

What The Eye Can't See The Heart Can't Grieve For

By Sally O'Reilly

An adage is an accepted truism that, more often than not, can be applied with platitudinous slap-dashery. Matthew Tickle's installation *What the eye can't see the heart can't grieve for*, however, illuminates a rift between language and reality, drawing attention to certain pitfalls within our verbal folklore. Like slapping a sticking plaster on a wound, such maxims are not applicable in more advanced situations; the individual generally requires more than generic treatment. Adages are based on observation and an oral tradition – little account is taken of sophisticated theories of science, philosophy, sociology and so on. In this case you could say that, counter to the phrase 'What the eye can't see...', the unseen often presents a more insidious danger than the visible –radioactivity, chemical weaponry, viral infections and so on.

Tickle's installation, devised in collaboration with theoretical physicist Dr Fay Dowker, consisted of a hundred Geiger counters rigged up to a hundred photographers' flash bulbs and arranged throughout the physics department of Queen Mary's University, London. Every time a particle of background radiation was detected the bulb would flash instantaneously. Every night for six weeks, from dusk until daybreak, the buildings lit up intermittently, as if inhabited by a sprite darting nimbly from room to room, block to block, from clock tower to casement to the deep recesses of laboratories. The light show was a sort of mapping in the four dimensions of space and time whereby the sub-atomic world was translated into a tangible phenomenon, into something we can point at, maybe even give a name to.

Everyday language, though, cannot quite pinpoint what the installation represents –it is neither a mapping nor a translation, it is something beyond such recognizable terms. This highlights the fact that we cannot quite shake off our Newtonian, mechanical understanding of the world. We talk about knock-on effects, the turning wheels of progress, the closing of a chapter. We may know something of Einstein's theories of relativity, and the uncertainty principle that it spawned, but its implications are counter-intuitive. We understand mechanics in terms of cause and effect much more readily –one instance followed by another in a string of interdependent but discrete events – as we apparently see evidence of such things around us, day in, day out. The dog barks, the postman jumps, he bangs his head, he curses. What early twentieth - century physicists introduced was a fault line in the straightforwardness of the physical world, a dissolution of causality. Theorists were led to wonder if perhaps the dog was actually only barking when there was someone around to hear it.

This new relationship between observer and event or object came out of theories of quantum mechanics. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that, at a fundamental level, the behavior of particles is inherently unpredictable. Matter may behave like a particle or a wave but, to make things even more tricky, even its behavior as either one is more a matter of chance than fixed properties; so now scientific enquiry can no longer be based on deterministic deduction, but on probability. What is more, the Copenhagen Interpretation states that only when the human observer observes a particle is it in a definitive state, before then the wave/particle itself is an indeterminate entity hanging in limbo, like the dog without the bark.

In tandem with these scientific discussions, Tickle's installation also raises issues of consciousness and its influence on meaning within the context of visual art. It touches on the profoundest misreadings of reality or, more accurately, the rift between sensory perception, assumption and conceptual possibilities. Tickle's Geiger counters detect particles, yet instead of interpreting them as waves or particles, he transforms them, by way of flash bulbs, into light. Light is as lacking in solidity as the initial radioactive particle, yet it has a visibility that exists within our range of perception. But here is where the viewer is essential to the existence of the piece: the insubstantial nature of light –its transience –effectively destroys the notion of the art object. We may be able to hold the apparatus, but the bulbs and Geiger counters do not constitute the

work itself; the work exists only as a series of moments of perception, as imprints on our retinas. The moment of looking is the point at which the art exists. In addition, if we think in terms of the Copenhagen Interpretation, the flashes might not even exist at all unless we are there to witness them. This is about as subjective as you can get: experience is not only evaluated from the individual's perception of an event, its existence relies upon it. Not even the structuralists could have come up with that. It is eerie to think of all this radioactivity ticking away in the world at large; it reminds us that hidden, natural forces could rise up at any moment. But then again, wasn't electricity deemed a terrible threat to mankind before it was harnessed and bent to our will? The flashes at Queen Mary recall the harshness of lightning, yet they are silent, velvet-footed through the corridors of the physics department. The violence of a flash disembodied from its usually attendant crash creates an uncanniness that is more like the disturbance caused by a moment suspended for too long than by classic schlock tactics. An element of Freud's definition of the uncanny is that which is usually concealed made visible—in this case it is the flashes that sear through the darkness which are evocative of invisible forces. As Freud also points out, a fear of the dark is perhaps more a fear of the absence of vision, and here light only makes us more aware that the source of the event is not visible.

As a result of this twisty-turning series of the visible and invisible, *What the eye can't see...* has a curious relationship to photography, the 'fixer' of visual information. The flash bulbs obviously refer to the photographic medium, yet there is no moment of capture, no shutter other than the observer's eyelid. In allusion to photography's documentary application, the flashes are evidence of the radioactivity, but indirectly, through a sort of trans-sensory analogy which reinterprets the imperceptible in a parallel, observable form. In fact, the shortcomings of photography even extend to the documentation of the piece as a whole; namely, the incompatibility between shutter speed and the unpredictability of the flashes. The sluggishness of the camera could not match the instantaneous spectacle, making it impossible to produce any photographs of the buildings as they scintillated in the night.

Of course, even the most responsive stills camera could never capture the essence of a time-based event anyway. The only real solution for documentation was to video the installation. As presented here on a DVD, Tickle has transformed the piece into something else again. Although it may evoke the intangibility of the original work, the physicality of the image on the screen solidifies it somewhat. The video image still falls as light on the retina, but the monitor pixilation imbues it with the trappings of construction, while the fact that you can view it over and over eradicates the anxiety of the ephemeral event. The piece now feels more like hard evidence, proof of the invisible world and the covert forces that surround us.

In the video the traffic rolls on as if oblivious; people stop to look but the drama never reaches a crescendo. In this sense, the video departs from usual narrative structure of beginning, middle and end. Yet when the video gives us an insight to the inner workings of the piece—the camera slips inside the rooms, so we see lab and office interiors momentarily lit up—we might think of filmic conventions like the sweep of a burglar's torch beam in a slumbering home, an approaching car or a rumbling storm. Here the piece takes on narrative by way of objects—we have glimpses of a computer, lab equipment and furniture. The contingent mix of Regency and mid-twentieth-century architecture no longer contains the piece; now we have a more organic understanding of the installation, inside-out, and we can appreciate the fluid interdependency of time and place. Although the video retains the original event's articulation of time by way of its unpredictable strobos, there is an extra element of intention and even pattern, the sort of control that can draw the distinction between noise and music. In fact, Tickle talks about the rhythm of the piece as 'ambient'. If we take the definition of ambient as that which is inherent in its surroundings, then these flashes are certainly that, in the most fundamental sense. The fleet pulsation of lights are like the rhythm of a threnody, a song of lament for the dead, dedicated to the particles racing towards their half-life.

Churchill once said, "Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened". Yet *What the eye can't see the heart can't grieve for* hints at how, at

the sub-experiential level of particle physics and ontological theory, the meaning of 'truth' and 'nothing' no longer fits the words.