

The Arts

Jokers who fail to see the funny side

EXHIBITION

State of Play
Serpentine Gallery

Nick Hackworth

WHY did the chicken cross the road? Apparently to get into the art gallery, where it could pretend to be a funny work of art. State of Play brings together 13 international artists to highlight an increasingly noticeable trend in contemporary art: playfulness. It is a tendency that stretches from work that toys with artistic conventions to work that is, literally, a joke.

Most of the pieces here hail from the jokey end of that particular spectrum. For example, Martin Creed, who won the Turner Prize with an empty room in which the lights flashed on and off, presents Work No 100: On a Tiled Floor; in an Awkward Place, a Cubic Stack of Tiles Built on Top of One of the Existing Tiles, which is just that.

German artist Andreas Slominski shows a wall of breeze blocks built, we are told, from the top down. Another German, Christian Jankowski, screens a video of a mock academic conference peopled by characters from the Muppets and Sesame Street, Bjørn Melhus shows his video, Weeping, in which he assumes the role of a telly evangelist, and British artist David Shrigley exhibits a selection of his quirky low-fi drawings and visual puns.

All of which would be hilarious, if only it were funny. But, once again, contemporary artists have exploited the expanded cultural role that they now enjoy to stray into territory in which, to put it kindly, their skill-sets do not equip them for survival.

Pathetic political art by politically ignorant artists is just about palatable, but unfunny art by unfunny artists is not. Worse still, such work, being low entertainment posing as high culture, exposes the



Preaching to the converted: Bjørn Melhus's video installation, Weeping, 2001, in which the artist parodies a TV evangelist

long hidden truth that high culture is a poor substitute for low entertainment. Visitors will soon realise this and galleries will be forced into a war of escalation with cinemas, clubs and playgrounds, in the hope of maintaining their meagre

share of the entertainment market.

In this nightmare scenario, it will be only a matter of time before, in a desperate bid to shore up visitor numbers, curators execute their artists, who are mere amateurs in this entertainment game, and begin

strewing fake turds about the place and hiring Eddie Izzard to stand in the corner of their galleries.

Which, come to think of it, would be a welcome development.

● Until 28 March. Information: 020 7402 6075.

Such a soft touch for The Emperor

CLASSICAL

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment/Norrington
Festival Hall

Stephen Pettitt

EMANUEL Ax is no stranger to the early piano. He has already recorded Chopin's complete works for piano and orchestra on an 1851 Erard, and here, in another concert of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment's Beethoven Piano Concerto series, he played Beethoven's mighty Fifth Piano Concerto, The Emperor, on a copy of an 1824 Conrad Graf original. He showed that the relatively small sound and shallow travel of key of the period-style instrument do not represent compromises over the might of a modern Steinway. It is simply a matter of different attributes, and he exploited fully those of the instrument at his command here. Particularly breathtaking was his delicate soft playing. The broad result was that the work, though sounding as bold as ever, lost some of its usual grandiosity but gained in clarity and colour range.

Conductor Sir Roger Norrington and the orchestra played their part too, with precise articulation and total empathy with the soloist. Norrington always brings something fresh to his readings. Here, with tempos swiftish but natural rather than rushed, there was a wonderful transparency in the orchestral textures. Yet this was no dry performance. It possessed majesty and poetry and earthiness in abundance, and the gorgeous transition between the exquisitely poised slow movement and the finale was beautifully managed.

Before this Norrington directed a rare performance of the music — all of it — that Beethoven wrote for Salvatore Vigano's ballet, The Creatures of Prometheus. Here the rather short and numerous numbers were helpfully linked by a modern narration — complete with odd weak joke — by Oliver Cotton. The music, very well written, was very well played. But oh for some dancing.

The sun goes down on a Parisian brief encounter

VIENNA, 1995. Jesse, an American backpacking around Europe, meets a young Parisian, Celine, and spends a magical evening and night with her before catching a cheap flight home. Deciding not to swap phone numbers, they set a rendezvous for exactly six months later, in the same place — destiny will decide if they were meant to be together.

That was in Richard Linklater's third film, the cult hit Before Sunrise. Now, in Before Sunset, which had its world premiere in Berlin yesterday, the director and his two stars and co-writers, Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy, return to the characters. They have missed the date with destiny, but Jesse, a novelist, is in Paris for a book signing, Celine comes to see him

FILM

Before Sunset

Berlin International Film Festival

Sheila Johnston

and they meet again for the first time.

Before Sunrise perfectly fulfilled a young director's modest ambitions. Nine years and six more movies down the line, Linklater — currently riding high on School of Rock — is perhaps not quite firing here on all cylinders.

Before Sunset is a much smaller film, with virtually no incidental characters and the dramatic action telescoped from the 15 hours the pair spent in Vienna down to a fleeting 90 minutes.

Back then, their lives stretched out gloriously before them, filled with hope and mystery. Now the mood, inevitably, is more regretful: Celine has given up on the idea of romantic love, while Jesse suffocates in a stale marriage.

But, as in the earlier film, the talk roves widely over all manner of intimate and international affairs. Their chemistry is still bubbling and there is, as one would expect, a new, more affecting emotional depth to the characters and performances.

Linklater's continued benevolence towards them is manifest in a terrific final scene that wraps the piece with a sweet and graceful surprise.

● The Berlin International Film Festival runs until 15 February.

Raunchy male twins, looking to be challenged. Have been in intense training for Valentines. Many requests can be answered in a single phone call.