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variant



The Lottery in Babylon

Leigh French

THE LONG GONE and almost forgotten Government pledge that Lottery funding would not become a replacement for 'public funding' of the arts has been, to the surprise of everyone, one with little credibility. Yet again used as another semantic toy in the game of systematic privatisation.

Arts institutions' moral indignations to the Lottery also appear to have died away. The scene having shifted from one where few wanted to mention they might actually be interested in 'cash' from such a 'public' source, to a tacit acceptance of the situation.

For many arts organisations there appears to be no realistic alternative to ensure immediate and long term survival than an application for Lottery funding. While this may demonstrate the only position tenable for some in the present cultural climate, for others it exposes past 'condemnations' of the Lottery as more a reflex of liberal guilt than any actual political stance.

This being the situation, 'dramatic' changes to the Lottery guidelines, for funding whom and what, have recently taken place. The Government appears to have acknowledged restricting Lottery funding to building works, for want of a better description, isn't very 'productive' if those institutions cannot then afford to run. In spite of the very large number of arts organisations and practices the previous criteria excluded, the recent Lottery funding changes take another step towards the eventual replacement of 'public funding' by a covinous, project assessment based system with a growing core of private facilitators and consultancy agencies. This is publicised as bringing about an apparent democratisation of the funds!

The Arts Council of England (ACE) started its receipt of Lottery applications under its new guidelines 'Arts for Everyone' on 6 January 1997. The Scottish Arts Council (SAC) launched its 'National Lottery New Directions Guidelines' Roadshow in February 1997. Comparison of the two new sets of guidelines and application forms reveals the SAC's excessive regulations. The level of bureaucracy presented is alienating to any potential applicant, especially to those not familiar with the internal structures and workings of the SAC. It could be suggested that there was an attempt to make visible some such workings, to orientate potential applicants. But, the guidelines fail to encourage greater involvement in the arts and endear the SAC to a broader cross section of 'public'. On the contrary, they illustrate a rigid replication of the specific forms of cultural division that already exist within the SAC. Perhaps access to a broader spectrum of 'tastes' was not the SAC's intention at application level.

The 'Arts for Everyone' document openly declares that for every £1 billion spent on Lottery tickets the arts receive £51 million, £41 million being spent in England. By contrast the SAC's 'National Lottery New Directions Guidelines' coyly mentions that it is responsible for distributing 8.9% of the money available for the Arts, working out at around £4.5 million. Not surprisingly then, a somewhat more positive front is presented by the ACE's 'Arts for Everyone' document, incorporating a wide ranging list of cultural interests as part of its cover design, an attempt at encouraging participation from 'all' communities. The ACE also has an express system for grants under £5,000, "...designed to get smaller-scale initiatives started fast. Minimum fuss, minimum bureaucracy, maximum opportunity." How they will operate in practice, we wait to see.

I recognise the difficulty in attempting to 'legislate' for a multiplicity of projects in any one such document, especially following on from the high expectations raised by the ACE and with less funding to distribute. However, the SAC's new guidelines seem to primarily concern themselves with a performance, venue, agent affair. While this may well be representative of the interests of the individuals who carried out the research for the document, this is not always the method by which a diversity of cultural forms, from a plurality of constituencies, function.

Receiving more attention than in the recent past, a large portion of the SAC's 'National Lottery New Directions Guidelines' is taken up with the sector of Arts Education. This is distributed throughout the document, posited under a number of 'pro-active' terms, encouragement, development, engagement, involvement, access, participation, awareness, outreach. The SAC's relationship with a broader public is presented as an arbitrary distribution of 'gifts', whereas these terms of association too often disguise the imposition of a unified culture. From the tone of the document the desired role of 'Education' and 'Access', far from being discursive, appears to be that of legitimising the hegemony of a particular definition of culture.

In both England and Scotland individuals cannot directly apply for Lottery grants, having to do so through a 'constituted' organisation. This *could* mean many things. One fear in Scotland is that, in reality, it will mean through those bodies already 'consecrated' by the SAC. This has been the climate encouraged to date. The SAC bestowing its sanction on those who satisfy their requirements, "...on the chosen who're themselves chosen by their ability to respond to its call."¹ So appearing "given", those advising on and processing the applications will deal with the same individuals they regularly deal with. The institutions involved effectively operating as a buffer cum filter system, part of a 'naturalised' cultural administrative system with an internalised orthodoxy. What then is actually meant by broadening the scope of 'funding'?

Lottery funding could be regarded as a 'much needed' drip feed supplement for these institutions, particularly in light of the present Scottish Office funding crisis. Funding is also required for new arts projects under development. For example, the Dundee Arts Centre, presently under construction, with circa £60,000 earmarked for two salaries, poses an extra strain on the existing finite financial resources.

The various moral questions and contradictions surrounding the public funding of the arts, in all its incarnations past and future, continue to predominate. Particularly in the clamour of political uncertainty surrounding the forthcoming general election. Whether the SAC's 'National Lottery New Directions Guidelines' were the creation of complacency or conspiracy, the way in which it appears to operate seems to benefit only certain approaches and certain institutions. One underlying question asks, how much of it depends on personal relationships with an (allegedly) objective body that appears to have little accountability? We must now examine ways in which larger institutions can act, not just as 'agents' potentially replicating a narrow curatorial system, but ways in which they can participate in a broader, supporting structure for a plurality of constituencies today.

1. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: Signs of the Times Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, edited by Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris

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Advertising address PO Box 1269 Glasgow G3 6QA Tel: +44 (0)141 552 3436 Fax: +44 (0)141 553 2660

Editorial address 1A Shamrock Street, Cowcaddens, Glasgow G4 9JZ

Tel: +44 (0)141 333 9522 Fax: +44 (0)141 553 2660

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Editorial

HELLO AND WELCOME to **Variant 2**. For new readers let us introduce ourselves. What you have in your hands is an independently produced 'art' magazine, which is distributed free in the UK and abroad. We take art to mean culture and how culture is formed, **Variant** makes a contribution to this through the work of our writers. **Variant** is not run by the Arts Council or a district council; this gives the magazine more freedom of expression: the freedom to criticise is something which is dying out in the UK. **Variant** is produced by a small group of individuals with the support of the artistic community. We feel that **Variant** can also be appreciated by a broader public. All of the contributors are individuals working in the visual arts. The writing in the magazine is 'critical'; we see this as meaning that it should function as a forum for writers to document, report, explore, analyse and express their ideas and arguments. We welcome contributions and also criticisms of the magazine itself from our readers.

New Directions?

At a time when the Scottish Arts Council introduces New Directions, many community arts organisations are facing drastic cuts in both their capital and revenue funding. The break up of local government has split funding bases, leaving our future dependent on the short termist whims of central government.

Recreation, Social Work and Education departments face large cuts as the new councils come to terms with the limited purse given them by Government. Teachers, Social Workers and Community Workers are being forced to take voluntary redundancies as part of the 'streamlining' of our council services. But what of the arts amongst all this? As an Arts and Disability Development organisation, Artlink faces an uncertain future. Over the past ten years it has built up an unrivalled body of knowledge and expertise in work for and with people with disabilities. It has sought to develop new and innovative approaches within its arts provision. Funding of project activity has always been problematic but it appears even more difficult to see how we can work effectively within even tighter constraints. Access to cultural expression is a right. How can wider access to the arts be realised and new developments sustained if its only support is time limited and therefore restrictive? The future? Does anyone fancy a bit of basket weaving or face painting perhaps?

Alision Stirling
Projects Director, Artlink, Edinburgh

Bad News

Pavel Büchler

Comments

According to press reports, Scotland faces a nearly certain condemnation in the history textbooks of the twenty-first century. The immediate cause of this shameful fate is the society's attitude to contemporary art. "Culturally, as a nation, we will be judged on how we have treated Mr Richard Demarco", prophesies Giles Sutherland in *The Scotsman* on 11 December. Four days later, in *Scotland on Sunday*, Iain Gale predicts that "the Scots face future vilification as cultural reactionaries," because "the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art contains not one work by any of (a generation of younger Glasgow) artists." Sutherland and Gale are not the first to raise the alarm—just over a year ago, the nation was being publicly cautioned by a bitter painter with a vigorous imagination who complained that his works had been banished to the company of "stuffed giraffes in the Kelvingrove Museum"—but their call to arms rings with a sudden sense of urgency. History doesn't wait. "Unless there is a collective pooling together of resources and energy", warns Sutherland, and "unless something is done very soon", hastens to add Gale, the Scots will be in trouble. They will have to shoulder the blame for the institutional "indifference" which threatens to deprive Demarco's European Art Foundation of its home in Edinburgh's St Mary's school and which denies the talented artists in Glasgow their share of the wall space at the Gallery of Modern Art.

Or worse: this may be a case of a reckless conspiracy of negligence in the face of impending historical embarrassment. The identity of this artistic culture is already being shaped elsewhere, on someone else's terms, and the official domestic "cultural sector" does not even care to come out and play. Iain Gale makes no bones about it. It is "not the established mainstream" but a "close knit-knit body of artists, curators and critics" who are seen abroad "as the ambassadors for a new, epoch making strain of Scottish art." Yet, "when 10 years hence, the history of Scottish art in the 1990s comes to be written, the art itself will not be in Scotland, but in London, Switzerland, Germany and the USA."

This is bad news for the people of Scotland. The nation can rightly demand that its nominal representatives take care of its future reputation. But the stakes are too high and history is not a particularly fair arbiter. The common apex of the bleak prognoses seems to be the suggestion that, in Scotland, the blind rule in the kingdom of the myopic. As the municipal cultural policies and practices of Edinburgh and Glasgow are putting the good name of the country at risk, the community as a whole must be mobilised to do or be damned. It wouldn't be for the first time that history forgets the culprit and condemns the culture. Even where cultural misdemeanours are committed by men of a greater stature, resolve or power than those currently sitting on the committees in the respective city halls, it is their broad constituencies that are made responsible in the final account. Remember, "the Germans" banned Kandinsky from teaching, "the French" put Genet in jail and "the Russians" drove Jesenin to suicide. Passing the responsibility from people onto "the people" is history's oldest trick.

Promises of eternal damnation are often the last resort where all other arguments have failed. But in the case of contemporary art in Scotland, such arguments are yet to be rehearsed. There has not been much public debate, for instance, about the nature of what Gale calls "Scotland's art establishment", nor for that matter about the terms of the "debate on contemporary art in Scotland" itself—despite the record number of column inches devoted to lamentations about the blinkered vision of the former and complaints about the absence of the latter. The "debate", such as there is, seems to suffer from serious confusion. What or who comprises the "art establishment"? By what standard do we define "the mainstream"? What does the word "art" mean in the context of such institutions

as Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art? What do the terms "Europe" or "international" stand for when it comes to the artistic culture of Scotland?

The truth is that we don't quite know—or that we don't even ask. Take for example the Gallery of Modern Art. Its self-proclaimed identity rests squarely within the "entertainment business" (Julian Spalding in *The Herald*, March 28, 1996). As a theme park it surely is one of the finest things outside Las Vegas and Euro Disney. But why on earth do we feel compelled to talk about it as though it had anything to do with art? Or take the generation of artists who are supposedly ignored by and excluded from the "established mainstream". Excluded from what? What is there that the "art establishment" (whatever that means) could offer them? Why would they ever want to be involved with an "establishment" remarkable only by its almost total obscurity and its manifest lack of ambition? (Think of the trickle of decorative pictures juried for seasonal exhibitions by a club of gentleman-painters of a bygone era "world famous in Edinburgh".) Or the collections of contemporary art in Scotland—how do their agendas match the aspirations of work which is determined to assert itself within a living culture? Whatever their individual interests, it is unlikely that Scotland's cultural institutions and its "art establishment", as they are, could provide more than a limited support to the uncompromising commitments of artists who know that the identity of living culture cannot be constrained by geography, let alone by the priorities of municipal politics. Granted, these artists' work should be collected and made more readily available—not because it is Scottish, but because it is often very good. It also is, in many instances and in the most positive sense of the terms, European and international. Indeed, without the artists' efforts international art would not have much presence in Scotland. The same goes for Demarco. He too deserves support because of the genuine international aim of his enterprise—and because he shares with the younger artists the spirit of ambition. The whole culture which they claim as their own is aspirational and outward-looking. They are the ones who belong to the mainstream - not the regulated flow of populist entertainment, but that current in art and culture which engages and makes visible the experience of living in the world.

Just as we seem to massively overrate the cultural importance of institutions and the "establishment", so we underestimate the oppressive power of mediocrity hidden within the institutional culture. This not only stifles the best efforts of those who work within or outside institutions to create a cultural climate of high ambition and excellence which all good art of whatever provenance demands, but it also perpetuates a general sense of limitations. As a result we are too ready to settle for crumbs of official benevolence which may save from closure a gallery in Edinburgh or secure "for the nation" a video work by a young artist, but which will not, in itself, change anything else. And while we listen with sympathy to those well-meaning few who take it upon themselves in the name of "the nation" to lead the charge against "indifference", we fail to notice the tone of dependence in their alarmed voices. They have faith in the merits of the art which they advocate, but they too believe that the supreme gesture of recognition is a seal of approval by officers, local politicians and "Scotland's art establishment". Their anxieties about the future are themselves signs of surrender to the creeping regime of the official and the ideology of institutional culture. Their concerns are ultimately compromised by the very terms of their arguments. Unless these terms are questioned and challenged, all the practical victories which the "collective pooling together of resources and energy" could bring about may still be our symbolic defeats. And this is the real danger today, no matter what history might think of it "10 years hence".

Meanwhile the public can be best advised to forget the judgement of posterity and to concern itself with

the message of ambition that contemporary art contributes to our sense of who we are right now. The nation can be assured that cultural identity is not made up of institutions nor is it authenticated by them. Even less is it fabricated by planning departments or museums. Rather, it is formed by the tensions between what people do and what they aspire to. In its verdict on our attitudes to art and culture, history will look kindly at those who do not bow to mediocrity - which will undoubtedly be recognised as the tyranny of the late twentieth century.

Roman Signer: Dead-pan Chaplin with bombs?

Oliver Sumner

Right: ROMAN SIGNER Cap with Rocket 1993

IN A SEQUENCE of four photographs a man dressed in black stands in a snow-covered Swiss meadow, a dark coniferous forest in the background. A white woollen hat, pulled down to conceal his face, is tied to a large firework standing to his right. Once he has lit the fuse his hands rest by his side, reminiscent of a condemned man before a firing squad. The rocket takes off with such a force that the hat is whipped from his head, revealing the face of the artist.

In his experiments, Roman Signer discovers in his own back yard, laws that Isaac Newton discovered 300 years before. Signer is, in his own words, "somewhere between scientist and explorer, between exploration and explosion." His show at the Photographers' Gallery in London in March, is curiously his first major British exhibition. Having trained in Poland as an architectural draughtsman, from the early 70's Signer began creating 'actions'. Possibly a kind of personal reconstruction following an asthma-related illness that meant extended periods in hospital. Previously, a competitive canoeist and mountain hiker, he now put his energy into constructing what he has referred to as little 'Alpine Dramas'. In 1971, influenced by Lamorisse's 1956 film *Le Ballon Rouge*, he documented balloons released at intervals across the Bodensee. Signer takes the word 'action' (not happenings) from the Vienna Actionists, a group interested in masochistic body-ritual in the 50's and 60's. Signer prefers not to draw blood, but his works are nonetheless perilous. There exists a natural impulse to institutionalise unfamiliar work by

classifying it in our own terms. To disregard anything as original and look to our own 'stream of consciousness' associations.

Smithson's Wake

Everyone has a favourite Python sketch. In one of mine, a series of neat bushes on a supposed MOD training ground are blown up in an attempt to reveal the camouflaged troops behind them. Like Monty Python, part of the enjoyment is in the recounting, time and again playing out the scene as if it was as fresh as first shown. In the tradition of surreal comedy, the collision of unlikely elements in fundamental.

Signer spends much time experimenting with a ready-made vocabulary, which might include: 'bicycle', 'case', 'barrel', 'explosives', 'boots' and 'table'. The energy to trigger the actions could be natural, a river or gravity, or manufactured, explosives or a catapult. Timing and speed are also important components. Signer sees the greatest part of these solo trials to be the preparation, the actual (often momentary) event does not hold special significance for him.

Signer's gallery exhibitions have included actions and installations, their resulting traces and—as here—their photo and video documents. For his 1990 show at American Fine Arts in New York, a sack of sand was suspended from the ceiling. Mid-exhibition at a pre-designated time, Signer telephoned the gallery from his studio in Switzerland and introduced himself. His call mechanically released the hanging sculpture which plummeted to the floor. Sand burst across the gallery, where it remained for the duration.

While his works indeed seem frivolous, Signer has the credibility of other early 70's time-based artists, reliant on the photo-document. But placing him in the wake of Smithson, Kaprow and the Happeners, some criticise him for not being overtly discursive. It is true, the playing out of entropy, the authority of the document, the relation of unconfined location to museum are unmistakable qualifications. Counter to that casting, I would not expect to see 'The collected writings of

Roman Signer' in the shops next Christmas; he is more interested in 'practical questions.' But compare and contrast the dignified silence Signer often maintains, with the enigmatic public persona assumed by Warhol at interviews. Or Sherman—who one suspects greatly appreciated the role of witness to her own critical acclaim—seldom accepting or denying any theoretical account. Signer, not peddling sophisticated irony, is completely sincere. On a Sunday afternoon when the weather is fine, perhaps the Signers would go into the country to film some experiments, trying out proto-actions—play and trial are his favourite means of discourse. "It's me" he insists, "it's not another language—it's me all the time." Roman Signer is not Robert Smithson.

No More Flat Feet

Neither is he (as has often been implied) consciously positioned in the legacy of the Situationist International or Zurich Dada. The directness of means should not be simply construed as guerrilla tactics. In one example a table catapulted from a hotel window hurtles vainly towards the snow-capped mountains, diving into the trees. Another was a timed device in an exhibition, the viewing public kept in the dark as to detonation time. To the extent that violence is presented in Signer's actions, it tends to be directed nowhere in particular. His exercises take place in the Swiss landscape and make not the slightest bit of difference to the outside world. At their most elaborate they are once in a lifetime events—uncompromising potlatch—and Signer still has energy to waste. Where else but in a general economy would we see such an unashamed expenditure of energy for absolutely no gain? The point is, Signer's project is not consciously engaged in the social realm.

I had already imagined him as a Chaplinesque figure but when I spoke to Signer it was he who broached the subject. I think *Modern Times* may be a favourite, because Chaplin arrives in New York carrying a case—part of the Signer vocabulary. Consider the slapstick, and Chaplin too is not unaccustomed to failure.

Now picture Guy Debord, bodily preventing the press from entering the Paris Ritz in 1952 for Chaplin's great press conference promoting his film, *Limelight*. This was how the Lettrist International (preceding the SI) chose to launch its first assault. They chanted: "No More Flat Feet!" Also the heading of their leaflet, which read:

...Because you've identified yourself with the weak and the oppressed, to attack you has been to attack the weak and the oppressed—but in the shadow of your rattan cane some could already see the nightstick of a cop...but for us, the young and beautiful, the only answer to suffering is revolution... Go to sleep, you fascist insect... Go home Mister Chaplin.

To the Lettrist's, Chaplin had defected to the Spectacle. Signer's self-sufficiency makes him no revolutionary, his is a distant trajectory of personal discovery. His work manages to particularise the so-called universal. I asked, "why do you make actions?" His response: "Why climb a mountain?"

Not included in the present classification

When Signer says, "I must get to grips with transience," I believe he refers to physical actions and their consequences, not least his own impermanence. But he could just as easily be referring to the impermanence of the artwork and its photo-document. He told me (dryly) that the video works would degrade first, then the photographs. The most lasting testimony would be his diagrammatic drawings of actions. Another kind of transience is similar to the void which lies within Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*: the photograph refers to the 'core' of the work, but the 'core' was never visible. Very



often for Signer nothing much really happens.

In one film Signer is seated with a blow torch and candle mounted on the floor in front of him. As he tugs on a string the candle is blasted with a 2 foot jet of flame. But after repeated attempts, no change. I heard that Wordsworth visited the Swiss mountains, expecting to experience some sublime, life-changing transfiguration but returned unchanged and probably a little morose. Lots of Signer's actions are a bit crap too.

As the show's curator, Jeremy Millar says: "If we think that his experiments fail, then it is because we have misunderstood the nature of enquiry." It is precisely this lack of sophistication that is so appealing. They are low-tech with low production values and yet the photo-documents are spuriously seductive. Their all over amateurism is the currency of up-to-the-minute 90's advertising imagery. The unexpressive document floats, as the image quality causes it to be at once immanent and distant. Like a telephone voice, the removed is confronted by the direct and intimate.

Millar has arranged video monitors nonchalantly behind screens, so you meet the actions as if stumbling across them in a wooded glade. You would sit on a tree stump in the shadows and watch the private ritual being acted-out beneath shafts of sunlight. A single rocket propelled boot rotating furiously around a nail on a tree gets one of the biggest laughs.

In another video Signer emerges from the back of a gallery wearing a metallic protective suit including boots, gloves and helmet, marching a circuitous route, each deliberately placed step activating a small explosive device in his path. There's a self-evidence only before seen in the kind of safety training videos the fire service produce for company employees.

Signer's latest works show he is aware of his new younger audience. Protective gear suggesting a fetishistic reading of the vocabulary, and new elements added to it: model helicopters, a net-wrapped Christmas tree as an inept javelin. Others are greatly enthused by the unhinged aspect of the work, brought about by its lack of explanation. Signer agreed that in the absence of a caption or prior knowledge of the work, the viewer was inclined to invent other stories as explanations of the photograph. Viewing the unguarded image outside the context that reveals it as loaded with concept, evinces a resistance to the classification impulse I mentioned before. But rather than the didactic subversion typical of other 70's art, Signer's is included in a more contemporary institutional critique based on mockery, the absurd. The subtle undermining of the system is reinforced by the dematerialisation of the artwork—the document also being a distancing device.

