

# variant

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# contents

<b>Letters</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Comment</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Women still in Profile Social and Cultural Projects: Women's strategies in Glasgow</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>A Low Down Dirty Shame</b> Tom Jennings	<b>11</b>
<b>Letter from Palestine</b> Joyce Carmichael	<b>13</b>
<b>Documentary from No-man's Land 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' and Document 1</b> Doug Aubrey	<b>16</b>
<b>Evaluating the Social Impact of Participation in Arts Activities</b> A critical review of François Matarasso's <i>Use or Ornament?</i> Paola Merli	<b>18</b>
<b>Wasting Our Powers Away</b> Stephen Dawber	<b>23</b>
<b>Neither Great Nor Glorious</b> John Chalmers & Sandra Marrs	<b>25</b>

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# Letters

**'Video purified of television:  
On why video art wants to be boring',**

Beech & Beagles, Variant no. 18  
www.variant.org.uk/18texts/18videobore.html

**A response from Rachel Garfield and John Timberlake**

Despite some sympathy with their respective positions and practices, we thought the essay by John Beagles and Dave Beech, 'Video Purified of television; On why video art wants to be boring', made various errors and omissions, at times seeming to have been written in a partial vacuum (or perhaps derived from a single exhibition) which offers only a tendentious account of the histories of video and film, or for that matter the specificities of the current cultural moment. The exhortation for art to fail to be entertaining should have been located, not in Wollen but in Brecht, who argued that a critical distance was necessary for educating the masses towards a reflexive engagement rather than a passive consumption. Furthermore, that Matthew Higgs enjoyed *Rushmore* more than the Liverpool Biennale might say something about the Biennale and definitely something about Higgs, but little else. Long ago Art & Language laudably observed in response to the moans of Peter Fuller that arctic rations do not resemble haute cuisine.

So where do we start in responding to this? We re-affirm that film-making, at least as much as video making in Britain, is a site of contested claims to history which is still being fiercely fought out; there has been a consistent writing out of practices other than the structuralist and materialist films of the 1980s which the current exhibition at the Tate Britain, curated by Dave Curtis reveals. If Beech and Beagles deem video to be boring because of the official history then it is incumbent upon them to find the many other examples that exist and the writers that excavate and support less trumpeted versions of that history. But this would, in any case, be burning straw men. Any attempt to differentiate on the basis of class and power the formalist conceits of some video art from the popular pleasures of the televisual and cinematic has now to account for not only the gravitation of much managed fine art and its curation towards a more public and populist platform over the course of the past 10 years, but also the cultural ramifications of a decade or more in which a generation of artists have sought to engage with the vulgar pleasures of the popular, not as a marginal practice of negation but as an affirmative and legitimizing trope. We have in mind here a number of examples, from Pulp-videos-and-Blackcurrant-tango-ads as art at the ICA eight years ago to any number of Becks' Futures candidates. Yet Beech and Beagles fail to identify the importance of curators and policy shapers (what Jackie Hatfield calls the avant garde police) in what gets shown, documented and so remembered.

Video practice does indeed derive, in part, from Performance, and of course Expanded Cinema, but the breadth of this practise is not acknowledged by Beech and Beagles who see it all as merely 'glum earnestness'. By the same token, for every example of video art and film brought to bear to 'prove' its properties there are other examples to counter these points. For example, Chris Cunningham is not oppositional to TV and film; Isaac Julien, the Wilson twins et al aim for the sophistication of commercial film; William

Wegman's dogs are funny and would not look out of place on some reality TV shows, as (more interestingly for us) might Jonathon Horowitz. Jan Svankmeijer (to conflate film and video again) comes out a strange surreal practise that is hard to place within the trajectory set up by Beech and Beagles. All this is not to 'disprove' Beech and Beagles points but to say that (1) vague assertions are not a convincing tool for argument and that (2) video as a practise is subject to the criticisms and interpretations of any other practise. Not even the proponents of what Beech & Beagles term 'serious video art' would dispute that "It is more than a coincidence that [it] looks nothing like television": but that said precious little ground can be made here beyond that already established for a wide range of other forms of fine art practice in relation to what might be posited as some form of pop culture counterpart—Callum Innes' work, after all, doesn't look much like graffiti, and only bears tenuous links to those natty tricks with Dulux we've all seen on daytime telly. Problems arise in trying to dismiss formal trends by virtue of their inevitable transience yet inevitable re-emergence some time in the future—it might well be increasingly hard at the moment to shake the notion that video projection will come to be seen as a defining embarrassment—like shoulder pads and big hair in the '80s—not just for being there, but for being everywhere—yet to state this just at the point when a stroll into Top Shop shows that big hair, hot pink batwing sleeves and shoulder-pads might actually be de rigueur for a generation too young to remember the horrors of twenty years ago seems deliberately anachronistic. Not all video artists foreground form and technique in the way that Steve McQueen, for example, does. But



then Steve McQueen is as representative of video as Peter Halley, Thomas Ruff or Do Ho Suh are of painting, photography and sculpture respectively.

