

# Get a Fucking Job

## The Truth about Begging

A critical, but solidary review  
by a member of New Social Art School

Aberdeen is one of the wealthiest cities in Scotland with an average income 5% above the national.<sup>1</sup> This however hides the greater disparity in income and circumstances on the ground – a happy few are better off than a large number can even begin to imagine. Conversely, some are more destitute than we like to acknowledge. According to the same data, provided on the Aberdeen City Council homepage from a survey of 2005, 18% of households are living below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> Investigating the situation of beggars in the city, Danish artist Eva Merz's book 'Get a Fucking Job' explores the lives of some of those on the have-not side of this great divide.

### Ban the Beggars

The result of a year-long, slow and considered approach to many of the people on the streets, the book 'Get a Fucking Job: The Truth About Begging' consists of a collection of conversations with 13 beggars, former beggars, relatives and support workers. The starting point for the project was a campaign carried predominantly by the region's two main newspapers, *The Aberdeen Press & Journal* and the *Evening Express*, calling for a ban of begging in late 2004 – about a year after begging had become an offence in England. While the media purported to speak for Aberdeen citizens, their outcry supported ongoing ambitions within Aberdeen City Council. In September 2004 at the City's Community Services Committee a report on Street Begging by the Council's Safer Aberdeen task group recommended, among other measures to be undertaken in a 12-month pilot scheme, the introduction of a byelaw which would make street begging unlawful in the city. This was a response to a "perceived increase in the levels of overall street begging and aggressive begging".<sup>3</sup>

Following the launch of this pilot a 'Safer

Aberdeen Sub-group on Street Begging' was formed. The group is made up of staff from various Social Works departments of the City Council, the local voluntary organisation Aberdeen Cyrenians, Grampian Police, and NHS Grampian. In a progress report on the Pilot Street Begging Initiative in January 2006, after the scheme had run for 12 months, an extension of 6 months was recommended. The overarching goal of these measures is the absence of any beggars in the streets, although it is acknowledged that "there is evidence to suggest that where individuals give up street begging, others will take their place." The group's own report goes on to acknowledge that there is a lack of resources both to administrate the scheme and to provide support to beggars. The report also returns to the proposed byelaw and the negative response from the Scottish Executive in June 2005, which recommends the use of existing legal force in the form of Antisocial Behaviour Orders (ASBOS). Interestingly, the restated need for the byelaw in the 2006 report, responding to the Executive, now argues for the need to make begging unlawful in the following terms:

The reason for seeking approval for the Byelaw was to establish a means that could be used as an added incentive for people who have complex needs, who tend not to engage in aggressive begging and who are unwilling to engage with support services.<sup>4</sup>

The definition of aggressive begging given later in the report includes activities such as sitting in the proximity of a cash dispenser while asking for money. As Aberdeen City Councillor Neil Fletcher clarified in comments to the BBC: "We think a by-law is the only way we can remove these people from the centre of town."<sup>5</sup>

In contrast with the above-mentioned 'perceived increase' cited as the justification for criminalising begging, Grampian Police, as mentioned in the

January 2006 report itself, estimate, based on CCTV footage, that a relatively constant number of about 25 people beg in the city, mainly on the main shopping street and in its immediate vicinity. In the months following this progress report by the Council, the Scottish Executive has agreed to reconsider the proposed byelaw.