An attraction of the deadpan, unsentimental documentation which has become increasingly a persistent 'style' of the 90's, is its ambiguity. Whether it be Hilla and Bernd Becher's, typographical shots of industrial structures or Fishli and Weiss' random video footage, uninflected documents are most open to misunderstanding. Like Signer, this 'loose cannon' effect is part of their achievement.



ROMAN SIGNER Cap with Rocket 1993

Jason E. Bowman

Towards the Festival Format

CO-PROGRAMMED BY Hull Time Based Arts and the Ferens Art Gallery, the forth annual *Root* (Running Out of Time) Festival—*Skint*—took place in Hull between October the 5th and 20th, 1996, and was reviewed by David Briars in Live Art magazine's December issue. In his review of *Skint*, Briars opens by stating that "Hull's European dimension is actual, not virtual..." This statement would appear to infer that Hull has a particular relationship to the notion of boundaries, which would initially appear to be appropriate owing to the fact that historically the city's economic base was established on its ports as sites of import and export.

Briars then continues to state that: "One wonders why festivals such as this have a theme at all, as so few of the invited artists applied themselves assiduously to the festival theme, if at all." He then further criticises artists and co-programmers for having omitted to address one particular issue. Last year the boundaries of the district councils in Yorkshire, Humberside and Lincolnshire were restructured and Hull City Council introduced entrance charges to their municipal museums and galleries for non-residents. The Ferens Art Gallery which was a co-programmer and commissioner of works for *Skint*, was one of the venues affected and was also where I was hosted as live artist in residence throughout the festival. In his review Briars appears to be unable to accept the diversity of the ways in which the festival format establishes a pleonastic framework within which contexts themselves become shifting boundaries of purposeful investigation.

The necessity of how artists establish criteria by which to address contexts, as opposed to becoming obligated by them via the commodification of their sensibilities and individual identities, is a question the invited festival artist must recognise. *Root* has established a commissioning policy which, whilst supporting the development of new work, also clearly invites artists to examine their commodification by the organisations who commission them. In order to deal with the potential obligations and restrictions which commissions outline, it is a necessity for the festival commissioned artist to then address the relationship between their own product and those of the other artists. In addressing these issues the artist may then recognise that their work is situated in an extremely discursive programming format.

Briars' review and its criticism of the artists for not addressing one particular issue within a context would appear ripe, for such assiduousness also posits serious questions in relation to how the function of festivals are critically assessed and represented. One of a series of issues, which must be addressed when examining any cross-media festival, is their ability to engage with specific contextual issues whilst simultaneously ensuring that they successfully employ modes of agency which will protect the ensuing discourse from becoming limited by obligation to the most moderate elements of such structures.

Briars intones that the festival format should be employed in a prepossessed relationship with the umbrella title within which the inherent issues are

explored, in this case identified by the programmers as poverty, wealth and power. His belief that the artists chose not to allow the festival theme to control their practices to the point where their individual products may be recognised as significantly appropriate, offers the opportunity to reconsider the role of the festival format and their relationships to artists. Festival environments frequently offer contextual frameworks for artists but also position major questions in relation to how the artist will then deal with the inherent issues.

In establishing a schema within which to site discursive debates the co-programmers—particularly with a festival which searches to examine issues such as those in *Skint*—are also inviting artists to become responsible for establishing a series of criteria by which to assess their involvement and representation. These assessments demand that the artist examine their own commodification within that environment. However, in the recognition that the involvement in a festival is largely not an opportunity to showcase work and ego or to develop careerist tactics, but to enter into a framed discourse, the artist may rather discover that they are forced to address a wider series of contextual issues.

In clearly demonstrating his vision of the festival format as being generic ("festivals such as this"), and in his choice to ignore many other works which were site or context specific—as opposed to the single omission he identifies—Briars offers a piece of writing which clearly represents the crisis in the ways in which festivals are critically represented. In his reductivist selection of individual works he establishes the means by which he is able to examine the works stripped of the contextual discourse which the festival provided. This results in a selective commodification which the very format of the festival seeks to refute.

This means of selective representation provides the critic with a way in which to reject the significance of the festival format, and to further provide themselves with a means by which to ignore any responsibility to discover relevant forms of criticism. Ultimately the festival critic must become responsible for discovering a form of criticism which can actively parallel the means by which festivals establish internal discourse.

Festivals use a whole series of means by which to create overload: intense programming in a short period of time, clashing time schedules in the presentation of work, representations of diversities of practices and art forms and sites for exhibiting. The supposed function of this overload is to escape the reductivist tactics by which commodification of the inherent debates can take place.

Should festivals, whose aims and functions are to actively create complex sites for the development of critical debates (by structures awash with internalised confusion, contradictions and comparisons resulting in open questioning of how discourse is constructed) continue to be critically represented by value structures which appear to be dependant on the commodification of individual elements, then the potential for major misrecognition of their intrinsic value may be allowed to continue.

Francis

IN THE PAST weeks our demons have returned to haunt us. Blake Morrison's personalised account of the of the Bulger murder in Liverpool, and Michael Howard's pronouncements on Myra Hindley and Ian Brady have revived memories of events that have attained the status of myth. In both cases the murders and the images associated with the murders have assumed an importance above the merely documentary.

The iconic photographic portrait of Myra Hindley from the 1960s, her unforgettable eyes staring darkly at the camera, has once again surfaced in the newspapers. Its air of brooding menace has become so saturated



UNKNOWN: 17th Century Dutch Emblem

with associations of evil that it easily eclipses the more recent images of a softer, kind-looking middle-aged woman. The equally iconic image of James Bulger, taken from a security camera recording his meeting with two older boys, has similarly reappeared across the media.

In Britain, today, these images signify evil. The flatness and banality of both photographs allow the imagination no purchase on the notion of communality or shared distress. Hindley's portrait is too furious

to admit us to any understanding, while the security camera in Liverpool keeps us at an unacceptable distance from the acts we witness. It seems important that both images are in grainy black and white and that both are the product of the camera as a mundane documentary tool. There is a tacit agreement that no art or artifice has been involved in the production of the two pictures and this has contributed to their power, they are taken as proof of the existence of some incomprehensible and occult force that we cannot hope to comprehend.

At this level, the images function as some sort of folk representation of evil, portraying it as a concept alien to most of us. This stance is consolidated by the media's general approach to the subject which is based on sentimental notions of benevolence and emotive descriptions of 'tragedy'. These descriptions often seem to distort the real and immense suffering of the victims families into an oversimplified scene of woe to which we can only respond on an emotional level. Ultimately, this kind of coverage leaves us feeling helpless.

For the contemporary artist, the power exercised by these images poses a real threat in that they severely limit the boundaries of what can be said about human nature. Given their use in the media (and their exploitation by election-minded politicians), the images and events surrounding the Bulger and Hindley cases have become so charged that any discussion of the murders has become taboo. The only safe option is to sympathise with the victims, condemn the killers and distance ourselves from the acts as much as possible.

Moreover, the impact of this new taboo can be felt in all our representations of morality. Dunblane, drug-taking and sex crimes have all become subjects so fraught with condemnation that no sophisticated debate can take place around them. In some cases, the media straitjacket on morality now verges on obscenity itself. J.G. Ballard, in his notes to *The Atrocity Exhibition*, comments that:

"The equivalent of the US television commercial on British TV is the 'serious' documentary, the ostensibly high-minded 'news' programme that gives a seductive authority to the manipulated images of violence and suffering offered by the conscience-stricken presenters—an even more insidious form of pornography."

The media representation of social problems has reduced our world to a simple morality play of good versus evil. If we are to understand anything about

A Touch of Evil

Mckee

I saw Satan Fall Like Lightning Luke, 10:18

human nature this needs to be resisted. In the visual arts, in particular, the problem has urgency, given the growing pressure on galleries to self censor work that may suggest we all have dark urges.

In the case of the Bulger murder, Jamie Wagg's "History Paintings" of the security camera photograph were removed from the Whitechapel Gallery's Open Exhibition after prolonged attack by the tabloids in 1994. The images were already rendered unforgettable through their exposure in the news media, yet their reproduction outside of that arena was considered an 'outrage'.

Mark Cousins, in an essay analysing the furore around Wagg's paintings notes that

"The work seeks to set the image of the boys in a public space of memory which does not repeat identification but works through them. It is a work in search of a public sphere in which canonic images are set within the historical and political conditions of their emergence. It is probably right that the newspapers expressed such outrage, for the work challenges the space of representation and identification within which newspapers coin it."¹

This search for a public sphere in which to interrogate not only 'canonic images' but a multiplicity of moral and natural impulses has more recently gained momentum. Again, the murder of James Bulger seems to have provided the starting point for much of this new debate. David Jackson, for instance, in a short book on the killing, clears away much of the obfuscation around the notion of 'evil' which permeates most accounts of the incident:

"If we want to prevent another James Bulger killing from occurring again we have to start by challenging the tabloid voices that are constructing the two boys as folk devils. For example, the Daily Star leader for November 25th, 1993 needs to be challenged. It spoke of seeing 'pure evil' in the faces of the two boys and insisted that; 'As Long as they both draw breath, they must never be released.' In challenging this we have to say firmly and clearly, that the two boys aren't devils. Despite being extremely disturbed, they are both more like ordinary, working class boys than exceptional monsters. Right under our noses, on a regular, daily basis, destructive and damaging things are being done to the lives of many of our boys. But we still react with surprised, innocent shock to these happenings as if we can't bear to acknowledge where they come from."²

Jackson is of a growing group of writers and thinkers who are attempting to confront the savage, natural instincts that we all share. Others like Blake Morrison and Gitta Sereny, both attracted to the murder of James Bulger are likewise undertaking personal explorations of the nature of what we term evil. Sereny, in her recent biography of Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, has provided a stark insight into the way in which a man can slide into connivance with a system of brutality. Moreover, she penetrates the self-deceptions and defences Speer raised against his own knowledge of his activities and acknowledges the human suffering he experienced in doing so. Describing the aim of her book as an attempt 'to learn to understand Speer' she points out 'while in such encounters it is essential never to pretend agreement with the unacceptable, moral indignation for its own sake is an unaffordable luxury.'³

These accounts of personal morality and the intimate response to what we describe as evil have, however, been paralleled by more scientific approaches such as that of Richard Dawkins. Speaking on the apparently different subject of DNA, in *River out of Eden*, he outlines an unsentimental view of the universe:

"Nature is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent...We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, but simply callous—indifferent to suffering, lacking all purpose. In a universe

of blind physical force and genetic replication some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The Universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."

This neo-Darwinian statement of evolutionary process offers us a contemporary existential landscape in which to make a more honest appraisal of our general human condition. At first glance, it seems fairly bleak but there is no reason why it should become a landscape of despair. Dawkins, like Sereny and Jackson, has simply asked us to be honest about the darker side of our natures and to accept the savage indifference of life. From that point, he believes it possible to build something more lasting. Even the myths he appears to attack are left intact. Dawkins himself, in his choice of book titles such as *The Blind Watchmaker* and *River Out of Eden* is only too aware of the imaginative power of the metaphor.

Although, for Dawkins, this approach eventually leads to a renunciation of God there is no good reason why this has to be. In *Ecclesiastes*, we can find statements comparable to his own, such as: "Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared for an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them." There is an acknowledgement of the random and democratic nature of evil that is as strong as anything by Dawkins or even Nietzsche, who wrote: "There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena."⁴

In the visual arts, this stance may appear difficult to articulate. Goya's *Capriccios*, for instance, deal with evil but within the larger context of nightmare and madness, as if the artist is overwhelmed by the vision of nature he has evoked. Among contemporary artists, though, Gerhard Richter has succeeded in expressing a clear acknowledgement of the need to approach the subject in a tempered frame of mind:

"26 June 1992. It might be for us to look on killing as part of our own nature—of the very nature that we seek to regard as our antithesis, as in the inhuman, 'blind' nature of natural disasters, carnivorous animals and exploding stars.

Our behaviour conforms to this nature in two ways: on the one hand as active killing, both in wars and as civilian murder; on the other in the still more horrifying passive mode of assent (we watch the news while eating dinner; we enjoy seeing murders in films). This is because of the way we take death for granted: just as we know that we are alive, we know that we die; death comes as naturally to us as life. The instinct to stay alive limits our compassion and our willingness to help; we give our help and our pity only under duress, and when it seems to be to our own advantage.

The suppression and repression of these facts gives rise to dangerous delusions, the politics of hypocrisy, false and lying actions.

And yet to accept them would be so unimaginable and so unworkable that we knowingly and impotently prefer to allow for—that is, include in our plans—all future catastrophes."⁵

Cady Noland, in her essay, *Towards a Metalanguage of Evil*, adopts a similar baseline in her interpretation of nature, but carves out a much more sophisticated position for the artist. Acknowledging what Richter has called the 'blind Nature' in all of us, Noland goes on to describe a society founded on a game in which the rules are often hidden and many of us are lost in 'a world of deceit'. Essentially, she describes a world which Richard Dawkins would recognise as the Darwinian survival of the fittest, though Noland views it through the lens of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. In her world, everyone assumes an element of disguise or artifice,

conning each other strategically for their own ends:

"Conning devices are tools. The degree of harm they do, if any, depends upon the purpose for which they are instrumented. Where the "mirror device" might be used by a parent to encourage a child, or by a psychiatrist as a therapeutic device, it is also used by ambitious students, known otherwise as "brown-nosers" or "ass-kissers", who cynically reword the opinions of their teachers in their written and oral work. People also use the "mirror device" to "pass", as Erving Goffman points out. A high school girl may try to hide her intelligence and assume a "light-weight" persona instead of going dateless. Goffman details this and Many other versions of "passing" in his book STIGMA."

The "mirror device" is a tool with which to mollify Y, and render him more pliable to X's manipulations. Malignant use of the "mirror device" abounded in Nazi Germany. To cite just one example, a perfect imitation of the Treblinka Railway Station was constructed for the express purpose of lulling prisoners into thinking they'd arrived at an apparently benign destination. This so-called station was actually a killing center."⁶

Cady Noland's world is not so far from that of *Les Liasons*

Dangereuses—a world of strategies in which everyone plays or is played upon. The consequences can be horrific as she points out in her reference to Treblinka, but she is not advocating any closure of the game. She is simply saying the game and its rules continue whether we like it or not, and we must acknowledge its existence if we are to play it successfully or change it.

For the contemporary artist, the 'game' is vital. Artifice, after all, is an essential element of art. The very notion of artifice may have been tarnished by the superficialities and power games of the 1980's but it would be naive to abandon the concept itself. Recasting it, as Noland has done, in a sphere which demands greater self-awareness and an understanding of Machiavellian designs offers an alternative to the simplicities of tabloid culture.

In his introduction to *The Return of The Real* Hal Foster writes of the "fundamental stake in art and academy: the preservation, in an administered, affirmative culture, of spaces for critical debate and alternative vision."⁷ In Britain, today, these spaces are diminishing and real critical debate has been reduced to a trickle of coded signals. This is not to advocate a highly politicised art movement. However, no matter how vibrant an art scene may appear to be, it requires the freedom to explore all dimensions of human nature if it is to continue to thrive.



DAVID SHRIGLEY Land Mine 1995

1. Mark Cousins, Security as Danger, 1996, p.8
2. David Jackson, 'Destroying the Baby in ourselves, 1995, pp 39-40.
3. Gitta Sereny, Albert Speer, His Battle With Truth, 1995, p14.
4. Fredrick Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil ,1886.
5. Gerhard Richter, Notes 1992, The Daily Practice of Painting, pp 242-243.
6. Cady Noland, Towards a Metalanguage of Evil, Documenta IX, 1992 pp 410-413. Many thanks to Eva Rothschild for pointing me at this essay and other necessary background material.
7. Hal Foster, The Return of the Real, 1996, xvii.

Sharsted Self-Build

The first shared ownership self-build in London

Prior to urbanisation people built houses that arose organically from the materials of the locality. Britain is particularly rich in diverse styles of vernacular housing because of its diverse geology. The interiors may have been a bit Spartan but the house forms were, and still are, tremendously attractive, resonating with a sense of place.

As we were urbanised this central part of our culture was removed from our control. Housing became a matter of 'provision', the style of which was decided by municipal authorities or philanthropic gentlemen. House style expressed social division.

In the 20s and 30s, when proletarians had gained a modicum of leisure, there was a movement of shanty or chalet self-build, in which townies bought a tiny cheap plot out in the country and would gradually build up a homestead at weekends with whatever they could get their hands on. This autonomous movement, a contemporary proletarian vernacular in the making, was crushed by the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act with no defence from the Labour party or workers movement, who seemed to have no sense of its significance. The capital intensive mortgage system then moved in. Control of housing self-provision and its architectural expression was recouped by the state for the benefit of the bankers.

Getting ourselves a home of any sort is still a major undertaking in most of our lives. This area of culture probably takes up more time and energy than any other. Our choice of house and interior design is fundamental to the expression of our identity. The importance of self-build in cities is the hope they hold out towards regaining the vernacular. A move out of the mind frame of public housing provision, whether by government or mortgage companies, and towards an idea of democratic housing expression.

I'd been obsessed with the idea of building my own house all my life. Two previous attempts, which had each taken a year or so, had for various reasons failed. So, when I heard of the Sharsted Street Self-build Shared Ownership scheme, which was cranking itself up just around the corner from me in Kennington, South London, I was determined to get onto it.

The scheme had been set up by South London Family Housing Association who had negotiated a very beautiful little site, just behind Kennington tube, from Southwark Council. It had been the site of an old factory and had a high wall on two sides with a school kitchen and a nature garden on a third side.

It was for ten local families who needed two or three bed housing but who did not have the combination of capital and/or income to afford mortgages, or enough 'points' to be re-housed by the Council. The commitment required was that each family did 20 hours work each weekend for a year and a half. If you were short on your hours at the end of the month there was a fine of £10 per hour. This was a tough commitment for parents and especially single parents.

In the end we earned £9,000 per family in sweat equity: the value our labour produced, so we came out of it alright. But this figure is dependent on the houses' market value being greater than the other building costs, so there was a disconcerting element of risk. There were times in the scheme when it seemed that we might end up getting next to nothing for our Herculean efforts.

The group formed from people who turned up one way or another to our monthly meetings. It was quite difficult to find people who filled the criteria and were willing and able to make this commitment. This random process resulted in a wide cross-section of hardy Londoners with people of Irish, Italian, Caribbean, African and Polish backgrounds making up about half the group. There were 3 single parents (including myself) and 17 young people. But only two people had building skills!

How could we hope to build 10 houses without building skills? The plan was that we should do this partly by sub-contracting the skilled work (plumbing, bricklaying and plastering) and partly by being trained as we went.

Difficulties dogged the scheme from the start. The site had been cleared and foundations laid by a contractor, another supplier had erected basic timber frames. Our first job, in a very wet November 1993, was to felt, batten and tile the roofs. The 'training' quickly exposed itself as a myth. Our supervisor turned out to have never laid a roof himself. With our motley unskilled workforce, a foreman who hadn't done a roof before and an architect who—we gradually realised—hadn't worked through the details, the process was extremely frustrating. The architect had been pretending to do work which he simply was not doing. After a few months and a series of increasingly tense meetings, he was sacked. From then on the job was run by the

Quantity Surveyor who, however, worked from Chichester! This saved money, but resulted in an almost complete lack of on-site supervision of sub-contracted work.

The stress of all this was, of course, absorbed by the group. We organised the work as best we could and plodded on making use of sub-contractors whenever we got stuck or too far behind schedule. There were a few bleak weekends when very few people seemed to be turning up—but overall, the group hung on in there. Looking back now, I can only admire how people weathered the chaos and finally produced houses fit to live in.

The external design had been decided at the planning permission stage, 2 years before I joined. However, it is surprising how much satisfaction can be gained from having control over relatively invisible architectural elements. We changed and improved the design of things like the ground floor structure, the dormers and the patio doors. We also had a choice, within tight cost limits, of front doors, garden fencing, kitchens, bathrooms, lighting design and the exact arrangement of internal partitions.

In spite of a complete lack of support to help people design their interiors, each house is quite unique inside, with a style that has been the result of each families' thinking and choice. This increased control adds up to a connection with your house which has quite a different quality to one obtained through municipal provision or purchase.

After the group building period when the basic shells were finished, each household was then responsible for decorating, laying floors, fitting wardrobes, landscaping gardens and putting in any special finishes and fittings to their own dwellings. One person did their whole ground floor in reclaimed maple. Two of the two-bed houses have added conservatories: these were not luxuries, the architect's plans had provided no space for a dining table! I spent some money I had on swanky materials like Italian glass mosaics in the bathroom, whilst my son and friends helped me decorate, which saved money. Other people paid decorators.

Self-build seems to hold an overly romantic attachment to the idea that there is intrinsic value in self-builders doing all the physical work themselves. In practice unskilled people will often work so slowly that it really makes more sense to hire a skilled person with specialised tools. Especially when you realise that the scheme had to have a loan of £250,000 for the construction costs, and that we were paying something like £2,500 per month in interest charges! Each weekly delay cost us £650. In this situation at least design work, supervision, canny tendering and other such 'head work', can often produce better results in terms of time and money than slogging on dutifully.

Clearly this is no magic solution to getting a house. You do need a decent wage or a bit of money in the bank to pay for carpets at the very least. But in the last two years of hard work, I've at least saved the equivalent of nearly £10,000 and got a house which has an indefinable quality which comes from such close engagement with making it happen. Beyond that, there are neighbours who are a known factor... warts and all! There is a sort of community. Because we experienced 18 months and something like 1500 hours of close contact in meetings and on site, we know each other very well in comparison to most London neighbours. This has already resulted in some very easy going impromptu events at times of seasonal festivals.