The point remains, which video practices are we talking about? It's symptomatic of Beech & Beagles' methodology that they embark on ascribing a genealogy stretching from Diderot to Fried to Wollen to glum performance (as if Late Capitalist culture really would respect Peter Wollen's right to some ideological law of inheritance, rather than re-inventing and re-territorialising to its own ends) rather than emphasizing contingency and interpellation as that which is of value in Wollen's position. Moreover, given the notorious extent to which the postulates of professional art-crit remain empirically underdetermined, we would question ascribing such genealogies in the first place at the level at which art objects are made to cohere within managed



culture. "If everybody has a video recorder...the argument goes, then video uses a 'language' everyone understands". But who does actually use this argument? It is not necessarily the medium that dictates the language. One could, for example, discern a pre-occupation with form and technique in any number of contemporary managed practices, from neo-minimalism to neo-conceptualism and so on, and obviously such practices bear no ideological relation to their eponymous 'geneological' antecedents. The demand for the 'good student' Beech & Beagles describe surely arises not from any need to proscribe dirty pleasures per se but from the need for a globally marketable—and trans-culturally negotiable—'universalism' defined by the tropes of hegemony. Hence the persistence of a kind of minimalism.

Alongside this anachronism and a touching pre-occupation with hygiene (we counted 11 implicit references to contagion, virginity and infection) there is the implicit attempt to differentiate video in terms of its ethical status: 'Video art's populism is bogus' being the most blunt. Well of course; populism generally is bogus, since it is founded upon the conceits and elisions of rhetorical façade, much like fascism of course, its party political cousin. "Like a politician that has crossed the house" Beech & Beagles go on, "video's position has to be continually questioned, it's honesty continually questioned." Again, a curious anachronism, in an age when politicians' dishonesty is simply taken as read, regardless of whether they do anything as dastardly as 'crossing the house' or merely starting a war. On the one hand we again wonder why should video art more than any other art be questioned, and on the other whether the questioning of the ethical status of video serves as the point of differentiation that the authors imagine. Whilst we fully accept that the conferment of legitimacy on video-as-fine-art form was late coming in terms of recognition by some art mags, this process has to be contextualised in relation to that particular milieu, rather than in relation to video's status vis a vis film, which the authors attempt. Yet by citing Wollen as a major influence when writing about Godard, Beech & Beagles simplistically differentiate various modes of production and consumption of film and video as if some sort of ethical claim is at stake across the board. Binaries are unhelpful generally and there was a lot more to film history of the 1970s than Wollen. Furthermore, we might include practitioners as diverse as Agnes Varda, Steve Dwoskin or Michael Winterbottom in a list of film practitioners who have transferred their practice to video technology without any discernable shift in their respective ethical claims. Yet again, when the authors turn to the question of editing: "Nowadays the

Jonathan Horowitz  
*The Jonathan Horowitz Show*, 2000.  
copyright the artist; courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Jonathan Horowitz  
*The Jonathan Horowitz Show*, 2000.  
copyright the artist; courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

**Letters**  
(continued)

edit isn't everything. In fact the edit usually counts less than character, dialogue [etc]." Such a point has to be qualified. In an era of endless special edition redux re-releases and Director's Cuts, one could just as easily argue that editing means more—and in box office and DVD revenue terms it certainly is more important than ever before. 'Counting less' or 'counting more' is swampy relativism, when all aspects of film making have changed since the Soviet pioneers, bless 'em. What is called for here is a materialist understanding of how and why the role of editing has changed, and how the commodification of editing is necessitated in Late Capitalist managed culture, when (of course) under Soviet rule it meant something else.

**'From Porridge to Pelf: Young Adam and the Mysterious Scottish Film Industry',**

Mike Small, Variant no. 18  
[www.variant.org.uk/18texts/18youngadam.html](http://www.variant.org.uk/18texts/18youngadam.html)

**A response from May Miles Thomas, Director, Elemental Films**

The Scottish Film Industry isn't nearly as mysterious as Mike Small would have us believe. The only mystery is why Variant was prepared to publish his poorly informed piece on Young Adam—less a cultural and economic analysis of Scottish film than another plug for a £4.5 million star vehicle distributed by US major, Warner Bros. This is not to deny David Mackenzie's long-cherished ambition to make Young Adam, nor the creative endeavour and achievement of its production, but an article seeking to criticise the public—or any other—film funding bodies should at the very least be factually accurate and offer substantive qualification in its argument; Mike Small's piece fails on both counts.

