

Occurring every five years, the British Art Show is a definitive marker of significant developments in contemporary art in the United Kingdom. This lavishly illustrated book is published on the occasion of the exhibition mounted by Hayward Touring. It includes essays on the themes of the show by curators Lisa Le Feuvre and Tom Morton and texts on each of the 39 selected artists. The subtitle, 'In the Days of the Comet', is taken from a 1906 novel by H. G. Wells.

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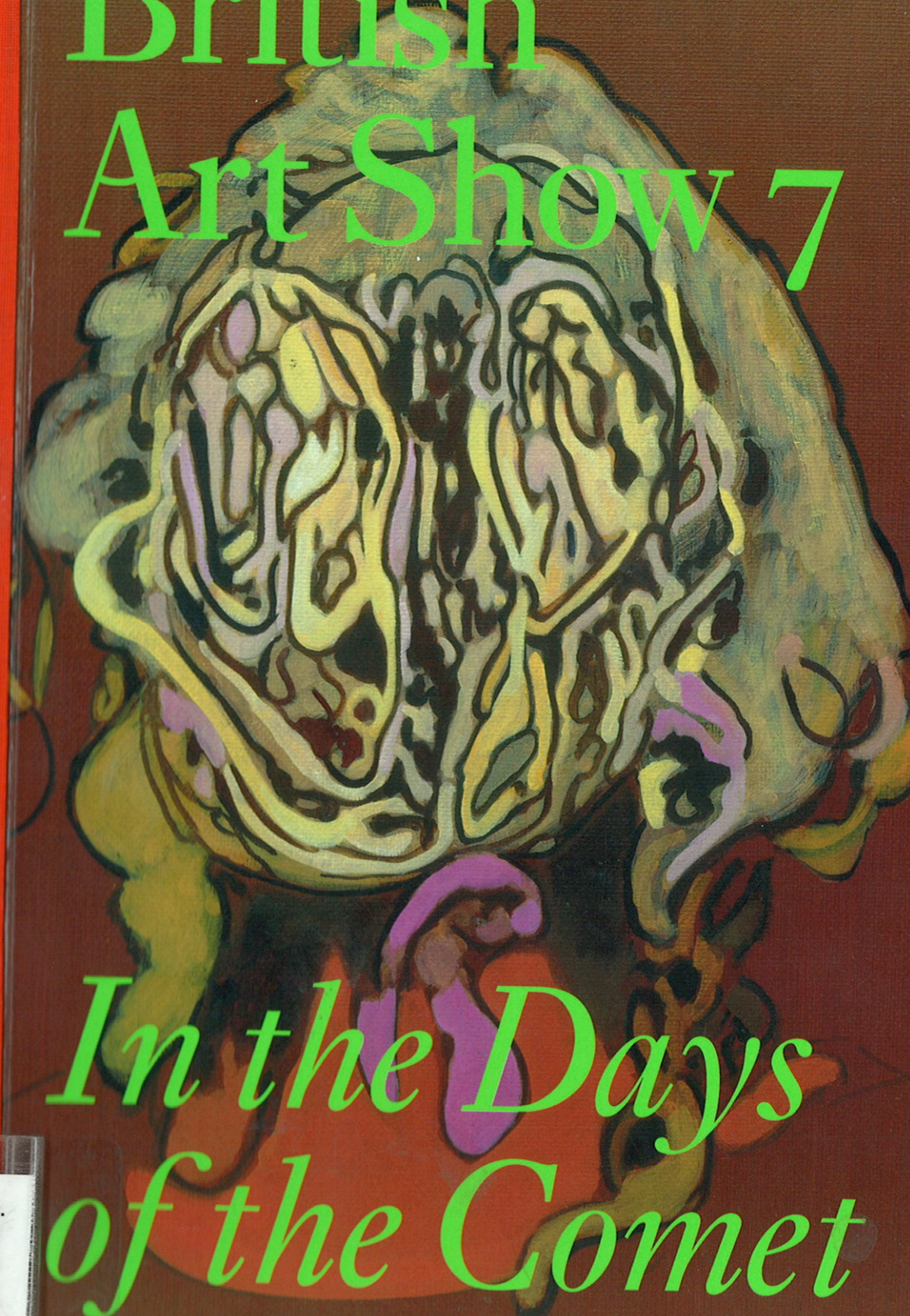
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British Art Show 7