More broadly, I think self-build has a symbolic value in a modern society, which has had this core of culture, building your own house, taken from it by the process of urbanisation. Home-making is a central part of most if not all cultures. Often the reaction of people when you mention you have just built your own house is one of disbelief, based on a simplistic idea of one person doing everything alone. Our houses were built by hundreds of people. But the point is that we were at the centre of this process, even if we were screaming and shouting with frustration at times.

Housing Association self-build can never challenge the harsh financial strictures of modern life in the same way that the widespread 'plotland chalet' movement of the 20s and 30s did. This is not to say it could not play a useful role for a few people and have a symbolic role more widely.

Stefan
Szczelkun

Mondo Mythopoesis

Stewart Home

IT IS INCREDIBLY difficult to summarise the bizarre developments that have taken place in what can be misrepresented as the 'underground' in recent years. The origins of the **London Psychogeographical Association, Association Of Autonomous Astronauts** and other even more bizarre groups, are now obscure. The same can be said about the arguments taking place on private Internet servers such as the **Invisible College**. In line with the slogan "anonymous elitism," participation in these forums is by invitation only. Those involved are forever covering their tracks and engineering faked feuds and public slanging matches. They use each other's names, as well as constructing collective identities which may be used by anyone, to foster anonymity.

If there is a precursor to all this activity, then it might be found in Neoism, an equally murky 'movement' said to have existed in Europe and North America during the 80's. Unfortunately, information is not only hard to come by, it is often unreliable. This point is illustrated by an anonymous Invisible college text headlined *Censorship Is A More Popular Form Of Subjectivity Than Imagination*:

The Neoist slogan "it's always six o' clock," for example, was coined by the Montreal Neoists Kiki Bonbon and Reinhardt U. Sevol, who used to beat up anyone who dared to ask them the time. TENTATIVELY, a CONVENIENCE and some East Coast Neoists campaigned for the "friendly fascist" Vermin Supreme in Baltimore. With support from the graphic design entrepreneur John Berndt, the Groupe Absence advocates radical free trade capitalism, while the godfather of Monty Cantsin, Dr. Al Ackerman, lifted the Neoist slogan "Total Freedom" from his fellow science fiction writer and drinking buddy Lafayette Ron Hubbard. Of course, these anecdotes are not exactly "authentic"...

All I can present here is a vortex of free associations, a chaotic overview of phenomena that are extremely difficult to categorise. How is one to describe hundreds of anonymous cultural 'terrorists' whose activities have coalesced into an autonomous literary genre? Imagine a 'heroic bloodshed' movie with rumours instead of bullets. Outside the UK, many people have been told that the person co-ordinating all this activity is Grant Mitchell, in 'reality' a character from the popular British soap opera East Enders. Another tale slanders those engaged in 'avant-bardism' as recuperators who are infiltrating the revolutionary 'movement' to 'intoxicate' radicals with crazy theories. It goes without saying that claims of this type simply play into the hands of psychogeographers and autonomous astronauts. Indeed, it is widely believed that the individuals slandering the 'avant-bard' are actually working hand in glove with them, in a bid to further publicise their activities!

Rebels and bohemians traverse cities scattering

signs, staging enigmas, leaving coded messages, usurping the territorial claims of priests and kings by transforming the social perception of specific urban sites. Both the London Psychogeographical Association and the Manchester Area Psychogeographic use their newsletters to publicise regular gatherings that interested parties may attend. On these trips, anything or nothing at all may happen. These are possible appointments and sometimes only one intrepid psychogeographer attends. Other events are huge gatherings of urban tribes bent on emotionally remapping the cities in which they dwell. Psychogeographers pass each other like ships in the night, show up late or not at all.

A concrete example of all this activity is the Radio Blissett broadcasts from Bologna, which began in 1994 and ran for a year and a half. Radio Blissett was a late night psychogeographical show in which every participant used the name Luther Blissett. Patrols were sent out into the city, where they were able to maintain contact with the studio via mobile phones. The patrols reported back on where they were and what they could see. They received suggestions about possible activities from listeners and proceeded accordingly. People called in requesting that the patrols do this or that, perhaps something as minor as buying a pizza and taking it to a specific address. The patrols drifted around the city, meeting up with listeners and incorporating the situations they encountered into the show.

In 1995, an autonomous Radio Blissett show began on a left-wing radio station in Rome. The Bolognese programme was broadcast midweek, the new one was aired on Saturday night when the streets were crowded, and there were more opportunities to create confusion. Actions included mass demonstrations with leaflets being handed out against proper nouns, there were also collective psychic attacks on Bourgeois notions of identity. During a massive psycho-sexual be-in, thirty people decided they wanted to have full sex. They wrapped themselves in a huge cellophane sheet and began to caress each other. As the petting got heavier, the cops broke up the shag-in. On 17 June 1995, a listener called the show and exhorted its audience to occupy a number 30 night bus. A merry band of psychogeographers boarded the bus with ghetto blasters blaring Radio Blissett. A police block stopped the bus in Piazza Ungheria. The illegal ravers moved onto a 29 bus, which in its turn was stopped by the Old Bill in Guido d'Arezzo. The psychogeographers refused to surrender and when the filth assaulted them, they fought back. A cop fired shots into the air. The riot and shoot out were broadcast live via mobile phone. Ten Luther Blissetts were arrested and charged with participation in a seditious rally.

These activities, like everything else, are a self-conscious construction. As such, the notions they utilise—including 'psychogeography', 'Luther Blissett' and 'fucking in the streets'—should not be viewed as arbitrary, but as self-contained signs. Everything done with

these signs immediately effects what they are supposed to represent. 'Originally,' both these modes of activity and the accompanying theorisation of them, were simply fancies circulated in ephemeral forms, private systems of symbols shared among a number of international players. One popular psychogeographical game was to ornament these symbols by enshrining them within an allegorical form, creating fables that could only be deciphered by insiders. At some point, perhaps through forgetfulness, this insider knowledge was lost, and those playing this game had to continually reinvent it. Increasingly fantastic interpretations were made of these symbols, until 'avant-bardism' became an 'art' of systematic contradiction, a self-refuting perpetuum mobile. In their sublime solemnity, such activities have had an extraordinary impact on those unenlightened by critical thoroughness.

Moving on, the Association Of Autonomous Astronauts launched itself with picnics in different parts of Europe. In Windsor Great Park, just outside London, the consumption of food and drink was accompanied by a mass release of gas filled balloons bearing the triple 'A' logo. By way of contrast, events staged by the Workshop For A Non-Linear Architecture are usually sparked by chance encounters and remain unplanned as they unfold. Although these activities have been misrepresented as 'anarchist' or even 'avant-garde' by the press, it should go without saying that such strategic failures of the understanding fail to do justice to the omnidirectional attack of psychogeographical activity. Those involved in 'avant-bardism' sometimes adopt positions that might be mistaken for 'occultism' or 'anarchism,' but they do so solely as a means of dissolving these categories by pushing their internal contradictions to a 'logical' 'extreme.'

The 'avant-bard' has no programme, it simply utilises practical methods to explore our 'world' of proliferating margins. Using maps of the Outer Hebrides, the Neoist Alliance spent one bracing winter day traversing Holbeach Marsh on the Wash. Here, the managed environment of fields and dikes ends at the sea walls. Nevertheless, even on the salt marshes uncovered by the tide, the influence of human domestication prevails—prior to reclamation, the sea lapped several miles further inland. The London Psychogeographical Association celebrated one solstice with a gathering at the Callanish standing stones on the Isle of Lewis. Despite the fact that nature has been rendered inorganic by the onslaughts of capitalism, with any meaningful distinction between the town and the countryside abolished, psychogeographers still see mysterious ley lines everywhere. Whether ley lines actually exist is irrelevant, as the widespread dissemination of astrological materials demonstrates, belief in mysterious 'phenomena' adversely effects the behaviour of millions. The satirical deconstruction of these beliefs is merely one achievement of the 'avant-bard.'

Tales of the Great Unwashed

Ian Brotherhood

“PHEW. WHAT A Scorcher,” puffs Frank.

“That’s easy for you to say. You don’t have to work in it sure you don’t,” intones Joe, wiping his brow with a callused hand.

Frank was once the editor of the *Stewarton Tribune*, and he thinks and speaks in headlines. He dreams still of the perfect attention grabber, the phrase which will stamp itself indelibly onto the collective unconscious.

Joe cannot read, and ascribes Frank’s laconic air to dipsomania. Frank treats Joe (veteran navy with the Roads Department) as an item of genuine anthropological interest—a text-book dunderhead whose existence belies the nebulous concept that there is dignity in labour.

Today *The Great Unwashed* has open doors, the first burst of Summer upon us. It’s as if we’ve never seen weather like it, and little else has been talked of all day. But the subject suddenly changes as Frank buys a round.

“What do you make of this Channel Five then?” moots Joe.

“Video Tuning Chaos Looms,” retorts Frank with a grimace.

“Makes no sense if you ask me. That’s them four channels all on the go, and not a decent thing to watch anyway. There’s the cable telly, and the satellite dishes, and videos on top of that. No need for number five, that’s what I say.” Joe sucks a full half pint of tepid lager through the gap between his three remaining front teeth and wipes his freckled brow again.

“Channel Five Big Turn-off,” says Frank with an air of resignation.

“Anyway, I know a fella who uses a bin-lid to catch the Sky telly and it’s as good a picture as you get with the fancy things. Same shape, and that’s what counts.”

“Man Catches Trash From Sky.” Frank’s eyes light up—possibilities there.

“And what’s the point in the cables, digging bloody great trenches all over and there’s the satellites up there? Why don’t them cable lads ask the satellite fellas to send out the stuff for them and it saves all that sweat. Makes a fine mess of the pavements anyroad.”

“Cable Finally Buried,” moans Frank, before adding, with genuine relish, “Murdoch Makes Feeble Bid.”

Joe immediately warms, his pet topic introduced. “Now, did I tell you I got the man’s autograph?” Frank buries his face, *deja-vu* sweeping over him.

“Bobby Murdoch. A true gentleman. If I’d ever got a hold of Ronnie Simpson that’d be me with all the Lisbon Lions, and there’s not many can say that.”

“Surname Confusion Leads To Argument.”

Bernie “The Bolt” Henderson enters, and I’ve his whisky poured before he reaches the bar. Bernie sells oranges in the precinct and makes more than I do. He greets all present with a hearty belch and relates good tiding.

“Sixteen crates in four hours. That’s a record,” he says with a boyish grin.

“Haven’t heard it. Is it in the charts?” splutters Joe into his lager.

“Man Pushed Too Far,” groans Frank as Bernie shoves a large voddy and coke besides his pint.

“And three bananas. Good margin there boys, that’s sixteen quid just like that.”

“Jazes Bernie, that’s an awful price for three bananas.”

“Bananas Going Like Hotcakes.”

“How about Channel Five then Bernie? What’ll that be about eh?” says Joe earnestly—he loves nothing better than a good debate.

“Well that’s your Nintendo and Sega people cracking up ‘cos it’ll interfere with Sonic the Hedgehog. Whatever’s on Channel Five comes through onto the picture, so you’ll get a shadow there,” says Bernie with authority.

“Interfering with hedgehogs isn’t right.”

“New Channel Runs Over World-famous Hedgepig.”

“Personally, I hope Branson gets it. After all, he lost out with the lottery. He’s come a long way, and all on the back of that Tubular Bells,” says Bernie.

Joe winces. “Tubular Bells? You can get ointment for that sort of thing.”

Bernie warms to the subject. “And that other thing he did that was a great idea, the UK 2000 project, picking up crisp pokes in the park with Maggie Thatcher.”

“Eccentric Litter Scheme Binned.”

Joe pulls strands together in his inimitable way. “He’s your man there, with the bin lids, gets it for nothing with a bit of copper and a brassneck. Give it to him then, and that’s the answer.”

“What worries me isn’t having another channel, it’s what’ll be on it.” Bernie savours the silence as we all ponder the prospects. Frank Frowns, Joe sucks his teeth.

“Personally, I’d like to see the pioneering spirit of Channel 4 carried a stage further.”

“Man Demands Explanation.”

“Minority interests. They need to be more minoritised. I’d make time to watch a programme about brewing your own beer. I mean, there’s millions of folk doing it, why not cater for them?”

Joe makes what he believes to be an expression of intelligent interjection. “Cobblers! next thing you’ll have programmes for glue-sniffers and people who keep toads as pets. You can’t encourage that sort of thing. It’s not right.”

“Vivaria Pointlessly Slammed.”

“It’s a hobby,” Bernie calmly points out.

“It shouldn’t be, it’s a secret.”

“Obscure Beer Recipes Revealed.”

“There’s programmes about how to cook a decent meal, and how to grow plants, how to kayak through the Gulf of Corryvreckan, even how to decorate your toilet. Don’t tell me there’s more people want to know how to do-up their bog than make a half-decent ale.”

“Don’t bring the toilet into this.”

“Storm In A Lavvy.”

Joe Reddens, that famous temper starting to twitch. “There’s folk that dig holes in roads, and others sell bananas, and there’s a blessed few making the beer, and you’d

have them destituting themselves on the telly for what?”

“The enlightenment of the masses.”

“You can’t put mass on telly, it’ll stop folk going, just like the football.”

“Virtual Holy Communion A Step Nearer.”

Bernie snaps. “Mark my words, if we don’t tell them what we want to see, we’ll end up with more soaps and sit-coms. Is that what you want then?”

Joe, aware that a question has been asked, lapses into a doleful silence.

“Bonehead Speechless.”

Joe quietly dribbles onto the bar as the evening sunlight glances through the open door. There will be much quaffing on the proceeds of Bernie’s bananas, and the lads will stay till closing time—and why not? There’s nothing decent on tonight anyway.

Under the Central

John Beagles

SCOTTISH BASED artists returning from abroad, frequently complain of the romantic, idealistic picture many seem to have of artistic life in Scotland.

Londoners in particular seem to need to believe in Scotland (Glasgow specifically) as the home of egalitarian, socialist co-operatives where everyone supports and nurtures in a pseudo cultural wonderland. The reality, of course, is infinitely more complicated and contradictory. The idea that the lack of private contemporary galleries in Scotland is responsible for the present flowering of artistic production, glosses over the competing and conflicting pressures that exclusive public funding generates. The following partial sketch of gallery activity is designed to shed some light on the nefarious shenanigans, disputes and moves which have taken place of late in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Transmission Gallery is probably one of the best known venues in Scotland for contemporary art. Possessing a formidable reputation, based largely on its breaking in of many of Glasgow's most successful

resulted in explicit and implicit pressure (from within and without) falling on those 'taking over the mantle' for more of the same. This has the effect of producing something of an identity problem for the gallery, unable to effectively escape the confines of what was expected of it, it had frequently succumbed to tried and tested avenues. For a while you knew what you were going to get at a 'Transmission Show'.

Lately, however things have markedly picked up, recasting the original ideas and spirit that originally propelled Transmission to prominence. Casting their net wider than before has thrown up some genuine surprises, such as "21 Days of Darkness" and "Hong Kong Island". This coupled with a newly rediscovered impetus to exhibit some of the rising hotshots of international art (the artists then known as Art Club 2000, Paul McCarthy and coming soon Alex Bag) and a frequently interesting basement space (which in accepting members' applications allowed a limited reappearance of gallery democracy—there's still the suspicion, however, of the basement being where the naughty children are sent). All this and the commitment of the new committee has helped to navigate Transmission out of predictable waters. Its recent increase in arts council funding, after a protracted freeze, was long overdue.

While new Transmission operatives are no doubt almost exclusively responsible for this turn around, a developing friendly rivalry with Scotland's other artists run space, the Collective in Edinburgh, is playing its part.

The Collective Gallery has in the last two years also had its share of hits. Zoe Walker, Spencer Finch, Terry Atkinson, Dave Shrigley and Chantel Joffe have all shown there, as well as less well known local artists in gallery curated shows such as "Rear View". Its investment in a project room, designed

to allow for short term projects, prompted Transmission to follow suit, while its development of a free listing guide has helped to significantly inform the cultural stew in Scotland.

At present, its only noticeable shortcomings are its inability to secure quality international work, either for solo shows or as part of larger group shows (something Transmission has been consistently successful at) and its rather limited brief, which has it too exclusively tied to representing Edinburgh artists (the local art College is hardly a fertile ground for up and coming talent, while the city itself has less of an arts community to draw upon than Glasgow).

While the Collective has noticeably improved, the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh's other venue for contemporary art has taken what looks like a plunge into mediocrity. While it has been popular to accuse Charles Esche, head of Glasgow's Tramway Gallery, of misusing public funds by pursuing an exhibition policy more akin to a private gallery, Graham Murray, Fruitmarket's 'supremo', has somehow managed to

largely avoid the accusation. However of the two, the mud sticks more persuasively to Murray. Steadfastly following a path dictated by his personal predilections, he has demonstrated a disinterest in most 'contemporary' art (especially Scottish). Instead, he has opted for staging 'discovery' shows of new Asian art (China and Japan with India to come) with group and solo exhibitions of romanticised, elemental work.

Bubbling under the surface of the Fruitmarket's exhibition programme, there has been a tangible, almost exclusive orientation towards that traditional nexus, the Artist and Nature. Holed up within the confines of the gallery, lies an unreconstructed modernism, where the artist remains the sole creator of *his* work, authentic materials imbued with meaning abound and everywhere there is the promise of an art of quasi-religious transformation.

With only a couple of notable exceptions, the Fruitmarket has increasingly begun to behave like a bastion of self professed good taste, ardently protecting all that is proper and right about art, in the face of a perceived onslaught of young British artists' childish, puerile fantasies.

In this drawing room, where aesthetic propriety is the master, the only fart to be heard of late was Pierrick Sorin's video works, from the gallery curated-show of French artists "In/conclusive States". The sight of Sorin videoing his own arse, an exercise designed to squeeze humour out of introspective probing, finally managed to levitate the heavy cloud of solemnity which had engulfed the gallery. How long the Fruitmarket can survive, behaving like an irritated ostrich with its head in the sand, is tellingly up for grabs at present. A shave off its art council funding has seen to that. It's about time the Fruit Market looked outside of 'itself' for some revitalisation, when it does (as in In/conclusive States and hopefully the Lectures Beyond Art and Science) it's a breath of fresh air.

If the Fruitmarket is the cankerous old uncle of Scottish Art, harping on about the good old days when you knew where you were, the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow (the C.C.A.), often comes across as suffering from a mid-life crisis. Lurching from notable highs (Ross Sinclair's "Rocky Mountain") to depressing lows ("Phenomena", the "Wallpaper show"), its exhibition policy could arguably point to a lack of artistic conviction, opting instead to reference all the 'right' cultural bases, in an over eager attempt to please everyone.

Sinclair's show, a full size reconstruction of a slice of prime Scottish hillside, complete with stuffed animals, a running stream and the folk warbling of the artist sitting in his hilltop hut, was an exceptional example of the gallery sticking its neck out. His complex, humorous and contradictory take on that popular chestnut 'National identity', was a welcome interjection into an increasingly polarised and simplistic political and cultural debate (arguments raging over both Glasgow's Museum of Modern Art—what was 'real' Scottish Art—and Euro 96). The C.C.A.'s support for a local, internationally successful artist, offering him a platform to produce new work at 'home', as opposed to shipping it out of Scotland, was exemplary. Unfortunately the C.C.A. seems as equally interested,



ZOE WALKER Portable Paradise Collective Gallery 1996

art stars, its being consistently perceived as the hip, young thing of Scottish Art. However, over the past two years this reputation has often looked precarious. Its previously innovative approach to exhibition programming, which had it leaping from solo shows of Jo Spence to group shows mixing Lawrence Weiner with then little known local artists (Douglas Gordon for example), had increasingly started to look like a 'radical' agenda slowly solidifying into a predictable orthodoxy.

The problem for newer committee members is 'following in the footsteps' of the successful godparents of new Scottish art, artists such as Ross Sinclair and Christine Borland, involved in Transmission in its earlier days. These and other equally well known artists, had themselves broken the stranglehold of the 'Glasgow boys', booting their parochialism into touch and waving good-bye to their council flavoured, stereotypical, painterly representations of 'real working class life'. The high profile careers this relatively recent generation of 'Transmission' artists embarked upon,

Belt

if not more so, in developing and expanding its other exhibition strategy, the themed group show.

C.C.A. themed group shows curated by hired guns (Francis McKee the most recent and decided) variously try to hang individual artists works on advertising hooks. Creating tidy packages examining 'hot issues' ("Phenomena", UFO's, X-Files, end of the millennium; "Lost Ark", humanity/nature; "Inbetweener", gender/identity) they have in their strenuous attempts to cover all the angles, frequently ended up missing all the points. While the range of the exhibited works is often interesting, it's often hard to escape the feeling that the individual pieces are secondary, with the curator's concept the main attraction. Whereas heavily curated shows like those organised by BANK in London, have succeeded by virtue of their wilful belligerence about appearing virtuous, the C.C.A.'s shows in their nod at this issue, wave at that issue, frequently end up producing something less than the sum of its parts.

The rise of the 'curator superstar', essentially seems nothing more than a mutation of that classic modernist division of labour, whereby the critic (everybody needs a Benjamin Buchloh) becomes the mouth piece for the artist. In Scotland's ever increasing bureaucratic culture industry, the new breed of free floating curator, rapidly assumes the position of cultural manager, liaising and brokering on behalf of the artist with both the gallery (heh I got a great idea for a show) and the public (we got some great films and some of that art stuff too). In Glasgow, ravaged as it is by a deep schism between its art intelligentsia and the public, brokering of this kind through the catch all theme show, is an attractive prospect for administrators pressured by accusations of elitism desperate for some populist clothing.

The C.C.A.'s interest in such crossover shows utilising all of its facilities, also stems from its immanent redevelopment (with lottery money) into a more self sufficient centre for all contemporary arts. This kind of art centre was originally what Charles Esche had envisaged and planned for the Tramway Gallery, unfortunately Esche's departure makes the future of the gallery look far from secure.