### Speaking for Themselves

When confronted with the demands for a 'begging ban' in the local press in autumn 2004, Merz decided to investigate the issue in an art project that clearly came down on the side of the beggars, and in particular countered claims made regarding their perceived wealth. As stated in the book's introduction, she wanted to find out what was really going on from the beggars' position and at the same time to allow them to speak for themselves. Merz founded The New Social Art School in 2004 as a framework for her work with others who then become 'members'. The 'school' is conceived as an open group for collective, informal learning through communication in various artistic projects focused on social issues. In this project Merz collaborated with Bob Steadman, an artist who had experienced homelessness himself. Interviews with both Merz and Steadman by Alejandra Rodriguez-Remedi aim to make the positions and relationships of the authors clear. In addition to Steadman's support, initial contact with beggars was provided through the voluntary organisation Aberdeen Cyrenians. Merz also approached beggars directly in the street, and went on to develop further contacts through them. The main underlying motive in the work emerges as that of understanding their perspective through an exploration of their position as they tell and live it. The appeal to the reader is that they develop their position, as it were, in retracing the experience of the artist into increasing understanding of the beggars' positions. The underlying aim of the project is to create empathy. Based on Merz's own identification with the viewpoints and experiences of those she speaks to, the reader is encouraged to feel what it is like to be a beggar.

Merz's interviews are interspersed with a series of black and white pencil drawings by Steadman, her collaborator on the project. Steadman's illustrations were made some time before his work with Merz, while living on the streets himself. In addition, he also made one print for the project. As an approach to art practice and in their visual imagery, the drawings are in tension with, while integrated into, the wider project. They represent a nightmarish, emotional and individual vision – fused shapes encompassing faces, figures, body parts. In contrast to the overall dialogic structure and focus on social interaction between people, theirs is an inner, isolated world. His new work for the book, an etching, represents the social world in symbols as a closed, impersonal system. His explanatory text – handwritten, underlining the authentic, personal expressiveness of his work – is a decoding of his personal inner world-view. In the publication, the drawings are also interpreted through an interview with Steadman. Their meaning emerges in their creation by someone who has himself been homeless as embodying his

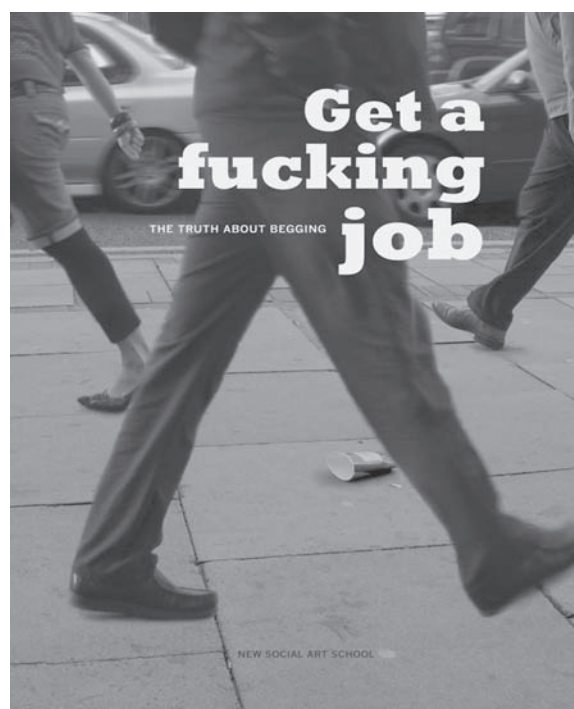


authentic expression and ultimate identity. Unlike her questions to Merz, in her discussion with Steadman, Rodriguez-Remedi remains caught up in a fascination with his background and creative expression is seen exclusively in relation to this. However, in the process of proximity, friendship and collaboration, Steadman's representation is – as far as anyone can be in control of this – based on his own intentions. Within the publication, his drawings stand in conflict with the publication's dominant mode of art practice – the research-based, conceptual work with our attendant aesthetic and ethical expectations. Whereas Merz develops an almost neutral, self-effacing visual presence, yet remains in control with her life beyond the project is not exposed, Steadman's drawings are pushed to represent his 'real' being as a 'street person.' Representing his unmediated, true expression, they also claim to reveal and stand for 'the truth about begging'.