As one of the very few Scottish filmmakers to have made two feature films in Scotland, I consider myself well qualified to counter Small's assertions. That Scottish filmmakers are being denied access to "anything that falls outside the [UK and Scottish Film Bodies] world view" assumes that the UKFC and Scottish Screen have a world view to start with, or have adopted a cultural/commercial remit that seeks to exclude certain types of production. There's no evidence of this, just as there's no evidence of "increasing numbers of film-insiders" pointing the finger at the funders. Some films are funded, most are not. Such an unattributed and lax reproach is the stuff of tabloid hackdom, with no credence in terms of cultural criticism.

Public funding bodies are the softest of targets. A more relevant question is why do filmmakers need public subsidy when other creative industries rely wholly on private sector investment? Given that the majority finance of UK film production derives from tax shelter, industry and broadcast sources, the notion that public bodies wield influence is moot. Certainly within Scottish Screen, the issue of cultural relevance versus commercial ambition has never been addressed, let

alone resolved, and as long as this situation prevails, Scottish film—which I define as indigenous producers, writers and directors—will be what it always has been: an arbitrary process by which unpaid or low paid practitioners strive to produce films by any means necessary. That is not to say that the public service arbiters of Scottish film are without blame. They are also without cash, industry leverage and confidence. Neither can they put our films into distribution, something of a disadvantage when their declared remit is to "promote Scotland's filmmaking culture to the world."

A better example of how a difficult and socially relevant story was realised is my most recent film, *Solid Air*, (which like its 'Scottish' counterparts, *Young Adam*, *Afterlife*, *Wilbur*, *Four Eyes* and *16 Years of Alcohol*, also premiered at the 2003 EIFF). Based on my father's case, *Solid Air* deals with the plight of workers seeking compensation for asbestos-related disease. The film, produced for less than a quarter of *Young Adam*'s budget, may not have the cachet of literary provenance, or boast any 'name' talent, which possibly accounts for why the film has so far been buried by the media and ignored by its main investor, Scottish Screen. Mike Small rightly states that the viewer cares 'not a wrinkle' about how films are financed, but to suggest that *Young Adam* ought to have been financed and produced wholly within Scotland is an expression of breathtaking ignorance of how film finance operates. Scottish film has virtually no private investment, so at £4.5 million, *Young Adam* would have bled the public coffers dry at the expense of other, arguably more deserving productions. Besides, despite Ewan McGregor's public protests, he got his payday, *Young Adam* got made and the world turns.

There is no Scottish film industry: no private investment, no studio, no distributor, no sales agent, no film lab, no high-end post production facilities, no marketing company, no Dolby licensed sound studio. The sooner commentators grasp this reality, perhaps the sooner we can rid ourselves of the notion of Scotland as a viable filmmaking nation. Faced with this non-prospect, where do filmmakers go? Hell, even a long-dead self-lacerating junkie knew the answer to that.

May Miles Thomas  
[www.elementalfilms.co.uk](http://www.elementalfilms.co.uk)

**Mike Small responds**

I'm looking forward to May Miles Thomas's future articles in Variant on Scottish Film given that, in her own words: "There is no Scottish film industry: no private investment, no studio, no distributor, no sales agent, no film lab, no high-end post production facilities, no marketing company, no Dolby licensed sound studio. The sooner commentators grasp this reality, perhaps the sooner we can rid ourselves of the notion of Scotland as a viable filmmaking nation." Which, strangely, given her strangled response, is exactly my point.

May claims that: "...there's no evidence of



'increasing numbers of film-insiders' pointing the finger at the funders. Some films are funded, most are not." Before continuing, and by now really working up a head of steam, "Such an unattributed and lax reproach is the stuff of tabloid hackdom, with no credence in terms of cultural criticism."

Well I never claimed to have such a lofty aim as 'cultural criticism', but her argument falls down somewhat because I carefully attribute the criticisms being made, specifically by Tilda Swinton and Alex Cox amongst others. Maybe she didn't read the article? Meanwhile, the picture she paints of a happy-clappy Scottish-film-utopia seems a fantastic, if slightly preternatural description.

My point was really to compare the Scottish film community with the Scottish publishing industry and the wider arts culture. In terms of the publishing industry—until a few years ago, when Giles Gordon 'retired' from London, it boasted few literary agents, and a crumbling infrastructure. Now it has signs of perhaps a little more ambition (though it is interesting to note that with Gordon's death go his clients).

When May Thomas argues that: "To suggest that *Young Adam* ought to have been financed and produced wholly within Scotland is an expression of breathtaking ignorance of how film finance operates" I fear she has completed the task of re-writing my article far better than I possibly could have myself. A better example of a failure to see beyond the current limitations couldn't be found. Presumably, under this line of thinking, we shouldn't engage in anything that doesn't currently exist, or strive for anything more ambitious than pandering to our existing inadequacies. The purpose of a publication like *Variant* is not to look at 'what is' and say 'good'.

