

The Curator's Egg



The Curator's Egg, Altera Paris, 2012, installation view

In November 1895, the novelist George du Maurier caricatured 'True Humility' in the satirical magazine *Punch*: 'I'm afraid you've got a bad egg, Mr Jones', says the Bishop to the Curate over breakfast; 'Oh no, my lord,' the Curate replies, 'I assure you that parts of it are excellent!' And so the phrase 'The Curate's Egg' was coined, which perfectly sends up the British fear of causing offence. In 1994, almost 100 years after the publication of Du Maurier's cartoon, and in a decade when 'Sensation' was *de rigueur*, the expression was borrowed for an exhibition at Anthony Reynolds Gallery. Hundreds of art-world aficionados were invited to select one work by a living artist (with the sole restriction that it had to fit through the door) and 75 took up the challenge. The result was a cacophonous display that provoked debate about artistic tastes just as a new breed of curatorial *auteur* was taking centre stage.

On 2 February 2012 – that is, Groundhog Day – Reynolds reprised the idea, with the opening of 'The Curator's Egg, Altera Pars'. The title this

time was misleading (not to mention pretentious) since the exhibition was a sequel more than it was a second half (as the Latin subtitle implies). Yet, 18 years on, the concept continued to compel and the two rooms – crammed as they were – bristled with the energy of all the personalities that had been asked to reveal their tastes. The selectors (none of whom participated in the original exercise) were a largely London-centric bunch, ranging from Sarah Thornton, the author of *Seven Days in the Art World* (2008), through to Caroline Douglas, Head of the Arts Council Collection, and Ed Vaizey, the Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries. A paper hand-out matched each chosen artist with their chooser, although the decisions behind these choices were left unexplained, which was where much of the fun was to be had.

The more literal-minded opted for works that made direct reference to an egg: Jean-Philippe Dordolo's Landscape *Drawings (Sunset / Sunrise)* (2011), in which two raw egg yolks quiver in the bottom-right and top-left corners of two framed boxes, was prominently displayed in the reception area beneath the orange glow of Dexter Sinister's *Neon for the Serving Library* (2011). Then there were the more oblique allusions, like the ovoid form in David Batchelor's *04.04.11 (White/Ali)* (2011); Iris Priest's delicate shell-like roe deer skull painted in a florid William Morris print; or the rich yolky yellow of Andrew Graves's painting *Lounge* (2012).

Predictably, several participants chose to promote their organizations through their selections – like Victoria Pomery, the Director of Turner Contemporary in Margate, who picked *Boulder, Iceland* (1996) by Hamish Fulton, who they are currently exhibiting. Some used it to advocate for their own medium: Keith Wilson, the artist and curator of 'Modern British Sculpture' (2011) at the Royal Academy, picked a sensitive sculpture by Sam Porritt that (appropriately for this show) questioned the societal and artistic cult of the individual; while Mary Doyle, the co-founder of the Drawing Room in London, submitted a stunning graphite and pencil drawing by Emma McNally. And others put themselves forward, like the

ebullient Italian curator Alfredo Cramerotti, who selected *Tent* (2010) by Bedwyr Williams, a sculpture made from a single sheet of pasta.

This sense of play was enhanced by Nicholas Keogh's *A Film About Bluebottles* (2010) – one of the highlights of the exhibition – which caused his slapstick soundtrack to cascade down from the first floor like the jumbled neon letters of Tim Etchell's *Will Be* (2010) that were hung above the staircase. The dispersed letters spelled out the phrase 'the future will be confusing', which could be taken as the resounding message for this show. Predicting tomorrow's tastes is futile and so the best inclusions pointed to the politics of preference. Such as Shaun Galdwell's *I Also Live At One Infinite Loop* (2011), a stand-out work selected by Jane Won, in which the artist's outstretched arm holds a video camera, the display screen of which shows him recording himself as he does dizzying stunts in an L39 jet fighter. The *mise en abyme* mirrors brilliantly the narcissism of the art world, which is what made this, for those in the know, such a thoroughly intriguing show.