Under Esche's control the Tramway won the 1996 Prudential prize, a jackpot of £25,000. While this was almost universally recognised amongst the 'progressive' members of Glasgow's art community as being well deserved, local council commissars chose to ignore it, continuing instead with their policy of putting the boot in. Esche undoubtedly made some mistakes in his exhibition strategy, the simplistic universalism of the show "Trust", with its call to arms, "to suspend disbelief" and the previously mentioned accusation that he was rather too transparently using the gallery as a launch pad for an exclusive stable of artists, didn't help in his dealings with a suspicious and openly antagonistic arts establishment. However when it came down to it, what eventually sunk his plans for Tramway, was its location. While its south side position is geographically close to the heart of the city, symbolically for culture mulchas, it might as well be in London. Esche had professed a hope for the gallery becoming a fully fledged art centre, with a studio complex (for local and visiting international

artists), darkrooms, cafe, cinema and so on. Occasionally Tramway had succeeded in generating sufficient energy to convince that this was a viable project, however the increasingly apparent problem lay in sustaining this energy over a protracted period of time. With the potential audience for Tramway's brand of 'neo-conceptualism' being relatively small (drawn as it is almost exclusively from the artistic community of the city) Esche eventually and grudgingly had to accept that there was a finite limit to his expansionist plans for the gallery.

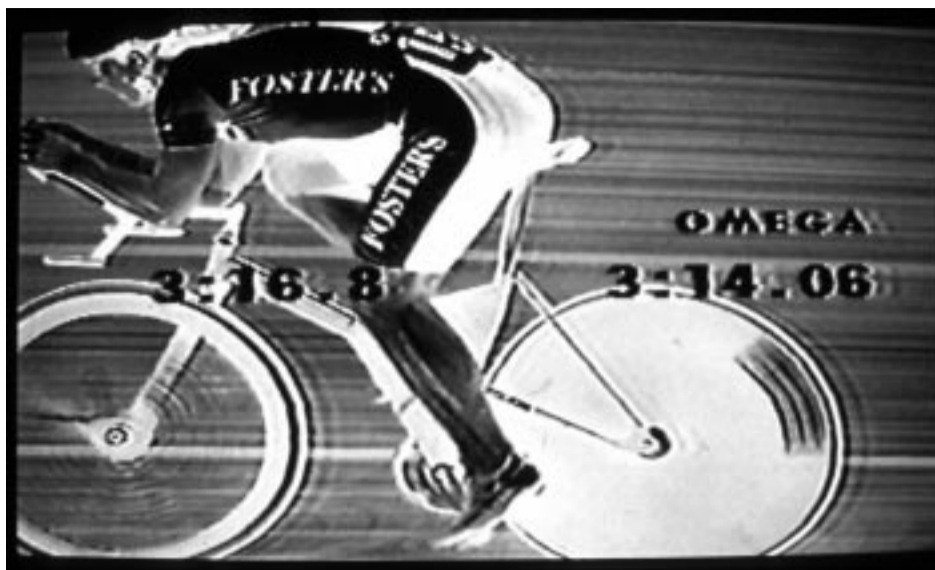
Redirecting his energies, his new incarnation will be as overseer of an 'artangel like body', instigating public and private art projects with local and international artists in Scotland, his first venture has been the recent "Wish you were here too", organised with local artists Dave Wilkinson and Beata Veszely in their Glasgow flat. While Flat shows have become relatively popular of late, I hope that with Esche and his floating art body, they don't become the rule. Their hermetic approach, advertising through the usual channels, preaching exclusively to the converted, is OK as far as it goes, but I can't help feeling its popularity might again be symptomatic of how the polarised cultural climate in Glasgow produces a pendulum like response to the problems of "reaching a wider, more unfamiliar, audience for art".

A productive example of a 'show outside the gallery', which avoided the patronising tone of many a parachuted in public art project I've had the misfortune to walk over this year, was Graham Ramsay and Simon Payne's show "Bleep Bleep Bleep" at Diva Records, Glasgow.

"Bleep Bleep Bleep", an exhibition of artist produced 12 inchers in a specialist dance, music shop, succeeded in amusingly and productively disrupting many expectations about shows outside the gallery. At Diva, confusion and incomprehensibility existed in an unusually more equidistant, productive relationship. The seasoned record buyer, armed with extensive information about labels, DJ's etc., found themselves confronted and bemused by the presence of labels, DJ's, they'd never heard of (a Club Adorno release for instance), while the members of the art audience, unable to instantly seek, find and enjoy the art, had none of their specialist skill's validated (at the private view many people thought the 'art' was the DJ's set, the artist produced 'fake' 12 inchers passing them by). Unusually at Diva, members of the art community might have left feeling bored and out of place.

The Scottish art scene occupies a particularly precarious position at pre-

DAVID NOONAN *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space: Cycling*
Transmission Gallery 1996



sent. On the one hand it's continuing to successfully expand, with home grown and Scottish based artists consistently attracting national and international attention, while simultaneously, these same artists operate in cities hovering on the threshold of economic, social and political collapse. How long it can continue to maintain this present status, in the face of such pressures, is something which may well be beyond its control.

PIERRICK SORIN *C'est Mignon Tout Ça* Fruitmarket Gallery 1996

Representing desire in postmodernity

THE POLITICS OF desire has been a prominent feature of much contemporary art in London and elsewhere. Recent exhibitions in the capital, bearing titles such as 'Popocultural' (Cabinet Gallery/South London Gallery), 'Bonkers Bird', 'Goffick', 'Shut up you Stupid Cunt' (BANK) and 'Belladonna' (ICA), have continued to draw upon discourses which were important for the formation of identity politics in the seventies and the eighties. In viewing these recent shows one could conclude that the 'de-centring' of the subject and the assault on repressive social institutions through a pursuit of pleasure, remains a key concern for many contemporary artists. Some, informed by post-structuralist theory, have gone further by radically investing in *libidinal economies* thus implying that representation itself is a mechanism of repressive power. Such practices have attempted to explore desire as a drive (towards pleasure and the dissolution of subject/object boundaries) rather than conceptualise desire as something oriented towards an object: a move which has challenged the notion of desire as something produced by the prohibition of pleasure.

One could further conclude from recent exhibitions that this particular celebration of *libidinal economy* and its concomitant critique of representation has been challenged, of late, by artists whose works have manifested the limits of desire or the relationship of desire to the social realm. While the various ruminations on the politics of desire by contemporary artists are too diverse to map, we intend to identify two prominent, recent projects with the positions outlined above. The purpose of this is to point towards some of the implications of a *libidinal economy* as expressed in cultural forms today.

The first example is Jake and Dinos Chapman's installation *Chapmanworld*; a utopia populated by mutant infant mannequins created for the ICA in the spring of 1996 in which Logos was banished, setting libidinal drives free to run riot in a perverted Garden of Eden. The second example is Larry Clark's film *Kids* which similarly presented pleasure-seeking bodies in the form of very young people, though Clark's work differed from that of the Chapman brothers as it contextualised the kid's libidinal economies as a form of alienated consumption. In considering these examples we will discuss the problematics of these two projects which have developed out of Post-modern debates on pleasure and representation.

The comedian Jack Dee is not commonly thought to be an expert on matters relating to the politics of desire; so perhaps it was just an accident that he quipped: "they say that parents shouldn't smack their children but I think they should stop fucking them first". Dee's insight would not be wasted on Jake and Dinos Chapman who populated *Chapmanworld* with mutant infant mannequins. It was claimed that the infants who sported erect cocks, anus and vaginas where their mouths, noses and ears would normally be found, were genderless. A further claim was made that these beings were "reproductive" and "not representations"—a declaration which owed much to the post-structuralist cultural discourses of the seventies and eighties.

We understand a *Libidinal economy*¹ as a force that shatters the stage of representation, the rigours of production and all value systems through a libidinal drive which recognises neither hierarchies, ethics or history. Lyotard conceptualised this through the image of a revolving bar. When static the bar serves to separate the subject or body from the world but when the bar rotates at high speed all boundaries are destabilised and the surfaces that separate things (people, objects, genders, substances) all dissolve. Such *libidinal economies* have been severely criticised as risking too much but despite even Lyotard's own denouncement of such 'philosophy', *libidinal economies* became an

established feature of eighties Post-Modern discourse. What then is a stake in a turn to a *libidinal economy*? Is it that the promise of freedom can collapse into the familiar consumption patterns of late capitalism, or is it that such a move could not hope to escape the stage of representation? The question is perhaps then, not 'how perfectly *libidinal economies* fit with the patterns of consumption of late capitalism', but rather can those desires, pleasures and excesses that might be set in flight through a *libidinal economy* escape capitalism? There is also a further question of gender politics as it might be highlighted that Lyotard's Nietzschean libidinal economy should be understood in the context of a patriarchal society.

In *Chapmanworld* this Lyotardian discourse on pleasure and desire is examined through various devices. The kids dressed only in Nike trainers, are 'polymorphous perverse'. Perhaps they are visitors from a future where advanced technology has eradicated the limits for libidinal excess, creating a world where the libido is no longer confined to the imagination or the literary, as in Bataille's 'The Story of the Eye': in this future anus could become mouths and pricks could replace noses through advanced genetic engineering.

Freud's definition of the 'polymorphous perverse' is premised upon the pre-oedipal state of a child's body as a surface invested with uneven sites of erotic intensities, sites which are limitless. In *Chapmanworld*, the artists sign-posted these possible erogenous zones with orifices and phallus that unexpectedly grow at surprising places all over the angelic bodies of their creations. In *Zygotic Acceleration, biogenetic de-sublimated libidinal model* (1995) the space between two heads becomes a vagina and noses metamorphose into pricks, inviting the viewer to leave the safety of voyeurism and plunge a penis or fingers into the orifices. The ginger-haired *Fuckface* (1994) has both aroused cock and orifice offering pleasure to any passing hermaphrodite. Within *Chapmanworld* there is a nostalgia for the pre-oedipal and to take part in the delights of the garden you must forget yourself, forget your history and leave your civilised bourgeois subjectivity at home.

The Chapman's in their installation and through their polymorphous perverse beings, challenged the western fantasy of the child: they implied that their mutant infant beings didn't exist as subjects. Visitors to *Chapmanworld* were offered the choice of either forgetting themselves or acting as a responsible parent and condemning the whole affair. What is lacking in the Chapman brother's gambit, though, is not only the consequences of forgetting but the contingencies and circumstances that form our desires. In this light, the Chapman's supposed abandonment of representation is contradictory as on the one hand, it is strategy designed to incur moral outrage and thus employs representation to this end and on the other hand, formulates an idealised, abstract libidinal universe.

Our uneasiness with the Chapman's abstract libidinal universe can be expanded upon by considering Lyotard's critique of the subject, brilliantly analysed by Peter Dews in his book *The Limits of Disenchantment*. Dews quotes Lyotard's use of a Borges story 'The fauna of mirrors' and suggests that for Lyotard, 'Subjectivity is presupposed by reflection' and the consequence of this is that the specular world is lost (imprisoned) through this reflection. For Lyotard, this reflection must be smashed to unleash the specular world (*libidinal economies*). Lyotard, however, recognised that there was a problem with his libidinal revolution: he realised that one person's excess might be felt as an objectifying force by someone else and in 'Au Just' and later in 'The Differend' he refuted parts of his earlier thesis.

Contemporary culture, identity and even politics is often lived through the activism of consumption in

which bodies are empowered and identities are shaped, changed and undermined; but what of alienated consumption?² A reading of Larry Clark's film *Kids* offers a dystopian vision of excess and consumption, something he blames on bad parenting.³ Either by chance or by design *Kids* evokes the concept of libidinal economies; the anarchic, pleasure-seeking bodies in *Kids* are without order, the kids are ciphers caught in an endless flow of consuming the next pleasure fix in a perpetual present. The lead character, Telly, defines his identity through a relentless pursuit of "pussy" and at the end of the film he says:

'When you're young not much matters. When you find something that you care about then that's all you got. When you go to sleep at night you dream of pussy. When you wake up it's the same thing, it's there in your face, you can't escape it. Sometimes when you're young the only place to go is inside. That's just it, fucking is what I love, take that away from me and I really got nothing.'⁴

Kids is a film about bodies in search of pleasure; the lives of the characters are structured by drifting from one party to the next, the city is one big concrete playground. The parents are elsewhere; only one parent is seen, sitting at home nursing a baby, oblivious to her teenage son's exploits and at various points in the film the kids act as one body—they skate, drink, fuck, fight, steal, smoke, dance and swap stories about sex and Aids in large groups. Two scenes capture this behaviour. The first scene is in a park where the kids, united by their homophobia, brawl at a passing gay couple whilst sharing a joint. Telly's sidekick Caspar, high on weed, borrows a skateboard and collides with a passing stranger; the confrontation leads to the unfortunate guy being brutally beaten by Caspar and his friends as the camera circles around the faces of the baying kids raining blows upon their victim. The second scene is at the end of the film in which the camera passes over the overlapping, interlocking bodies of the comatose party-goers, the morning after the pleasures of the night before. They are a group burnt-out by pleasure and seemingly undifferentiated by class, ethnicity, family or religion. The force that unifies them is their hedonism encouraged by the absence of their parents and the production of a social space which constitutes the kids network of relationships. This network is defined, in the film, through consumption. For the kids, the city is a series of sites for pleasurable encounters and the lead character, Telly, is caught in an endless cycle of consuming and drifting as he searches the city for virgins. He finds them, fucks them and forgets them. His everyday life is governed by an economy in which everything is spent, used up, beaten and fucked. In his first soliloquy, whilst screwing another conquest only one year into her puberty, Telly makes clear his motivation for his life style:

"Virgins, I love 'em. No diseases, no loose as a goose pussy, no skank, no nothing. Just pure pleasure"⁵

The world of Clark's kids manifests itself through an alienation from the adult world and Telly and Caspar either cannot aspire to, or refuse to conform to, the values of production and responsibility. Instead they create a social space in which they are not productive bodies but consumers who steal, whether it be liquor, money or virginity.

The film presents another narrative interwoven with Telly's pursuit of pleasure; that of Jennie one of Telly's previous conquests. Telly's search for Darcy, (his next virgin), is paralleled by Jennie's search for Telly which begins after a visit to a health centre. Jennie's search is driven by a recent discovery: although Telly is the only boy she has ever slept with Jennie has learned that she is HIV positive and she

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974)

2. An empowered form of consumption, for instance, was delineated by Simon Edge at a conference which accompanied the exhibition *Imagined Communities*. He described a hedonistic life-style that worked, progressively (though problematically) to further gay acceptability in his paper 'The Politics of Visibility: hedonism in the gay nineties'. He suggested that the recent commercial culture has seen less old-style political activism, but more people coming out. Gay culture has moved from the "unhealthy" subterranean leather images of Tom of Finland to the "healthy" cappuccino bars of Old Compton St. While this new commercialism disempowers those without a disposable income, and those whose consumption has been curtailed by the Aids virus, the visibility and acceptance of homosexuality has, in Edge's opinion, been increased. This has thus been achieved by aligning gay culture, not with an alternative and marginalised politics, but with capitalism. For Edge this is a new and positive activism.

3. Artforum, May 1995

4. *Kids*, faber & faber 1996

5. *ibid.*

6. discussed by Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman & Causality* Verso 1994

Paula Smithard & David Burrows

tries to track Telly down before he infects yet another girl. Telly however has forgotten Jennie, remembering past conquests is not part of his vocation but Jennie is Telly's past catching up with him and in that sense she occupies a different temporality to that of Telly: Jennie is all too aware that there was a beginning and that death will bring about an end to her present predicament. Clark here indicates gender differences between the kids by reflecting on this difference in terms of temporality—Telly caught in an eternal present and Jenny haunted by the past and future—and by also presenting the male kids as possessing boundless libidinal energy.

What marks out the world of *Kids* from the utopia of *Chapmanworld* is Larry Clark's insistence on highlighting the contingencies of excessive behaviour; whereas the Chapman's abstract libidinal universe is unhindered by social circumstance and the consequences of transgression. In *Chapmanworld* the visitor could endlessly renew themselves through a stream of erotic encounters in a world which offers no limits to pleasure, not even disease despite their interest in mutation and filth. Clark is forever reminding interviewers that his *Kids* are real kids and in his film, while blurring the boundaries between realism and fiction, the kids often come up against the limits of pleasure. The spectre of Aids is clearly one limit to Telly's pleasure, the scenes of poverty, addiction and the mental ill-health filmed in the estranged blue light of the dawn, are the spectre of another limit. For Clark there is no escape from repre-

sentation through a pursuit of pleasure. In the final scene of the film a wasted Casper, gazing around at a scene of devastation after raping Jennie, exclaims what one might suspect to be Clark's own moral outrage, "Jesus Christ! What happened?"

To agree with Clark, though, who believes that we need better parenting, that is more understanding parenting, is to call for an ordering of pleasure and such an ordering is never acceptable to kids. If the Chapman's demand for a libidinal revolution is problematic then Clark's siding with the parent, i.e. a Superego, is equally misplaced. The child which is socialised by learning that certain drives should be repressed to win parental approval will have those same repressed drives propel future desires: as everyone knows the forbidden is always desirable. To seek an escape from representation, parental law and an ordering of pleasure, suggested by *Chapmanworld*, seems equally implausible: imagine the Chapman brothers' world of reproductive beings existing beyond representation where nothing is forbidden; would it not also be a world without desire?

Despite the limitations of both projects it must be recognised that Larry Clark and the Chapman's have important insights into the politics of desire and reveal the limits of each others practices when considered together. While Clark foregrounds pleasure's relationship to specific contingencies, a perspective lacking in *Chapmanworld*, the Chapman's propose utopias and alternatives to the present, a concern unfortunately

absent in Clark's realism. The representation of the kids in Clark's film is an interesting one though as it deals with the culture of an alienated group whose only expression of non-productivity is a cycle of consumption that at times risks death—indeed in one scene a boy laughs at the possibility of "going out" fucking, a mood which seems to echo the much fetishised annihilation of the subject sought by the Chapman's.

Adorno fantasised about some sort of reconciliation between libidinal drives of the Id and the Ego by banishing the Superego.⁶ This would be a reconciliation between the spectral world trapped in Borges mirror and the human world. As is true of all utopias, though, its hard to visualise such a world as this would mean the pursuit of a sovereignty without a forbidding Superego, which would no longer direct the subject behind the subject's back so to speak.

Adorno's utopia is clearly appropriate when considering the pleasurable economies of the kids in both *Chapmanworld* and Larry Clark's film as these young people have no place in the adult world, alienated as they are by its demands and restrictions which also demarcate the limits of their pleasure. Their underworld of sex, violence, dress and behavioural codes could be viewed as not so much a pursuit of freedom but the outlet for desires and economies otherwise unrecognised. It is hard to imagine a reconciliation of this conflict, for as Jack Dee implies, not only is the child a fantasy but so is the good parent.

Oi! Millican! No!

Michael Donaghy

THE NATIONAL REVIEW of Live Art made a welcome, if unscheduled return to Glasgow in late October/ November 96. The event had been planned for elsewhere, but due to problems with the venue or funding, the honour fell to Glasgow. The venues which filled the gap at fairly short notice: The Arches, Bar 10, The Old Fruitmarket, Glasgow School of Art, Tramway, The CCA and the GFT are to be lauded.

That's most of the lauding done for the moment. Firstly, a funny thing which happened on the way to the 'theatre'. This writer made his long anticipated and scheduled visit on the 1st of November. Variant had arranged for press passes for the last three days, to be left in his name at the box office of the Arches, the main venue. Having come from beyond Oban he presented himself at the booth, but there seemed to have been some kind of mistake—there were no tickets under that name, nor 'Variant'. The supervisor knew nothing either, but went off to find a man-who-did. Muggins is left throwing glances at the ceiling but batting them down with his eyebrows. "Huh! Administration, eh?" "Aye", says the doorman. "No", said the man-who-knew, who'd appeared in the lobby beside them. There was no mistake or administrative error, there were no tickets for him, and no entry without them. He acknowledged though, that arrangements had been made with New Moves, the organisers, but went on:

"Since the arrangements had been made, the director, Nikki Millican has reconsidered and has decided to withdraw the offer of complementary tickets because of difficulties she has with Variant's editorial policy."

While his gast was being thus flabbered, salient points jockeyed for position:

(a) What had Variant's editorial policy to do with any of its contributors?

(b) Might she not have informed Variant and the writer, saving him a journey?

(c) You tell me this?

Fully flabbered, he ventured to remark that since he had come so far he was going to write something, and so far it could only be about this encounter. The man-who-knew shrugged. Point (a), he said, was nothing to do with him, he was only following instructions. point (b) was regrettable, but was nothing to do with him. On point(c), however, he was only following instructions—but it did seem regrettable. The writer must understand that the man-who-knew had no leeway. He agreed that it was ironic that the locally based organisation's local/national event was not to be covered by the local/national art magazine, but see answers (a), (b), (c).

Unaccountably getting miffed now, he took the writer down a peg or two by revealing that, so tight were the restrictions on tickets that even the artists had to have them, so who was he to be treated so differently? The man-who-knew wouldn't clarify whether they paid for them, as implied, or if (as it turned out), artists were given tickets for the benefit of temporary staff who might not recognise them. At any rate, he rendered the matter redundant with his clincher, a fine example of the appeal to obscurity:

"Youse are a quarterly, anyway. By the time youse come out the event is over. That's no good to us."

It was pointed out that the 're' in review admitted as much, though the conclusion was specious. A 'pre-view', to clear up the misunderstanding, was what Variant had published for the benefit of the NRLA in the previous issue of the magazine—but the man-who-knew was resolute. Nothing could be done; he was

bound by standing orders.

