? Underlying it is a question of agency and an anxiety towards the idea of overproduction, in an age of ever-increasing production and consumption processes in the art world but also in a larger sense. So although the political agenda might be a very similar one, I tentatively would like to argue that this work acknowledges an inbuilt sense of paradox, thus the impossibility of following the beliefs through to the bitter end. The pared back aesthetic belies the dry sense of humor often lurking near the surface of Joana's work. If we think of the turn of phrase 'perfectly reasonable', placed amid the muscle-flexing notice, it is hard not to enjoy the deflation of its own seriousness.