



One might be inclined to think that you ought to visit an exhibition in person before you make the case of having a credible enough opinion to write about it on the internet.

Arguably, an exhibition space can only be understood having visited it, with the set-up, lighting, display and “flow” all having a profound impact on the experience of the viewer. There is a danger in reading reviews and critiques as a means to create false memory, or a presumption that had you been, you would feel a certain way. Despite particular viewing habits, reading the plot line of a film is not the same as watching the film itself, nor does reading the blurb of a book warrant you an effective understanding of the story inside it. The same can be said of galleries.

However, in the curious case of Maria Eichorn’s first and much anticipated show at the Chisenhale Gallery, there is no exhibition to view.

Instead, at 6pm on the 23rd of April, the Chisenhale closed its doors, the only visual clue as to the gallery’s fate being a small placard hung on its gate.

Entitled, “5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours”, German born artist, Eichhorn, has as part of her project, closed the gallery and given all staff paid leave. In this allotted period of time, the gallery, along with its offices, have been shutdown, with all emails to the gallery’s address being deleted, phones left unanswered and the complete absence of any employees on gallery property. From the 24th of April to the 26th of May the Chisenhale Gallery is not open for business. Or so it seems.

Whilst at first glance one could see this as a modern revival of certainly old conceptual address being deleted, phones left unanswered and the complete absence of any employees on gallery property. From the 24th of April to the 26th of May the Chisenhale Gallery is not open for business. Or so it seems.

Whilst at first glance one could see this as a modern revival of certainly old conceptual stunts, most notably Yves Klein's, "The Void" (1958), there is more to Maria Eichhorn's "5 weeks," than just the closure of an esteemed venue on the London contemporary art circuit. The work of art itself, or at least the output of Eichhorn's efforts concern not the gallery, but the acts of the paid employees once they have left. Under the orders of the artist, Chisenhale staff have been told to do whatever they want during their month of absence, with Eichhorn stating that, she "doesn't know," what the employees will get up to, but that "the institution itself and the actual exhibition are not closed, but rather displaced into the public sphere and society."

Of course, the lack of physical tangibility in "5 weeks" is not a singular occurrence, with a 2011 exhibition budget for the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland being used to pay for renovations to the gallery building itself. "It's not easy," Eichhorn stated, "to distinguish what is part of the work and what is not."

You can imagine the disgust of Daily Mail readers, as in their minds eye they see the equivalent of crisp green notes being thrown into the air, pointed questions of, "what's the point?" and "it's not art though, is it," being hissed across dinner parties all over middle England.

Is this a protest on labour?

An attack on the definition of art?

Is this institutional critique? And if it is, how?

If the meaning from Maria Eichhorn's "5 weeks," comes from the activities of the gallery staff during their paid leave, the question ought not to be what the definition of this "art" is, but instead on what the employees will do during their absence to make it art.

A months paid leave is, quite simply, a long time to not be at work. 5 weeks is enough time to go on holiday at least twice. In 5 weeks you can build a nice garden shed, the kind with cushions in it and a nicely painted door, or maybe take a pottery course. In 5 weeks you can trek around a bit of India, or build a school in Ghana, you can definitely learn how to ski in 5 weeks, maybe even pick up a bit of Italian.

Essentially, what we have here is a study of free time, what we do with it, how we make the most of it, and what it tells us about people in general.

The problem with this concept, is that whilst five weeks is a long time, it is also a lot of time to do absolutely nothing whatsoever. I'm sure that for a lot of people, were they to be given five weeks off work, they wouldn't spend it doing anything particularly productive, or at least art worthy. Really, wouldn't the luxury, the joy in this time of paid absence be in the act of being blissfully lazy.

For Maria Eichorn's, "5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours" to be truly successful the outcome should reflect the poignant truth of how we use our spare time. Nervous gallery staff, heads bowed in embarrassment, should laugh apprehensively as Eichorn realises that a good 26% of the gallery staff spent their 5 weeks watching the entire boxset of House of Cards, whilst the rest became increasingly emotionally invested in the outcome of Pointless. The nature of free time is that we inevitably end up wasting it, choosing the instant rewards that come with a lie in, a nice cup of tea in bed and leisurely breakfast over the stress of flight plans, social interaction and busy schedules.

As awful as it is, work (in any form) gives us meaning. The questions which arise from "5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours" are not necessarily about what makes a work of art, but more about the nature of work, and what it means to have free time. It's a social experiment that has the audacity to look into people's lives and challenge them to do something with it. At least, the potential for that is there.

Whatever happens in the next 5 weeks will undoubtedly shape the way in which Eichorn's work is received. Will this be a meditation on institutional critique in the 21st century? Or will Maria Eichorn be the artist responsible for revealing how dull and benign our lives without work, are.

Either way, I can't wait to find out.

– E.S Bell