

# Weekend notes

## Social States Exhibition @ The Pump House Gallery

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Baptist Coelho | 'I thought I had forgotten about it' and 'Display #1' 2011-12 | Raster engraving on veneered MDF and wooden table, mixed media installation | Courtesy the artist and Pump House Gallery | © The artist

If anyone finds they are able to savour the shift in London's weather with a visit to Battersea Park this spring, I strongly recommend making the effort to see the current exhibition showing at the Pump House Gallery, right by the lake in the park's centre. Titled *Social States*, the exhibition presents work by two artists, Baptist Coelho and Nadia Kaabi-Linke, who have each undertaken a three month residency with the gallery.

Both Coelho and Kaabi-Linke have developed practices that utilise various techniques and media to focus in on the experience of individuals within a particular environment. With the Pump House Gallery serving as a base for each artists' activities during their residencies, they have produced work that situates the gallery space as a point of confluence for various social, cultural and historical realities that have shaped the landscape of Battersea Park and the surrounding Wandsworth Borough.

An exhibition such as this gives us certain challenges. A major part of these artists' research and activity has involved interacting and participating with members of the public. As a result, there is a very real sense in which the works on display here expand beyond a conceptual or formal space. *Social States* speaks of other stories, is charged with real lives, and we don't just reflect on the world, it's here with us in the gallery space. But we're not here to passively receive journalism or historical documentation, we're here to actively engage and critically measure artistic activity, to get some use from it.

This is what the artists are tasked with realising, and it is a task that becomes acute within the organisation of the exhibition itself. The Pump House Gallery is split into four levels. Aside from the ground floor reception area, where Coelho's *Eight Pauses* is installed, each floor contains a detailed text that sets out a logic of construction for the works you are about to see. In addition, for a donation, you can pick up a guide that provides a context for the exhibition as a whole. I can recognise the necessity in this: the dynamic nature of each artists' practice means much of what we see here is rooted in an event involving other people, something concrete that has happened elsewhere, and so explication serves to make us understand the works by providing us with access to this. But however neutrally informative, benignly instructional or soberly authoritative such texts appear, their use of language foregrounds ideas and concepts for you to take in to an exhibition with you - they supply a template through which to look at a work and recognise value. The work of the artist, of an artist arranging materials to purposefully draw out and apply pressure to various strands of meaning that run through existence, is then undercut; the scope and substance of their achievement is narrowed around a functional common denominator, or what is obviously a poor piece of work is elevated and legitimised via the blessing of critical or institutional authority. This makes clear a challenge for us as viewers, then, one referenced in the gallery literature: it's up to us to consciously negotiate the information we have and experiment with our approach to these artists' works.

For me, the heart of Baptist Coelho's activity in this show is *Display #1 (Battersea Park, London)*. I actually found this work slightly daunting at first, mainly because of the spread of material it gives you to make sense of. Entering the first floor gallery space, there is an installation with a series of shelves carrying several objects - bottles and jugs of water, wash basins and cloths, neatly folded army fatigues - that signify or have been left over from an event where the artist, dressed as a soldier, washed the feet of members of the public. Framed, handwritten testimonies from people who took part allow us to assemble an understanding of this and to observe the mix of human intimacy, profound feeling, discomfort, connection, personal interpretation and biblical and spiritual connotations generated by this event. But for me, what this work makes emerge most prominently is a strong sense of the figure conspicuously silent at the centre of all these voices - the figure of the soldier. Coelho has previously focused on the de-humanising effects of acts of military duty and servitude, in a way that somehow emphasises the body, the spirit, the anonymous being that performs them, and it is this idea that dominates *Display #1 (Battersea Park, London)*, as well as the atmospheric, intimate and theatrical *Stand at ease* on the fourth floor gallery space and the aforementioned photo and video installation *Eight Pauses*.

See what you think, but I spent some time with *Eight Pauses* on entrance to the gallery, I understood what I could from it, but it really achieved sense and meaning after seeing *Display #1 (Battersea Park, London)* and in particular *I thought I had forgotten about it...* This latter work, which shares the first floor gallery space with *Display #1 (Battersea Park, London)*, was the work of Coelho's that, for my own reasons, I got most excited about, and admired the most. Coelho has framed 4 genuine incident reports from 1941, which record the damage or the fact of bombs that have fallen in and around the grounds of Battersea Park. Near this, there is a table with a veneered MDF surface, upon which these incident reports, their forms and layouts, have been engraved - but not exactly: Coelho has supplanted the different typed sections with the stuttering, stumbling and searching language of individuals recalling their personal experiences of when these bombs fell. These engraved incident reports no longer present themselves to be filled out, they don't create space for an oblique, official record; their parts have been punctured through, and we now glimpse more substantial, more emotive, more real versions of these historical events. Like this, the work creates a sense of the real lives, the real consequence, often lost between the gaps of monolithic historical record. As I said, I thought this was a great work.

When I entered the second floor gallery space, I had to stop for a moment and check myself. The lights were off, the blinds were down, only muted daylight crept into the space. There seemed to be works here, rectangular glass panels installed on shelves running along the walls, but despite this presence it seemed the space might be closed, inactive, dead, like stumbling into someone's bedroom when they're sleeping in the middle of the day. No one else was about, no audience safely announced this as an art work, there was no guide for behaviour in the space, and I was unsure of whether I was meant to be there. Should I turn the lights on? Am I allowed? I set about examining the glass panels. At first, in the half light, they seemed blank, empty, nothing there, but as I edged in and stepped slowly about the shelves, as the muted daylight gently shifted its angle with me, marks and messages timidly revealed themselves. A sharp movement and they were gone again. I read statements, found myself looking at evidence, and the state of the space suddenly took on a weight of purpose and feeling.

This was my experience of Nadia Kaabi-Linke's *Impunitias*, and I'm sorry if my dramatic, suspenseful account is massively lame, but I thought this was such a great, powerful and affecting work that I didn't want to say too much or ruin it with critical description and assessment, because I felt it could be. This was one experience of this work, one way of giving you an idea of it. I would just say it is definitely worth seeing.

And I would say that about the whole show. *Social States* is a powerful and immensely rewarding exhibition, especially if you have the confidence to stand on your own as much as possible with the artists' works. Further details can be found on the gallery [website](#).

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