With impeccable timing the writer's name was called and a hand descended onto his shoulder. Not the doorman but the Polish artist and curator Wladyslaw Kazmierczak, with whom he has worked in the past and plans to again in the coming year. They hug and do the 'It's good to see ya' bit, then he asks: "Are you coming in to see my performance?" "Eh, apparently not, Wladyk; they don't like the editorial policy of the magazine the review would be for, so they are renegeing on their promise of press tickets." The man-who-knew lived up to his moniker by here interjecting that, there was just a possibility that maybe a ticket might be found, which would cover the writer just for this evening, he understood?

Well understood, at least, is how the cover of the gloom of anonymity allows us to carry out the grubbiest of details unconscionably, actions that might instantly shame us in the light of day. For 'light of day' read 'witnessed by East European artist of international standing who is familiar with all the forms that censorship and repression can take.' But all that is besides the point, if close to the bone.

In order to better comprehend New Moves' old move, the writer has been trawling through old Variant editorials in a search for the bogeyman. Could it be this, from the re-launch issue?

"We have resurfaced at a crucial yet not altogether unfamiliar point, which in the interim period of our absence has witnessed this tendency to openly and routinely consign independent and critical voices to silence, developed into something like policy... It is our perception that the current climate seeks to stifle any deviation from the cultural packaging and re-packaging of a benign culture of entertainment."

Or could it be this older bugbear?

"Variant is not concerned with providing the 'institutional' art machine with an approving image of itself...For the establishment of a critical, engaging and diverse culture, lateral links have to be made across media, and opinions need to be expressed and exposed." (Vol. 1 No.16)

Radical stuff indeed. It amounts to a condonation of individual thought and an espousal of free speech. Of course, New Moves objections may well lie elsewhere, and in the interests of free speech and open debate the editors wrote to Nikki Millican (7/11/96), inviting her to outline her objections to Variant's editorial policy, and to explain why the NRLA needed protecting from it, but three months later she has neither replied, declined or acknowledged the letter.

Clearly, her discomfort did not predate or prevent her from supplying the information for the preview of the NRLA in the last issue, or indeed the original promise of press tickets. Her position is untenable, hence the deafening silence. In that silence something doesn't ring true—the adoption of sudden and vehement positions without precedence or context is enough to send the average amateur detective to scurry in search of the coercive element. But who could coerce the underfunded New Moves? It's a poser, isn't it?

The aim of a 'national' review is presumably to bring its purview before the widest audience, exposing them to the gamut of current practice. That aim is compromised somewhat in an eleven day event when day tickets are £6 (£4). Leaving aside the qualms many performance artists might have with the notion of anyone paying to witness their work, some seventy people had done so that evening. It would seem, in the naive world the writer inhabits, that if that were the average

attendance, then £5,000 in extra funding or a re-allocation of the existing budget, would have enabled the setting of nominal prices that would have allowed more people to visit the review, and to see more events.

Any serial event that suffers itself to hang on the tenterhooks of fundraising applications throughout the year followed by eleven days being flogged with a shoestring budget is in the process of undermining itself. More than one artist later remarked that the paucity of the materials and equipment budget forced them to curtail their intentions. Okay, that's the real world. But their wants were not extraordinary, and the object of the lesson can hardly be to give artists a lesson in penury or to present a distorted view of their work. One does not get more quality by stretching what one already has; on the contrary.

When the term 'national' is appended to an event it presupposes a commitment to enable an appropriate level of presentation that does justice to the claim; that demands a consensus in the first place that the event in some way represents the 'nation' in its field, in which case the 'nation' finds the funding, presumably. All that a shoestring can do is get tied in knots - but as we tie them ourselves we think of them as bows. In today's management structure such skills are, without a trace of irony, thought of as adding another string to one's bow. The shoestring budget is the marginalizing element *par excellence*, the classic technique for booting to the sidelines, from where one's laces can be tied together with impunity.

The notion of a national event has other corollaries. One of the expected functions is to serve in a definitive role, an invidious task in a medium whose practitioners have yet to define to their own satisfaction. To judge by the evenings events and the programme (needs must), much of the work could be characterised as quasi-theatrical, and some of it not so quasi-. The blurring of performance art/theatrical parameters is considered a cardinal error by most theorists and practitioners. Commenting on the 9th Cracow Meeting of 1981, Jerzy Hanusek noted that reproaches against theatricality were uttered virtually exclusively against foreign artists, saying that, even though they had all emerged from alternative circles which have remained in opposition to the commercial art market, "the proximity of this market did, however, seem to cast its shadow, in the form of the greater care for the spectacle aspect, which is as much as to say the saleable attractiveness of the actions."¹

It is clear that performance borrows thespian techniques—indeed, Klaus Groh asserts that "performance art is life, portrayed by using methods and systems derived from theatre,"² but we must remember that theatre is life, portrayed by using methods and systems derived from life. It seems, to blur rhetorical parameters a moment, that we are in danger of counting our chickens before they hatch, or our eggs before they are laid, and in any case, the one that comes first gets to play in the road.

If performance art is to be considered a distinct medium (which the writer thinks it is), it must qualify its distinction by delineating its boundaries and scope. What does 'live' refer to in live art? If it is only to the presence of the artist it becomes spurious, if not trite. If it pertains to the immediacy of the work, it shares the epithet with breakfast television. If it refers to the intensity of the action, doubt also appears—as Hanusek put it at the 10th Cracow Meeting (1995), "a bad performance can be more dead than a good picture."³ He prefers to think in terms of 'direct action'.

Action he sees as direct when the receiver is not aware of the presence of an intervening media, or in which that presence is of little significance. When one's activities are governed by such a subtle line, and if one's means are blocked in with such a wide brush, little wonder that the results can be equivocal and belaboured. And suspension of disbelief has no part here—performance art/direct action doesn't have an audience really, rather it has witnesses to the action. All that a witness need bring is their full sensibility, and in these circumstances, artifice glows in the lime-light as well as in the dark.

Some find these terminological efforts tedious but nomenclature must be defined if analysis or assessment is to be applied; as it must if the medium is to orientate itself amongst other media. The reluctance to resolve these issues has its result in a general unwillingness to judge performance. If anything goes, art will surely take advantage of the out, and artists will follow. When everything is valid, banality and egotism are legitimated, with the usual vapid results. To countermand this tendency, Hanusek posits a concept of performance art as 'work' in a way that functions as a memento-art, and a fundamental point of reference: "The moment when this concept disappears beyond the horizon of thought—this may be from a macro- or micro-perspective, that is, when thought is bogged down in details, or becomes too general—that is the moment when we leave the area of art."⁴ A man who doesn't need reminding is Polish artist Jerzy Berés, who has the definitive word on this reluctance to judge, a defect that he sees as not confined to the field of aesthetics:

"The prolongation of the suspension of judgement is, after all, an attempt to stop, or at least retard, the course of history. And this is the fundamental factor distorting the reality of the 20th century, which has perhaps prematurely been labelled an age of astounding progress, which is supposed to make humanity happy. It is perhaps this very model of life made easier, a model promulgated by the advertising and propaganda machines which has brought about the general consent to the lack of judgement. For judgement entails rather the 'difficulty of existence'⁵

Berés, who makes sculpture and 'manifestations' (the latter sometimes serving to sacralize the former)

is the most uncompromising of artists who has been irking authority (political and artistic) and subverting expectations before, during and after Poland's period of totalitarianism and martial law. The creative act he sees as the result of an independent attitude to reality. Such a unique attitude brings with it an enforced responsibility for one's actions that is not negotiable. The crux of independence rules that the creative fact - the tangible trace of a creative act - is not intended to fulfil society's general expectations, though it occasionally does so by common coincidence. Far more likely is that the creative fact will serve to irritate and unsettle the collective 'self-satisfaction'. This is not its primary aim but a side effect, and it is not politically motivated (though it can be). Berés says he is not a political artist, he is merely "interested in more than one dimension of art."⁶

The plot, or more accurately 'culture of complicity', thickens when we recognise that events like the NRLA tends to be funded by quangos and agencies of whom it would not be unfair to suggest that they share a certain collective self-satisfaction, to the extent that we have not become weary of the constant re-evaluations of their mandates and their self-criticising zeal. And these agencies seem to be calling for creative efforts to be 'populist', not 'highbrow', because they have a responsibility to the people. To be populist is to have integrity; to be highbrow is to be suspect. What a quasi-world it is we are living in.

The trouble is that in a culture of self-satisfaction and complicity, being sure of the roots of our philosophical thought may be more difficult than we think. Most thinkers think themselves models of objectivity, but few can say that they have examined and are conscious of their base assumptions, which define their attitudes. Those base assumptions are secreted deep within received wisdom—we are exposed to them at a point in our development when we are incapable of cognizing their ad hoc nature. Cognized, assumptions act according to their nature as starting blocks. Unrecognised, they are stumbling blocks (and can be picked up and used as blinkers).

There are signs that artists are becoming aware of the natural environment for their actions. Berés likens it to animals escaping from the zoo - not all will prefer the vitality of freedom. "Those who have grown accustomed to the cages, to the runs of superficial freedom, to the generous patronage of their feeders, and to the

public, staring through the bars, will remain to live out their days there."⁷ Too often—i.e. not always—watching the artist in a gallery situation is like watching a seal with a ball balanced on its nose; when art is reduced to popular entertainment even its ludic functions are played out.

So what, then, is the function of a national review of live art? As the writer has examined three of the terms to date, he may as well confess to misgivings about the remaining one—a re-view of live art? All this may be hair splitting but sometimes the hair gets to be exhibit A. The insignificant attains its meaning by tracing its associations with more material facts. Such is the tangled web in this case, that one can only assume that its function is obscurantist. Repeat performance by rote is no more palatable of an event than it is of a performance art.

It is a pity that this article could not cover specific works, for not all of them were done justice by the general remarks - but then, they are unlikely to be in need of the writer's approving image. Of all the works he *didn't* see, the one he liked best was Alexander Harvey's 'Holding Together.' Harvey went out onto the streets each day and built sand castles; and no one needed to ask why. More than seventy saw the action, which was free. Its simplicity would have been as eloquent anywhere else in the world, which is no mean feat. Now that is a view of Live Art.

1 Jerzy Hanusek, 'Cracow Meetings with an Eight Year Epilogue,' in 'Spotkania Krakowskie' (1995, BWA Contemporary Gallery of Art, Krakow, p115.

2 Klaus Groh, 'Theoretyczna idea sztuki performance,' in Performance, a collective work (Warsaw: MAW, 1984), p61.

3 Jerzy Hanusek, op cit.

4 Jerzy Hanusek, p112

5 Jerzy Berés, 'The Work as a Stimulator of Judgement', Spotkania Krakowskie, BWA Krakow p80.

6 Jerzy Berés, 'Zwidy, wyrocznie, oltarze.' (Phantoms, Oracles, Altars.) An Autobiographical sketch) Grupa Krakowska, Cracow 1991.

7 Andrzej Kostolowski, 'The Giggle of Time', in 'Zwidy Wyrocznie Oltarze Wyznania', Museum Narodowe, Poznan 1995.

Of Hype and

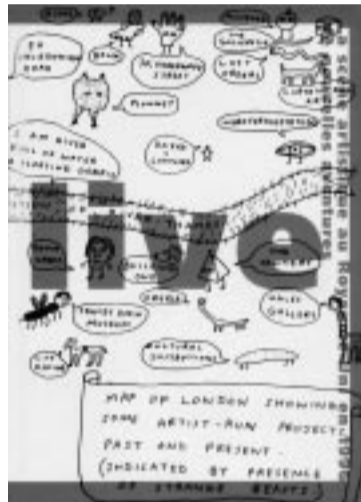
Peter Suchin

review

Life/Live

La scène artistique au Royaume-Uni en 1996

Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris,
October 1996–January 1997



SPEAKING AT A symposium on Terry Atkinson and conceptual art in March 1996, Seth Sieglaub noted that 25 years ago one might walk into a gallery and remark, after a quick perusal of the work therein, that it was bad work. In the present situation, Sieglaub continued, one's reaction upon seeing "bad" work would more likely take the form of saying the work was bad but that perhaps it was meant to be.¹ In a different context, Philip Hensher, discussing Liz Arnold's contribution to the prestigious John Moores Exhibition commented:

"They were quite revolting pictures to look at, painted in flat, clashing colours, and executed with a neatness which did nothing to mitigate the limpness of the drawing. But those criteria are not relevant any longer. Rather, the viewer must contemplate his own distaste at looking at a work which gives so powerfully the impression of aiming at something which it then fails to accomplish."²

Hensher is pointing out the current rhetorical stance expected of the "ordinary" viewer and indeed the critic when considering contemporary artworks, a position of consideration that is now, indeed, a well-established orthodoxy of sorts. I say "of sorts" because the existence of a certain insecurity of judgement is precisely

the point being raised by Hensher, and by Sieglaub too. No one, now, seems to be too sure of what kind of response they should have regarding incompetent work. If the act of incompetence is deliberate then the seeming inadequacy of execution is mitigated. Certain examples of such deliberately clumsy work come to mind. The work of Dada activists in the early years of the century are a clear example of the refusal to conform to the assumed long-lasting patterns of bourgeois taste. And in the 1980s Terry Atkinson made a series of pictures in which the drawing was intentionally incompetent when read against the established conventions of western art.³

There is plenty of evidence to support the view that Dada was an all-out attack on bourgeois values; and Atkinson's titles, along with other texts in which he refers to the "botched up" nature of the drawing, make it clear that something that at first sight appears as incompetent is in fact a carefully selected mode of approach.

But as regards the recent Paris exposition of contemporary work from Britain, *Life/Live*, little evidence of deliberate incompetence was apparent. Much of the work in the show was, rather, just badly made, clichéd, trivial and (for my money) uninteresting. Whilst a small number of the contributions to the exhibition were exceptions to the rule, by and large little of the work on display could be favourably described. To place this somewhat sweeping assertion in some perspective an extract from Thomas Crow's recent book, *The Rise of the Sixties* might be of help. In his introduction Crow remarks that:

"Ordinary viewers of today, hoping for coherence and beauty in their imaginative experiences, confront instead works of art declared to exist in arrangements of bare texts and unremarkable photographs, in industrial fabrications revealing no evidence of the artist's hand, in mundane commercial products merely transferred from shopping mall to gallery or in ephemeral and confrontational performances in which mainstream moral values are deliberately travestied."⁴

What Crow is referring to here and elsewhere in his introduction involves an, as it were, conventional sense of outrage being expressed about and around contemporary art. How can such rubbish or such so obviously non-art concatenations of materials be taken seriously as art? These are the kind of questions that are being raised, if implicitly, within the emotional reactions of the uninformed viewer, who according to Crow's sketch, are the victims of their own incomprehension. For obviously, to those "in the know" such things as Crow describes are today well within the established parameters of art. But what we have with *Life/Live*, and indeed with a large proportion of the work that has fast become associated with the "young British artist" myth is not another knowing lesson in superficially "conceptual" practices modified by the present generation of successful artists, nor is it a return to the confrontational hammerings of Dada; what, rather, we have here is no parody or critique or blushing subtle re-presentation within the museum walls of "real life" but, in fact, one hell of a mess.

The structure of *Life/Live* is perhaps its most interesting aspect, unless your concern is that of analysing how pictures of particular artistic moments are constructed by the managers of culture. A reading of both the catalogue and the show reveals some contradictions. *Life/Live*, Susan Pagé

records in her catalogue essay,

"Marks a new stage in our European survey, which, from Germany to Holland, Belgium, the Czech Republic and beyond, aims to capture the spirit of contemporary art at its most vital and urgent. This is reflected in the title-cum-manifesto of this look at a scene that is both effervescent and down to earth, impelled by a determination to get to grips with the thick of life—the everyday, society, existence—but also to survive, to which end it has developed a remarkably inventive and open range of professional strategies."

Pagé's praising of the British "scene" is to be expected; after all, she was hardly going to suggest that nothing much was going on in the UK in a catalogue for a large survey show funded in part by the British Council and on display for three months in a prestigious Paris Museum. But the seeming inability or deliberate refusal to make a distinction between the "scene" and the actual work selected for the show is one of the contradictions—and an important one—to which I above refer. Reviewing *Life/Live* in *Art Monthly* Andrew Wilson suggested that:

"Discussion of British art has recently been subject to a largely ill-informed, journalistic hyperbole that treats the "scene" almost as if it is the art rather than just its less interesting by-product...In such a situation, content, meaning, the reinvention of life, political or social purpose, a concern with the artificial or the very complexity of artistic practice is neither here nor there. The decor and props of the "scene"—the gossip, the parties, the mayhem...are everything."⁵

In his substantial analysis of the myth of the "young British artist" Simon Ford has similarly raised the issue of the promotion of select aspects of contemporary British art.⁶ Carefully tearing to tatters the characteristic claims that have been made for the so called "yBa" "scene", Ford offers a number of examples of the ideological utterances whose existence effects the actual framing of the "scene". He discusses, for example, Andrew Renton's influential anthology of 1991, *Technique Anglais*. Writing in that book

"Andrew Renton said that a "certain kind of irresponsibility seems to me to be a very key concept that brings all these people together, aesthetically." Although such a heterogeneous body of work should be difficult to categorise the seemingly effortless way that it has been categorised is not surprising; myth suppresses heterogeneity by co-option: the yBa is confident, ambitious, irresponsible, accessible and heterogeneous."⁷

And Ford continues:

"One strategy for countering the myth would be to provide social and financial information about the relationships between artists, editors, dealers, and collectors involved with the yBa. This project was offered but ultimately dismissed by Liam Gillick...The manufacture and nurturing of the myth are more productive than the phenomenology of facts, figures, and social relationships."

In his article Ford does not examine in any conventional sense the works produced by any of the artists to which he refers. Indeed his concern is a Bourdieu-like account of the practices and institutions of those institutions whose status and power allows them to confer value upon whatever it is that is actually going on in the UK at the present time. As the lines from Wilson quoted above make clear, to give one's attention to the ostensible products produced from within the "scene" itself looks a somewhat secondary concern in a context that is, one feels, largely an artificial fabrication, a structure constructed of hype and hearsay. This linguistic "picture" has at its central core notions of a

Hearsay

nation called "Britain" and, attached to this, an essentialist claim about the Britishness of British art.⁸ Even though *Life/Live* was not entirely a display of "young British artists" the ghost of that designation haunted the Paris show, bringing with it the holy spirit of confirmation, the sign of an "authenticity" and "seriousness" which was pretty difficult to detect during an actual visit to the exhibition.

According to Michael Archer: "It is true to say that one problem with showcase exhibitions is that they ultimately overvalue Britishness as a criterion of authenticity."⁹ And, as Ford again points out:

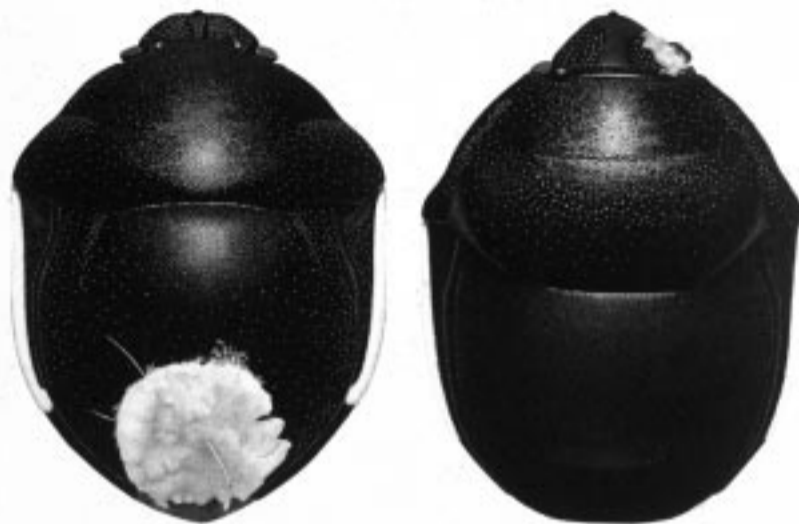
"By appealing to national pride the myth of the yBa seeks to instil in its audience a sense of national identity which is where myth fades into ideology. This group has been utilised as cultural ambassadors representing and defining "British" culture abroad." It is promoted as entrepreneurial, opportunist, confident, resourceful, independent and non-political, representing Britain in full "enterprise culture" bloom."¹⁰

In other words, the attributes ascribed to the yBa are precisely those values reiterated in the media by British politicians wishing to convince the public (including representatives of foreign business) that Britain has returned to a 1960s-style economic boom.¹¹ The thriving British "scene" thus turns out to be a literal materialisation of Conservative values, wearing the mask of an oblique (but of course uncritical) rebelliousness—or is it just a novelty of forms? Laurence Bossé and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the show's curators, begin their catalogue essay by remarking on: "The unique vitality of today's British scene, the stirrings of which were first perceived in the late 1980s..."¹²

I mentioned the structure of *Life/Live* as being one of its most praiseworthy features. Sixteen artists were given individual mini-shows within the overall display, this being complemented by the contributions of eight mainly artist-run spaces, a video room showing the work of nine artists, and a "kiosk" area in which were displayed copies of twenty contemporary art and theory journals. These latter included *Mute*, *Art Monthly*, *Variant*, *Circa*, *Everything* and *Frieze*, the artist-run spaces had among them presentations by *Locus+*, *Transmission*, *City Racing* and *BANK*, videos were contributed by Gilbert and George, Damien Hirst, Leigh Bowery and Sarah Lucas amongst others, and the artists given individual spaces included Mat Collinshaw, Douglas Gordon, John Latham, Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing, Gustav Metzger, the Chapman Brothers and Gilbert and George.

Most of the artists shown in *Life/Live* were probably in their 20's or 30's. Four older artists, Gilbert and George, Latham, David Medalla and Metzger were included as "father figures" for the younger contributors, ostensibly because the socially-concerned nature of the senior artists' practices gave them avant-garde status with respect to a "scene" that, as the title of the show proposed, looks directly towards everyday life as subject matter and general frame of reference. Gilbert and George have long proclaimed that it is their intention to transform life through art. I've never understood why this means that everything they make has to consist of rigidly figurative imagery—many abstract artists, Mondrian and Malevich, to name but two—have expressed similar commitment to cultural transformation. But this supposedly straightforward (yet ridiculously simple) connection between "figuration" and the everyday ran through much of *Life/Live*.

