

Sian Bonnell: *Kaput*
Out of Order
Pavel Büchler

The editor's job is to make pictures work. In the present instance, so she tells me, the editor of this magazine has selected a handful of photographs, from a lot of fifty, "all from the office environment". The choice is unsurprising:- the office is an editor's natural habitat. It is where editors put to work an array of means, instruments and technologies, from the keyboard at the heart of the work station to the humble pencil sharpener on the corner of the desk, the coffee maker, pair of scissors or the omnipresent rubber bands and paper clips, to make the pictures do something meaningful for us. Not so for a photographer, an unsettled, migratory kind of creature who lives at large and drifts between light and dark stalking for images - which makes it equally unsurprising that when Sian Bonnell found herself temporarily resident in the administrative quarters of the Photography Department at the Moravian Gallery in Brno, she felt stuck.

The photographer's job is to halt things, to steady them, immobilise them for the benefit of the picture. In *Kaput!*, a four-part series on the theme of 'work', made during her stay at the Gallery in 2005, Bonnell has done just that with a vengeance, twice over. To get going, she devised all manner of little interventions, obstructions and traps. She brought things to a standstill even before she took up her camera to take the pictures. She stuck paper clips, pins and cutlery in the gaps and apertures in the casing of the office machines, inserted darts where the leads should go, jammed a cupboard door with a wire coat hanger and the pencil sharpener with a referee whistle, propped up the telephone receiver with a half-eaten cheese sandwich. The initial aim of this doubling up may have been idle: to give herself something to do or just kill time (paper clips seem to have been designed for that), but in the process she discovered a metaphor for photography itself. In Bonnell's photographs, useful objects seem rendered useless, but this also seems to be their very purpose. It seems that Bonnell had noticed that the world captured in photographic images is always in a state of irrecoverable crisis. Things don't work in pictures, or not in their ordinary ways. The functioning of the camera makes everything else malfunction. It turns everything into a paradox, a self-contradictory static event. It puts the spanner in the works (or a tea spoon in an electric cooling fan), as it were.

Or perhaps, the things shown here had been broken in the first place and have been fixed with whatever was at hand, and these provisional interventions may be makeshift repairs and ad hoc improvements rather than minor acts of sabotage. Perhaps the paper clip or the small ball of BluTac holding depressed the reset button on some piece of electronic equipment are improvised tools of the photographic trade, like the tripod or the head brace from the toolbox of a Victorian portrait photographer, and what Bonnell is after are simply the photographic qualities of the pictures. These are often expressed in a terminology borrowed from music: harmony, tone, composition. Indeed, later in the series, Bonnell turned her attention and her camera to an old piano. It is tempting to point out the close proximity of the musical instrument to office equipment through its use of keyboard (which would explain how one of these pictures found its way into the editor's selection). But Bonnell's innovative use of a blue scouring pad, stuffed between the piano strings and the hammers, or the yellow rubber band

stretched across the keys, look like they may have come from the repertory of techniques developed by John Cage, Alvin Lucier or Robert Ashley.

For the avant-garde composers of the 1960s, the tampering with the pre-determined possibilities of the instrument was a means of opening their compositions to accidents. They did not try to demonstrate how things worked, or even if they worked, but merely that the unexpected offered other ways of thinking about use and function which can refresh our perceptions of, and our interest in, the familiar. And they left it to the music to do the trick.