## The Truth about Begging

The claim to a truthful portrayal of the authentic experience of the beggars is at the heart of the project. On a very basic level the book gives the beggars a voice to counter the media claims. Contrary to the claims of council and media, the beggars speaking in the book know plenty about support systems and have plenty of reasons why they are not adequate for them. The truth emerging in this respect is one of extremely limited resources offered, and those are in decline. The most salient example is the fate of the homeless shelters in Aberdeen, some of which were closed some years ago, but not replaced with other facilities, a situation that continues. Reprinted clippings from local newspapers and references to a critical report on the shortcomings of housing services in Aberdeen by Communities Scotland<sup>6</sup> lend further support to the claims of the beggars. The goal of 'Get a Fucking Job' is, however, not primarily the countering of data used by press and council with other facts, but to investigate the meaning of begging and what it is like to beg for those doing it. This is for Merz the truth of the beggars' perspectives, in their differences and individual struggles.

Yet the notion of 'speaking the truth' is obviously complex, as, on a basic level, the conversation develops in relation to the immediate situation, the relationship, including the respective social positions of those involved and their respective goals.<sup>7</sup> Hence Merz's efforts, to create a more equal situation, to meet the beggars as much as possible in the spaces of their choice and on their terms. In the range of printed interviews – all were agreed with those interviewed before publication – some clearly take pleasure in telling adventures while others are eager to present a 'reformed' identity. Many endeavour to set themselves apart from other beggars in the particularity of their own situation. It seems safe to assume that both Merz's own conjecture – which she attempts to clarify through the interviews and the conversation with Rodriguez-Remedi recounted in the book – and the roles beggars share when undertaking their activity, influenced the truth stated in 'Get a Fucking Job'. Merz's focus on individuals' perspectives produces room for understanding, rather than the focus on immediate solutions that dominate institutional surveys. As pointed out in Pierre Bourdieu's 'La misère du monde' such surveys, commissioned by government and voluntary agencies, fail to account for the complexity of their subjects' lived realities as the questions and manner of enquiry reduce the potential answers.<sup>8</sup> Their scope of enquiry is based on what is already pre-empted as worth knowing by the commissioning body, thus reducing the existence of the interview subjects as well as the scope for what can be said, and hence recorded and revealed.



## Singing with one Voice

The main focus of the interviews is the beggars' present existence. Their histories, as remembered and told by them, are as fragmented and individual as is their daily life and their struggle to get by. As Merz asks questions and enters the sphere of the beggars, her knowledge of their lives increases and similarities emerge between their stories. Rather than being outside of society, 'excluded', they very much play a role, they engage, however different their initial situations, personal tragedies, aspirations, and views are. Begging very much emerges as a job in itself. One of those portrayed, Zoe, significantly, describes the people who give money as "customers". All have a clear notion of the skills, the self-presentation required to attract money from passers-by. Begging clearly is part of public, even economic, life rather than outside of it. In this way, the 'truth' that emerges in their personal, daily experiences, reveals a reality of hard work and relationships with others that are suppressed in the official accounts of street begging as a threatening and alien presence in public space.

The main shopping street of Aberdeen, Union Street, and the adjacent shopping centre, is punctuated with banners spanning the width of the street displaying official images of the city. For the last few months, the message has been "Aberdeen – City and Shire. A Brighter Outlook". This new city brand cost the Council £150,000 from London-based consultant Corporate Edge. Although documents about the branding state its goal is to sell the region to consumers and business elsewhere, the dominating presence of the logo and message in the city centre can only reach local people. As with previous banner series in the same location, the message both labels the surrounding area and the people passing through, prescribing the correct vision of the city. Both this branding exercise and the desire to remove beggars from the streets are highly visible symptoms of the control of public space and the authorities' vision of their ideal city and citizen – Freedom Of Information requests reveal almost £5m over the past three years has been spent by the Council on external consultants. Documents in support of those two ostensibly very different measures both evoke economic benefit and unity amongst (ideal) members of the community.<sup>9</sup>

