

Reviews

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TREAT YOURSELF: HEALTH CONSUMERS IN A MEDICAL AGE

The Science Museum, London
26 May – 14 September

Forget the prying of long-lens paparazzi and forget the ambulance-chasing of tabloid hacks, the greatest act of personal intrusion is child's play: looking in other people's medicine cabinets. It's there that the mask really falls and every aspect of our physical health, private anxieties and petty vanities, fall bare.

It's a keen sense of this which brings a sparkling and engrossing new exhibition at the Science Museum to full life. Mounted in collaboration with the Wellcome Trust, 'Treat Yourself' takes an historical look at the commerce and culture of personal prevention and cure, uniting a bounty of contemporary art, modern design and museum piece curiosities.

Alongside organisations such as the Gulbenkian Foundation, the Wellcome Trust have been instrumental in promoting the union of science and art by furnishing grants, organising partnerships and staging exhibitions such as this. Art being jealous of its own terrain, their message of collaboration and dialogue has yet to really catch on, but 'Treat Yourself' makes some powerful statements in their favour.

The most powerful is perhaps in the installation itself, which is a wonder to behold. You enter as if you were entering into the afterlife, through a long illuminated pink corridor ringing with the soothing chimes of a sound piece by Brian Eno. Turn the corner at the end and you're in a blindingly white purgatorial realm of cleansing and private reflection, and into another corridor with a succession of small enclosures alternating with more open areas – like waiting rooms. These rooms hold a medical history told in old quacks' treatments, favourite modern remedies, and futuristic medical prototypes, whilst the adjoining spaces are arranged with contemporary art. Six rooms are paired with six open spaces, each considering an aspect of



Top:
Spencer Tunick,
Melbourne (no. 2 in
edition of 6),
cibachrome face
mounted on plexi-glass,
125.5x156.5cm, 2001.

Above:
Sophie Calle,
The Chromatic Diet,
photographic prints
and text, 1997.

personal health, ranging from getting a good night's kip to pumping iron to, shall we say, matters of the water closet.

The art itself is impressive, with top-bill names like Mona Hatoum, Martin Parr and Sophie Calle leading a vivid and wide-ranging selection of lesser lights. However, one could argue that it fares badly. One reason for this is that the competition is so tough: some of the historical objects, like the eighteenth century ivory dildo (allegedly uncovered in a Paris convent) are absolute showstoppers. Many other exhibits too are fearfully haunting by virtue of the rude and mechanical way in which they work on the body: pieces like the wooden massagers simply out-weird the Surrealists. Also, those artworks which are rooted in avant-garde traditions, like the unyielding steel of Hatoum's *Divan Bed* (1996), seem to strike a sour note in a show which cannot adequately recognise the way in which such art was so often society's antagonist, not its doctor.

On the other hand, much contemporary art has developed a conversational tone which makes it the perfect partner of such modern self-help. Ellie Harrison's digital animation *Eat 22* (2002), is a sprightly summation of all the food she ate during her twenty-second year, documented in notes and a fast-flickering montage of snaps. Meanwhile, photographs from Helen Sweeting's *Pool Portraits* (1999) series steps back from all the imagery of grace and strength in sports promotion to reveal what ordinary folk look like beside the community pool. Indeed, Sweeting expresses what art's role should be in such a dialogue of art and history: it is to reflect and humanise.

Small worries aside, in every curatorial department this show is an extraordinary achievement. It achieves a warm, sometimes miraculously harmonious marriage of art and science, and does so whilst both lending breathing space to the individual works and uniting them in a union which is richly expressive, distinctive and multifaceted.

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