

Your place or mine?

THE FOLLOWING is an edited discussion, chaired by John Beagles between Martin Vincent, Andrew Brook, Janie Nicoll and David Wilkinson. All of the participants are artists who have been involved in organising exhibitions within domestic flats in various parts of Britain. Martin Vincent is part of the Manchester based duo Annual Programme, with Nick Crowe, who turned their homes into art galleries to show specially made work by another artist. Month by month, each artist took a turn at being host/curator, and then guest/exhibitor, in a form of 'chain exhibition'. Janie Nicoll, along with Karen Bauld, Marcia Lochhead and Nicola Cooper, organised 'Pretty Vacant', an exhibition in a 'To Let' tenement flat in Glasgow. David Wilkinson, along with Beta Veszely and Charles Esche, organised 'Wish you were here too', a large group show of Glasgow based and international artists, exhibited amongst the flotsam of his everyday living space, also in Glasgow. Andrew Brook organised and curated 'Smooth Operation', one of a series of ongoing exhibitions held in his flat in Dundee.

The intention of the discussion was to examine some of the differing reasons for organising 'flat shows', their recent popularity, especially in Scotland, and some of the issues associated with them.

John Beagles: Martin, what prompted your involvement or interest in putting on a 'flat show'?

Martin Vincent: We were trying to raise awareness within Manchester of what could be done and to raise awareness outside of Manchester of what was happening there. It was also about being artists and living in a particular place. We set up a series of critical relationships between artists, some of whom did not know each other when the project started out. It was an investigation of the whole idea of curating and exhibiting.

David Wilkinson: Part of my reason for doing 'Wish you were here too' was to look at the way that as artists you continually involve yourselves with other artists' work, this was really the idea of the show. Firstly we asked artists if they would like to show with us, then, as it was impossible to visit everyone, we asked them

to send all the pieces of work to us. We explained what space was available and exchanged ideas about possible spots for the work; they'd say they'd like the piece to be by the bed etc. These quite complex relationships were set up and allowed to exist. We didn't try to control that, and in the end these relations became what was most interesting.

JB: How do you think your show 'Pretty Vacant' differed from 'Wish you were here too' Janie?

Janie Nicoll: I think we felt we were doing it very much off our own backs, with very little time or money, which is why we simply advertised the event locally with fliers. The show was on for a relatively short period of time. We kept the space as it was, as a vacated flat, with all the remnants of previous tenants that go with that. We were interested in showing in a domestic space as a lot of the work concerned itself with that environment. The whole thing was very informal, small scale, with mainly friends turning up.

JB: Andrew what caused you to organise 'Smooth Operation'?

Andrew Brook: I'd been involved with the art community in Glasgow, then I went back to Dundee to work. The difference was striking. Apart from the exhibitions in the college and the print makers workshop, there's really nothing else, as far as showing work is concerned. Initially my motives were purely selfish. I wanted to show my own work, what I was doing in Dundee, and there was no way of doing it. I carried on in that vein in the sense that I decided I would organise other people and that I would curate, having control and power, over how it was shaped. I didn't feel I was tapping into ego mania by dictating all this, because it was our flat.

JB: In the late 80s, early 90s warehouse shows were the preferred way of attracting the attention of the 'big boys', now it seems flat shows have replaced them as a way of flexing curatorial muscles. Do you see the flat show as a strategic move, as a stepping stone to bigger and better things, or are you interested in it as more low key, informal way of showing work?

MV: I don't believe you think about it in those ways, at

least not in advance. What we were doing was just trying to work things through. We'd invite a few good artists, put on a series of good shows, and just go like that. The only way that it was a strategy, was that we didn't feel there were any other options. If we didn't do anything nobody else was going to.

AB: I agree. I never thought about that until someone turned round and said "Oh you're the curator". Just because I'd phoned a few people up and asked them if they'd send me some work, that suddenly made me a curator. Having said that I did advertise the show in the Guardian and the Observer, and I was aware that the whole thing could blossom into something else. But with reference to the question of using the flat show as a stepping stone, I think it's different in Scotland, because there isn't the market for contemporary art. People don't expect buyers to turn up.

DW: Warehouse and shop spaces don't seem interesting anymore, so even from a conceptual point of view they've been ruled out.

JB: When you were organising the show, did you decide you were going to try and make the flat look like a gallery space or did you just place work amongst the other items in the flat?

AB: Well my flat's very basic, I've not got that much stuff and it kind of looks like a gallery anyway. Also, I didn't want people rifling through my record collection.

