

Frieze

AOIFE ROSENMEYER, "WILLIAM HUNT", FRIEZE MAGAZINE, ISSUE 162, 2014.



William Hunt, *But it was not to be*, 2014, installation view

William Hunt is accustomed to testing his endurance while making music – his medium of choice – in art spaces. Previous performances have seen the Dusseldorf-based British artist singing and playing under water, pinned upside-down to a ceiling and crushed by his instrument (on that occasion, for *Even As You See Me Now*, 2008, a piano). In this exhibition, the spatial constraints of the gallery invited consideration of the roles of performer and audience, in particular when the two were separated by walls and a screen.

Hunt's installation *But it was not to be* (2014) consisted of a piano suspended from a metal beam that protruded through a hole in the wall. On the two walls that bookend the gallery hung six vertical panels, each featuring a photograph of a pair of hands clapping. During the opening, a chord progression was bashed out on the piano by hammers (like those inside the piano), which were attached to a rig of numerous strings, playing a rough, slightly mournful, tune. When there was a break in the music, which happened more frequently as the performance went on, the panels, taped together to form large tumbling toys – like Jacob's Ladders – were operated remotely by Hunt. They clapped loudly and abruptly. In a dark space behind a curtain, the artist could just be seen via a jewel-

like camera obscura image. Visitors crowded around this vision, which appeared as an indistinct projection of a figure floating around a space akin to a cell. Though his movements were difficult to discern, he could be observed occasionally rotating in a harness attached to the ceiling. While he played he appeared to be upright, but as the image became inverted, it revealed that he was in fact hanging upside-down.

Motifs of flipping, revolving and challenging gravity repeated throughout the installation. Several different processes of input and output took place concurrently: the audience, craning to see what was happening, were rewarded by the performer's activity; Hunt activated the pulleys to make the hammers bash the keys; the noise of the panels dropping caused heads to swivel to find the cause. This series of relayed actions made it difficult to trace the musical process – if Hunt pulled a string, the effect was indirect: his hammers were only striking other hammers that struck strings inside the instrument.

In a text on the artist's work, Andjeas Ejiksson compares Hunt to the bird in Joseph Wright of Derby's 1768 painting *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, in which a family observes a cockatoo struggling as it is deprived of air. The image testifies to the unsentimental empiricism of science. Hunt makes himself a test subject and, when he appeared as a reduced, remote image in this performance, his audience seemed to loom over him. While research and experimentation are indeed elements of Hunt's practice, But it was not to be says much about the nature of performer and audience. After the exhibition opening, Hunt's birdcage lay empty and the instruments fell silent. Inside the previously inaccessible chamber, the absent performer seemed less the puppet and more the puppeteer, as his now-revealed system of piano-playing resembled a marionette's strings, and a number of reflective boards that had produced the blurred image seen by the audience were also visible. This behind-the-scenes view inverted the balance of power between Hunt and his audience, or at least suggested a mutual dependency, and complementary drives to act and to observe. If celebrity culture has precipitated the corrosion of distinctions between performance and life, producing hybrid performances that are called 'reality', Hunt's act was an experiment in other possible versions of performance and reality.