

Memories... you're talking about memories*

JJ Charlesworth

The WITH Collective invents a catalogue of 'life-situations', taking aspects of our everyday lives and turning them into 'solutions' that become commodities, off-the-peg or custom-made services that we can buy from WITH, at a price. WITH's solutions aren't like other goods or services – it's not like buying a new toaster, or getting someone in to do the cleaning.

Worryingly, WITH's services focus on replacing parts of our personal lives and experiences with synthetic substitutes, where they play out some aspect of your life, on your behalf, so you don't have to. WITH's solutions take the intervention of the self-help book and life-coach to an absurd extreme, satirising contemporary culture's fascination with lifestyle choice and personal development. If you can have plastic surgery to change the bits of your body you don't like, WITH's solutions allow us to outsource the darker or less appealing aspects of our inner lives: can't get anything finished? Try **completed***, where WITH takes responsibility "for anything you've failed to deliver on". Afraid of getting old? Go for **relayge***, where a member of The WITH Collective will live your ideal age for you, as you, for a year, before passing the responsibility on to another member, who will relive the same year again, as you, for you, for as long as you want.

But The WITH Collective's funny, sometimes sinister perversion of our culture's obsession with replacing the authentic with the artificial isn't simply a gesture of social satire or critique coming from the separate world of art. Because at the heart of WITH's warped form of benevolence – wanting to help you sort your life out – lies a broader questioning of how art is itself often used to try to remould and reshape the people that come into contact with it.

Over the last decade the notion of audience participation in art has become a controversial issue; art that involves its audience in an interactive exchange, or that seeks to influence its participants' attitudes towards particular social issues and contexts, has been promoted as a form of socially active, responsible and engaged art by some, and accused of trying to manipulate and control its audiences by others. While alongside this, another type of participation-art has emerged: located somewhere between theatre, live-art, installation art and set-design, this new art seeks to immerse the viewer in a pseudo-real environment in which the experience of the work becomes almost indistinguishable from the experience of the reality it seeks to represent.

For their show at Chapter, The WITH Collective push the idea of participation-art to ironic breaking point. Relocating part of the large café seating area into the gallery, WITH immediately short-circuit and highlight the fragile distinction between art-experience and non-art experience. Are we in Chapter's café, or in a participation-art reproduction of Chapter's café? Are we to encounter it as real or as artifice? It's impossible to decide.

What we do find in the displaced café area, however, are indications that other forms of delegated and displaced activity are being carried out on our behalf. Information left on the café tables explains WITH has arranged to intervene in the lives of Chapter's visitors – specifically, WITH has arranged to set up and then miss arranged meetings with people, on behalf of individuals drawn from Chapter's mailing list – or so we are told. Date-marked photographs, depicting people waiting pointlessly for acquaintances that will never turn up, hang on the walls. Further on, beyond a turnstile that forces you to pay for an 'unlimited edition solution', is a 'free' poster explaining that WITH will arrange to wake up on your behalf, at 06:57 each morning in the gallery, and just before nodding off to sleep again they will, "pretend to be you".

These uncanny and vaguely oppressive encroachments on our sense of personal identity and selfhood, (we can no longer trust what is being done or in whose name it is being enacted - there is a wilful displacement of parts of reality into simulation and fabrication, all under the designation of art) seems to suggest an unease and uncertainty about the terms by which art is supposed to be effective. Here we are presented with an interventionist participation-art which insists on manipulating the lives of its subjects, to the point of re-inventing reality on their behalf. But WITH's interventions also suggest that there is perhaps a complicity between such art and its audience: on a monitor, a string of people talk enthusiastically about the experience of an unspecified, immersive event which they have all been party to. Clearly they are all excited about having been in some form of altered reality, where actors cannot be distinguished from real people.

In the romantic tradition of aesthetics, the experience of artworks is always a tussle between being able to step back and reflect on what you are experiencing, and the experience of succumbing to the overwhelming sensation of the work, in some sense 'losing oneself' in the work. Now, however, we increasingly find forms of art which do not allow any space to 'step back' from the experience; we are either lost 'in the moment' or entirely outside of it, and the work seeks to colonise the whole of the reality in which one encounters it. Rather than being immersed in the experience of an artwork *within* reality, we're now faced with being immersed in the experience of an artwork *as* reality. While this kind of art might be made with the desire to make art as effective and as affecting as possible, that insistence on taking over and controlling its audience perhaps suggests a deep anxiety over why art should want so badly to affect, manipulate and change us. Because what is quickly lost in this situation is our independence from the work, and by extension, our freedom not to be manipulated and coerced by it. The immersive moment of aesthetic experience, which we might participate in freely, has been turned into the immersive coercion of *social* experience, from which we are not allowed to escape.

The inherent aggression of that shift is what WITH's illicit fusion of café, art gallery and uninvited life-intervention parodies and undermines. It questions the terms under which we engage with art, at a time when art seems to want to impose forms of participation which we are

not free to step back from. If WITH's darkly comic world seems to resonate, it is because the experience of forced participation – being manipulated, cajoled and engaged with – is an all too common aspect of contemporary life. And there is no artificial life-style solution that can change that.

JJ Charlesworth writes regularly on contemporary art for magazines such as Art Monthly, Modern Painters, Time Out London and ArtReview, where he works as associate editor.

The WITH Collective is represented by Rokeby, London. More information about their work and projects is available from www.withyou.co.uk

During RESIDENT the gallery will be open at the following times:

Monday – Thursday 8.30am-11pm; Friday 8.30am – 12.30am; Saturday 8.30am – 12 midnight;
Sunday 9.30am – 11pm

The Shop opening remains the same:

Tuesday – Saturday 10am – 8pm; Sunday 2-8pm