But this love of quotidian was one of the reasons why *Life/Live* was such a tedious exhibition. The blunt presentation of poorly-produced pieces negated the



possibility of transformation. Much of the show was about as well-made as a lazy 1st year fine art student's end of semester exhibition, cobbled together in a few hours or less—or that's what it looked like. It didn't appear so badly put together by choice, to make a point or transgress established convention: it simply looked pathetic. This isn't to say that it really had to be well crafted because it was "top quality" work; rather, it should have appeared convincing—and this is what much of *Life/Live* did not appear, on whatever terms one could muster. When one encountered the politically complex and technically sophisticated productions presented by *Locus+*—works by Stefan Gec, Gregory Green, Cornelia Hesse-Honegger and Paul Wong—one experienced a kind of shock: the shock of realising that much of the rest of this "blockbuster" show was as rubbishy as one had initially considered it to be. *BANK*'s gathering of papier maché zombies looked rather tame amongst a panoply of exhibits equally crude in their construction, though in some contexts their work has at least had the virtue of attempting some kind of critique.

One often hears how young artists working today have attitude. "When Attitudes Become Form" was the title of a large show of conceptual work held in Berne and London in 1969. Today, nearly 30 years on, it is attitude, and seeming little else that has become the most prominent "form" constituting the work, just so much guff and bluff masquerading as an ever so fashionable avant-garde.

notes

1. The symposium was held at Norwich School of Art & Design on Wednesday 20th March, 1996, to accompany Terry Atkinson's exhibition, "Histories Biographies Collaborations 1958 to 1996".
2. Philip Hensher, "Bad Art," *Modern Painters*. Vol. 9, No. 4, 1996 p. 83. Quotation of this passage should not be read as implying a general agreement with claims made in Hensher's text.
3. See Terry Atkinson, *Work 1977-83*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1983.
4. Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996. p.7.
5. Andrew Wilson, *Life v Art*, *Art Monthly*, No. 194, March 1996.
6. Simon Ford, *Myth Making*, *Art Monthly*, No. 194, March 1996.
7. Ford, p 5.
8. On this point see Stewart Home, *The Art Of Chauvinism in Britain and France*, *Everything*, No. 19, 1996. It is interesting that only ten years ago Matthew Collings and Stuart Morgan were suggesting that there was no such thing as a coherent entity called "British art". see their discussion "True Brit An Enquiry into National Character", *Artscribe*, no. 61, Jan/Feb 1987.
9. Michael Archer, *No Politics Please We're British*, *Art Monthly* No. 194 March 1996, p 12.
10. Ford, p. 5.
11. The dealer Jay Jopling, very much associated with the yBa "phenomena" is, as Ford mentions (p.7) the son of a Conservative MP.
12. *Life/Live La scène artistique au Royaume-Uni en 1996*. Vol. 1, p 13. Susan Pagé's remarks quoted above are from the same source (p. 8).

CORNELIA
HESSE-
HONEGGER
*Two Negro Bugs
from Swartara,
USA (Cydnidae)
1992.*

The left bug has a growth on its wings. The right bug has a growth out of the right eye. Swartara was heavily affected by fall-out from the accident on Three Mile Island on 29 March 1979.

manifesto

FIRST OF ALL we think the world must be changed. We know that this change is possible through appropriate actions. We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. My life is its own definition. So is yours.

The spectre of annihilation of humankind and of all life on planet earth haunts us all. I mean we are sitting here waiting on a powder-keg and I don't think that is what we want to do with our babies. I am convinced that ours is indeed a time of crisis. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relation with his kind.

There is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce, We will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke. The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. The independence we seek is taken for granted by other nations. We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom—bringers of beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women. A woman not only takes her identity and individuality for granted, but knows instinctively that the only wrong is to hurt others, and that the meaning of life is love. It is only a loveless world that is crazy after sex and a world crazy after sex is loveless.

The streets of our cities are as safe today as those in any throughout the world. They must remain so. Kill, plunder more quickly, love as much as you wish. And if you die, are you not sure of being roused from the dead? Die with respect. Lay down your life with dignity, don't lay down with tears and agony. There's nothing to death. Let yourself be led. Events will not tolerate deferment. You have no name. You look better than I've seen you in a long while, but it's still not the kind of peace that I wanted to give you ...Everything is inestimably easy. Self-forgetfulness should be one's goal, not self-absorption.

Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Art, infact can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice. Our aim is to make sure that enjoyment of the arts is not something remote from everyday life or removed from the realities of home and work. A degenerate can only produce degenerate "art". Artists must be chased out of the cities into the villages ...If they do not leave, do not supply them with food. Famines are of no importance. Poverty is a blessing. Come on! Set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift on those waters, discoloured and shredded! Whatever is repugnant to the people, people have a right to resist against, so long as they do it non-violently.

Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly! Non-violent Civil disobedience is the reservoir of people's power. Many will destroy themselves. I'm speaking here not as the administrator but as a prophet today. If anyone says that I know everything then it is not true. The government will automatically collapse. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. Dropping out is not the answer: fucking-up is. They have the illusion of continuing something worthwhile. They have a world to win. There's no point, there's no point to this ...we have ...we are born before our time.

manifesto

FIRST OF ALL we think the world must be changed. We know that this change is possible through appropriate actions. We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. My life is its own definition. So is yours.

The spectre of annihilation of humankind and of all life on planet earth haunts us all. I mean we are sitting here waiting on a powder-keg and I don't think that is what we want to do with our babies. I am convinced that ours is indeed a time of crisis. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relation with his kind.

There is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce, We will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke. The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. The independence we seek is taken for granted by other nations. We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom—bringers of beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women. A woman not only takes her identity and individuality for granted, but knows instinctively that the only wrong is to hurt others, and that the meaning of life is love. It is only a loveless world that is crazy after sex and a world crazy after sex is loveless.

The streets of our cities are as safe today as those in any throughout the world. They must remain so. Kill, plunder more quickly, love as much as you wish. And if you die, are you not sure of being roused from the dead? Die with respect. Lay down your life with dignity, don't lay down with tears and agony. There's nothing to death. Let yourself be led. Events will not tolerate deferment. You have no name. You look better than I've seen you in a long while, but it's still not the kind of peace that I wanted to give you ...Everything is inestimably easy. Self-forgetfulness should be one's goal, not self-absorption.

Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Art, in fact can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice. Our aim is to make sure that enjoyment of the arts is not something remote from everyday life or removed from the realities of home and work. A degenerate can only produce degenerate "art". Artists must be chased out of the cities into the villages ...If they do not leave, do not supply them with food. Famines are of no importance. Poverty is a blessing. Come on! Set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift on those waters, discoloured and shredded! Whatever is repugnant to the people, people have a right to resist against, so long as they do it non-violently.

Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly! Non-violent Civil disobedience is the reservoir of people's power. Many will destroy themselves. I'm speaking here not as the administrator but as a prophet today. If anyone says that I know everything then it is not true. The government will automatically collapse. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. Dropping out is not the answer: fucking-up is. They have the illusion of continuing something worthwhile. They have a world to win. There's no point, there's no point to this ...we have ...we are born before our time.

"And the judges

This text comes from a talk delivered at a lecture to students of art at Glasgow School of Art in November 1996.

AT THE AGE of 15 I had vague notions about art but it was music that excited me. We were listening to people like Buddy Holly, Fats Domino, Del Shannon, the Everley Brothers, and into my sixteenth year The Beatles exploded the scene, then bands like The Animals, Them, The Stones, and local bands doing similar stuff here in Glasgow, the Poets, the Blues Council, the Pathfinders, Alex Harvey and so on. The major influence was blues but allied to this was country and western music; these musicians had a massive impact on Great Britain and Ireland during the late 1950s, early 1960s. They sang of their own existence, in their own voice, from their own emotion, whether rage, hatred or love. At the root of what they were about was self respect, and they had assumed the right to create art. This I see as the essential thing the young working class musicians in this country were learning. In literature if anything similar was taking place I knew nothing about it. I continued reading, aside from the lives of the Impressionists which I'll refer to later, it was mainly American literature. Stories about pioneering communities, gamblers and rounders; boys who liked horses and wanted to be jockeys or newspapermen; tramps, cowboys, gangsters; small towns and big cities. All were rooted in a life that was recognisable, more or less, the lived-in, the everyday.

One thing these fictional characters held in common was that they were not having the life snuffed out of them by an imposed hierarchy. It was a breath of fresh air. The English Literature I had access to through the normal channels is what you might call state-education-system-influenced reading material. People from communities like mine were rarely to be found on these pages. When they were they were usually categorised as servants, peasants, criminal 'elements', semi-literate drunken louts, and so on; shadowy presences left unspecified, often grouped under terms like 'uncouth rabble', 'vulgar mob', 'the great unwashed'; 'lumpen proletariat', even 'riotous assembly'.

Equally significant for myself was a strain in European literature that asserted the primacy of the world as perceived and experienced by individual human beings. These individual human beings were mainly government clerks or mixed-up members of some kind of minor land-owning class. It was a society far removed from my own, both in place and time. But for some reason I could read the work of these 19th century writers, mainly Russian, with a definite empathy. Gogol and Dostoevski made me chuckle in ways that seem a contradiction in terms in respect of mainstream English Literature. Irony requires some sort of a mutual recognition of selfhood, and I was not excluded from it. English literature did not allow this, people like myself were a sub-species and generally excluded by definition.

So it was from an admixture of these two literary traditions, the European Existential and the American Realist, allied to British rock music, that I reached the age of 22 in the knowledge that certain rights were mine. It was up to me what I did. I had the right to create art. Not that I thought in these terms, I just wanted to write stories. But I didn't have to write as if I was somebody not myself (eg. an imagined member of the British upper-middle-classes). Nor did I have to write about characters striving to become other persons (eg. imagined members of the British upper-middle-classes). I could sit down with my pen and paper and start doing stories of my own, from myself, the everyday trials and tribulations; my family, my boss, the boy and girl next door; the old guy telling yarns at the factory; whatever. It was all there. I was privy to the lot. There was no obligation to describe, explain or

define myself in terms of class, race or community. I didn't have to prove anything. And nor did I have to prove anything about the people roundabout me, my own culture and community. In spite of dehumanising authority they existed as entire human beings; they carried on with their lives as though 'the forces of evil' did not exist. My family and culture were valid in their own right, this was an intrinsic thing, they were not up for evaluation. And neither was my work, not unless I so chose. Self respect and the determination of self, for better or for worse. Most of this was intuitive, but not all.

It was the same existential tradition in literature that is also a point of departure for some materialist strains of left-wing thought which, ultimately, are as authoritarian as the right-wing. These ideologies also debase and dehumanise individual existence, forcing people into 'the scheme of things', not allowing them the freedom to live as whole beings. Unlike fantasy and romance 'committed' artists here reveal their commitment in their work—their particular form of socialism or whatever—as a function of its representation or approximation to 'the real world', i.e. naturalism, or 'social realism' so-called. Stories, paintings, music, drama and so on are duty-bound to concern 'the harsh reality', i.e. the effects of, and the struggle, against the capitalist system. The central characters rarely have time to tell a joke, fall in love, get drunk or visit the lavatory, although sometimes they are allowed to visit museums, libraries and art galleries, or do evening classes with a view to 'bettering' themselves.

The establishment demands art from its own perspective but these forms of committed art have always been as suffocating to me as the impositions laid down by the British State, although I should point out of course that I am a socialist myself. I wanted none of any of it. In prose fiction I saw the distinction between dialogue and narrative as a summation of the political system; it was simply another method of exclusion, of marginalising and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities. I was uncomfortable with 'working class' authors who allowed 'the voice' of higher authority' to control narrative, the place where the psychological drama occurred. How could I write from within my own place and time if I was forced to adopt the 'received' language of the ruling class? Not to challenge the rules of narrative was to be coerced into assimilation, I would be forced to write in the voice of an imagined member of the ruling class. I saw the struggle as towards a self-contained world. This meant I had to work my way through language, find a way of making it my own.

When I was making my first stories it didn't occur to me that I was breaching linguistic and social taboos. My only concern was how to enter into my own world, how to make use of myself, my own experience, my own culture and community, and so on. Time was short and energy limited. I was having to earn a living; myself and my wife were bringing up two kids. So necessity informed my working practices, my creative methods. The problem of 'the blank page' or 'writers' block' only really arises when you have certain freedoms, perhaps essentially economic. Eventually I had as a project to write a group of stories set wholly in Glasgow, that self-contained Glasgow, not subject to the yays or nays of ruling authority. I got into the habit of evaluating my own work, training myself to recognise when a story was finished as well as it could be finished, when it was working and when it was not working. I didn't need outside opinion, although when it came it was always welcome, even my first criticism when I was about 25, that I used "the language of the gutter" and whereas I was free to do whatever I wanted I was certainly not free to thrust this language in

the face of other people. I've spoken about this elsewhere and won't go on about it. Instead I'll read a poem by Tom Leonard, from his sequence *Situations Theoretical and Contemporary*:

And their judges spoke with one dialect,
but the condemned spoke with many voices.

And the prisons were full of many voices,
but never the dialect of the judges.

"No one is above the Law."

There is a notion that art is sacrosanct and it is a dubious notion; there is also the notion that the practise of art is sacrosanct which is just nonsense. If you explore that notion more deeply I think you'll find that the only context in which it has meaning is political, it implies hierarchy, it assumes freedom for some and economic slavery for others; for some there is the luxury of time, not having to worry about how to get by in the world, you can be a free spirit, it is your right as an artist, you are set loose from the everyday trials and tribulations of an ordinary person because first and foremost you are not an ordinary person, with all the diverse responsibilities which that might entail, you are an Artist. It is part of the same myth, or disinformation, that as a young artist you should take it for granted that by working hard and by doing things properly economic necessity will be borne away, as if by magic on a high breeze—or perhaps on a mighty zephyr, us artists talk a different language from other people.

Maybe the only artists who ever talk about the sanctity of art and its practice in that manner either have a form of private income or are earning good money, perhaps by teaching art or else maybe they have managed to cut adrift their adult obligations, perhaps by choosing to remain adolescents, perhaps by moving into voluntary exile, which is something most artists dream about at some point or another. It's better not to discuss artists who are forced into exile. In fact it wouldn't surprise me if the study of such artists is being withdrawn quietly from the national curriculum, if it was ever on it, since it might tempt students into pondering over the British State and its relation to people who try to seek safety in exile, asylum-seekers is what they are called.

The most contemporary example might be Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian writer who was murdered by the Nigerian State authorities several months ago. I strongly recommend his work, read his novel *Soza Boy*, also what he says about his use of English in the author's note at the beginning. Part of what the authorities found so objectionable was his commitment to his own culture, that of the ogoni people. What would have happened if this artist had arrived incognito and unannounced in Britain seeking sanctuary to continue practising his art? Would he have escaped being sent back to the torturers and murderers, and kept here pending a decision? Would he have survived the prison chosen for him by our Heathrow immigration authorities pending that decision? or would he have been found dead in a British cell, suffocated in mysterious circumstances, cause unknown? or would the Home Secretary and the British Government make a special case for him because he was not only a well-known writer but supported by Amnesty International?

Imagine the education authorities did allow a proper study of the work of contemporary artists-in-exile, all those exiled in London at this very moment in time, or better still imagine the art establishment held a genuine Best of British art exhibition, open to any artist domiciled in Britain, artists from the Middle East, Africa, the Sub-Continent, Turkey, Kurdistan,

*The first line of a poem by Tom Leonard, the last in his sequence *Situations Theoretical and Contemporary*, from his *Reports from the Present* SELECTED WORK 1982-94 (Jonathan Cape, London, 1985).

said... " *

James Kelman

South East Asia, anywhere at all. I'm sure the specialist-art-authorities would have no hesitation in selecting the work on its merits. Would they have to conceal the difficult bits, the political bits, and the political bits are the biographical bits, the lives of these artists are a political issue? Then too we might have to look at bits that focus on the collusion between this country and the despotic regimes that sent these people into exile in the first place.

Of course us artists are not supposed to talk about political issues, we are too idealistic, we don't have a firm enough grasp on reality. We are supposed to leave that to the responsible adults, those who aren't artists. Obviously it's not only artists who are required by the State to be children, it applies across the board: as a working rule the only folk capable of making proper judgments are Cabinet ministers, certain members of parliament and the house of Lords, certain members of the State and certain media-commentators. The rest of us allow our judgment to be impaired, clouded by sentiment etc.

But being an artist is not a licence to remain an adolescent for the rest of your life. Some of the mythology surrounding art gives us to understand that a special case is made for those who create poetry, music, paintings, stories, drama etc.—whatever the media—that artists are allowed to remain children. Either that or we are forced to remain children; it occasionally seems like that this is what society requires of its artists, in one way or another, that we remain children. But I'm an adult human being and if I want to express an opinion then I'll express it. I'm not going to enjoy it if my opinion is downgraded simply because I'm a story-teller or artist. It's quite remarkable really the different ways whereby the State requires its artists to suck dummytits, even when we're walking with the aid of zimmers, like kids we are to be seen and not heard.

Some of the points I'm raising here were never clearer than during the turmoil surrounding the European City of Culture carry on. Here to my mind was a classic example of the exploitation of art and artists. It's still a taboo subject. One is not supposed to mention it, just recall it hazily, but with affection, as the time our ayn wee city of Glasgow made it onto the international map. Anything is justified because of that. Look at the publicity the city got! It was only five years ago and already it's a sort of legend, a mythical kind of thing, mythical in the sense that it isn't open to analysis, not available for critical examination, not then and not now. If you attempt such a thing you're a boring spoilsport.

But it was definitely a classic exercise in respect of how art and artists are regarded by the authorities, with a mixture of contempt, distrust and fear. Once again we were children, usually spoiled brats. Those of us who refused to stand up and sing our party-piece for the visiting adults were sent to bed without a chocolate biscuit. The authorities were unsure how the visitors treated their own naughty children. However some of them lost their temper and gave us a smack in public. The city's PR team, including most media

commentators, responded in mitigation, and with one or two exceptions they took great pains in pointing to how naughty we were, how sorely we had tried the patience of the adult authorities, didn't we appreciate the embarrassment we spoilsports were causing? Surely we knew it was all for our own good, we didn't even have the wit to see this, not knowing which side our bread was buttered, how could we be so disloyal, but that's to be expected of artists, their selfishness is a byword, they luxuriate in their perpetual infancy, their rosy-hued idealism, meanwhile us adults must enter bravely into the real world, the world of the everyday, the world of compromise and necessity, if the good old adult authorities didn't get their hands dirtied why then all us artist-children would be in a right pickle and the amazing thing is we wouldn't even know it, because the world of adult-authority is mysterious and secretive and beyond the ken of infants.

There was another approach to us artists, this one was utilitarian; it appealed both to our sensibilities and to our reasonableness. Okay the politicians and paid arts administration, the so-called cultural workforce, might make mistakes but it's always well-intentioned and in the interests of everybody, and come on for Christ sake nobody's perfect. We all know how crass it all is but play along, don't rock the boat, you might get something out of it, some kind of commission maybe, a chocolate biscuit, a year's supply even, who knows, if not now in the long run, and if you don't maybe some other artists will, you might even know some of them.

In this scenario the then leader of the district council was portrayed as mister happy-go-lucky, a well-meaning kind of simpleton, but one who not only had a heart of gold, he was a patriot, he loved his Glasgow, he might make a wrong move now and again but it's all for the good of the cause, above all he loves his ayn wee city.

And okay, what if he is a Philistine, at least he is an unashamed card-carrying one. And anyway, while we're on the subject, surely the preciousness and pomposity of artists needs a good smack in the face now and again and this is what the leader of the district council is doing, he is showing all you artists up for the bunch of arty wankers you really are. Yeh, that too was in there. We were being asked to show solidarity with the politicians and arts administration either because it was in our own best personal interest, the best interests of artists in general, or the best interests of the city itself. In this utilitarian argument art had nothing to do with it, art was kept out of it. And in a sense this was a paradigm of the Year of Culture, art had nothing whatsoever to do with it. Never mind that it was precisely art as the product of individual people that was being highjacked and ripped off so mightily. The artists were being asked to conceal or disown their existence, all for the good of the cause. Part of the underlying thinking behind the authorities' strategy was that if such a thing as art does exist then it certainly isn't being created in Glasgow although for some peculiar reason foreigners see things differently. I can't resist that classic line from the former leader of the council, now the proud recipient of Glasgow's

highest office, the present Lord Provost, to paraphrase: I might not know what art is but I'll milk it for all it's worth.

It's always interesting to see how the various State authorities try to separate not only living-artists from society but art itself. The educational system is one such authority, a crucial instrument of the state. Think of the resources, economic and intellectual, all that time and energy, being spent or wasted in spurious discourse, spurious activity. Areas of academic endeavour are actually devoted to theories of art where we learn that the text or artwork is all that matters, forget the artists who created the thing, their lives are unimportant, forget too the social conditions in which they worked, such things are irrelevant. When it comes to art with a capital A it makes no difference whether an artist is a multi-billionaire landowner or some poor bastard dying of malnutrition, let's examine the work. As responsible art critics we learn to establish proper criteria, objective criteria. (Note that art-critics are always responsible by definition.) As responsible and mature art critics we can award the artwork marks out of ten as a function of our unbiased and objective evaluative criteria, once we have done this we may wonder, if we are so inclined, whether or not the artist led an easy life, or if the society in which he moved was difficult or not, but it is unimportant, for we can both recognise and evaluate beauty wherever we find it, in a sewer or a gilded palace. All that kind of shit.

