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Bill Drummond: The 25 Paintings

Eastside Projects Birmingham 15 March to 14 June

I am sitting at a table eating homemade marmalade on toast. A man is showing me an artwork that he has brought into the gallery, inspired by the exhibition. Bill Drummond, the artist and the assumed recipient of the sculpture, is sitting to the other side of me, reciting various stories. Usually, the first thing I do when writing on an exhibition is to separate the artwork from the artist, but in this case it is almost impossible to do so. Drummond is omnipresent: either seated at his desk in the middle of the gallery space, engaging visitors, or out and about in Birmingham undertaking various activities. The exhibition represents the first iteration of an 11-date world tour that will culminate in 2025.

Central to the project is a series of 25 paintings that Drummond began production on in 2001. Stacked like a deck of cards in the gallery, the paintings depict short slogans in primary colours. The typography is standardised; Drummond always uses the same sans-serif typeface. Each painting operates as an instruction, the surface pitted and painted over with previous iterations: 'stay', 'make soup', 'bake cake' and 'bang drum', among other statements, recall the various activities that he will be undertaking during his time at the gallery. Drummond originally studied painting before embarking on a prolific career in music (most famously as one half of the KLF) and has frequently expressed a troubled relationship with the medium. The paintings conflate his formal urges with his stated belief that 'art should use everything and be everywhere'.

Drummond doesn't make art about the social, but rather his art is social, consistently seeking new interfaces between himself and his audience. Through his work he continually attempts to turn spectators into participants and collaborators. I am reminded of his early career, involved in the punk scene, first as a musician and then as record-label owner and manager. The DIY ethos of punk similarly eroded the distance between the audience and performer. Most of Drummond's projects happen outside the gallery and the exhibition is more of a hub, documenting the various activities. Large local maps with scrawled notes are pasted onto the walls and objects from previous performances are left as mementoes. From handing out daffodils to knocking on doors and giving out homemade cake, Drummond's work is pervaded by the romance of a chance encounter. One can see the various activities as different parts of the same work – the objects become tools to start up conversations.

For Drummond, production, display and marketing are all the same thing. He casts himself as a committed amateur, as someone who feels compelled to complete a Sisyphean task without necessarily understanding or communicating why he is doing so. Certainly, his work foregrounds a kind of purposeful futility, his art is everywhere and nowhere, it is useful and entirely useless – the cake tastes good, but it is not going to fill you up. In a superficial way, one can draw parallels with the relational practices of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Tino Sehgal yet, unlike these artists, Drummond's work doesn't circulate in the art world but around it. His success has not been measured in critical appraisal and institutional validation but rather in column inches and YouTube hits. His work is more aligned to Billy Childish who, although formally oppositional, similarly traverses the music and art worlds. Both figures embrace an excessive productivity and nomadism. One can certainly read this as overtly romantic, and, of course, Romanticism was in part a response to the alienation felt at industrial capitalism ('New Romantic(ism)' *AM*376). The amateur, like the romantic, dramatises the production of surplus labour, assuming an oppositional position to the efficient machinery of the workplace.

Drummond's work moves between a convivial sociability and a more antagonistic refusal. One shouldn't forget that this was the man who once burned a million pounds as one half of the KLF, and took out adverts in the tabloids calling for people to abandon art. Excessiveness and withdrawal both serve a similar function here, each challenging normative value systems. Drummond continually short-circuits 'the reciprocity of the gift' (to paraphrase Marcel Mauss); exchange value is frequently inverted and problematised. We can also view Drummond's practice as both a megaphone and a mirror to the activities of Eastside Projects, amplifying the strategies and approaches of an artist-led gallery. Drummond's art circulates as conversation and speculation, it is a Chinese whisper. And he makes really good marmalade too. ▮

Bill Drummond
The 25 Paintings
2001-2025
installation view

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