

## REVIEWS

Stuart Middleton "Beat"  
at ICA, London

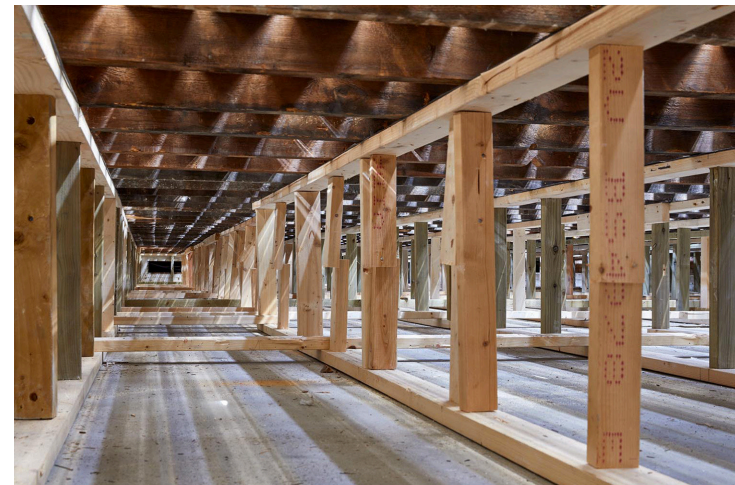
by George Vasey

I'm beat. To beat. If the former phrase suggests exhaustion, the latter articulates something more aggressive. Defeat and defiance. Depending on the context, one can expect a punch in the face or a medal. "Beat" is a common homonym, and the word can mean different things in multiple contexts. Stuart Middleton's solo exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, *Beat*, encompasses a stop-motion animation in the upper gallery, a short text written by the artist, and an empty lower gallery. Further, Middleton has removed all the accumulated architectural detail. Stud walls, lighting tracks, bannisters—they're all gone. Some visitors would be excused for thinking that the galleries, left unpainted as they are, were mid-install.

The grand Regency exterior of Carlton House Terrace is countered by the starkness of the newly opened-up gallery space. The bare wooden floor recalls the building's original function as stables for the royal horses (Buckingham Palace is just up the road). The effect is more Hackney warehouse than the glitziness of neighboring commercial galleries such as Marian Goodman and Hauser & Wirth et al. Of course, the bare walls of a commandeered industrial building are not a completely anomalous sight in city centers. Boho-chic has become the default aesthetic of expensive bars and upmarket clothing shops: London is now packed with artisanal cafés where punters can drink £3 lattes amid faux-brick walls and peeling paint. One can view Middleton's empty gallery as a form of visual homonym. Its meaning depends entirely on the context you bring to it.

A number of artists have physically intervened in, closed, and emptied gallery spaces, and the visibility of Middleton's gesture pivots on the visitor's previous knowledge of the ICA building. Alongside the architectural deconstruction, Middleton has knocked down the partition that separated the corridor and the gallery, and an elevated timber floor covers the entire space. The building has often been an obstinate host for the institution, and the effect of the newly opened-up gallery is startling. Rather than descending into the lower exhibition space, visitors are now greeted with an elevated floor that makes the whole place feel more stage-like.

I'm reminded of Michael Asher famously removing the walls between the exhibition space and the offices of Claire Copley Gallery in 1974. Empty of objects, the institution became both sculpture and subject, and Asher revealed the previously hidden mechanisms of gallery life to its public. If Asher's move foregrounded transparency, Middleton suggests something more nebulous. Exposed brick walls, Mumford & Sons, tattoos, beards, and cocktails in jam jars all represent the same thing: an idea of the authentic in an era of austerity. Asher's asceticism, and Middleton's quotation of it, suggests that something so historically antagonistic has become scenery in overpriced cafés. Authenticity becomes another thing to sell alongside expensive lattes while the rhetoric of transparency is spouted by tax-avoiding corporations.

Stuart Middleton's *Beat* at ICA, London. Photographer: Andy StaggsStuart Middleton's *Beat* at ICA, London. Photographer: Andy StaggsStuart Middleton's *Beat* at ICA, London. Photographer: Andy Staggs



Stuart Middleton's *Beat* at ICA, London. Photographer: Andy Staggs

The stop-motion animation *2* (2017), projected in the upper gallery, presents a skinny dog writhing around in the corner of an empty room. Agitated and bored, the undernourished canine paces, sniffing and barking intermittently. The shrill sound echoes in the empty space. A bark without a bite, the dog is in looped purgatory. We may try and socialize dogs, yet they continue to misbehave, shitting where they shouldn't and barking at the postman. The dog seems like a cipher for the artist's broader interests, oscillating between performed exhaustion and aggression. The animation is laboriously crafted, and, as throughout Middleton's practice, mechanized and repetitious labor manifests itself in truncated form.

A *short text*, provided as a handout, takes the form of a resignation letter written by a young motorway service station attendant. We're not quite sure whether the story is partially biographical or purely fictional, but the indignant tone pinpoints the micro-hierarchies of dead-end jobs so acutely that one feels that Middleton is writing from some experience. I'm reminded of a summer job I had as a student, working in a dairy factory. My sole responsibility was to take the milk off a conveyer belt and wheel it into the refrigerated room next door. It was a loud and cold environment, and you couldn't go home until all the milk had been processed. The shifts were typically twelve hours long, and my coworkers would often sneak off to the toilet while we were working, returning about half an hour later. It was common practice to just sit in there, reading the paper and having a smoke as a kind of low-level strike. Hardly placards and protests, yet an incredibly efficient and subtle form of nonproduction that was tacitly ignored by some of the senior management. Like an irritable dog, human bodies have a habit of misbehaving. My knackered coworkers were expressing, in their own small way, defiance against a system that aggressively mechanized their bodies. I wonder how many of them daydreamed about handing in their own resignation letter.

Middleton's exhibition also recalls the work of Maria Eichhorn. In *Money at the Kunsthalle Bern* (2000), Eichhorn used her exhibition budget at the Kunsthalle to renovate the dated building, presenting the outcome as an empty, yet newly restored, gallery. For *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* (2016) the artist closed Chisenhale Gallery, London, for the duration of her solo exhibition and gave the salaried staff a paid holiday. Both Eichhorn and Middleton offer differing responses to the notion of fatigue that is manifested via the infrastructural and physical material of the institution. While Eichhorn's projects are often immaterial and dispersed, Middleton amplifies their labor, turning his focus inward toward objects, architecture, and images.

*Beat* is the last project organized by outgoing curator Matt Williams and coincides with the new directorship of Stefan Kalmár. For an institution with such an important history, the ICA has often felt like an incredibly contested space. Everybody in London seems to have an opinion on how it should work and what public it should serve. *Beat* is a literal and metaphorical clearing of the decks. The institution often feels submerged under the weight of its own history, caught in a double bind between the need to move forward and the compulsion to look back. Middleton's exhibition offers a form of erasure, an architectural palimpsest, and it will be intriguing to see how the new regime starts to build into the space and onto the gallery's histories.

at ICA, London  
until July 2



Stuart Middleton's *Beat* at ICA, London. Photographer: Andy Staggs