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## At the beginning of a movement was scandal

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5–6 minutes



'Museums', observed Theodor Adorno in *Prisms* (1981), 'are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture.' 'Am Anfang der Bewegung stand ein Skandal' (At the beginning of the movement was a scandal), curated by Susanne Clausen and Alun Rowlands, considered the conventions and effects of the museum, its forms of definition and its dissemination of social and political values. By inserting the work of some 20 contemporary artists into the Lenbachhaus, one of Munich's major historical collections, they opened up patterns of aesthetic and ideological consumption within and around the museum for critical examination.

Broadly speaking, two approaches were here put into play: a reinvigoration of the historically important but arguably 'dead' works that this particular collection comprises, and a broadening out of how the museum might today be perceived, utilized and evaluated. The fact that these two strands were not mutually exclusive was demonstrated by Kaye Donachie's *Enlightenment* (2002), a

compact installation of six small canvases depicting the esoteric spaces of Masonic ritual and exchange. The central painting reproduces the pose found in a well-known photograph showing Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky engaged in an evidently Masonic handshake, while other pictures similarly record easily recognizable aspects of 'The Craft'. In presenting Freemasonry as an élitist discourse ghosting that of Modernism, Donachie reminded the viewer that, while art is frequently regarded as an enlightened occupation, its most celebrated practitioners often rise to prominence through clandestine but influential networks and connections.

If Donachie's provocative tableau suggested that the works surrounding it - by Klee, Kandinsky and their contemporaries - should be reconsidered in a more questioning light, FlatPack 001's Presence: Cultural Excavation No. 5 (2002) interrogates the dark and mysterious, in the form of the curious shape found on the cover of Led Zeppelin's seminal 1976 recording Presence. FlatPack 001's contribution consisted in part of a poster packed with suggestions as to what the black void might actually be, its central form a spiral of text, an iridescent ripple of conflicting projections. To speculate on popular culture within the confines of the museum was an interestingly tacky approach. It implied that, if the museum is to maintain a seriously meaningful existence, it must be open to values and agendas quite distinct from those that informed it during the 18th and 19th centuries.

This challenge to the decorum of museum aesthetics was further extended in two video pieces, Inventory's Coagulum (2001) and Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz's The Berlin Wall Still Exists (1996). Inventory are tracked in the act of a collective rugby-scrum crawl down London's Oxford Street, encountering in their awkward, edgy *dérive* a po-faced posse of shopping centre security guards clearly intent on dispersing the gathering at any cost. In the case of Brener and Schurz we are shown a grainy black and white image of two or three figures whitewashing a section of the Berlin Wall, obliterating it to the point where it can no longer be distinguished against the rough and ready speckle of the tape. There's a kind of

desperation in this act of framed erasure, a whiting-out in order to bring into play those politically vivid voices, incidents or ideologies frequently, if often ineptly, kept at bay.

Another video piece, the Szuper Gallery's *Good Morning Mr Bloomberg* (1999), documents an exchange between four neatly suited artists and an influential collector. Attention is focused on the civilized gestures involved in the commercial acquisition of art objects: the opulence of the collector's apartment is prominently displayed, hand and body movements are careful and restrained, wine politely sipped, and glances casual but controlled. Placed within the preserved apartment of the Lenbachhaus' benefactor, a highly successful 19th-century portrait painter, *Good Morning Mr Bloomberg* could be read as a sarcastic commentary on the artist as a complicit and uncritical victim of corporate collecting and business-as-usual art world bravado.

It is hard to find a show these days to which Liam Gillick does not contribute something. His *The Winter School* (1996), a text relating to a 1971 critique of Documenta 5, is a fictitious account of a gathering whose actual details are not on record. To some extent this work is a model of possibilities, a kind of microcosm of the exhibition as a whole.

'At the beginning of the movement was a scandal' tried to take the measure of the museum, expand its borders and puncture its sometimes pompous façade. After all, if museums are in the business of preserving the dead, someone needs, now and then, to insert a little life.