Finally, I'm not entirely sure what May is ranting about when she says: "That is not to say that the public service arbiters of Scottish film are without blame...they are also without cash, industry leverage and confidence...neither can they put our films into distribution, something of a disadvantage when their declared remit is to 'promote Scotland's filmmaking culture to the world'", given that that was, after all, the very point of my article.

Yours in Tabloid Hackdom, Mike Small

# Comment

"Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaption of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organizational requirements, and by people at higher levels who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centres of power."

## 'Manufacturing Consent', Chomsky. p. 300

"In the media, as in other major institutions, those who do not display the requisite values and perspectives will be regarded as 'irresponsible', 'ideological', or otherwise aberrant, and will tend to fall by the wayside. While there may be a few exceptions, the pattern is pervasive, and expected. Those who adapt, perhaps quite honestly, will then be free to express themselves with little managerial control, and they will be able to assert, accurately, that they perceive no pressures to conform. The media are indeed 'free'—for those who adopt the principles required for their 'social purpose'. There may be some who are simply corrupt, and who serve as 'errand boys' for state and other authority, but this is not the norm. We know from personal experience that many journalists are quite aware of the way the system operates, and utilize the occasional openings it affords to provide information and analysis that departs in some measure from the elite consensus, carefully shaping it so as to accommodate to required norms in a general way. But this degree of insight is surely not common. Rather, the norm is a belief that freedom prevails, which is true for those who have internalized the required values and perspectives."

## 'Manufacturing Consent', Chomsky. p. 304

An analysis piece in the *Guardian* by David Miller of Stirling University ('The domination effect', 8/1/04) succinctly spelt out the development of the US government's strategy during the Iraq conflict from managing the media for propaganda purposes to one of information dominance, where little distinction is made between propaganda and journalism; it is all seen as "weaponized information" to be deployed by the military command structure, part of achieving "full spectral dominance". Miller explains that it is not only domination of the media which is the focus, but also the denying, degrading and destroying of "unfriendly" media. To this end, the embedding of journalists within Iraq was a clear means of building up "friendly" information — an MoD commissioned analysis shows 90% of embeds' reporting was either "positive or neutral". Miller points to the setting-up of the Pentagon's TV service for Iraq, IMN; the shutting down of Iraqi-run newspapers, radio and TV stations; and the attacks on the independent TV network al-Jazeera's offices as evidence of the latter.

Having developed its embedding strategy in Iraq, it is now being carried through in the US itself.

James Ridgeway writes ('The Martial Plan: Police State Tactics Transform a Nation—Our Own' 24-30.12.03 <http://villagevoice.com/issues/0352/mondo1.php>) that "the most recent crack-down [in the US] seems to be on the foreign press—the source of much of the substantial critique of its policies.

"U.S. immigration authorities are detaining foreign correspondents on grounds they have not obtained special visas permitting them to operate here... There is a law stipulating a special visa for journalists, but few have ever heard of it and it is seldom enforced... No one ever told the visiting journalists it had suddenly been revived. As a result, immigration officials aren't allowing reporters from abroad to come in under ordinary 90-day tourist visa waivers. Peter Krobath, chief editor for the Austrian movie magazine *Skip*, was seized and held overnight... with 45 others who landed without visas... He is guilty of flying to the

U.S. to interview Ben Affleck. Thomas Sjoerup, a photographer for the Danish paper *Ekstra Bladet*, had to give the American authorities fingerprints, a mug shot, and a DNA sample, and was promptly sent back home anyway. Six French journalists were marched across a terminal at Los Angeles International Airport in handcuffs, having had their belts and shoelaces removed. The International Press Institute, based in Vienna, along with the International Federation of Journalists, headquartered in Brussels, is protesting this treatment."

Prior to such conspicuous censorship of international reporting, other assaults were taking place on independent media networks within the US.

During the week of demonstrations against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Miami, Nov. 19-22 2003, protesters were met with a massive show of state repression, backed by \$8.5 million in US Government funding. Police using batons, rubber and plastic bullets, pepper spray, tear gas and other chemical agents attacked demonstrators. Over 100 demonstrators were treated for injuries—2 hospitalized. There are estimates of more than 250 arrests. People have been denied access to attorneys, visitation rights, and access to essential medical attention.

