

The Degree Zero of Art Shows

Review

'All Smoke and No Fire' at Free Range

June in London; the sun breaks through the cold spring skies, flowers begin to bloom, and thousands of Art and Design students prepare to expose the last three years of their work to the public. For those interested or involved in the creative industries, London is lucky to host numerous established Art and Design Universities, such as Chelsea and Central Saint Martins (to name just two), alongside hosting degree show fairs to accommodate the work produced in Art Colleges outside of London.

To those who have invested their time and energy in a creative degree, the final show represents more than the culmination of three years of learning. 'The Degree Show' has come to signify a young artist's public entrance into the real world of creative industry. It is a chance to prove your professionalism and your potential, not only to colleagues, but to future employers, curators and collectors. Whether you approach degree shows with this fatalist attitude or not, one cannot deny that for those involved the degree show process is often one saturated by hope, hype and competitive adrenalin. So is this what art college is all about? And does the degree show really prepare artists for the oncoming abyss of art practice outside of the institutional comfort blanket?

At this year's ***Free Range*** graduate Art and Design show, one Artist's Group from Nottingham managed to smuggle a Trojan Horse into the midst of the spectacle, offering an inspired repose from, and reflection on, the competitive degree show phenomenon.

Free Range is 'Europe's largest graduate Art and Design Show', 'Housed in the cavernous splendour of Brick Lane's Old Truman Brewery'¹. For many recent art graduates, this show offers the chance to expose their work to a new audience in the heart of London's East End. The venue democratizes the display process, offering students from diverse colleges space to exhibit under one large umbrella event. For viewers; members of the public and arts professionals, Free Range provides a convenient solution to taking in the fruits of this year's creative graduates without having to trawl the length and breadth of the country.

Yet, what are the negative implications of a large event such as this? From a graduate's point of view, individual practices risk being submerged in the sheer amount of work on display. Audiences skim past, searching out objects of particular visual interest amongst the repetitive formulae of wall mounted displays. Art Fairs such as this are in danger of becoming salon type shows that, quite frankly, do not suit all creative disciplines. Time based and conceptual works suffer in this environment.

There is also a lot of emphasis on commercialism, 'uncover today's talent at tomorrow's prices'², which makes artistic talent seem like a sofa or nothing more than a strategically made investment. For many, Art *is* an investment but, in the words of artist and writer, Matt Lippiatt, 'Is this what four years of art education boils down to? Selling?'³

¹ O'Hanlon, Tamsin, (Free Range Director), Introductory statement to the Free Range Catalogue, London 2008.

² *ibid*

³ Lippiatt, Matt, '*Sell sell sell: The Stink at Degree Shows*', The Times, 11.07.06

As a viewer it feels as though many of the ideas concerning the context and value of art work, that have been in circulation ever since Duchamp put a urinal into an open submission exhibition in 1917, have been overlooked. These issues may not concern every field of creative practice but there must surely be opportunities to push the installation and reception of art works in more creative and radical directions. And this is exactly what artist's group **Tether** did with their collaborative offering to **Free Range** this year.

After gazing at the plethora of art and design work on display around the large, well lit enclosures I stumbled across one dark and mysterious room at the heart of the Truman Brewery. As I entered, I had the feeling of wondering into a foreign land, somewhat barren for the lack of wall displays and signage. Strange hooded figures with lanterns took position around the room fulfilling the role of invigilators. A uniformed man controlled a sweeping search light and, if you turned around quickly enough, pillars could be seen creeping around the room, drawn to the movements of unsuspecting viewers.

In the centre stood a large, cardboard Trojan Horse, at once awkward and intricate in its execution. But what had been transported into Free Range hidden inside the belly of such a beast? Well, on approaching the cardboard animal and looking inside through a hole I discovered a model replica of the Tether Headquarters.

The loud roar of an on-coming steam train would occasionally break the calm silence, on trying to locate its bombastic source I found a small toy train coming out of a model tunnel and then tracing a circle around a pillar before disappearing once more. Echoing the architecture of the room, large pillars with legs would engage viewers in impromptu games of cat and mouse, turning the viewer from distanced spectator into a viewed and active subject within the whole installation. Inside the room many subtle and intriguing objects and interventions unravelled themselves, each appearing under the guise of being something other, something grander and more authoritative than they actually were. A successful piece that played with notions of art interpretation and narrative was the selection of audio guides, each offering a different insight into the project, complete with digressions, nonsense and unrelated discussions.

Through this intervention, Tether initiated a project that was 'free from individual artistic ownership'⁴, suggesting new and collaborative ways of working whilst illuminating the aesthetic and conceptual drawbacks of displaying art works that are competing for attention. This piece also addressed the reality of *post* graduate life, as most Tether members are one year out from graduating in Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University. Their project cast a critical eye on the ecstatic tremors of degree shows, calling into question the strategies artists employ in order to survive *after* the exhibits have been taken down. Should art universities really be sending graduates off to occupy two metres squared of an established fair or should they be asking graduates to organise their own shows, finding their own ways to distribute work and show projects in the public realm?

From an audience's point of view '**All Smoke and No Fire**' was successful on many levels. The project added a much needed element of criticism to the event whilst remaining humorous, exiting and inviting to the diverse array of viewers that came to visit Free Range, from children to collectors. Let's hope that Tether keep on making such adventurous and intriguing projects and that some of next year's

⁴ Tether, Taken from the press release for **All Smoke and no Fire**, 2008

graduates are willing to take a more unconventional and reflexive approach to the ways they launch themselves into the public consciousness.