

Reviews of Work

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by Phil Oppenheim

With a jab of his stumpy finger and a shake of his oddly coiffed head, Donald Trump has distilled our suspicions about the corporate boardroom and our anxieties about work, the workplace, and our roles within it into a malevolently theatrical utterance and gesture: "You're fired!" Helena Reckitt, senior director of exhibitions of the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, sought to illuminate some of the recessed of Trump's rapacious world by assembling works that confront business with the tools and strategies of art in a show that asked **What Business Are You In?** [January 29-March 26, 2005].

Michael Aurbach answered the titular question with the exhibition's show-stopper, a room-filling installation that presented a nightmarish vision of life at the receiving end of a supervisor's power. *The Administrator*, 2001, conjured up a galvanized steel-clad office that, resembling a torture chamber, functions as an intimidation factory. **Aurbach's** fantasia drew its power from the concatenation of small details.

A chair faced a menacing desk; behind the desk were dials and knobs controlling the heating coil on the guest chair---literally a hot seat---and a lever operating the trap door under its legs. Puppet strings, hoops, and knee pads were waiting for prospective victims, while shoe-lifts and rubber stamps (TERMINATE; DELAY; REJECTED) were within easy reach of the desk's occupant (as were the desktop picture frames whose pictures were replaced by mirrors reflecting the boss' own image). A telescope pointed out from the front of the office; a circular set of pipes curled above and behind whoever looked into the eyepiece, assuring a perfect view up one's own asshole. **Aurbach** could have simply caricatured an authority figure to give disenfranchised viewers cheap *ad hominem* laughs at their superior's expense. His mysterious, sadistic office works instead as a portrait of the corruptive force of power itself, an indictment of any institution that places one person beneath the thumb of another.

Jason Irwin's work also proffered an institutional critique, though his target was more precisely the sterility of corporate culture. In wall hangings and a floor sculpture boasting gaudy mirrored surfaces and shiny laminates, Irwin mocked big business' fascination with itself. Enlisting a laser technology used for license plates, he etched images of feral machismo---lions and tigers---into cheap acrylics, creating witty shorthand for career trajectories that stretch from the boardroom to the prison yard, and back again.

Reckitt's curatorial selections also wittily play on the meaning of job performance

by focusing on performance pieces. Two landmark works by category brand leader Andrea Fraser's were presented on video. In *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* , 1989, Fraser dons a professional's hound's-tooth suit to perform a hilariously dry institutional drag show as a docent who drifts into cultural critique and self-analysis. In *Inaugural Speech* , 1997, she adopts several roles (corporate sponsor, artist, Governor of California, etc.) in a soulless cobbling together of political corporate banalities, including an explanation of corporate arts sponsorship as a strategy to crack the elusive upscale demographic.

Lucy Kimbell recreated her *Free Evaluation Service* , previously performed in 2004 at Oxford University, by asking artists to evaluate their practices in a parody of corporate self-reviews and Dianetics life counseling. The survey results were displayed as a series of the participants' hand-drawn dials and dashboards. London-based Carey Young borrowed corporate dramatics for *I Am a Revolutionary*, 2001, a video-performance where she is coached how to persuasively deliver and sell the work's title by a professional trainer, and the similarly ironic *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong*, 1999, wherein she introduced boring, pre-packaged presentation skills to the spirited cacophony of Speaker's Corner's amateur soliloquists.

Young's piece highlights one of the show's flaws. *What Business Are You In?* lapsed by attempting to combine its stated interest in the interplay of art and commerce with academia, leading it to lose its focus, and become more insular (and risking comparisons with **Aurbach's** rectal telescoping). The show also suggested that artists have more in common with each other, with the business of art, than they do with the demands of their particular national marketplaces---if that still means anything. This worked to distance many works from the American business milieu, dulling the show's edge in the same way that the potency of the BBC's sitcom *The Office* got lost in translation in its American adaptation. Lastly, the thorough visitor would have had to commit to nearly three hours---standing or crammed into inhospitable plastic chairs and headphones---to absorb all of the show's video and performance pieces. This, in itself, may be quite a bit to ask the average gallery goer. After all, time *is* money.