

Exploring the mind



BEN COOPER



RUTH MACLENNAN



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Left to right: The Milgram Re-enactment, In Memory of Your Feelings, The Dictionary Ranges: Table

State of Mind was an art project devised by artist Ruth Maclennan and Professor Nikolas Rose at the BIOS centre at LSE, supported by a People's Award from the Wellcome Trust and the Arts Council England. The project was an original approach to a difficult and broad subject: the mind and brain in contemporary art, science and society. **Ruth Maclennan** explains more.

State of Mind was not about collaboration between art and science, but rather a series of choreographed encounters and open-ended conversations where artists, scientists and social scientists speak to each other from the position of their own practice.

The exhibition of contemporary art and the series of five debates were designed to allow formal debate, informal discussion, and the experience of looking at and engaging with contemporary art and science. The debates mapped different aspects of contemporary investigations into the mind. Each one posed a question, which was addressed by each of the speakers – an artist, a social scientist and/or a scientist. After each debate, the audience and participants walked to the exhibition to continue the conversation over a glass of wine.

The exhibition *State of Mind*, which I co-curated with Simon Gould, opened in April 2005 in the atmospheric, currently unused New Academic Building on Lincoln's Inn Fields. It brought together seven artists – Rod Dickinson, myself, Christian Nold, Uriel Orlow, Abigail Reynolds, Phoebe von Held and Richard Wentworth – most of whom made new work for the exhibition.

For her sculpture *The Dictionary Ranges: Table*, Abigail Reynolds placed objects together in order to map how different meanings of a word are related. An entry in the dictionary is placed in such a way as to describe its relation to another, and so 'table manners' grew up out of 'table as furniture', which gave rise to 'under the table' and had 'table dancer' resting against it. The apparent instability of the sculpture, with elements interpenetrating, reflecting and illuminating each other, hinted at the shifting terrain of written language,

which even the *Oxford English Dictionary*, perceived as guardian of linguistic truth, cannot contain.

The Milgram Re-enactment by Rod Dickinson is a video of a real-time reconstruction of one part of Stanley Milgram's infamous Obedience to Authority psychology experiment conducted at Yale University in 1961. During the original experiment, subjects were asked to take part in a memory and learning test and give seemingly real electric shocks to another, unseen individual. The experiment was designed to test how far subjects were prepared to follow the orders of a scientist – an authority figure – to hurt another person. No actual shocks were administered, and the scientist and victim were actors. The *Re-enactment* was identical to the original experiment except that it took place in front of a live audience and all the participants were actors. No one was fooled into thinking they were administering electric shocks. *The Milgram Re-enactment* examines the performance of science, and the mechanisms that underpin systems of belief and social control, as well as challenging our relation to the past.

I made two works for *State of Mind*, using the building as a film set and site of memories. Both explored the projections of the mind and body on to a real or imagined space. *In Memory of Your Feelings* is an empty room lined with wallpaper printed with Rorschach inkblots. The blots conjure up personal associations, but also suggest the interpretation of mental states by psychoanalysis and psychology. The piece also debunks the artistic gesture associated with abstract expressionism.

The project as a whole and the collaborations it entailed are a distinct and important part of my work as an artist. *State of Mind* explored the role that

artists and curators can play in institutions to engage directly with the most contemporary and difficult ideas in science and social science, while maintaining their independence and ability to look obliquely at the world. I found the atmosphere and working with other researchers at BIOS extremely stimulating.

The artist Richard Wentworth wrote to me: 'There is a long and wonderful history of improvised events involving artists, more or less curated, which have gone into the blood stream of arts' debate. Dada boys in Zurich, all manner of Parisian salons, impromptu loft events in the States and make-do-and-mends in Britain. It was refreshing to be involved with a highly motivated and very mobilised small group of people, with a gentle sense of background institutional support and goodwill. When an institution is quick on its feet, imaginatively opportunistic, and capable of taking risks, it confirms that it is alive. For me, it was flattering to be invited to participate and a pleasure to be part of a widening debate.' ■



Ruth Maclennan

was artist in residence at BIOS 2004-05. In 2001-02, she was Leverhulme artist in residence in the LSE Library Archives. Since completing *State of Mind*, she has curated *Overawe* at Foxy Production in New York and participated in a major exhibition *The Body. The Ruin* at Ian Potter Museum in Melbourne, which includes work made while at LSE. See www.lse.ac.uk/collections/BIOS/state_of_mind.htm