

## ■ Con Art

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**Site Gallery** Sheffield February 16 to April 6

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'Magic/Object/Action' is the first essay in the catalogue of this show, in which magicians, illusionists, escapologists and a flock of sheep all make an appearance. In 'Con Art', magic is not just the ability to cast spells nor to perform illusory tricks effortlessly before an audience's very eyes. The magician, as a beguiling entertainer, is a pivotal figure for a number of artists, having the ability to create a willing, complicit audience. The success of this show lies not simply with its unabashed desire to entertain viewers with a new set of conjuring tricks, but to reveal in the process some provocative questions on the subject of illusion itself.

'Con Art' brings together the work of 12 international artists. Lens-based media predominates, with video and other time-based media stealing the show. The tone is set in part by Christian Jankowski's film *The Flock*, 2002,

**Mark Wallinger**

*Regard a Mere Mad Rager* 1993 video still detail

situated in the gallery's entrance, where an illusionist turns 12 visitors to 'Con Art' into real sheep. Between each transformation, he demonstrates the lack of trap doors and false curtains, yet still disguises how the illusion is done. The resulting flock is herded around the gallery to view the other works on show, filmed from a sheep's viewpoint, and then transformed back into their human selves. *The Flock* is a sly introduction to the show, in which viewers are simultaneously entertained, but are also made aware of being the butt of a Jankowski joke: to what degree are you in on the act?

Other videoworks by Mark Wallinger, Aura Satz and Simon Patterson engage in some aspect of deconstructing the performance of a magician or illusionist. Wallinger and Satz both re-edit archival TV footage, and use the notion of reversal to defamiliarise the original material. In *Regard a Mere Mad Rager*, 1993, Wallinger takes Tommy Cooper's performance of a bottle and hat trick, plays it in reverse, and then reflects the monitor image into a mirror. The viewer is then left to work out the palindrome Wallinger creates. By turning the image on its vertical axis, Aura Satz's *I put a spell on you*, 2001, reverses the traditional roles between an illusionist and his levitating female assistant. The assistant appears more like a sleepwalker and her entranced state means the reversal of gender roles is a partial one. Satz adds another technological trick to the original illusion; a kaleidoscopic effect on the woman's torso, which is sometimes magnified or impossibly pinched. Is Satz alluding to some historic beliefs on entrancement and

**Simon Patterson**

*Escape Routine* 2002



female susceptibility, or simply playing with the image? In common with Wallinger, she leaves viewers to draw their own conclusions.

Much less ambiguous, and consequently more satisfying, is Simon Patterson's re-enactment of Houdini's tricks in *Escape Routine (Work In Progress)*, 2002. Displayed on an airline-style seat monitor, *Escape Routine* features a cabin crew, who mix their routine safety demonstrations with that of the escapologist. A female voice-over advises on the use of handcuffs and trick straitjackets, and how to get out of them, but also emphasises the importance of the performance itself. The two routines of the escapologist and the cabin crew wittily coincide when, with great style, an offending cigarette is literally whipped out of a passenger's mouth by the flight attendant. *Escape Routine* is a deconstruction, in that it reveals both the mechanics of escape and the mechanisms of a legendary escapologist's performance. Ironically the knowledge of 'how it's done' does not detract from Houdini's legacy as an entertainer. In *Escape Routine*, knowledge and the process of deconstruction are presented as pleasures that are as important as the pleasure of the illusion itself.

Other works in 'Con Art' investigate the object and its relationship to magic, and significantly, how the object shifts the performative element to the viewer. An example is *Device and Illusion*, 2002, Jonathan Allen's large, luminous, lenticular photograph of a painter's easel in a studio. The easel is empty, but suggestive of the art historical place of pictorial illusion. The expectation, that a hidden image will reveal itself as long as you stand in the right place, and the physical presence of *Device and Illusion*, sends viewers pacing back and forth in front of the work. But this desire is frustrated; the painter's easel remains empty, and the viewer is left feeling manipulated by a trick that never reveals itself.

If Allen's photograph risks disappointing the viewer, a poltergeist experience with a wine glass exploits the element of doubt more rewardingly. The interactivity of the viewer is crucial to *Values for a New Age*, 2002 by Kyrianiou & Hollington. Here the wine glass is first viewed through a spyhole, and then on two monitors. In real space, the wine glass appears to be completely inanimate, except the viewer is very aware of sensors clicking away while

peering at the glass. However, in CCTV style, the monitors appear to record the glass moving. A return to the spyhole confirms that the glass is in a different place creating doubt on a number of levels: what viewers have seen, or not seen, with the suspicion that a suggestion has also been planted in the mind. *Values for a New Age* uses an illusion to raise provocative questions about the nature of evidence, documentation, and your own reliability as a witness.

The immediacy of *Values for a New Age* initially sets other works that investigate the uncanny power of the animated object at a disadvantage. However, the photographs of Alessandra Spranzi, Anna & Bernhard Blume, Sarah Charlesworth and Keith Tyson's spell books bring other dimensions to 'Con Art'. Photography's ability to play tricks and masquerade as evidence are utilised by Spranzi's levitating objects at a dinner table, and the strange constructivist happening apparently documented by the Blumes. Magic, in its more occult sense, is suggested by Tyson's *Magic Item*, 1976-2000, and *Control & Abandon*, Charlesworth's photograph from the 'Natural Magic', 1992-93 series. Here a pack of cards, with the title words printed on the backs, are thrown in the air, while Tyson's encased books, with detailed instructions and warnings, ensure that activating magic is not left to chance. Tyson's books also appear in Inge Lüscher's ongoing photographic series *Please practice magic, whatever it means to you, now* in which 18 participants present a range of 'magic moments' that include the simplest of pleasures: the sensation of smoke in the mouth for Laurence Lee, or Eva and Adele's kiss.

'Con Art' is a compelling show, not just because of its seductive theme with the connotations of spectacle and entertainment. It is a playful exhibition, but the underlying investigation of the power of illusion, and its histories, is a serious one. ■

**Con Art** tours to Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea in the Autumn.

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