

MANCHESTER

Il Tempo del Postino



Parachuting into Manchester's 1st International Festival, *Il Tempo del Postino*, which took place last July, promised to transpose the canon established by curators Hans Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno into a performative setting, giving each artist 15 minutes of fame. Punctuated by Gillick's *Factories in the Snow*, a spotlighted ebony piano amidst fake snow, a sentimental prop playing mute master of ceremonies, and Huyghe's comic skit *Hello Zombie*, many of the works were characterized by an ambitious desire to counter theatrical expectations. Tino Sehgal's *Untitled*, wherein the red stage curtains merrily dance around as if auditioning for a part in *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, was by far the most

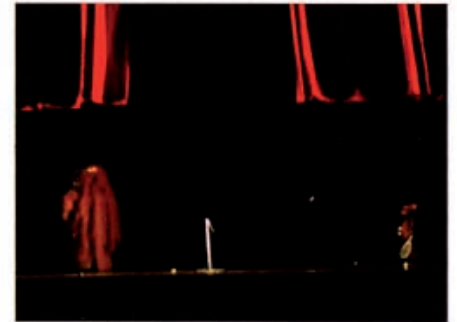
successful in this sense, capturing the excitement, promise and enchantment of the opening scene. Though a difficult act to follow, it was all but equaled by Doug Aitken's *Light Bright Now* featuring midwestern auctioneers rapidly toasting each other. Just as often, however, Brechtian devices and Cagney tactics fell flat. Those most comfortable with working in gallery environments showed a poor grasp of timing. Many of the events dragged on, exponentially losing impact. Tacita Dean's name-dropping edition of *4'33"* (feat. Merce Cunningham) was narrowly beaten to the bottom of the barrel by Gordon's *It's Only Real When It's Dark*, playing the local nostalgia card with a cheesy rendition of Joy Division's *Love Will Tear Us Apart*. The frosty reception this received suggests that a better way of having a regional dialogue would have been to commission a few artists based in the host city.

The majority of the event defamiliarized the 'conventions' of theater in a formulaic way: place the performers amidst the audience (Aitken, Anri Sala, Barney & Bepler), encourage audience participation/inclusion (Olafur Eliasson's *Echo House*), deconstruct the institution (Gonzalez-Foerster's mobilization of the orchestra as

performers) — breaking down the fourth wall to nobody's great surprise. Much of this seemed stuck in early-'90s, eternally returning to clichéd investigations of authorship and quasi-minimalist gestures rather than risking constructing anything richer for fear of accusations of 'operatics.'

This can't be said of Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler's *Guardian of The Veil* by virtue of its eschewal of stoic taste and its embrace of baroque narratives and myth-laden iconography. Less haptic than Barney's films, the theatrical performance did at least suggest a more thorough engagement with what theater is capable of and thus ultimately of what visual arts might learn from it.

—Neil Mulholland



Pierre Huyge, *Hello Zombie*, 2007. Upperleft: Doug Aitken, *Light Bright Now*, 2007. Photos: Howard Barlow.