The fundamental issue concerns their own criteria. Never mind what they are, where do these criteria come from? They have to come from somewhere. The thing is they don't come from anywhere. There is no ultimate evaluative criteria. It just seems that way, that there are criteria within society that somehow exist a priori, like god; unchanging, immutable, eternally fixed. And just like that whole set of priests, rabbis, mullahs and ministers these specialist-critics and expert-judges—those who bestow the final verdict—they do so from a position of absolute authority. We have to take their judgment on trust, the validity of the criteria is not up for discussion. We are to have faith in the specialist-art-critics because their integrity is vouchsafed by an Unimpeachable Source.

But what is the source? Well, that should go without saying. If you persist in such questioning you show a marked breach of faith. There is a stage where even the most skeptical among us are obliged to bow the head not in sullen silence but in silent reverence.

The people who come armed with these special criteria always have the final word, because authority is invested in them. Aye but who invested authority in them? The wisest authorities in the land, a tiny but dedicated circle of men and women who are expert in every field imaginable, not only that but they have the qualifications to prove it. Aye but what qualifications? Many qualifications, a veritable plethora of qualifications. Who says so? And what kind of qualifications are they? Who do they 'show' them to? Where do they get them?

Older people here will remember the minor furore caused in a West Highland town a few years back

“And the judges said..” *continued*

when they held a festival of The Best of British Music. The organisers were good at publicity and managed to get press releases carried in most of the national media. When the programme for the festival was released people up and down the country were amazed to find that only music composed by local musicians had been selected. That's right, with the freedom to choose from anywhere in the land the Best of British festival was entirely composed by musicians based in the town itself. This caused a real stramash. The national media arrived in force. They discovered the selection-panel consisted of only one man, some local guy.

The pressure mounted till eventually it couldn't be ignored by the authorities; an enquiry was set-up, headed by a committee of three 'specialist-judges' from the art establishment department of music. What they wanted to know was firstly where the funding for this so-called national festival came: was it just local private money or did the cash come from the public purse, from the Scottish Arts Council or even god help us from the Arts Council of Great Britain? The next thing they did was find out about the local guy, the so-called judge. What were his qualifications and where exactly did he get them? Was it just some kind of music diploma from his local secondary school or what? They discovered he hadn't gone to the Royal College of Music in Scotland, never mind the one down in London and when they went to examine his credentials they couldn't find any. Next they tried to examine the criteria by which the guy had arrived at his final selection but that proved impossible and what little they did pick up they just couldn't make head nor tail of them, the criteria the guy used. After that they had a quick listen to the selected compositions but that didn't help matters at all, most of it seemed to be 'West-Highland-town-type music', in the words of one of the specialist-art-judges. (He later apologised for his lack of clarity on that one but said he didn't know how else to describe it.)

At last the specialist-art-judges approached the organisers and told them their man had no qualifications at all, they had checked his credentials, all of that, he just wasn't qualified, not only that but the guy had never been further south than Dalmally in his life, never more north than the Kyle of Lochalsh.

But the organisers defended their judge and insisted on the validity of the guy's selection, that it was both unbiased and objective. They backed him all the way. According to them he had a great ear and was scrupulously fair, it was traditional too, it ran in his family, his father and his father before him, they had been unbiased judges as well. And their township needs this kind of honest, unbiased criticism because it's also a port and ferries arrive daily, it's a cosmopolitan place. And then they flummoxed the specialist-art-judges; never mind his qualifications, they said, what about yours? I bet you've never even been to the town. And they were right. None of three 'specialist-art-judges' had ever set foot in the place although occasionally they flew over it on their way to art conferences in Canada or Iceland.

There was a similar sort of rumpus happened over an exhibition of contemporary European Art which took place in France, I forget which city, maybe it was Paris. This time there was a panel of genuine attested art-critics making the selection. But the explosion here was that not one solitary piece of work by any living French artist was chosen. Imagine that, none of the art being created by the French community was judged good enough for the exhibition. It was extraordinary. It was said at the time by many French people that their country's art might not be good enough for Europe but it was certainly good enough for them. Never

mind the European community they said, French art is good enough for the French community. But not everybody agreed, a few French art experts went along with the panel of judges and issued a statement to the effect that French artists should work harder in future so that they might bring their art up to scratch, scratch being the European standard, whatever that happened to be at the time.

I'm speaking today as a writer of fiction of course. But here's another example that isn't fiction:

During the European City of Culture in 1990 there was an exhibition of British Art held in Glasgow. The director of museums and art galleries was responsible and he caused much controversy when he excluded the work of certain local artists. He is reported to have done so on the grounds that their work wasn't good enough.

A very interesting comment from someone holding such an office. Let's assume that his motives were unimpeachable and that he approached the task of selection in a scrupulously fair manner. Let's also assume there was no political pressure coming from the team at George Square. Nor were there any sort of 'quota issues' involved, and I mean by this that if in the director's own considered opinion there had been no home-based artwork 'good enough' then nothing by the city's artists would have been chosen at all, as in the French example. As far as I know the possibility that he might choose nothing at all by local artists wasn't referred to by the director but in the context of this argument it is surely implicit, if not the argument is spurious. And we would just have to lump it. Top officials are often forced to make painful decisions which we might not like but which are always for our own good in the long run. It's no good us hiding our head in the sand, if our art isn't good enough then why not admit reality and just try and improve it so that one day we can be acceptable at a national level. I mean I can imagine an exhibition of The Best of Contemporary World Art being held in Houston, Texas where we find empty galleries, the judges having decided that none of the art submitted was of a high enough standard. Fortunately for the administrators of the European City of Culture embarrassment was avoided, artwork by certain Glasgow-based artists was considered 'good enough' by the director.

Amidst all the nonsense I'm trying to draw attention to a couple of problems with these 'not good-enough' and 'best-of' arguments, that distinctions have to be drawn between the art of a community and the art of a community-at-large. I'm saying that the value of the art of a community seems to be a function of an extended community. We are forced to have our art evaluated relative to what takes place, in this wider community. Our art is not judged on its own merits. Yet once we actually look at this wider community we find it isn't really very wide at all; in fact it's toty, it's toty and it's exclusive, it's restricted to the values of the elite group of people who form the controlling interest of this country. What you find is that our society is premised on the assumption that the criteria by which art is evaluated within this elite group are the only criteria which truly matter. These criteria are the same criteria by which all art thought worthy of the name is evaluated throughout the entire country. Artwork from different cultures and communities cannot have intrinsic aesthetic value. It may have merit on a relative scale (which is minor by definition) but it has no aesthetic value in its own right. Only when measured by the standards of the elite culture, judged by its criteria alone, can the artwork of particular cultures be awarded authentic value. Every culture in the land is subject to it, subordinate to its standards, controlled by those who are trained to affirm it whether by birth,

adoption or assimilation.

But since this elite group controls most everything else anyway it should go without saying. So much so that it's seldom said at all. And only then by those out with the controlling-group; fringe-people, social-misfits, failures, folk with chips-on-their-shoulders; conspiracy-theorists, provincials, racists, fundamentalists, nationalists, radicals, subversives, extremists, etc.

Obviously I'm not saying that somebody who takes control of a community's museums and art galleries must be born and bred within the community itself. Nor am I even suggesting that s/he has to have an intimate knowledge and understanding of a community's particular cultural traditions. It's just that by adopting this argument for the exclusion of certain local artists the criteria used by him, these pertaining to a wider cultural standard, some sort of greater conceptual base, these criteria cannot recognise the inherent value of the art of a particular community. The crucial point for Glaswegians about the "not good-enough" controversy was that here we have somebody in charge of a community's museums and art galleries, number one authority in control of the history, traditions and cultural inheritance of the city, and he seems not to understand, even intuitively, that aesthetic value is intrinsic to the art of any community, any community at all.

The argument also allows and makes use of another hierarchy-based fallacy, that the artwork produced within one culture is superior to that of another. Now it might well be possible that the artwork produced by one culture is 'better' than that of another. That's fine by me. I'm wary of folk who adopt relativist positions; it usually means they won't take criticism. But what I do want to know is the criteria used to establish value. Surely it's not too much to ask of our finely matured art authorities.

Maybe people with an interest in other areas of Scottish life will see parallels. Why, for instance, is there no national theatre in this country? Is Scottish theatre not good enough to warrant such a thing? What do we mean when we say of a country that its theatre isn't 'good enough'? Is it possible for somebody brought up in Scotland to make such a statement? Maybe. I'm not saying it isn't, not necessarily, I just want to know about the criteria, what criteria are being applied, how is the evaluation being made, who the hell is making that judgment?

It became clear to me early on that writing stories did not offer a living, and no matter how much I resented this it was stupid to blame it on my partner. It wasn't her fault that the thing I gave most of my time and sweat to had no economic value. If I felt like changing the World then at the same time I would have to work it so that the burden of looking after the children didn't fall solely on my partner's shoulders. I didn't expect her to have three economic burdens, the two children and myself. And I remember discussing this many years ago with Tom Leonard and with Alasdair Gray, that if you couldn't be both a parent and a writer then maybe there was something wrong with being a writer. It's a perennial discussion for most artists, I was chatting about it as recently as last month with an 84 year old woman, the American writer Tillie Olsen. Some of you may know of her, she has written one of the seminal works of this century on creativity, it's entitled *Silences*, and I recommend it here and now to anyone who hasn't read it.

The way I'm talking might sound like a denigration of art, it isn't. But we have to be able to see art in the context of society as it exists, it cannot be separated from it. Art is not an eternal verity. Let us take it as given that life without art is so unthinkable that it may as well be a contradiction in terms of what it is to be a

human being. But when all is said and done art is created by human beings, by people; and people live in societies of people. I'm not speaking as an art historian but as a practising artist, a writer of stories.

I used to read the biographies of artists, in my mid to late teens, mainly the Impressionists but it was the lives of these artists that drew me to art as a maturing teenager, not the art itself. I thought Modigliani was great, he was a kind of hero. After that came his art, I looked at his art. I also thought Pissarro was great, again this had nothing really to do with his painting, it was because his home was a welcoming place, plus the fact he and his wife had a pot of soup at the ready for the skint and hungry young artists of the community. Again with Cezanne and Emile Zola, I liked them both. I didn't give a damn about their violent quarrel, I wanted to speak to Cezanne on behalf of Zola, if Emile is willing to forgive and forget then why can't you for Christ sake Paul come on, shake hands, life is difficult enough.

Obviously there is a sentimental side, it's allowable in adolescence. For several years I thought Turgenev was a stuck-up aristocratic mean-minded shit, and I didn't read him. Then at last I did read him, and found his work was great, why the hell was I so prejudiced! Dostoevski was to blame. I was so stuck on Dostoevski I had followed him blindly, even when he attacked Turgenev without telling me about his own gambling problems and how poor old Turgenev had loaned him dough till finally he couldn't any longer, and Dostoevski damned him for it. So I had graduated to a more mature understanding of the reality of that personal situation.

I can't imagine somebody studying the life and work of Vincent Van Gogh and not being moved by it, not being outraged by the conventional view that suggests he was a kind of naive idealistic madman. In spite of all that we know of the man's life the conventional view continues to be the premise, so that if we want to argue the point the burden of proof is on us. Why, why should that be? And we have a writer like Franz Kafka, we are to ignore the life of the man, we are to search his texts for its hidden mysteries, symbols and other coda about nightmare bureaucracies and despotic tyrannies as metaphors for this that and the next thing, including the immutability of a Christian god, given that Kafka was Jewish, we can involve ourselves however we like but rarely how it

was to exist in Prague at the turn of the 20th century, or the fact that the artist himself spent so much of his working time and energy trying to assist working-class people get their insurance claims settled through the various levels and rung upon grinding rung of state bureaucracy. How convenient for state authorities everywhere, that somehow or other whatever discourse there is via the normal media channels always seem to stop short of looking at the nature of society as lived in by the creators of art.

More recently, within the past fifteen years, I've come to see as exemplars artists such as Sorley MacLean whose death last Sunday came as a blow to so many people. He could not be divorced from his culture, not from his community. Throughout his life he fought all such nonsense, all such propaganda, because I also believe that it is propaganda. Apart from his poetry he produced a classic work of criticism which, as its own sad commentary on the current affairs of Scottish art, is now out of print. In one of his essays, entitled *Is there a hope for Gaelic?* he writes:

It is natural for a poet to love his own language if it is the language of his ancestors and dying, even if it were a poor defective thing. Gaelic is not a poor language, in art at any rate. Though it had only its ineffable songs, which cannot be put in other words, it would still be a priceless medium of expression. Therefore the Gaelic writer must be 'political', and in our day the teaching of the language is the prime business of its 'politics'.

At the Booker Prize ceremony a couple of years ago I upset some people by what I was arguing, which was not a plea for separatism, nor for nationalism, nor for the world to recognise the supremacy of Scottish culture—all of which was reported by various media. Nor was it an argument in favour of the local at all costs, an acceptance of the mediocre just because it happens to be a home-grown product. It is simply to say that the existence of my culture is a fact and why should that be denied? It's an argument not for the supremacy of my culture, just for its validity, and by extension, the validity of any culture. There is no such thing as an 'invalid' culture, just as there is no such thing as an 'inferior' or 'superior' culture. What else is a culture but a set of ideas, beliefs, and traditions held by any given community of people: a set of infinite extension, shifting and changing. Cultures will function in the same way as languages, not to mention the people

who use them: unless dead they live. I'll end with another poem by Tom Leonard. It was my original intention to read this one at the end of the Booker ceremony. But eventually I didn't, I've got a habit of going in the huff and I just thought to hell with them, but I'll finish with it now, it's a beautiful poem, entitled

Fathers and Sons

I remember being ashamed of my father
when he whispered the words out loud
reading the newspaper.

"Don't you find
the use of phonetic urban dialect
rather constrictive?"
asks a member of the audience.

The poetry reading is over.

I will go home to my children.

Carry On Screening

review

3rd New Visions Festival of film, video and new media

Glasgow, October/November 1996

SPANNING OCTOBER 11th to November 10th, the third New Visions festival took place in a city-wide range of venues, in Glasgow. The core week, focusing around the screening of the International Zeitgeist programmes, was the 11th to the 20th. These were all single screen and recent works, brought together from an open submission, some of which are reviewed below, in more detail, by Chris Byrne. Robert King also focuses on the CD ROM presentation at the Gallery of Modern Art elsewhere in the magazine. Here I will try to present a short overview of the Festival, giving the reader some notion of its breadth, scope and highly ambitious intentions.

All in all it was a massive and highly successful effort on the part of the organisers, Ann Vance and Paula Larkin. With way over 200 events, encompassing film, video, talks, installations, performance and new technology; from as far flung locations as South America and Japan, there is simply nothing quite like it in Glasgow.

New Vision's 'underground' spirit and character can also encompass very thorough historical assessments: such as the programme of experimental film exploring the Kinecraft movement (which centred around Glasgow School of Art in the 30's and included artists such as Norman McLaren and Helen Biggar); a presentation by Professor Walter Schobert, director of the German Film Museum, on German avant garde films of the 20's and a 'retrospective' of the filmwork of Tina Keane. Within this, the festival is also very conscious of the fact that it provides a platform which is the only chance a great deal of younger video and film makers actually get to show their work, in any kind of context or social framework.

With the festival, this time around, centring around the Glasgow Film & Video Workshop (one of the few fully equipped production and exhibition spaces in Scotland), a more open and accessible feel was generated. One particular example being the warm environment of the Virtual Living Room, an installation prepared by Martha McCulloch and Alice Angus, in which one could choose from a library of documentary, issue-based work and travelogues. There was something just straightforward, enjoyable and human about being in a comfortable space, taking in its carefully prepared notions about home and travel, and

actually being able to watch something interesting on a TV set in the early afternoon.

One could extend this 'theme' further in one of the first events, at the Tramway, with Max Eastley's 'Sound Sculptures.' Experimental music events can—in the pre-judging sense—threaten some kind of undeserved relentless barrage of angst aimed at small and innocent bones in the ear. Not in this case. Eastley's work has a rare and subtle beauty within it, perhaps hinted at by his only words to the rapt audience at the end of the performance: "I've really enjoyed being with you all tonight." A psychically audible cry came back from us all: "So have we Max, so have we." This was immediately followed by a mass migration to the stage, fuelled by ecstatic, urgent curiosity to find out how he had produced such medicine for the soul. Discovery of the means only deepened the spell.

The event at Java (an internet cafe with an exhibition space) perhaps also shared something of this approach, in the way it adopted a 're-humanising' treatment of technology, with an 'on-line interactive performance' by the group Elevator, whom I think emerged from Dundee Art College, which has maintained a long influence on electronic art in Scotland. This was a more quirky methodology perhaps focusing more on the body. The performances included a live soap opera, enacted after taking its plot from contributions from the web.

Street Level was the venue for works produced for the New Media Commission, a collaboration between Hull Time Based Arts, London Electronic Arts and New Visions, to fund and exhibit new work. This featured two distinct video installations: 'and finally their eyes looked in' by Stephen Hurrell, and 'joyride' by Keith Stutter. The remit of the commission aimed at issues of 'Civil Liberty & Civic Pride,' fast becoming mutually exclusive terms in Glasgow.

Video has become such an accessible medium that even TV producers are frightened of it, or at least frightened of who's hands it might end up in, particularly with the tactical possibilities fast becoming associated with it. This was taken up in the forum on Tactical TV. It seems we have to be protected from being eye-witnesses to some things in our society.

Working with other venues and allowing them involvement in the work was a key aspect of the festival. It should be pointed out that New Visions functioned on half of the budget for the previous year, and that the event receives no funding whatsoever from the Scottish Arts Council. The Festival is a showcase for artists working in different areas, styles, genres and production values, what binds it together is the commitment of its organiser's and participants and the celebration of 'non-mainstream' work. While 'mainstream' could be said to be in the eye of the beholder, it is still used as a bludgeon to denigrate

independent voices. New Visions represents a 'channel of resistance' to this routine. The organisation is not made up of a pool of jaded film theory addicts or wanna-be comfortably ensconced curators: essentially it draws on the strength of the artistic community, in other words it is of its community. New Visions may exist in the manipulated-from-on-high, toy town art world that Glasgow is fast in danger of becoming; but it showed itself responsible and yet unafraid to take risks. The Cinema of Transgression programme would have been quite a different matter, had it not been entertainingly put in context by a more than fairly knowledgeable presenter/enthusiast, Jack Sargent. The International Zeitgeist programme, in that it

tried to reflect the 'spirit of the age,' can of itself be taken as representative of the spirit of the festival. Where New Visions really works is in its commitment to combining such a large and open selection of artists' work with wider discussions and lectures. What you saw (events were almost all free) and what you combined that with was the mark of how engaged you chose to be, something very different for each individual.

Although contingent on the level of our personal involvement and by nature a temporary event, a festival's life or spirit is also something that exists or persists after the event. It is in this place of the mind when memory begins to assess, that we look to gain some notion of what we have learned, how we have been influenced, and arrive at thoughts of how we should or should not be influenced. Film and video are themselves quickly transformed into memory and have an intimate relationship to its processes. Into my mind immediately comes memories of Cordelia Swann's video, 'Desert Rose. A tremendous work, which, in its ability to evoke such convincing 'memories' (at times ancestral, at times childlike, at times harrowing), communicates with the viewer in a way which renews one's faith in the medium. It too looks 'back', though it distorts our sense of time. In content the work 'remembers' the Nevada desert nuclear 'tests,' a big part of which was the deliberate exposure of the population to radiation by the 'authorities.' It blends this with the 'exposure' to mind pollution and materialism that is Las Vegas. In its drifting gentle reproaches it tells us that this utter loss of all humanity was surprisingly and specifically predicted in the dreams and visions of the first people who inhabited the land. A land they inhabited so well that their art/myths are still pervasive. So do you want to end up in a radioactive Las Vegas? For some people working in the mainstream entertainment industry that's their big ambition.

William Clark

A FILM AND video festival is a curious event: groups of people sit for days in darkened spaces, watching hundreds of short works. The festival screening lies somewhere between the worlds of art and cinema. Boundaries between entertainment and intellect are at times blurred. It's a bit like a party—who will you meet, will you enjoy the experience?

New Visions sought to present works on their own terms, against what the catalogue termed, "the current frenzy for all that is themed and packaged and the increasing marketability and acceptability of certain brands of video art produced for the gallery system". The International Zeitgeist screenings, drawn from open competition, inevitably were themed, though this seemed sympathetic to the art shown.

I was struck by the number of video and film pieces utilising performance, often in front of a fixed camera, without editing. These techniques date back to early video art, and performance video has formed a vital element of artistic practise ever since. The use of minimalist and conceptual strategies today can be seen as a reaction to the high tech, glossy aesthetics widespread during the 1980's. Direct performance to camera could help the recorded image regain a sense of immediacy. Given the cheap availability of camcorders, it is simple to produce.

This approach could be seen in Tape, by Glasgow based duo Stephanie Smith and Edward Stewart. We see a human form below the waist, bound almost entirely by plastic adhesive tape. As the tape is slowly peeled away, two bodies are revealed, the performers 'joined at the hip', back to back. The piece is reminiscent of a 1970's performance by Marina Abramović and Ulay from their Relation Work series: the artists sat motionless, back to back, for seventeen hours. Both works can be seen as testing the limits of the body's endurance, but Smith and Stewart's act seems a teas-





ing pose in comparison. Despite a mild edge of sado/masochism, the attitude seems one of cool self awareness, a voyeuristic distance—not unlike Andy Warhol's films.

Stella D'Ailly's, *Lick* starts with a close-up of a face, appearing to perform cunnilingus. The camera zooms out to reveal D'Ailly alone, her face reflected in a mirror held between her legs. The action seems similar to a performance by Annie Sprinkle: she invited the audience to examine her vagina with a gynaecologist's speculum. D'Ailly's video could have been a passive meditation on the female form, safely enclosed within the camera frame. Instead, the initial voyeurism of *Lick* is turned back on the viewer as the interpretation of the scene changes. *Lick* manages not just to tease and deceive, but also to confront the viewer's gaze.