*In the Days
of the Comet*

Ian Kiaer

Buildings formed of card, wood and silver foil sit on islands and waves of foam against mountains of paper files. A collection of triangles lies on the floor as if waiting to be picked up and constructed into a solid structure. A black rubber rectangle high on the wall reflects sunlight and becomes a painting rather than a block of material. A painting retreats into a corner, and a plastic container curves itself into a sculpture that one might fall over while stepping back to wonder why the painting has been hung in such a strange position. These are some of the weightless, worthless objects that Ian Kiaer uses to form his installations that, with an economy of means, mine the history of speculative thought to perform an aesthetic magic.

Endnote, pink (black) (2010, pp. 92–93), conceived for the Munich Kunstverein, drew on the grammar of the still life and the syntax of the readymade, feeding off the museum's nineteenth-century painting collections. Utilising shifts in scale and sightlines, painting-like objects were placed in unlikely locations, butting up against a doorway or positioned so high as to almost touch the ceiling. Yellow latex, silver foil and fabric were stretched as paintings, some with abstract lines added, others left as found. Sheets of rubber and plastic hugged the floor alongside a towering inflated transparent plastic bag and a series of modular triangles (p. 91), reminiscent of Bruno Taut's 1914 Glass Pavilion – a recurring reference in Kiaer's installations. Championed by the German writer Paul Scheerbart in his 1914 manifesto *Glass Architecture*, Taut believed buildings made of glass could move towards creating an earthly paradise.

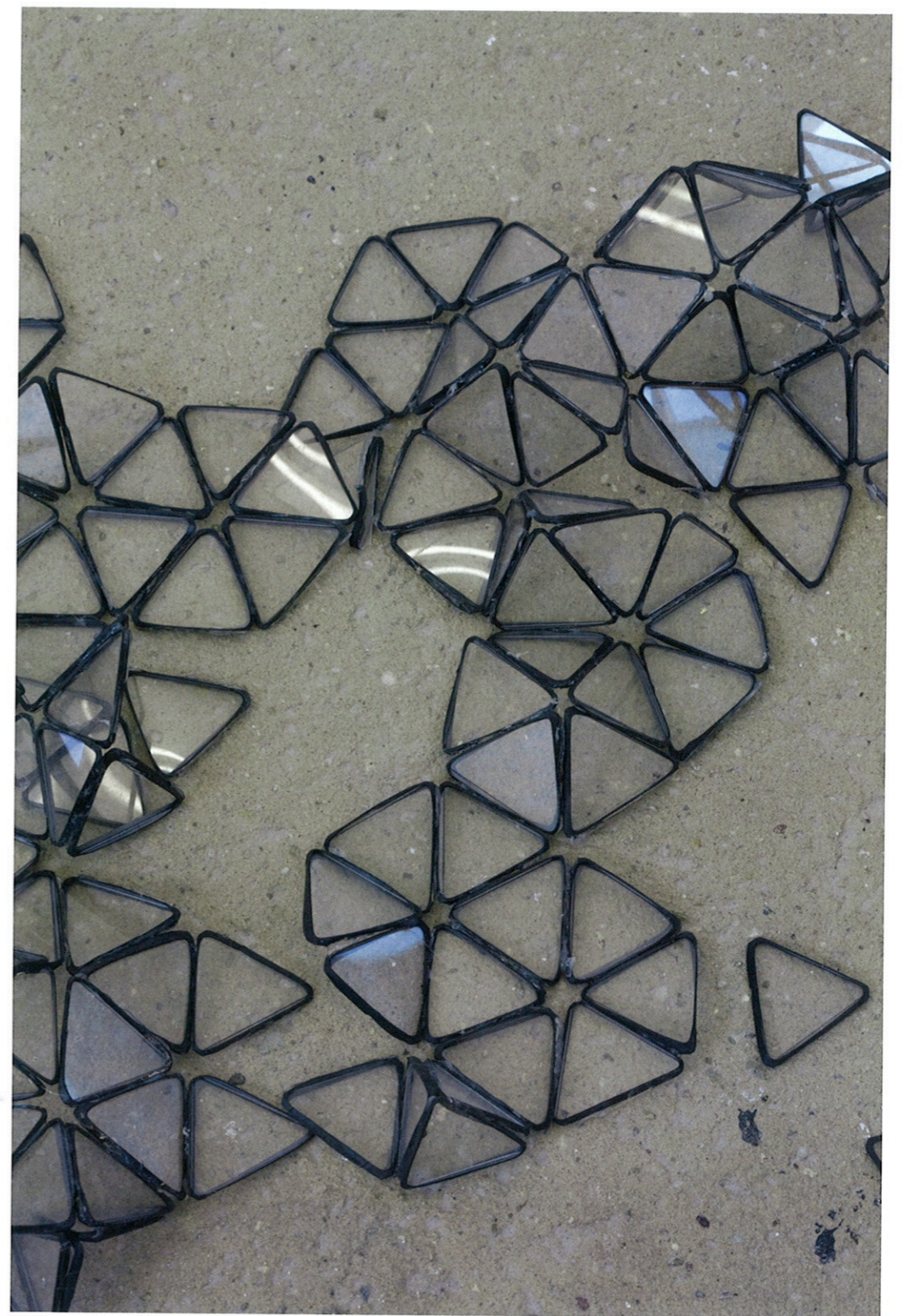
Referring to such experiments in the histories of literature, architecture and thought, Kiaer creates proposals for rethinking how the world is structured and understood. Narratives of resistance and disappointment form the conceptual base for his installations, and he frequently turns his attention to figures who have been exiled as a result of their public dissidence (for example, the poet Irina Ratushinskaya who was imprisoned during the 1980s for anti-Soviet activities) and to moments of visionary

