

Art, politics and provincialism

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The Sunday afternoon I visited the recent ‘Protest & Survive’ exhibition at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, I was witness within a period of twenty minutes to four different demonstrations outside the gallery. A single demonstration outside a gallery these days is pretty rare; four is a miracle. That they should all occur around the same time, therefore, was not fortuitous – news had spread that something was going to happen, so others decided to join in. However, the different forms these demonstrations took produced an extraordinary snapshot of the complex mediations of art and politics in the current period. Veiling, ventriloquism and self-irony met and confused and embraced the actuality of ‘first-order’ commitments.

The first and most prominent demonstration was the reconstruction of Endre Tót’s 1976 street action TóTaLJOYS from ‘Protest & Survive’, by the two organizers of the show, Paul Noble and Matthew Higgs. A banner proclaiming ‘I’m glad if this can hang on my neck’ was propped up on the pavement outside the gallery, while Higgs held a placard which read, ‘I’m glad if I can hold this in my hand.’ Joining them was a group of staff from the School of Art, Design and Media at the University of Portsmouth, protesting against the impending draconian cuts in the school and calling for a teach-in at the university. On the other side was a group of activists protesting against the closure of the library next door to the Whitechapel Gallery, into which the Whitechapel is planning to expand. One of the group’s placards read, ‘This is no fake art demo’. The idea of trying to prevent your demo being confused with an ‘art event’ is clearly a good idea these days if you are demonstrating outside an art gallery, but what the placard failed to take account of was how the group’s very ironization of its own commitment rendered it susceptible to its subsumption under the category of art. It took me a while to work out whether they were actually protesting the closure, or a group of artists performing such a protest in protest against such a loss of distinction.

The Tót demonstration soon wandered off up Brick Lane followed by a few art-world ambulance-chasers, leaving the two activist groups to hand out their leaflets and watch the Sunday morning shoppers and gallery-goers walk on by. This more familiar scene of leafleting and restitution of a kind of public ‘invisibility’ for the two groups was broken by the arrival of the Art Tendency Against Capitalism (ATAC), fresh from the anti-capitalist actions in Prague. Walking in formation up Whitechapel High Street dressed in eighties-style all-white nuclear-industry jumpsuits and masks, they arrived to inject the scene with the *frisson* of guerrilla street theatre and the threat of possible physical confrontation. In this they offered no apology for the ambiguity of their collective appearance – that is, this was a political intervention that, far from being worried about its loss of identity through its confusion with the art event, took its performativity as central to its politics. This was reflected, in particular, in the kind of leaflet they handed out. Their prose was more avant-gardist manifesto than propagandizing pam-

phlet; and each leaflet was pasted onto a section torn from the *Financial Times*, giving it a contemporary neo-conceptual appeal. 'Nostalgia is a pointless idea and a purposeless act. Now is the time to protest. Without protest there will be no Survival.'

Such forms of ironization, self-consciousness and performativity have set out to problematize the public language of socialist and radical commitment for over a



century. Indeed, the history of modernism is the history of its attempted contamination and transformation on the part of artists of the languages of propaganda and activism. ATAC are no different in this respect than many other artist-led or cultural-worker groups over the last forty years and beyond. However, what is interesting about this convocation of voices outside the Whitechapel is not that it points to how the boundaries between the art event

and political protest has a history long embedded in modernism's relationship to the Left, but that forms of performativity are being played out within and across the political at present that are transforming the limits of politics in art and the way artists in politics see their relationship to politics. The fact that the anti-library closure protest felt it needed to distinguish itself from any confusion with the art event is a profound reflection of the way that the political is assumed now to be either subsumed by the cultural or defeated by it at a more fundamental level, just as ATAC's taking on the mode of street theatre as part of a broader anti-capitalist movement is evidence of a wider process of culturalization within left politics – a culturalization that is deeper and more fundamental than the debates on representation, pleasure and the popular of the 1980s, or even the radicalisms of the 1960s. This is why it is not that hard to connect what was happening outside the Whitechapel with what was going on in the 'Protest & Survive' exhibition itself.