In his study of contemporary conflicts over urban spaces in the USA, the criminologist Jeff Ferrell describes the underlying issues in such measures:

In such landscapes [the public spaces of contemporary cities]...occupants know each other primarily as threats, understand each other mostly as objects of mutual distrust and surveillance – and so, with the social shut down, the expansion of control, the presence of a protective police state seems a reasonable and necessary option for ensuring 'community'. In such landscapes, the aesthetics of exclusion becomes aesthetics of authority; the policing of public space spawns a parallel policing of perception.<sup>10</sup>

Eva Merz's efforts to see her project featured in the local press or commented upon by Councillors

have, so far, met with determined silence. The book, however, has been selling well in local stores. With the imminent review of the begging ban and Merz's continuing relationships with beggars, the project of New Social Art School in Aberdeen is very much ongoing. Their next project, a film about the lives of those Merz and Steadman call the street people of Aberdeen, will aim to shift those limitations that keep us and the beggar in our professional roles by focusing on the imagination, dreams and hopes as well as the daily realities of her subjects, who are also, very often, her friends.

'Get a Fucking Job' by New Social Art School (ISBN 0-9543574-6) is available at various booksellers such as Fop and Waterstone's, Aberdeen; Wordpower, Edinburgh; and online at amazon.co.uk

## Footnotes

- 1 'Low Income Households in Aberdeen,' Aberdeen City Council, November 2005 [www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acci/web/files/Stats\\_Facts/LowIncome\\_aberdeencity.pdf](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acci/web/files/Stats_Facts/LowIncome_aberdeencity.pdf)  
While this is obviously a reductive use of data, the scope of this article lies not in the evaluation of statistics, with their differing provenance, aim, methodology and changing criteria.
- 2 'Low Income Households in Aberdeen,' Aberdeen City Council, November 2005 [www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acci/web/files/Stats\\_Facts/LowIncome\\_aberdeencity.pdf](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acci/web/files/Stats_Facts/LowIncome_aberdeencity.pdf)
- 3 'Pilot Street Begging Initiative – Progress Report', Community Services Committee, Aberdeen City Council, 31 January 2006, [www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acc\\_data/committee%20reports/cs\\_com\\_r8\\_4\\_060131.pdf](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acc_data/committee%20reports/cs_com_r8_4_060131.pdf)
- 4 See above [www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acc\\_data/committee%20reports/cs\\_com\\_r8\\_4\\_060131.pdf](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acc_data/committee%20reports/cs_com_r8_4_060131.pdf)
- 5 Aberdeen beg-ban law reconsidered, BBC News, Wednesday, 26 July 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/north\\_east/5216032.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/north_east/5216032.stm)
- 6 The report found homelessness provision in the city to be "poor". See 'Communities Scotland Inspection report. Aberdeen City Council. November 2005', Communities Scotland, [www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/ripics\\_011493.pdf](http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/ripics_011493.pdf)
- 7 In 'La misère du monde', Editions du Seuil, Paris 1993, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu sets out a methodology for interview situations based on an awareness of social hierarchies and the preconceptions of those involved, which raise issues relevant to the interview format of 'Get a Fucking Job'.
- 8 Pierre Bourdieu and others, 'La misère du monde', Editions du Seuil, Paris 1993, p. 928
- 9 See 'Why Brand Aberdeen City and Shire?', Aberdeenshire Council, [www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/support/city\\_shire.asp](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/support/city_shire.asp) (9 September 2006) and 'Pilot Street Begging Initiative – Progress Report', Community Services Committee, Aberdeen City Council, 31 January 2006, [www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acc\\_data/committee%20reports/cs\\_com\\_r8\\_4\\_060131.pdf](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acc_data/committee%20reports/cs_com_r8_4_060131.pdf)
- 10 Jeff Ferrell. 'Tearing Down the Streets. Adventures in Urban Anarchy'. Palgrave, New York 2001. p13-14