Also prevalent at *New Visions* was the aesthetics of the processed or re-edited image, sometimes using found footage or video recorded off-air. These methods stem from a loose tradition spanning structural films from the 1960's and 1970's, to *Scratch Video* in the 1980's.

Hic et Nunc, by Berlin artist Veit-Lup, takes as its material the static of the untuned television screen. He transforms this seemingly mundane image through the slowing of time, magnifying and refracting the cathode ray image through different lenses, and building layer upon layer of 'snow' through video effects. The electronic soundtrack seems derived from the television's own sounds, re-sampled and looped. What look like crystals slowly forming soon mutate into pulsing patterns of light and dark in dazzling variety.

Veit-Lup articulates the omnipresent continuum of television transmission: the 'Here and Now' of the title. Taking the form of the medium as subject, his approach echoes early work by European video artists, many of whom initially made experimental films. Indeed it seems there was some collaboration with veteran German video artist Antal Lux.

Jan Krogsgard's, *Titled For Archive* presents a conundrum to the viewer. Four short strings of text were looped and reprocessed continually, becoming nearly illegible in the process as the picture jitters horizontally in a rapid strobing pattern. A repetitive mantra of sound mirrors the cycles of the image. The text reveals itself to the viewer, whilst never appearing in a fixed moment: literally it is half-glimpsed. Tantalising flashes of imagery occasionally surface from the blur, but so cut-up and stretched they remain unrecognisable.

What does the text say? 'Theotheories'; 'stratastrategies'; 'sanskrit of cells'; 'tongues of junkies'. The lines give clues to the "reading" of the work: presented as an abstract field of signs, much as ancient Sanskrit texts were viewed before translations were available. The metaphysical tone hints at viewing as a trance-like experience. The fragmentary, flickering *Titled For Archive* reminded me strongly of the *Dreamachines* of Brion Gysin.

Finn McAlinden and Beverley Hood's *Transference* is bound by a more conventional structure. A kaleido-

scopic narrative unfolds, following a woman as she walks in the forest and the city. The two scenes are cut together in rapid sequence, matching shots using symmetry and movement. The forced connection between separate locations containing the same protagonist resembles techniques used in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-up*. There seem to be common concerns: the sense of mystery around a journey; and simultaneity, the idea that moving images can create parallel realities at the same moment in time.

The best attended retrospective screenings were dedicated to underground films of the 1980's: *Cinema of Transgression* featured shorts by 'famous' names like Richard Kern, Lydia Lunch and Nick Zedd. Many of the films had roots firmly in the US independent tradition of low-budget schlock. Influences ranged from Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Blood Feast* to John Waters' camp epics, mingled with the DIY aesthetics of punk and live performance to create a heady brew.

Among the contemporaries of Kern and Zedd shown was David Wojnarowicz and Tommy Turner's co-directed *Where Evil Dwells*. Only the trailer for the film survives, based on news reports about a teenage AC/DC fan who murdered a fellow teen, claiming when arrested that it was a sacrifice to Satan. It opens on a ventriloquist's dummy reciting obsessive dialogue: a distant ancestor to Beavis and Butthead perhaps. Intercut with the teen murder scene, the dummy begins to stab Tommy Turner to death, screeching dementedly. Finally an orgy of motorcycles, leather, chains, rape, murder, mutilation, and decay, conjuring a rock'n'roll vision of Hell. The scenes evoke an atmosphere similar to the films of Kenneth Anger. Eventually, *Where Evil Dwells* bores with its constant attempts to break taboos: and it is a trailer for a much longer film.

The main aesthetic of *Cinema of Transgression* was one of Gothic nihilism: other people merely play-things of desire, to be used and abused, even to the point of mutilation and death. Yet it's play acted, sanitised: a game. The film-makers were carrying on a tradition from the Romantic poets—de Sade, Byron, Shelley, through to Burroughs—all 'gentlemen of leisure' indulging in sexual pleasures and opium habits. In a similar way, these darlings of the New York post-punk scene had some political insight into their time. One response to the moral strait-jacket of the Reagan years was to immerse the body and psyche in sex, drugs, violence: all the 'forbidden pleasures'. Despite possible radical intent, the film-makers seemed unable to break beyond a scopophilic fixation

GILLIAN STEEL *Currency for the Superstitious* 1996

on sex, the look of it, the easy power of sexual or violent imagery to shock.

Made more recently, Tessa Hughes-Freeland and Holly Adams' *Nymphomania*, opens to a shot of performer, dressed as a Wood Nymph, dancing in a forest to Debussy's 'Apres-midi d'un Faun'. A character made up as a Satyr watches, masturbating as the Nymph sheds her flimsy garment. The inevitable rape scene ends in the Satyr's barbed penis piercing the Nymph's abdomen, killing her. It is all carried off with an understandably ironic humour. The film is an interesting development, focusing more on mythology than the contemporary. The return to unreconstructed Romanticism has been influential—*Nymphomania* is a precursor to the use of such imagery by art world favourite Matthew Barney.

A retrospective of the Cinema of Transgression 'school' will show at the Whitney Museum of Modern Art. If ever viewed as transgressive, these films are now firmly in the dusty embrace of the academy.

Which brings me back to a central problem with much of the work I saw, particularly recent performance video. Many artists choreograph, stage and record intimate moments or visual gags. Belying the spontaneity of such an approach, they fall back on the strategies of the past. Plagiarism can allow artists to develop new variations on old strategies, to take art forward. Unfortunately, only rarely do the results include social critique, or show much awareness of the wider technical, psychological or political impact of video and television. These ideas were often fundamental to the art they seek to emulate.



This leaves concerns mainly around surface, appropriation of aesthetic styles, and self-promotion of the artists as hip personalities. Suspicion arises that such works cynically 'quote' older artists who are currently in vogue. The product is knowing, self-referential art which adopts the tactics of the market's leading 'brands' from the late 1980's. Younger artists have followed their lead for places in the Saatchi collection, the Pompidou and the Tate.

There has always been a tendency in video art towards the one-line gag: a simple, often funny idea delivered with a stylish gimmick to engage the viewer. Alongside more ponderous works, short bites of humour provide light relief. If they become the dominant trend, eclipsing other modes of representation that is worrying. It would be sad if video and film artists lost sight of any distinction between their work and that designed to market global corporations. Not that art should necessarily be serious, or didactic. But if everything becomes entertainment, whose interests does it serve?

Chris Byrne

The Antithetical Ben Watson Meaning of Primal Guitars

In his essay *The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words*,¹ Sigmund Freud anticipated V.I. Volosinov's definition of the sign: a material pivot whose very ambiguity allows dialogue to occur. Attempts to fix semiotic systems in unambiguous correlation to single signifieds (Heidegger, Pound) are in effect blocks to the linguistic process. Leon Trotsky welcomed Freud's thesis as a blow against undialectical categories (what he called the 'impermeable bulkheads of Anglo-Saxon thought').² The perceived social ambiguity of the Avantgarde (its 'polysemanticity') results from bringing the antithetical nature of signs to consciousness.³ Such semiotic materialism should not be confused with either political disengagement or liberal collusion with an exploitative system.

Generalisations about the Avantgarde need to be contradictory to be true.⁴ Adornoite paradoxism can however be tempered by examining a particular case. In the third week of April, 1996, the 'Godfathers of Grunge', Sonic Youth, played a three-night residency at The Forum, part of a European tour to promote their *Washing Machine* album. Prior to this, guitarists Lee Renaldo and Thurston Moore, dissatisfied with the repetitious labour of precisely such work, had been dabbling with the Avantgarde. They'd played instrumental freak-outs at New York's Knitting Factory, an activity routinely condemned by DJs and record reviewers as 'self-indulgent'. Since 'self-indulgence' is high on the list of virtues found in yBa, this development seemed worth a closer look.

The antithetical moment actually arrived in the form of Sonic Youth's support act on the final night: Descension, a combination of the 'noise terrorist' guitar/drum duo Ascension and the 'jazz-players,' Simon Fell (bass) and Charlie Wharf (soprano sax). Definitions need to be hedged in quotes because what Descensioners play has not settled into the known quantity that makes regular musical life such a tedious reflection of undialectical Kantian categories. Once in the door, the 2,500-strong sell-out crowd packed itself to the front, teen spirit insisting that no-one relinquish their 'close-to-the-stage' spot, no matter how ghastly the support band (or how urgent the need for a pee). The opening band played predictably 'aggressive' folk-punk numbers and were applauded politely.

Descension's four members strolled onstage and went straight into a thirty-minute wall of delirious post-Coltrane Noise. I heard Duke Ellington's overarching pulse in their visceral propulsion, but this was a minority reaction.

Cans and plastic cups rained on the musicians throughout. Guitarist Stefan Jaworzyn especially enraged the trapped Youthies, who began aiming drinks at him, creating a dangerous pool around his leads. A roadie risked electrocution to lift a socket-board onto a towel. Drummer Tony Irving identified someone who'd hit him with a plastic beaker. He came out out from behind his kit and drummed on her head with his sticks. She insisted on clambering up onto the stage; the crowd roared. Some roadies were raised from torpor and a brief struggle ensued. Leaflets showered down from the balconies. The conflictive caterwaul of Free Jazz laced the altercation of the crowd into an epic Gordian knot of convulsive sonics.

Having only witnessed these musicians in small venues (Disobey Upstairs at the Garage, a crèche in Walthamstow and a horrible gymnasium in Leeds), I was taken aback by the detail and gory complexity of the sounds. With their amplifications free to move in an Odeon-sized air-space, Descension developed a garish grandeur. They were total negative/utopian rock-'n'-roll. Everyone was upset. Even better, everyone made something different of why: no two identifications of style or genre tally. Something happened, but none of us knew quite what. We'd changed. The chrome rabbit of Modern Art had been pulled from the rock-rigmarole wig-hat. Descension's music had become a material pivot for discourse.

In the intermission Thurston bounded up to Descension's dressing-room: "Gee! Is that was the Pistols were like?" Having had the fortune to see both, I can only pronounce that Descension were, if anything, better. At the Royal Links Pavilion in Cromer in 1977, the Pistols were great, but they were a supreme rock machine (those who maintain that Cook/Jones 'couldn't play' are deaf). As McLaren perceived, the Pistols meant more when banned and imagined, than in the flesh. With Descension, positive noise could embrace the paradoxes of denial and erupt stinky black mushrooms of speculation. After this wipe-out, Sonic Youth couldn't but sound fey, their adherence to song structures ridiculously cute and conformist. The formal calculation—artistic and economic—necessary for a record-promoting tour was perfectly symbolised by the party-time polka-dots of their computer-assisted lightshow: the pop-art prettiness of a late Lichtenstein print. Their much-heralded ten-minute guitar freak-out exposed them as cerebral celibates, too New Wave to indulge Jaworzyn's appalling motor-rev straight-to-the-loins innuendo.

Free Improvisation is the ongoing, practical training-ground that enabled Descension to strip bare the pop charade. But the event also depended on a conjuncture of ambitions: Ascension's rock

dreams and Sonic Youth's art perversity. Shot out of the pub-upstairs ghetto of Improvisation, where form chases itself in circles, deprived of social content, the event had the 'utopian broadcast' quality of a performance by Coltrane or Hendrix. Deprived of the media forces that could identify with this shock (no NME reviewer with the wit to report it), it remains an ambiguous curse, an underground rumour.

Sonic Youth showed that the 'end of the avant-garde'—the belief that artistic developments can no longer turn antithetical to the commodity system that produced them—is a consoling fantasy peddled by professors.⁵ As politically inspirational as The KLF's sheep at the Brit Awards, Descension's music—material movement of air molecules—proved that the generic distinctions between rock (Hendrix/Pistols), jazz (Coltrane) and classical (Varèse) are products of class niche-marketing rather than divisions intrinsic to musical form. All the 'category defying' promises (every one broken) of the South Bank brochures were suddenly enacted in real social space: one where psyches are capable of change.

Neither the commodified protest of Rage Against the Machine nor the status-flattering metropolitanism of Ambient, Descension went nude down the star-system staircase and delivered an immanent critique of rebel-rock 'extremism': antithetical dissension in the Temple of Grunge (even their name proved polysemantic). Free Improvisation woke up to its own outrage, its sedimented content exploding into shrapnel; pop's spectacle of indulgence was interrupted by a social exhibition of the self's own wants. The sonic potential was handed to the attendees to do with what they can—and what they will.

1. Sigmund Freud, 1910, *Collected Papers*, vol iv, London: Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 184-191.

2. Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Notebooks, 1933-1935*, translated Philip Pomper, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 89.

3. V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism & the Philosophy of Language*, 1929, translated Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 80.

4. A complaint from some brain-dead Kantians at a recent conference (Discipline, October Gallery, London WC1, Saturday 30 November 1996) was that a definition of the Avantgarde as something both produced by capitalism and antagonistic to it was 'contradictory'; we can only reply, with Marx: 'If, therefore, such expressions ... appear contradictory, this is only because they bring to the surface a contradiction immanent in capitalist production.', Karl Marx, *Capital*, 1867, translated D. Moore and E. Aveling, New York: The Modern Library, 1906, p. 238.

5. For unconscious attestation of the Kantian nature of both commercial pop and its academic crumb-suckers, see Simon Frith, *Performing Rites*, Oxford: OUP, p. 152.

6. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 121.

clicking in

Robert H. King reflects on the New Visions Interactive Gallery

WITH TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPING around us at a frantic pace it would appear that the future of multimedia is up for grabs. The music industry in particular is all over 'interactive entertainment' like crows hovering over roadside (information superhighway?) carrion. The search or rather battle to develop and market the dominant format gathers speed daily. CD-I, CD-ROM, Enhanced CD: the choice of hardware and of software titles are confusing the public. A recent survey found that 40% of people who own CD-ROM drives don't use them and 54% do not intend to purchase new titles in the near future.

A large amount of major CD-ROMs add very little in the way of interactivity and could easily be mistaken for videos. Enhanced CDs are compact discs that contain both audio and visual material, allowing those without the luxury

of the necessary hardware to be able to listen to the music. The sales pitch is obvious—you buy the CD and the multimedia is a 'bonus'. For a large majority of these Enhanced CDs the 'add-on bonus' is invariably a collection of stuttering Quicktime video clips, some soundbites, back catalogue promotion and usually amount to nothing more than digital sleeve-notes, all that 'cutting edge' (to paraphrase the writer Stewart Brand) is "a knife that's all blade and no handle".

At New Visions we feel that it has become more apparent than ever that there is a real need for more artist led projects that challenge conventional notions of interactive media. With this in mind it was decided to stage a CD-ROM gallery (for one week during the New Visions Festival), Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art was the setting.

As the 'curator' for this event I felt it was important that my personal preferences should not dictate what would be on offer to the general public and as such the various titles that were available for viewing had been submitted in response to a random mailing to companies producing multimedia. As a result the gallery offered an eclectic range of material that proved to be as equally 'popular' with children as with the 'Techies' drawn to the starkly lit and noisy basement 'Fire' Gallery.

What follows is an overview of several of the submissions that (in keeping with the random submission process) appear here as they were amongst the ones that the public returned to time and again over the week long installation.

The more interactive and 'real' a package seems, the more a sense of 'presence' is generated by the medium. However, if this is strayed from then the less likely a user is to return to the CD-ROM. Children in

particular are more willing to suspend disbelief with on-screen 'stories' whilst adults are invariably dissatisfied with the artificiality of it all. An excellent work that engaged everyone's sense of play (regardless of age) is **The Toybox**, commissioned by Moviola/Video Positive (Liverpool), it is an anthology of small scale interactive works by 20 artists on the theme of a dig-

ital toybox. These range from the profound to the frivolous. 'The Perfect Journey' by Nina Pope is a wonderfully put together piece of social commentary: clicking on an item (house, bridge...) turns any one of the many peaceful scenes into some sprawling industrial landscape, whilst 'Sex Toy' from 'F' entices you to pick your vice (group, solo, other...) and to peek behind the curtain and once inside you can never find your way out. Sex Toy was the one most people clicked on (again regardless of age). There is a refreshing amount of contributions from women artists (something of a rarity) and most importantly of all this is fun to use and actively encourages your participation, in

fact nothing works until you do something with it.

Of Monsters and Miracles is an absolute delight to wade through. This CD-ROM is a voyage into the world of weird phenomenon and was originally created as an interactive guide for an exhibition of the same name that explored the worlds of 'Fortean'. It is a thoroughly engaging collection of over two hundred stills, over one hundred navigable objects and over two hours of video commentary and footage. The screens and guiding objects are intuitive (there are no instructions) and you are at once made to feel comfortable in your journey into the realms of: UFOs, sea monsters, poltergeists, psychic questing, crop circles, stigmata, fakes and frauds and a Pandora's box of strangeness. There is so much within 'Of Monsters and Miracles' that I found visitors to the gallery coming back for further exploration.

The enhanced CD that is **Header** fuses the very best of club culture with innovative multimedia. The exclusive music covers drum 'n' bass, rap, techno, hip hop and experimentation from 4 Hero, Carl Craig and Derrick Carter (amongst others) whilst the stunning visuals include contributions from A Guy Called Gerald, Horace Andy, James Lavelle, King Tubby and a whole host more. The graphics form an intuitive interface that make it pleasing to the eye and easy to use. Header has broken all conventions of on-screen design and it pays off in a big way. People like noise and colour and with this installed on a Power Macintosh in

a dark corner the public were drawn to the sounds of the digital soundtrack scratching its way out through the screen. The standard turntable, mixers and faders have been (thankfully) replaced with a more appealing abstract and heuristic approach, dragging the mouse over any of the elements on display triggers a sound sample in the form of a drum loop, vocal strains or a keyboard drone. Further dragging and clicking allows the user to mix their own tracks, dropping elements in and out at will. Each section features a fresh interface that maintains its useability. Feedback from those dipping into Header showed that even if they were not particularly interested in reggae or techno they still found it entertaining and stimulating.

It's not a videogame, it's not a music CD, it's not MTV, it's not a music video, it is **frEQuency** from Modified. frEQuency comes at you at 100 miles per hour, there are no clear and logical rules, sit back and let it burn or attack it with a vengeance. Billing itself as the 'Fuzzy groove' the logical development of 80s scratch (video and music) and beyond, this barrage of innovative visual design gives you music and video you can alter and enhance. Pliable, approximate, leaving the linear behind as it speeds off into a future where nothing will ever be the same twice. The instruction booklet is deliberately minimal thus forcing you to explore and immerse yourself in a sea of audio visual information that's your's for the taking.



The interface is laid out like a Bladerunner-esque control console allowing you to access the on board sights and sounds or to import your own to be cut and spliced into new fragments of ambient, techno, jungle or trance. Modified have taken all of this one stage further by linking it to their Website where you can download new information bites and upload your own creations to be download by someone else to be uploaded. This has got to be a world first. frEQuency demands your attention, I defy anyone to cruise the

contents and not return to it later. It's like a virus, the snatches of music and video get inside your mind and pretty soon you're thinking of new ways to present it.

Graham Harwood is perhaps best known for his incisive graphics that were an integral part of that most cutting of publications the excellent 'Underground'. Presenting himself here as 'Harwood' he has with produced a disturbing and fascinating work in **Rehearsal of Memory**. The aim of this piece was to work with a group of people from Ashworth a High

Security Mental Hospital to produce an interactive programme embodying the life experience of those involved. This is manifested in the form of an anonymous computer personality made up of the collective experience of the group. Ashworth Hospital is located in the north of England near Liverpool and is home and prison to people who are a danger to themselves or to people outside the hospital. The group of patients he worked with ranged from serial killers to rapists, potential suicides and casualties of the excesses of society. The staff he worked with included psychiatric nurses of twenty years experience and orderlies. To quote Harwood: "This artwork is about the recording of the life experiences of the client group that are a mirror to ourselves ("normal society") and our amnesia when confronted with the excesses of our society. This forgetting is a dark shadow cast by plenty, a nightmare for some that constructs misinformation and fear about insanity, violence and victims. This mental space is occupied by the psycho, the nutter, the mad dog and Bedlam; this is the space where strong fictions lie and invisibly glue together the mirror from which we view our own sanity." This was quite possibly the most challenging work on display. Its stark duotone images of faces, feet, penises and numerous

body parts combined with text and audio material that spoke of poverty, sexual horrors, childhood memories of abuse and watching mothers commit sui-



cide, leave one feeling uneasy, uncomfortable but vicariously drawn to their stories. Indeed this is how it worked for the week it was on display. Visitors would nervously approach the computer with its muffled voices behind the words 'queer scum' click on the mouse and recoil as they were presented with the contorted face of the anonymous offender, only to return minutes later to push themselves just a little bit further. Sadly however I feel that this kind of work will prove too difficult for a mass audience (for sales), but placed within the gallery space it will help to encourage the idea that there is more to the future of interactive media than the truckloads of rock dinosaur titles that pollute the stores.

I am heartened to see that more and more clubs and galleries are fostering the idea of CD-ROM/interactive spaces and actively encouraging the works that occupy the outer (and more relevant) areas of this new medium. Towards the new digital aesthetic!

Contacts

Robert H. King email: rkh@sbcshend.demon.co.uk

Header 34-35 Dean St, London W1V 5AP.

email: header@tui.co.uk

internet: http://www.tui.co.uk/header

frEQuency / Modified Queen Anne House, 11 Charlotte St, Bath BA1 2NE. internet: http://www.modified.com

Rehearsal of Memory Bookworks, 19 Holywell Row, London EC2A 4JB. email: jr@bookworks.demon.co.uk

The Toybox Moviola, Bluecoat Chambers, School Lane, Liverpool L1 3BX. email: moviola@cityscape.co.uk





These images are from *What's Your Story*, an installation organised by Street Level Gallery, set in Glasgow's Central Station, which focussed on the issue of homelessness.