JN: It was a different situation for us, regarding the work and its context. The flat we consciously chose wasn't totally empty and obviously had a history to it, a feel about it. We were interested in our work relating to and working with these elements. And, while citing the 'domestic', we were still very much aware that it was framed in an art context.

JB: One of the problems about doing a show in your flat, is that people not familiar with 'art' are going to be quite intimidated by visiting someone's flat. I mean it can be bad enough visiting a private gallery where you make an appointment, but with a flat it seems worse.

DW: Well I was quite surprised, I didn't expect a lot of people to come, but I can honestly say a lot did. I saw a lot of people I'd never clapped eyes on before. Maybe



not advertising it as a flat show helped.

MV: I think that does help. We didn't advertise any of the shows as flat shows either. Everyone called their house by a name of their own choosing, my house became the 'Gallery of the Glorious 22nd February' for example. We thought it would be good if people in say, New York, might have no idea that the space was any different from Chisenhale. Also going back to the question about audiences, I think a lot of initiatives to try and attract new audiences end up being really patronising, even insulting: suggesting that people are only interested in entertainment and therefore art has to be presented as such. We didn't expect people who don't usually attend galleries to come, most of those who turned up were people we knew, but saying that, if only three people who don't normally go to galleries did, that's encouraging.

JB: Getting out of the gallery could also be read as getting away from all the problems of accessibility associated with showing contemporary art in a publicly funded space. This seems especially the case in Glasgow, where the pressure to popularise art has obviously resulted in the kind of tokenistic gestures Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art markets and the ill conceived attempts to reach a wider audience of the "Trust" show at Tramway. Do you think the recent interest in flat shows has been partly to do with retreating from these difficulties, and exhibiting to a smaller, known constituency?

DW: Well in some ways you don't want any of the hassles. Doing the flat show was a way of creating a space that, as artists, we could direct more freely.

AB: I never thought of applying for Arts Council or City Council money, mainly because I never thought the show would need that much. I thought, why do I need to manoeuvre through bureaucracy to set this up. It would be better if everyone involved just chipped in, then it could be done more simply.

DW: There's a growing gulf between artists and administrators these days. The more this kind of bureaucracy retracts itself and becomes a kind of desk tied facilitator, then the less contact it has with the art and the artists, so at the end of the day the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. The prob-

lem is that projects that might look good on paper might get precedent over other things which don't read so well, but could be fantastic. There's a problem if people in these positions don't know what's going on. You've got to have a working relationship with things to understand them.

JB: That does seem to be the case. What we've got now is a proposal culture where things which work well as typed paragraph, as a neat tidy package which can be digested easily and of necessity quickly, get the cash.

MV: I think we're in danger of really polarising the funding situation into 'them and us'. There's a tendency of regarding funding bodies as a homogeneous group, and the danger of believing that all artists have the same interests and concerns, when this is not necessarily the case. In any one organisation there are some individuals that are more sympathetic than others.

JB: No, I'm not interested in occupying a position of self imposed exile. You can't pretend that you work completely outside of these bodies.

DW: I mean, if 'they' want to formulate an effective funding policy 'they' have to know what's going on, and the only way they are going to do this is by listening, looking and creating forums where questions and discussion can exist. I don't think anybody wants to be completely isolated from these people, that's the whole point.

AB: While I agree that no one wants to be too insular or separated, I do however like the whole punk aspect of doing your own shows. It's your thing and no one can dictate how it goes. You don't have to respect the power of the establishment.

JN: Dave, how do you relate to that? People have said that your show featured a lot of artists who are very

successful and established and who have plenty of opportunity to show.

DW: Well yeah, there were people who were well known, but there were also people who weren't that well known. You have to balance these sort of things out. If it was just all people who weren't well known there wouldn't have been the same interest, which is after all what you want. It was funny, we got a request for a catalogue from the Museum of Modern Art in Sweden and we did actually sell two pieces of work to the Arts Council of England.

JB: What good has come from doing this for you, Martin?

MV: In Manchester it was a very studio based practice, people making paintings, piling them up against the wall, and then sending slides off to get shows. People seem less interested in doing that now, instead what you do is organise a show and make the work for it. My own practice has changed as much as anything else during this period. Our shows have contributed towards changing this climate, we have made a difference, but it's not all down to us.

DW: Have you had any reaction from the establishment in Manchester?

MV: Yeah, they like it. I think they're impressed. I mean it makes Manchester look like a good place to be right now.