In a Znet report by Jeremy Scahill on the Miami protests ('The Miami Model Paramilitaries, Embedded Journalists and Illegal Protests. Think This is Iraq? It's Your Country'), the producer and correspondent for Democracy Now!, recounts being stopped by a group of police cyclists. One of the 'police' had on a Miami police polo shirt, a Miami police bike helmet, the only detail that separated him from the others being a small badge around his neck identifying him as a reporter with the *Miami Herald*. That reporter was one of dozens who were embedded with the Miami forces during the protests. Scahill writes: "Watching the embedded journalists on Miami TV was quite entertaining. They spoke of venturing into Protesterland as though they were entering a secret al Qaeda headquarters in the mountains of Afghanistan. Interviews with protest leaders were sort of like the secret bin Laden tapes. There was something risqué, even sexy about having the courage to venture over to the convergence space (the epicenter of protest organizing at the FTAA) and the Independent Media Center. Several reporters told of brushes they had with 'the protesters'.

"...a colleague from Democracy Now!, Ana Nogueira, and I got separated in the mayhem. I was lucky to end up on the "safe" side of the street. Ana was in the melee. As she did her job—videotaping the action—Ana was wearing her press credentials in plain sight. As the police began handcuffing people, Ana told them she was a journalist. One of the officers said, "She's not with us, she's not with us," meaning that although Ana was clearly a journalist, she was not the friendly type. She was not embedded with the police and therefore had to be arrested. In police custody, the authorities made Ana remove her clothes because they were soaked with pepper spray. The police forced her to strip naked in front of male officers. Despite calls from Democracy Now!, the ACLU, lawyers and others protesting Ana's arrest and detention, she was held in a cockroach-filled jail cell until 3:30 am. She was only released after I posted a \$500 bond. Other independent journalists remained locked up for much longer and face serious charges, some of them felonies. In the end, Ana was charged with "failure to disperse." The real crime seems to be "failure to embed."



## Tramway Letter November 2003

Dear,

Bridget McConnell (head of Cultural & Leisure Services, Glasgow City Council) Graham Berry (Director, Scottish Arts Council) Frank McAveety (Minister of Culture, Scottish Parliament)

We are pleased to see that Scottish Ballet/Scottish Opera have responded to public opinion regarding their proposed takeover of Tramway and altered the terms of their Lottery bid so as to retain the visual arts space, Tramway2. However, while this change of heart is welcome it is not, in itself, a solution. It will only be made worthwhile as the beginning of a process of consultation and consideration that leads to a strategic commitment on the part of the City Council and the Scottish Arts Council. Any solution for the future of visual arts at Tramway must be well-supported, thought through and in place for the long term.

Glasgow has a major success on its hands, in the shape of what Tate Magazine recently called "the most vibrant, concentrated, successful group of artists in the world". Tramway, "one of the UK's most ground-breaking art spaces of the 90s" (*The Guardian*, 30/5/00) and "one of the leading contemporary visual and performing arts venues in Europe" (Glasgow City Council), has been instrumental in creating and supporting this success. It is a unique, free art space that offers the opportunity to engage with the best of new, local and international visual art, an engagement that is both a key part of contemporary cultural life and also now forms part of Glasgow's international identity.

Yet, currently, there is no clear strategy for the visual arts within Glasgow City Council, little coordination across the city or between the City Council and the Arts Council in respect of visual arts policy and priorities, and there has been no public or professional consultation regarding the Ballet/Opera proposal.

Tramway's Visual Arts Officer Alexia Holt remains suspended, apparently for simply bringing the existence of this Lottery bid to public attention. In the light of the decision to rethink this bid once the issues involved were publicly considered, it seems clear that conducting it in secret was a mistake and that Ms. Holt's suspension is unjustified and indefensible.

We draw attention to the recommendations made by the Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee in their Report on the Inquiry into Scottish Ballet, released November 2001. The Parliamentary Committee states, on the handling of the reorganisation of Scottish Ballet, that "the encouragement of wide

**Comment**  
(continued)

public consultation on issues of importance such as these is central to the Scottish Arts Council's role", and recommends to both Scottish Ballet and the SAC that "decisions should not be finalised until there has been a period of genuine consultation and debate and the Arts Council should insist upon such a period."

We believe that the SAC Lottery Capital Committee, made up of voluntary members, would be greatly assisted both by the existence of a genuine, in-depth consultation process and by the considered development of a visual arts strategy within Glasgow City Council, on the basis of which they might make an informed judgment - if indeed it should be their responsibility to do so.

The Lottery Capital Committee meets in January to make its decision. It seems possible that, due to the large amounts of money involved in the context of limited Lottery funds, a decision in favour of Scottish Ballet/Scottish Opera might well also see the proposed development of visual arts premises in King Street (and the ensuing improvement of provision offered by no less than eleven separate organisations) being cancelled due to lack of funds, an outcome that would also endanger Glasgow City Council's proposed strategy for the development of the Merchant City. Also, in the context of the revised Ballet/Opera bid, it has not been made clear why additional funding for a new build workshop is seen as the solution when other, perhaps more cost-effective, workshop spaces could be found in the city.