Fuzzy

'Protest & Survive' is a show that is claimed by its organizers to reinstate the 'political' in a period in which art – in Britain, at least – has supposedly left politics behind in favour of insouciant neo-conceptual game-playing. In an interview in the *Independent on Sunday* published after the show opened, Higgs insisted that younger artists these days would rather get on a coach to visit an out-of-town shopping centre than to support the miners (or any other group of workers). This may be so, but, as the choice of the Tót action suggests, the organizers themselves are perhaps not so uncomfortable with game-playing-as-politics. This would go some way to explaining the popular counter-cultural focus of the show. The commitment to politics is something that is largely identified from within the cultural and as such should be seen as no different from the wider processes of the culturalization of politics itself. This is why it is no surprise that the show is chiefly preoccupied with its own local art-world concerns: how its 'counter-

culturalism' sits in relation to the Young British Art's 'counter-culturalism', in order to open up some distance – though not too much distance, mind you – from these artists; and not with some durable and pertinent historical problems concerning the real limits and possibilities of politics in art, of the performative and the constative. The outcome is that the show's framework is inert and gestural, for all its recognition of some of the contemporary problems of doing politics and art. By this I mean that none of the critical machinery of politics in art of the last thirty years – praxis, negation, the commodity form, ideology, hegemony and the institution – is invoked or developed in any useful or historically productive way, as if getting too close to theory would somehow freeze thought or action.

Such reticence is, of course, standard for artists rightly worried about being thought of as intellectuals and politicians in an art world distrustful of both the artist-intellectual and politics. But I'm not too sure how the loose 'anarchist' stance of the show is any different from the platitudes of resistance within a number of other dominant and dissident art-world contexts. In fact the notion of politics as a protest is fuzzy enough to be indissociable from what you want it to be, including much of the YBA's neo-conceptualism. The claims for the political in 'Protest & Survive', then, are remarkably consistent with the broader 'post-political' culture of the moment, in which both social-democratic traditions on the Left and extra-parliamentary socialisms are seen as equally irrelevant or defeated and as such unusable for the utopian imaginaries of art. Thus, the defining work of the show is without doubt Thomas Hirschhorn's supra-gestural *Bridge*, a wooden passageway constructed to link the Whitechapel café to the anarchist bookstore Freedom Press next door to the gallery, which is obviously where the organizers would like each visitor to end up, suitably chastened. Given this, the regrouping of the very disparate artists in the show (Jo Spence, Tom of Finland, Mel Ramos, Dan Graham, David Hammons) into a kind of informal art brotherhood and sisterhood of 'protesters' is certainly consistent with the self-images of the moment.

For what marks out 'Protest & Survive' is its fundamental deflation of the representational and institutional problems of politics in art – the problem of realism and enunciation (the identification/disidentification with the other, as a dialogue with the other) and the problem of place and enunciation (the link between site and meaning in art) – in favour of a general enthusiasm for the return of art to 'life' and the artist's



unbounded 'energy'. This return of 'art to life', essentially, is the codification of a generation's antipathy to the administration of critique, and as such is little different from the moves made by the YBAs and much other contemporary art in the advanced Western democracies, fearful of the professionalization of critical theory. In this sense 'Protest & Survive' is part of a familiar watershed moment in art at the point of its globalization in the new millennium.

By distancing itself from the official postmodernist machinery of the critique of representation and the institution, 'Protest & Survive' lifts notions of 'protest', 'the everyday', and 'critique' out of history and ideology into an indeterminate realm of 'experimentation'. 'Our protest is for the survival of idea(l)s', says Higgs. The result is that the possibility of developing a critical framework in which the relationship between enunciation, negation and representation in art might hold on to a more *complex* and necessarily unstable relationship between the performative and the constative is overturned for a loose embrace between the performative and 'everyday life'. This is why, if what is actually defensible about 'Protest & Survive' is the turn it takes away from the voluntarism of recent art political theory (so prominent in 1970s art and social practice debates, and in 1980s critical postmodernism), what is problematic about the show's contextual voiding of the problems of representation and site (key to much of the better work in the show) is that the voice of political resistance is reconnected to the artist as abstractly creative and utopian. Politics is seen to be interesting only in so far as it is touched by the fluttering hands of the artist and curator, and not as part of collective social practice and experience.

