

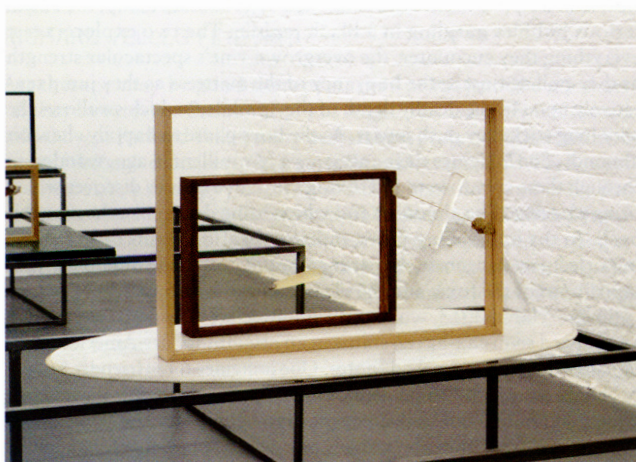
REVIEWS

Benoît Maire

DAVID ROBERTS ART FOUNDATION

Benoît Maire's recent exhibition was more accessible than the French artist-cum-philosopher's previous outings, even if it was hard not to feel that some aspects of it were pitched just over one's head. At least the exhibition's title, "Weapon," clearly expressed its main theme, here related not only to violence but to the material technologies of perception and measurement.

Several works in the show seemed suspended between aphorism and clue: a 2012 assemblage of a stone, a shell, and a piece of quartz imprinted with the words *HERE, MEASUREMENT IS AT FAULT, HE SAYS*; faux-vintage photographs of the artist's Paris neighbors set on top of a pedestal among stones separating several layers of glass (*Conjugaison No 4: 18 January 2013*); a photogram of a hand à la Man Ray (*Untitled*, 2013). Such works seemed to be fragments, implying that medium and message were being hermetically folded together. A more declarative



Benoît Maire,
Suspended Weapons,
2013, mixed media,
dimensions variable.

work was *Socrates*, 2013, a bust of the philosopher cast in soap with a die implanted within it—a slightly heavy-handed statement about the contingency in every intellectual endeavor. In the large assemblage *Suspended Weapons*, 2013, meanwhile, strange prehistoric-looking objects were mounted between panes of glass on metal tables with marble tops that, according to the accompanying leaflet, "were chosen for their reference to the Baroque." Also in the main gallery were several enormous silk screens—from the series "2 Tools," 2013—depicting sharpened pieces of flint as well as more dice. With this selection of works, the stakes of Maire's essayistic investigation were raised to include the history of art and the archaeological history of humanity, in addition to the history of philosophy.

The video *I.E.4 (Liquid Crystals)*, 2013, endeavored to tie up these various threads, managing to be at once concise and vague. "I was losing my image in parables": These, appropriately, are the first words spoken in the piece, voiced offscreen as a man rigs together a bomb that is connected to a tablet computer on which a video is playing. We then see him stash various such objects around town, while the video occasionally cuts to a woman sizing up the leaves of trees and plants with a measuring stick. Voices philosophize throughout, throwing in references to obscurities such as "the id and superego of Emily [Dickinson] and Søren [Kierkegaard]," but their import is hard to follow. The video ends with a *mise en abyme*, as the female figure opens a bag in which she finds a screen playing a video of herself—an image that, as the camera pans out, is itself revealed to be playing on a computer screen

behind her as she sits at a desk in her apartment. None of the video bombs is seen going off, so one is left in doubt whether the piece is an idealistic fantasy about the power of the image or a metaphorical statement about its alleged role. Are images as violent as bombs? Or are they merely somehow *like* bombs, although with the caveat that they don't, or can't, or won't ever explode? (This quite aside from the "dialectic"—announced in an on-screen text—between owning one's image and knowing that another owns it.)

Although frequently successful at melding the meandering style characteristic of Continental philosophy with the formal elegance of post-Conceptualism, Maire's show at times seemed most important as a lesson on the pitfalls of their codependency. The text accompanying the exhibition, by curator Vincent Honoré, spoke of the show's "aesthetic terrorism," but if this operates—as in the video—only as allegory or metaphor, it risks exaggerating art's power while undermining it at the same time.

—Alexander Scrimgeour

"David Bowie is"

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

Watching David Bowie's screen test at Andy Warhol's Factory in 1971 is excruciating. Moments before it was recorded, the artist had reacted with typical blankness to a playback of Bowie's song "Andy Warhol," and the young singer, his flowing hippie tresses capped by a wide-brimmed hat, can barely bring his eyes to meet the camera. For a few moments, he self-consciously acts out the old mime routine of being trapped in a box; then, sheepishly, he gives up. He may have failed in his attempt to engage with Pop art, but his multiple transformations would soon set the terms for what we now loosely call art rock. In 1996, he ended up portraying Warhol in Julian Schnabel's film *Basquiat*, tricked out in the artist's own silver wig and handbag.

This is one of the many remarkable, overlapping career trajectories mapped out in "David Bowie is," curated by Victoria Broackes and Geoffrey Marsh, a massive show spanning Bowie's entire career to date and including stage costumes, concert posters, handwritten lyrics, instruments, diaries, sketches for unrealized projects, film clips, and a room full of colossal projections of live performances. These artifacts can be highly revealing—as is the felt-tip storyboard drawing of a drowning Pierrot that presaged the video for "Ashes to Ashes" (1980)—or uncomfortably intimate. There's a coke spoon that the singer kept in his jacket pocket during the mid-'70s; elsewhere is a page scrawled in Bowie's childlike handwriting, outlining second-by-second lighting cues during his Station to Station tour. Even when his drug use was causing psychological damage, his brain was still exercising high levels of artistic control.

Bowie's sheer doggedness was already evident in the late 1960s, when he was attempting multiple routes to fame: via cinema (an early appearance in Michael Armstrong's 1967 avant-garde film *The Image*), theatrical mime with Lindsay Kemp, and the idealistic South London "arts lab" (its typewritten manifesto a