Meanwhile, the City Council has commissioned the consultants Bonnar Keenlyside to "identify options for the future development of Tramway", a positive move. Yet this review, itself Lottery funded, has no remit to consider the implications of the Ballet/Opera bid and would be made irrelevant if the bid is successful. We suggest that this review should look at all options that can develop Tramway2 as a major international gallery space offering public arts provision of the highest standard - integrated into a clear and well-supported cultural strategy.

We the undersigned represent artists, galleries, art schools, studio groups and other arts organisations across Scotland. We call for a genuine process of consultation and debate, leading to strategic action that takes into account all of the points made above. We believe that this is the time for intelligent, inclusive development to invest in and capitalise on what has been achieved so far.

We would like that process to bring together representatives of the arts community and Scottish Ballet/Scottish Opera, and officers of Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Arts Council as soon as is mutually convenient, certainly before the Lottery application in question is taken any further.

Yours sincerely,

Will Bradley: Board of Directors, The Modern Institute, Glasgow

Professor Klaus: Jung Head of School of Fine Art, Glasgow School of Art

Richard Calvoceossi: Director, Scottish National Galleries of Modern Art

Guyan Porter: President, Scottish Artists' Union

Nick Evans, Kate Davis, Charlie Hammond, Lotte Gertz and Jane Topping: Committee of Transmission Gallery, Glasgow

Graham McKenzie: Director, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow

Fiona Bradley: Director, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh

Toby Webster: Director, The Modern Institute, Glasgow

Mick Peter: Glasgow Project Room / Glasgow Independent Studios

Katrina Brown Curator: Dundee Contemporary Arts

Amy Sales and Lucy Gibson: EmergeD, Glasgow

Leigh French: Co-editor, Variant magazine

Lorraine Wilson: Co-ordinator, Glasgow Sculpture Studios

Malcolm Dickson: Director, Street Level Photoworks

Sam Ainsley: Head of Master of Fine Arts Course, Glasgow School of Art

Deidre McKenna: General Co-ordinator, Stills Gallery, Edinburgh

Paul Nesbitt: Director, Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Robb Mitchell: The Chateau, Glasgow

Sorcha Dallas and Marianne Greated: Switchspace, Glasgow

Susanna Beaumont: Director, Doggerfisher Gallery, Edinburgh

**Saving Private Tramway**

Whispers and rumours aside, the first confirmation that Scottish Ballet were putting in a Lottery bid to annex Tramway2 as a fabrication space was when Alexia Holt, Programmer at Tramway, confirmed the decision after requests from the media to do so. Having cleared it with her Glasgow City Council (GCC) overseers to talk to the press, she was subsequently 'locked out' of her office. Holt has now quit Tramway for pastures afresh, but her dedicated post of visual arts programmer has been axed.

The initial whipped-up reaction of a cluster of students and artists to the Ballet revelations wasn't much more than flailing, placard waving and T-shirt sloganeering at Tramway and the Gallery of Modern Art. This resulted in two artists who happened to be Tramway casual staff effectively being sacked—one had simply signed the above letter. (Glasgow School of Art were also told to 'back off' from the issue.)

Following pressure from press coverage of the Ballet's plans, there was a meeting between GCC Culture and Leisure Services Dept. and artists' representatives. It became clearer that GCC's prime concern lies in offloading the responsibility of maintenance of the building onto someone else—pretty much anyone it would seem—which the Ballet's bid would do.

GCC still have no Cultural Policy for the Visual Arts, despite this being a core requirement emanating from their Best Value Review of museums and galleries. Maybe that's a blessing in disguise.

I suppose writing a Cultural Policy strategy right now would be a waste of time—especially if you're Bridget McConnell and your Executive spouse, Jack, is busy ushering in a review of Scottish Opera (co-joined twin of Ballet) and overhauling the very foundations of public sector funding for what is deemed appropriate cultural activity in Scotland.

For the time being, Scottish Ballet's Lottery bid has been withdrawn but is expected to re-emerge in October, no doubt with Executive recommendations. However, under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, local authorities now have a statutory responsibility to implement Community Planning as part of their service delivery. The legislation addresses three key areas: Community Planning; Best Value; and Well Being. In essence, Community Planning recognises that the needs of individuals and communities must be addressed collectively by a range of organisations. Emphasis is given to involving relevant partner agencies and sectors in the planning and development of local services. Genuinely engaging people and communities in decisions about public services is also prioritised. To achieve this, local authorities are charged with developing local Community Planning Partnerships made up of a range of different representatives and organisations. Partnerships are expected to produce a Community Plan in consultation with local people and partner agencies. These plans outline a joint vision and outcomes, allocate resources and monitor progress. All of which doesn't square with the closing of Govanhill pool, just around the corner

from Tramway, and subsequent criminalising of the local community.