The fear of the performative

The artist as political, rather than the artist in politics, might be seen as the substantive difference between 'Protest & Survive' and another show of politics in art which was staged in the same month in Britain (November 2000), 'Look Out', at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery. Organized by Peter Kennard, 'Look Out' in many respects represents the kind of exhibition that 'Protest & Survive' did not want to be, and that the Whitechapel and the metropolis did not want to see. (In fact, the Whitechapel turned the show down.) If 'Protest & Survive' positions itself within the confines of the contemporary art world, Kennard's exhibition sees itself as being proudly outside such concerns. But, of course, 'outside such concerns' is itself questionable, and reflects what is limited and equally constrained about 'Look Out'. Indeed, the show plays the politically traditional constative role to the performativity of 'Protest & Survive', but without fully recognizing how intertwined the constative (iconic) and performative (allegorical) are in the work of artists in both exhibitions. As Kennard argues in an interview with John Slyce in the accompanying publication, 'Look Out' is 'about a direct relationship with the political world and not merely about art'. Even if we only singled out those practitioners, such as the documentary photographer Jenny Matthews, as exemplary of this would-be 'directness', it would be hard to see how this describes the working practices of the majority of artists in 'Look Out' (Mona Hatoum, Stuart Brisley, Cornford & Cross for instance) and how politics in art finds its audience.

Presenting as abstract a notion of politics as that in 'Protest & Survive', Kennard plays up the notion of the show as bringing the 'truth' of the world 'out there' directly into the gallery in order to figure a notion of art as allowing 'people to look at their own lives'. The 'bringing-truth-out-there'-into-the-gallery approach to politics in art is, of course, a conventional social-democratic model of ideological appellation, which has been around since the 1950s and the development of the new museum system. The 'social content' of art – which gets moved around in the debate like a hulking great marble statue – is appealed to on the basis of its capacity to 'raise consciousness'. It was this model that underwrote the doleful 'Art for Society' show at the Whitechapel in

1978, when the dispute between realist painting and abstract painting was still casting its deathly shadow over the British art world, through the left of the Labour Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain.

What connects 'Art for Society' and 'Look Out' is the simplified notion that art lifts the 'veil' of ideology and connects people to the world. But what distinguishes 'Look Out' is, of course, the absence of anything approaching the cultural and political context of twenty years ago. Thus, notions of 'directness' and 'access' may still overdetermine claims on politics in the exhibition, but as Kennard himself says, the 'old questions of realism or not realism have been wiped away' – as has the political context in which this debate was formulated. Indeed, if 'Protest & Survive' mediates politics in art through the crisis of institutional critique after critical postmodernism, 'Look Out' attempts to mediate the crisis of the category of Political Art after the theorization of art as cultural practice and the rise of critical postmodernism. Kennard, then, is not wholly blind to the performative. He recognizes that the artists in the exhibition would not describe themselves as political artists or begin from anything resembling so undifferentiated a category as Political Art. But the performative functions in a similar way to the person on the anti-library closure demo holding the placard saying 'This is no fake art demo'. There is an obvious need to recognize the excess of meaning that art brings in its wake, but only in order to protect the constative from the performative. Because without the 'protection' of the constative from the performative, the honouring of the reality of exploitation and oppression is held to be weakened.

This fear of the performative is the aporia that circulates around the political in art, based as it is on its persistent misrecognition of the work of art's audience. Political art (as understood on the social-democratic model) assumes that those whom the art work is destined for (the fantasized working class) need art in as much as they need Ideas in order to understand capitalism and class society. There is a never a moment's recognition that people are already engaged in practices in the world which are critical and transformative. This might be described as the Rancièrian void at the heart of politics in art: that for all its liberatory claims the category Political Art in fact reinstates the inequality in bourgeois culture between those who supposedly know and those who supposedly don't know. As the British group Art & Language said in response to the 'Art for Society' show over twenty years ago: 'The real problem is not how to make art which is pro-working class and anti-bureaucratic but how to be pro-working class and anti-bureaucratic.' The alternative is a bit like the comedian Dom Joly in his sketch of a man walking along Oxford Street carrying a placard on which is written 'Thief' with an arrow pointing to his head. Two policemen run past and ignore him.