

I thought it was my lucky night... but I only got a 'shniff'

Last Wednesday evening I was cycling along the back streets parallel to Ormond Quay on the north side of the Liffey when I came upon the opening of an art exhibition.

A small crowd spilled on to the pavement outside the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery on Great Strand Street, between Jervis Street and Capel Street, as I reined in my steed and dismounted. These are not only the smokers — it's a small gallery, so the people who have done the tour of the room tend to head out to the street to make room for others. Normally they stand on the pavement, but most of the pavement having been hammered to bits by city council operatives while the exhibition was being mounted, they stood on the street looking across at the back of the Morrison Hotel.

"Are you here for the shniff?" a painter I know asked. "Aha yes", I said, not too sure what he meant, but presuming it had something to do with a drink. The show was of work by five young German



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artists, and called *Was du brauchst*, which means 'What you need'. The five had spent a year in New York thanks to some kind of a German government grant, and came together again for this exhibition. I went in.

Painting is what you usually find in the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, from established figures such as Mick O'Dea and Dermot Seymour or from those starting out, having their first show, and all shades between; it is an interesting roster. But this is different. 'What you need' is an installation, video, sculpture of a certain kind, performance.

In the far corner is a very beautiful assembly of fluorescent light tubes spilling out from the ceiling. This is a piece by Klara Hobza, who for a previous show placed over 100 light bulbs in the clerestory of the Sculpture Center in Long Island City, NYC. By switching all the lights on and off, she turned the entire window space into a Morse code apparatus. Her video, shown in the present

exhibition, documents "her desperate attempt, over two days, to communicate with the neighbourhood and people in the passing trains and cars in Morse code".

Below the light installation there is a TV set with a video of a girl who stops people in a street and tries to rearrange their faces so as to make them smile. With some people the trick works well — they smile at the idea, of their own accord, and move on. Some take a bit of work — with two hands she has to tweak the cheeks until a smile is formed.

Some people are suspicious and don't like being touched; one young man lifts his two arms continually to brush her off and stop her doing whatever it is he thinks she is going to do. It is all great fun, to see how self-conscious people can be, and how well others handle it, and the piece is called *Lacheln* ("Smile").

On my way out to the street I pass a young woman, of medium height, dark, attractive, foreign-looking. She comes

up to me and sticks her face in that place where the sleeve of my jacket meets the main part of it, where my arm meets my chest. She burrows in there for a bit, into the crevice.

I react like a rabbit caught in a headlight unable to move; unable too to say anything coherent. Er hmmm, very nice I'm sure. She seems to be enjoying the experience, with her eyes closed to savour it all the better, but before I can say 'your place or mine?', she removes her nose, stands back again where she was and looks at me impassively. Smelling? Ah, the 'shniff! This is not some young one hopelessly attracted to me who can't help acting on impulse. She is the girl from the video in the corner, and — horrors! — there is another girl off to the right filming it all. My startled rabbit reaction will turn up some day in a gallery in Dusseldorf.

It could have been worse. I learn from Kevin Kavanagh's website that this is Stefanie Trojan who through performance, "questions human habits and social patterns,