

SOUND

Lundahl & Seidl: The Memory of WT Stead

Lundahl & Seidl's *The Memory of WT Stead* is easily explained. Seven spectators, who are about to become rather passive participants, sit on piano stools in the showrooms of the world's foremost manufacturer of concert grand pianos: Steinway. These spectators are given first a set of wireless headphones, that modern day equivalent of the disembodied spirit guide, and then a sophisticated blindfold – goggles with a gauze that permits the perception of light and darkness, but not vision. Rather more material guides then lead the sense-hampered audience gently by the hand on a disorientating tour of Steinway's premises, and indeed of the company's product, since I have not before so tenderly explored the innards of such an instrument. All the while the voice in the ear gives instructions for movement and prompts reflections on the relation of the haptic and the immaterial worlds. These are in part the musings of the journalist and believer in parapsychology WT Stead – a man who, if you read his claim that he would die either by drowning or by lynching through the right sort of filter, foretold his death on the Titanic in 1912, and who lends his name to this work.

The tour ends with the spectators seated on piano stools in the chilly basement: sight blocked, one's body becomes strangely and swiftly attuned to the nuances of space, and indeed to the tactile properties of pianos and the skin of one's escort. Under a single light the classical pianist Cassie Yukawa embarks upon one of Liszt's transcriptions of a Bach fugue and then a deeply compelling and felt rendition of the Hungarian composer György Ligeti's 'Pour Irina', from the third book (1995-2001) of his *Études*. Because one's senses are now so heightened one attends to this performance, and the music, with even more attention than would be usual for a piece of music. Interestingly, since I often concentrate on classical music with

my eyes closed, I found myself watching wide eyed – perhaps because I was grateful for the remission of blindness, perhaps because one is rarely granted the chance to watch so closely a serious musician at work. Yukawa, conversely, like a great many concert pianists, plays much of the time with her eyes closed.

But explanations are not enough; this is a performance that fomenters speculative association. One is, in a very real sense – and that sense is mostly touch – making abstracted and apparently haphazard connections in the dark. One of the most telling comments from my spirit guide was a question: 'What happens when the light is turned off inside a text?' At least, I think that is what it said. Now, this presumes that a text is self-illuminating, that as a convention it provides its own meaning. What happens if you turn the light off and force the 'reader' to proceed in the dark? Either the cover is closed or the reader begins to make their own meaning, to create their own illumination.

Given the overarching rubric of Stead's predicted death and the exploration of the spirit world, part of that illumination, for me, concerned the associations of music and mortality in the domain of art. The Baroque vanitas symbolised human ephemerality through the sheet of music, the broken string of the lute, or maybe just the musical instrument wedged into a still-life along with the decaying fruit, dead game and dice. The real or yearned-for plenitude of early modern culture included a very clear sense that everything was materially perishable, and that everything, however infinitesimally slowly and faintly, faded to nothing. What Henry Vaughan in his poem *The Morning Watch* called 'the great Chime/ and Symphony of nature' would eventually cease its hymn to heaven. This attention to the ephemeral and the mortal was given further emphasis during Lundahl & Seidl's guided tour: at certain points the darkness was broken by hazy light, which was simply that – a brightness at the edge of experience towards which you moved. The baroque motif was reinforced by the haptic exploration of what felt like a full-length mirror – obviously a surface for visual reception rather

than a tangible one – though one might, touching, through inexperience mistake the highly polished wood of a Steinway for glass. The decay on the final note of 'Pour Irina' inhabited precisely that liminal space at the edge of material experience towards which the Baroque gestured, and towards which western man in his terrorised, secular modernity has stumbled ever after, whether through the risible apparatuses of new religions and systems such as spiritualism, or simply in English modernism's rediscovery of poets such as Vaughan, Richard Crawshaw and John Donne, and Thomas Browne's great essay on death, 'Urne Buriall'.

There is a historical sense in which the light did go off inside the text of western culture, not suddenly, all at once, but progressively across what was, paradoxically, called the Enlightenment. So that, by the 1880s in the West, in encountering man's death one was quite literally at times feeling one's way in the dark, and the archaeology of pre-Enlightenment culture that high modernism undertook was one form of that exploration. At one point this last note was present, a material experience, and then eventually it was gone. And yet so sharpened was perception by now through the starvation of its normal diet, the elimination of background noise, that one sensed it still. That note died into infinity, into some kind of imperceptible afterlife that some hope perhaps all dead, redundant, obsolete things inhabit, whether Christian or just 'spirit world'. Which was, of course, the faith-driven, fearful understanding of both those Protestant Dutch painters of the 17th century and the perhaps less clearly theologically defined belief of WT Stead. It is an infinity that as a culture we still yearn to touch and which we will never be equipped to explore. ■

The Memory of WT Stead was at Steinway & Sons, London 25 March to 6 April.

CHRISTOPHER TOWNSEND is professor of the history of avant-garde film in the department of media arts, Royal Holloway, University of London and senior research fellow at the Henry Moore Institute, 2012-13.

LOST BOYS

The Territories of Youth

Curated by Denis Linehan & Matt Packer

Eleanor Antin, Doug DuBois, Douglas Gordon, David Haines, Seamus Harahan, Richard Hughes, Julien Nguyen, Alex Rose, Collier Schorr, Steven Shearer, Gillian Wearing

Lewis Glucksmann Gallery, University College Cork, Ireland | www.glucksmann.org | info@glucksmann.org | +353 21 4901844

The Artist's Eye

Photographic Portraits of Artists
from the collection of the Galleria civica di Modena

Curated by Fiona Kearney & Marco Pierini

Exhibitions run until 7 July 2013

galleria civica
comune di modena

UCC

arts
visual arts

GLUCKSMAN