architecture (such as Curzio Malaparte's 1937 house on the island of Capri).

For *BAS7*, Kiaer presents a new work focusing on the Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov, who was active until the late 1920s when he became increasingly isolated by Stalinist demands for Socialist Realism in architecture. In defiance of both this edict and of the monochromatic dogma of his contemporaries Malevich and Rodchenko, Melnikov began painting traditional portraits, closeted in his cylindrical house studio, a structure that, as Kiaer states, he had designed as 'a perfect synthesis of building, thinking and dwelling yet, after political censure, it became almost a working tomb for him'. This new work develops from his interest in 'minor' genres of painting – a realm of research that explores the ways in which a marginalised person, group or idea makes use of a dominant language that is not their own – for example, Samuel Beckett writing in French or Vladimir Nabokov in English. This process of deterritorialisation of power shifts both the writer and the nature of language itself. In art today, portraits, still lifes and figurative paintings could be described as 'minor' positions, sitting as they do outside expectations of what 'contemporary' artistic practice is assumed to be. In this, as with other installations, Kiaer creates a transitory and poetic arrangement of allusions, pointing to versions of the world once believed capable of radically transforming lived experience.

Harnessing the formal properties of light reflecting off colour, Kiaer's installations juxtapose watercolours, drawings and paintings with found and gently modified materials – from inflated Korean rubbish bags to office tables, fluorescent-tube packaging, swathes of plastic, deflated footballs and upturned buckets. These installations develop from his continuous research into idealistic and isolated proposals for alternative, and improved, ways of structuring the world through knowledge and architecture. His recurring references include Wittgenstein's studies of language, the sixteenth-century paintings of Bruegel, and Tarkovsky's filmic evocations of light and landscape. He folds these allusions into the specifics of exhibition site and context, each installation extending the premise of its predecessor.

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Endnote, pink (black), 2010 (detail)



Endnote, pink (black), 2010