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Exhibitions, installations, etc



Pavel Büchler, *The Castle* (2005)

Pavel Büchler

(Honest) Work

Ikon, Birmingham, UK

Entering the Ikon for Czech artist Pavel Büchler's *(Honest) Work* prompts an immediate interaction with his 2015 installation *Inside Watt*. The gallery's curved glass doors are covered with a passage from Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (1953), making you feel as though you're walking into the book, or at least preparing you for a text-heavy exhibition.

Büchler's *The Castle* (2005) arrests anyone planning to casually stroll through the gallery. This piece consists of numerous weathered-looking loudspeakers facing across from each other and pointed in random directions. They might be found objects, but their arrangement is based on a design for a PA system patented by Marconi in the 1920s, the same decade

Franz Kafka published *The Castle*. Text from his novel echoes from the speakers, spoken by a first generation text-to-speech computer. Kafka's words perfectly capture the dislocation from everyday existence that Büchler's work reveals. There's nothing fundamentally aggressive or challenging in the tone of Kafka's words but, as with any good propaganda, the longer you stand among the battered speakers, the more you begin to feel that someone just doesn't want you there: "*You are not from the Castle, you are not from the village, you aren't anything. Or rather, unfortunately, you are something, a stranger, a man who isn't wanted and is in everybody's way...*"

Throughout, Büchler's exhibition reveals in the alienating qualities of language and text, invoking a comforting paranoia with familiar phrases that have been twisted just enough to feel awkward. Typeset characters,

framed and mounted on the wall, feel at once familiar and threatening. A large X feels displaced from the flow of language. Is it an X that censors, or one that marks the spot? Then there are semantic shortcuts in found object sculptures such as *Il Castello* (2007), with its two pencils, and *Cannon* (2014), made of a billiard ball and a postcard.

Work, in Büchler's analysis, means the place of productivity in which valued contributions to society are made. But whose society is being discussed here? What does good (honest) work mean and what is art's relationship to it? The possible outputs of productivity aren't the direct focus of the exhibition, though. There's a huge collection of photos mounted along one wall, taken during breaks in previous installations of his work at other galleries. Wittily titled *Work (All The Cigarette Breaks)* (2007–14), it reveals shared moments

between curators, gallery workers and the artist himself. The most anyone can do to push back the tide of oppression is to take a break, Büchler could be saying, even if it's only for as long as it takes to smoke a cigarette. The contemporary cigarette break is taken outdoors, thus always causing a disruption in the flow of production.

(Honest) Work is as much about controlling people through language and print as it is about hegemonic structures, and works that put Lenin, Kafka and Marx centre stage threaten to position the exhibition in a bygone era of oppressive state control beyond the experience of most viewers. But while the names and means of oppression might change, Büchler's work is a reminder that we'd do well to re-evaluate and raise awareness of our current controllers and their methods of control.

Mark Hancock