When the above letter appeared in the media there were the expected flurries of playground name calling, mainly one sided it has to be said from Opera/Ballet aficionados—by and large the visual arts' criticisms were of the Ballet's plans and steered clear of attacking the art form itself.

One article in the Scotsman by Duncan MacMillan did stir up a bit of vitriol in the "Visual Arts Community". MacMillan claimed the Save Tramway2 campaign was a storm in a teacup, slated the exhibition that was on at the time ('it is simply very bad'), and concluded that Tramway is so full of such rubbish that there is no effective defence against Scottish Ballet's plans. It's not surprising then that the article attracted "much hostility" in visual art circles—however overly familiar the territory. The defensive response comes from an insecure, fragmented 'sector' (division and competition being the rule of the day) that has virtually no political representation and operates on what are tantamount to feudal principles. (No wonder new Labour plugs the condition of the artist as their great new occupational model.)

In the absence of any real political representation or public platforms for exchange of opinions, what endures in the visual arts is largely internal sniping that revolves around caricatures and stereotypes. The lack of meaningful exchanges, or independent platforms for dialogue, simply serves to reinforce this alienation. (And yes, the SAC Visual Arts Dept. has to take much responsibility here and their tendered magazine is not going to be any antidote.)

That it was not considered 'constructive' to criticise the Tramway2 show 'at that time' is the exact same form of self-censorship that's been propagated for years. It's always the wrong time, it's always too fragile, always a constant crisis to which the reaction to any line of criticism is always don't rock the boat, especially when you're being told (obliquely of course) it's not really your boat to rock—so whose is it? To broach these very questions is seen as distasteful, or uncouth at best.

We should be openly discussing how we arrived at this juncture and what outcome we want—what model do we want for Tramway2, who/what should it represent/support and how? Just what do we want for the visual arts in Glasgow, in Scotland? What might be considered to constitute this elastic field? Perhaps the problem, the very fragility, is a direct result of the unwillingness to address the lack of public discourse and the lack of political representation of the visual arts? Or perhaps this fragility is now too easily alluded to so as to stifle discussion—a convenient if not aggressive line of defence?

As Critical Art Ensemble underscore in Variant no.15 ('Collective Cultural Action'), there is a strong myth of the universality of a visual arts community, and with it an assumed or compelled affinity. But there is not a community of visual artists, rather a number of overlapping, though relatively closed social constellations. Within and between these social/economic groupings there are antagonisms and competitions over the interrelations of cultural consecration. There are also points of common interest, and retention of Tramway2 may be one—perhaps. A Coalition (rather than the construct of a familial Community) would be the bringing together of hybrid groups to focus on one or two common characteristics, putting potentially conflicting (and acknowledged) differences aside—which is about finding, rather than assuming, mutual ground.

The 'failures' of the political representation of the visual arts (in: GCC, SAC, Scottish Executive, the media) always seem to be burdened onto someone else, and in this instance over Tramway2 Transmission gallery have tolerated accusatory whispers from some quarters of the so-called visual arts community. Maybe this is because as one artist-run space, Transmission as a membership organisation can hold some claim to represent a

body of practitioners—even if this is a familial grouping constructed as much on similar tastes and concerns as generationally. Rather than it simply being opportune to amass a body of people, if the model of Transmission as accountable to a membership is seen as constructive in this current 'crisis' then shouldn't we be looking towards adopting a similar model for other bodies? If the problem over Tramway2 lies with the fact that the visual arts are finding it hard to claim representative authority then we have to be asking why, not looking for scapegoats in voluntary, artist-run organisations. It's not a question of how many students people can muster to wear "Save Tramway2" t-shirts—as no-one else is really looking. The very problem is that there is limited external representation. The question we need to address is how we achieve real representation, not a distractive image of it amongst ourselves? In particular, we need to see and treat individuals as more than simply a force to be brought to a field of contestation for our own personal benefit—whether that be students, artists, or a broader public.

In this climate of hostile careerism, visibly aligning yourself to a Save Tramway2 'cause' also serves to flag-up otherwise unspoken ambitions, for lack of direct lines of communication or clearly defined structures of 'advancement'. I'll go so far as to say it's important for some people to 'be seen' to be protesting—their words not mine—which is not to say it's not sincere. Ironically, you can be in a space with groups protesting potentially the same thing and never the twain shall meet, the same old social divisions remain as concrete as ever—despite the situation, there is still limited interaction between these relatively closed social constellations and a tiresome snobbery prevails in some quarters.

Well, drastic changes to state support for the visual arts are actually taking place, right now. It's something else we're not being consulted over, but ultimately something that's going to have a far more wide reaching and fundamental affect on all cultural activity in Scotland than the Ballet's proposals for Tramway2.

