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I Wonder What the Silence Was About

by Malwina Mapinska

The walls of the small room are painted black and as we pass through the entrance, decorated with bands made out of silver foil, it feels as though we are entering a peculiar chapel.

Three films, on three separate screens, are being shown in total darkness. It is the largest screen that initially attracts attention. At first, it's hard to determine what is going on. The film looks like an unusual documentary, in which various individuals, including pedestrians on the streets of London, make statements about art. Everyone is talking about a pair of mysterious artists, once politically engaged, but now silent for several years.

These artists, the subject of Weinmayr's installation, are Hannah Vowles and Glynn Banks, left wing radicals who created the Art in Ruins collective in the 80s and 90s. Art in Ruins became known worldwide for their uncompromising and eccentric art practice until a sudden withdrawal from the limelight. Today nobody knows what has happened to either Glyn Banks or Hannah Vowles, nor how to read their persistent silence. Is their lack of engagement in the art scene a sign of active opposition towards a system that they no longer wish to participate in? An act of provocation? The result of creative burn-out? Or maybe just silence before the storm of another unexpected project?

Weinmayr's work is intended as a detailed investigation into the disappearance of AIR from public life. "Investigation", however, may not be the right word. The further we enter into the speculations of artists (Ed Baxter, Stewart Home...), curators (David Thorp), critics (Heinz Schütz...) and representatives of British and German galleries, the further we move away from the subjects of the piece.

The opinions of experts become abstract. Documentary interviews become mixed with staged scenes where pedestrians, refuse collectors, fishmongers and a woman in a telephone booth all talk about Banks and Vowles. Statements and voices are disconnected from images of the speakers, a fact which increases a sense of alienation and in no way moves towards resolution of the mystery.

Similarly in the second film, statements are delivered without coherent narrative. We are exposed instead to various opinions, memories, impressions and speculations. Someone mentions that Hannah and Glyn used to wear black, were ambitious, and filled with anger. Another person speculates that they moved to Zimbabwe, while someone else questions the success of their creative methods.

Two mysteriously vanished artists continue to elude the viewer and reflections about them become a collection of unimportant labels.

The third film is the most surprising. The words of the authorities are reiterated by amateur actors in an experiment based on similar principles to those of Chinese Whispers. Participants re-enact opinions they have heard earlier and memorised.

Weinmayr thus poses questions regarding the nature of communication, the border between truth and fiction, authenticity and artificiality. Weinmayr also calls into question the existence of mystery within art. Perhaps silence is one of Art in Ruins' greatest assets inasmuch as it allows for the generation of myth? In addition to this, the mysterious darkness, which pervades the installation serves as a tribute to the inexplicable aspect of art, one of its most indispensable elements.