

# METRO PICTURES

McLean, Matthew. "Art Night," *Frieze.com* (July 9, 2016).

## frieze



Nina Beier, *Anti-ageing*, 2015, installation view at 190 Strand, 2016

There is an essay I've long wanted to write about the recent development of the experience economy in the UK. It would begin with Madonna playing Brixton Academy in 2000 and then trace how, over the following decade, live events came to represent greater shares of musicians' incomes and music festivals became part of the national calendar. It would draw parallels between this and the museum expansions of the early 2000s, and the ways in which spaces like Tate Modern's Turbine Hall became a place not just for ladders and slides but for once-in-a-lifetime, high demand concerts (Kraftwerk, 2013). The essay would encompass too exclusive pop-ups (Carsten Höller's Double Club), interactive one-offs ('You Me Bum Bum Train', *Marina Abramovic Presents...*, 2009) and the unspoken sense of endurance underlying several of these projects: the way the queues for immersive installations by Turrell, Kusama and Hiorns becoming as much a part of the experience as the viewing of the work itself. Somewhere, the essay would map all of this against the growing presence of the mobile phone, its evolution as both photographic record and geolocation device – a means to prove one's own presence and portal into everyone else's attempts to be there (wherever there might be). That, let's be honest, would somehow reference the work of Claire Bishop.

This is not that essay, but I feel it's only fair to disclose this mélange of unease and paranoia vis-à-vis a certain kind of cultural event, as it probably tinged my experience of London's inaugural Art Night. Inspired by the sporadic Nuit Blanche festivals, which began in Paris in 2002 and see arts venues across major cities hosting special nocturnal openings and events, Art Night is the work of Unlimited Productions, and this year was curated by Kathy Noble (London's ICA was also billed as 'guest curator', in a somewhat unfathomable arrangement).

Art Night had a pleasingly manageable array of 10 projects in 10 venues, all (bar one) of which were situated around the Strand within 20 minutes walk of each other. At 180 Strand – a disused 1971 block, turned venue for exhibitions and sometimes fashion shows – Celia Hempton had taken over a room with a dramatic vista over the Thames and a large construction site. Responding to the river and the heaped masses of earth below, Hempton installed a display structure on one side of the room, hung with three of her close cropped female nudes. The reverse echoed these bare orifices with intimate, splodgy brown studies of the source of the Thames in a Gloucestershire field, painted in situ. Across the road, Jennifer West's installation in the glorious church of St Mary le Strand claimed to also reflect on place, and its association with memory. A film screen installed in the altar-end of the church displayed rushes of celluloid, onto which visitors had written the name of their favourite films. At least I think that was the gist of it: it was hard to think amidst such overpoweringly glorious architecture. Nina Beier's installation *Anti-ageing* (2015) also risked becoming over-determined by its setting – a show apartment in a luxury development in 190 Strand. I loved glancing in the bathroom here, stacked with unused towels and toiletries, a fantasy of elegance assembled in the cupboard (Burberry, Jo Malone, belted trenches and pumps, if you must know). To reflect this untouched assemblage, Beier created a tableau: men sat still, their faces thick with creams, a dog lay on the carpet, and outside a window a younger man silently smoked. In another room, two women knelt on all fours by a unruffled bed. It was a little like being inside a Roxy Music record sleeve. The addition of a spill of organic fruits and veg felt like gilding the artificial lily; whereas in a laundry room the installation of a pair of pristine, oversized white sneakers splashed with saline solution made an altogether weirder and more lasting impression.

Time had also been standing still at Charing Cross tube station, where Koo Jeong A's *Odorama* (2016) occupied two abandoned platforms of the old Jubilee Line, not used for 20 or so years. The installation comprised bright lights installed at the end of each tunnel that lead towards the platforms (the platforms themselves were roped off) and a thick scent that pervaded the air. The artist, I was told, was inspired by the Agar tree. When struck by disease, the tree produces a resin that is used to make the prized scent Oud, yet so protected is the tree that the resin can only be harvested when felled by natural causes. In short: it's about the paradoxical allure of decay, about letting things go to seed. In this sense, the disused tube was a perfect venue on paper. In practice, it didn't look or feel so different from any of the shabby lines on, say, the District line.

For *After After* (2016), Laure Provoust had set up camp in Admiralty Arch, the bizarre structure that spans Pall Mall, introducing Buckingham Palace, but whose interior is a mystery to most, including me. I was led around a few rooms by a fidgeting, wittering performer ('I've worked here for a hundred years...') whose frustrating inability to orient us throughout the installation could either have been an integral part of the intended ambience or a basic lack of organizational nous. Rarely have I experienced the collapse of art and life so wholly, or so irritatingly. The main event was a new film installation in which a man searches for a woman, his spotlight alighting objects left around the viewing room in the process. At one point of high tension, he illuminates a tin of peas. I thought it was rather brilliant.

I missed a new dance piece by the legendary Linder at the nearby Duke of York steps as it was delayed by rain, so I rushed to the National Gallery instead. There, the all-girl choir Gaggle responded to George Shaw's mucky takes on forest mythology with a tree house-building workshop and a hymn to Diana, presented as tableaux vivants, with one bare breast – the sign of the hunter goddess's virginity – drawn onto each of their t-shirts. (As many Nuit Blanches have demonstrated, just being in a museum at night is a thrill, an easy trick that Art Night might have missed on this occasion.)

I made it to the courtyard of Somerset House for Xu Zhen's re-staging of his 2011 film *Physique of Consciousness* – a kind of 'meta Tai-Chi' – and had I skipped dinner, I might have got a full house. However, I had to miss Cecilia Bengolea and – woe! – two performances from Alexandra Bachzetsis. I hate missing out. In fact, my concerns about the experience economy are partially informed by the way that it feels predicated on the fear of not being there; of so many experiences being special because lots of people will miss out on them. Joan Jonas is now 80 years old, so I could not miss the chance to see her perform *Reanimation* (2012) at Southwark cathedral, to the musical accompaniment of Jason Moran. Tired, hyped and with just enough white wine inside me, I'll admit I was primed for an emotional experience, but what followed blew me away. Inspired by the writing of Halldor Laxness, Jonas recited passages, projected stills of arctic glaciers, made drawings of ancient-looking fish, and moved herself in front of projections so that her body became cinema. In the most powerful sequence, the screen showed footage of an elongated shadow trudging across a snowy field as if on stilts; Jonas rang an array of bells. It was stirring and gorgeous and innocent and profound, and it reminded me of that bit of St Augustine: 'The *jubilus* is a melody that conveys that the heart is in travail over something it cannot bring forth in words'. At the end, the person next to me leaned over: 'I usually hate all that plinky-plonky spiritual stuff, but that was wonderful'. They were not the only skeptic who found themselves softened that night.