

Ceal Foyer

By Mark Godfrey

On the wall of the ground floor gallery of the Lisson facing straight onto the street, Ceal Foyer has installed what she calls an 'assisted readymade': an altered sign of the kind seen in high-street bargain shops. The words 'Genuine Reduction' appear in a white, jolty typeface against a red ground. It's 'assisted' because Foyer sliced a section of red card off the right hand side, so that there is less space between the final 'N' and the end of the sign than there is between the first 'G' and the other end. Thus the genuinely reduced sign refers to itself. Placed like a title for the show, *Genuine Reduction*, 2006, also refers to the exhibition, which with five works is much sparer than Foyer's last outing here in 2002. But of course the work has other implications. If a gallery prides itself in showing high-art works and in keeping sales activities behind the scenes, it is an act of genuine reduction or deflation to compare such a gallery with a bargain store. Such would be an effect of this work if installed in the window of any major private gallery, but given the history of the Lisson, the piece has more resonances still, for this is one of the galleries that introduced Minimal and Conceptual Art to the UK. In contrast to the work of Sol LeWitt or Robert Mangold could Foyer's be an art of *genuine* reduction, an art not only formed out of minimal gestures, but one which also encounters the everyday world of the high-street? (At this point we can remember a precedent for *Genuine Reduction*: Foyer's *Monochrome Till Receipt (White)*, 2001, for which Foyer bought 36 white products, thus staging an unexpected meeting of the worlds of Robert Ryman and Kwiksave).

Foyer's art often works like this: what at first seems reduced becomes expansive as you contemplate it, so that there is a neat disproportion between the form of the work and the multitude of ideas it generates. In the gallery directly above *Genuine Reduction* there was a photograph called *Reversed*, 2005, showing a 'Reserved' sign sitting not on a restaurant table, but on a white ground. On the sign, the letters appear reversed. You get the pun immediately and there's almost the tendency to say the word 'Reversed' aloud when seeing the photograph. Only later does the work reveal itself as a rather complex mediation on the medium of photography. As a two-sided object, the photographic negative could be printed back to front, and many artists exploited this property of the medium in their work (for instance, the Surrealist Maurice Tabard). However, digital photography renders negatives obsolete, so in recalling the potential of negatives to flip, Foyer 'reverses' technological history.

In the case of *Reversed*, a literary pun opens onto the subject of technological change. In other works such as *Drain*, 2006, Foyer uses technology to create visual puns. A small round black speaker points upwards in the centre of the room with a black cable running loosely towards CD/Amp units in the corner. From time to time, the speaker emits the sound of water running down a drain. Looks like a drain, sounds like a drain, must be ... well, it isn't. *Drain* recalled much earlier pieces like *Light Switch*, 1992, for which Foyer projected a slide of a light switch onto a darkened wall and, as in those pieces, Foyer lays bare the crude technology creating the pun. There are two consecutive parts in the encounter with these works. First, there's the immediate sight and the quick denouement when you realise (in this case) that the drain isn't a drain. Next, there is the longer, and

more awkward time when the piece persists in creating its illusion even though we have seen already how it works. Though it would seem that Floyer's switch pieces privilege the first moments, really they become interesting after the denouement, when you start to hear the kind of embarrassed silence that follows a bad joke. *Drain* seemed not only to produce, but to reflect on this moment where drama spills away and everything tumbles into the silence like water down a plug hole.

For all the interest of *Reversed* and *Drain*, I find Floyer most fascinating when (as with *Genuine Reduction*), her works appear to offer oblique commentaries not just on their own effects but on historical or contemporary art and its relation to economics and spectacle. The only piece in the main Lisson downstairs space was *Double Act*, 2006. A spotlight on the ceiling projected a beam onto the corner of the wall and floor of the gallery. But where the floor was illuminated by an elongated semicircle of white light, the wall's semicircle was an image of red theatre curtains. Looking from the wall back up to the ceiling, you checked to see that the curtains were being cast by the spotlight (not a slide machine), as indeed was the case. It's just that the spotlight contained a 'photographic gobo' – a kind of circular slide that can be fitted into such lamps. Once it became clear that the light source was unexpectedly also an image source, you realised that this was the only illusion in the piece. Nothing else happens: the curtains do not open, the spectacle is withheld. With its minimal and elegant illusion, but with its denial of any grander event, could this work be a reading of the theatrical and spectacular excesses of so much projected-image art? Floyer's works will not reveal their targets directly, but this critical position often seems to be at their heart.