

## ■ Trauma

Dundee Contemporary Arts July 7 to September 2

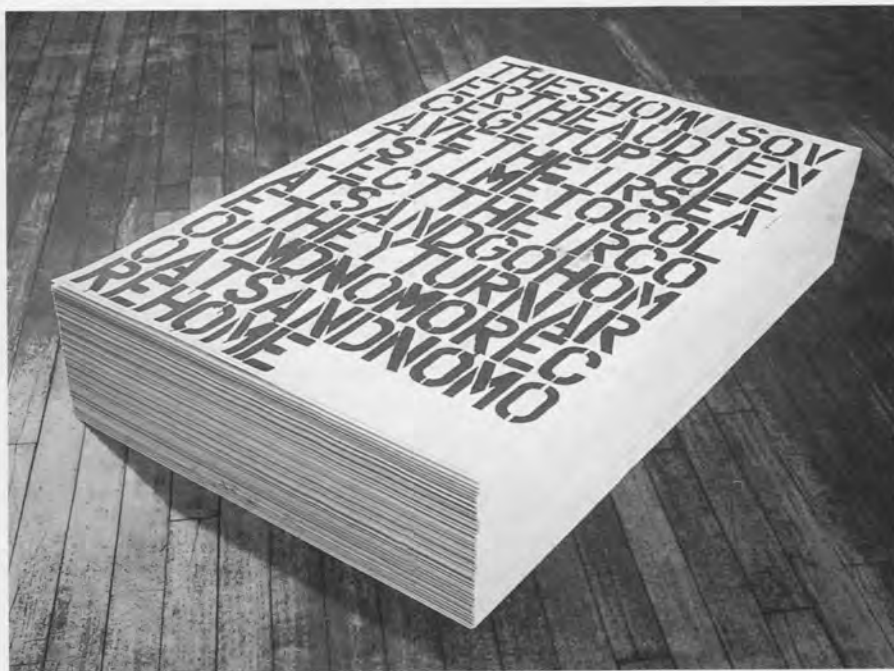
Trauma is a charged word and full of connotation. From the psychological to the pathological, trauma evokes powerful, often shocking experiences and the marks these make: injuries to bodies and souls, which encompass the social, sexual, historical and political. Trauma also brings with it a crucial figure, that of the witness, along with the act of testimony or even confession. In the 20th Century, the camera has played a significant part for both victims and perpetrators alike in bearing witness to trauma. However, mediating the experience of trauma to a collective, often global audience is fraught with ambiguities, where

raising consciences, mobilising action, voyeurism and anaesthetised viewers are all part of the territory.

Consequently, to title a show of contemporary art 'Trauma' seems like a provocation. It sets up a number of challenges, both for the works by 12 international artists that must carry the weight of this theme, but also for the expectations created in the viewer. The curators have effectively thrown down the gauntlet: 'can you take it?'

It is with this challenge in mind that you enter the exhibition only to be immediately confronted by the slogan 'Go home there is nothing 2 see' which is incorporated into Martin Boyce's piece *Now I've Got Worry*, (storage unit), 1997. This slogan, painted on wood and installed into a shelving unit with coloured laminates, simultaneously evokes scenes of accidents and the work of Piet Mondrian. The combined references to an unseen trauma, to abstraction while telling art audiences that there is nothing to see makes an obviously ironic start to the show. However, the wall-based works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Maria Lindberg keep this knowing irony in its place whilst at the same time sharing similar concerns with minimalist approaches. The framed photocopies which constitute Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled*, 1988, list significant titles and dates such as 'Patty Hearst 1975 Jaws 1975, Vietnam 1975 ...'. War, acts of terrorism, mass murder are traumas that compete with landmarks in popular culture, but the resonance of all are contingent on the viewer's own memories and sense of history. If traumatic events of a collective, global nature are signified by Gonzalez-Torres, the effects on an individual are alluded to in Maria Lindberg's *Drawings*, 1995-99. These are sparingly executed, with simple motifs and small handwritten words, which significantly play with the viewer. An example of this is *Abused Drawing* that

Christopher Wool &  
Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
*Untitled* 1993



consists of black painted squares and shoe prints. The drawing has evidently been walked on and thus abused as an art object but the footprints also signify that the act of drawing may be more important as part of a larger process. All this suggests art as therapy, but Lindberg's play on words (and the presence of Boyce's piece) curbs any assumption that this is an artwork that simply expresses or gives testimony to a trauma experienced first-hand by the artist. As a consequence, both modes (postmodern irony and the confessional mode) and their connection to trauma are cast into question.

The dialogues between these works have to operate with the soundtrack emanating from *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, 1997, an hour-long DVD projection by Johan Grimonprez, which is installed in a room nearby. The content of *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* has much in common with Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled* works, since both artists are referencing key events of the 60s and 70s, although in Grimonprez' case, the history in question is that of hijacking. News footage of some of the most infamous (and also some long forgotten) hijackings of the era predominate, with the personal testimonies of both hijacker and hijacked being juxtaposed with quotations from Don DeLillo, such as 'Nothing happens until it is consumed'. *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* is a history lesson, a reminder of both the complexity of cultural fascination with the figure of the hijacker and of the ideological issues that were at stake. Yet even in the face of such lethal situations, as revealed by the images of exploding aeroplanes and pools of blood, the inanity of journalists' questions (such as whether the length of the airhostesses' skirts attracts hijackers, or whether the terrorist got the sandwiches he requested) is equally disturbing. However, the most troubling aspect of this work is our own eager consumption of traumatic experiences – as long as we can watch them happening to others.

This is a powerful work, but one that highlights a problem with this show that becomes more apparent once you are in the main gallery. Here the relationship between film, video and the wall or floor-based pieces becomes more problematic. The sensory overload of *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* makes another series of drawings by Maria Lindberg look lost and insubstantial, whilst a crucial blood-red detail on *Slip*, 1992, Lucia Nogueira's delicate glass bell-jar, is easy to overlook. There was a sense of the show's energy being

dissipated so that even works that are not minimalist in approach, such as Tracey Moffat's well known lithographs *Scarred for Life II*, 1999, or the 60 flashing emergency lights that form Kendell Geers' *Cry Wolf*, 1999, struggled to hold the attention. The film and video works of Willie Doherty, Anri Sala, and Ann-Sofi Sidén, on the other hand, are installed in more intimate spaces, heightening the atmosphere of confidentiality in a way that inevitably draws the viewer in.

It is hard not to jump to the conclusion that it is the

Martin Boyce  
*Now I've Got Worry*  
(storage unit) 1997



film and video works which speak to the theme of 'Trauma' most compellingly. This is in part because of the wider relationship that lens-based media has with trauma and from which audiences will inevitably draw. Yet familiarity with such narratives and how they are constructed through the camera and the screen, presents the show with a tightrope not entirely of its own making. On the one side there is the danger of viewers being overprovided for by certain works whilst, on the other, are pieces that appear deceptively mute. The works that sit on the tightrope perfectly, such as Doherty's *Tell me what you want*, 1996, are where shadowy identities, awkward silences and subtle repetitions provoke the viewer to reflect on the legacies of those marks made by trauma. ■

**Trauma** tours to Firstsite @ the Minorities Art Gallery, Colchester September 15 to November 17 and MoMA, Oxford January 25 to April 7.

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