

# Telltale signs with enigmatic messages

AS someone who works in the theatre, Tim Etchells is familiar with the concept of names and titles “up in lights” but for one of his contributions to Art Sheffield 08 he plays with the notion of what is appropriate for illuminated signs.

He has created a series of neon signs in the Millennium Galleries that spell out enigmatic messages. We are used to seeing neon lights projecting advertising slogans or a company name on a building, but these carry comical and slightly perplexing phrases.

The aim is to disarm the viewer by creating an awkward moment of intimacy in a public setting.

Also in the Millennium Galleries are two video collaborations with New York-based artist Vlatka Horvat, Etchells’ real-life partner.

Insults & Praises was produced a few years ago as part of a residency in Stockholm, and Promises & Threats is “a follow-up of sorts”.

In the first, a man and a woman face the camera and take turns insulting and praising each other over the course of an hour, drawing on an exhaustive list of abuses and derogatory terms on the one side, and compliments and declarations of affection on the other. Threats & Promises, a special commission for Sheffield Art 08, finds the pair consoling, luring, shaming, intimidating and teasing one another with proposals



*Vlatka Horvat and Tim Etchells collaborate on two video works*

about future things they might do, from bringing flowers to behaving badly, from playing safe to smashing up the town.

They both explore the theatricality of a loving relationship in the sense that emotions are often worked through by making a scene.

Etchells and Horvat suggest that the theatrical exchanges that shape our relationships show how real and staged drama are intertwined.

Etchells is artistic director of experimental performance company Forced Entertainment and a published writer.

He says: “I have been interested for the last four or five years in developing this side of my work and now the visual art side has become a bit more focused. I have done projects of my own in a gallery context and also different collaborations with Vlatka and other people. It involves a different approach to the audience or viewer or spec-

tator. I love working in the theatre but you’re asking for an hour and a half of people’s time whereas it is up to them with visual art.”

The ultimate in that is neon signs which people just walk past and ideally they would have been displayed outside the gallery, but this was ruled impractical for safety reasons.

He says: “There’s a different kind of engagement you get in different ways of working but language is the basis of all arts practice. I am interested in words.”

Although some people find it hard to move from one area of the arts where their reputation is known to another, Etchells says he has not encountered this. “What’s important is finding a context to do so and the curators, finding the people who believe in what you are doing. I have been lucky in finding people in that respect both here and abroad.”

In between setting up Forced Ent’s next production, he will be pursuing his personal arts-across-the-board agenda this summer. He will be doing an arts installation for a festival in Italy and then in July his first novel, the Broken World, will be published by Heinemann. Having also at one point directed a short film, it is almost as if he is going round ticking all the cultural genres. “You can rest assured that ballet and music are safe from my endeavours.”