The Scottish Arts Council (along with other National cultural bodies) is undergoing 'review'. In September last year, Bryan Beattie was seconded from his 'arts and cultural consultancy company', *Creative Services*, and appointed as 'expert adviser on cultural issues' to Frank McAveety, Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport. Beattie was Chairman of Eden Court Theatre, Director of Scottish Youth Theatre, a Councillor in the Highland Council during which time he was Chairman of the Cultural and Leisure Services Committee, and a board member of Scottish Screen. He gave up the task of leading the Inverness and Highland bid for European Capital of Culture to be Director of Cork's efforts to mark its year as Culture Capital in 2005, then prematurely left that post. According to *Creative Services*, they "are one of the few dedicated arts and cultural consultancies in Scotland and the only one that specialises in working closely with community organisations." Commenting on his appointment McAveety said: "This is an important time for the development of cultural policy in Scotland. We are committed to a review of the governance structure of cultural bodies and this is now getting under way."

(Incidentally, new members of the Board of the Scottish Arts Council include Annie Marris, 19, "the youngest ever member of such an organisation", who is studying Fine Arts at Duncan of Jordanstone. Marris decided to apply for the unpaid post after working on... the Inverness and Highland bid for European Capital of Culture. She says: "Because of that I had a lot of contact with James Boyle, the chairman of the Arts Council, and I just decided to go for it.")

Expectation is that the SAC's gesticular "arms length" relationship to the Scottish Executive is not going to exist for much longer and nor is the organisation in its current form—it's as much as

assured. In its place speculation is that we are to have a single Executive agency overseeing 'Culture' in Scotland—meaning direct political control of all that is said to constitute 'Culture', where 'Culture' has to demonstrate tangible social gain in relation to the Executive's wider public policy framework, with a distinct focus on social impact. Welcome to the 'Ministry of Motivation'.

One likely source of inspiration can be found in Comedia's document 'Saturday Night or Sunday Morning?', 1989: "...the existing division of responsibilities between the Office of Arts and Libraries, the Department of Trade and Industry, and the Home Office needs to be urgently rationalised by the creation of an integrated Ministry of Arts and Communications...Such a Ministry would be responsible for overseeing the development of the sector as a whole...directly funding national arts institutions, museums and galleries, overseeing broadcasting regulation... It will require a shift towards understanding how the modern popular arts as commodities are produced, marketed and distributed by industries dependent on skills, investment and training, and a development away from older pre-industrial ideologies of art that emphasises personal development and the sacrosanct value of individual self-expression (but for only a few)."

Mike Watson of the Scottish Labour Party said as much at the Centre for Cultural Policy Research, University of Glasgow, 'Question Time on Cultural Policy in the Second Scottish Parliament' on 31/3/03:

"...responsibility for translating the objectives and key priorities into working practice and programmes of course lies with Scotland's various cultural institutions and bodies, not least the Scottish Arts Council.

The concept of an arms-length body such as the Scottish Arts Council was designed to distance decisions from government and to serve the constituency of the arts, giving primacy to the needs of the creative artists which, it was felt, politicians would have difficulty in associating with. That relationship has endured for some years but the shape that it takes after the election and the future has attracted quite a lot of public attention recently. I think every speaker so far has referred to it. I believe there is a need to examine the contributions made by the various sectors, from the Scottish Arts Council to Scottish Screen, the national companies and national institutions and embracing, where the links are mutually beneficial, the creative industries. It should also take account of the formation of EventScotland this year, which will develop a portfolio of sporting and cultural events. Of course, I wouldn't want to forget the important contribution made by local authorities in delivering much cultural activity.

Labour does believe that a single cultural agency for Scotland could be the most effective means of linking art and culture with the creative industries. But recent reports that this would necessarily mean the dismantling of the Arts Council and Scottish Screen are wide of the mark. I stress no decisions have been taken as to the form of such a body and I would want to encourage the widest possible debate about the future structure for delivery of cultural policy and the distribution of the resources available..."

If no decisions have supposedly been made regarding the future structure of SAC, Scottish Screen, et al, how could speculations of their dismantling be wide of the mark?

What is out in the open is in contradiction to the long held, if far-from-accurate, belief that the arts should be free from governmental political interference. What is being disavowed is the traditional "above-it-all" ethos of the cultural gatekeepers and purveyors of good taste, who more often than not fail to acknowledge their own political stance. There certainly needs to be an address to the current framework for delivering support, but these expected "reforms" or "modernisations" of the state apparatus would effectively centralise power and tighten the Executive's

grip on state funded agencies and those reliant on them. No doubt, the Executive's portrayal will be one of cost-cutting and meeting public expectations, which will play well with a public attuned to the ideology of efficiency and technocracy. But the real focus of attention should be on the reconfiguration of power within the state apparatus that these proposals will represent.

# Women still in Profile

## Variant Round Table Discussion

### Social & Cultural Projects: Women's Strategies in Glasgow.

#### Introduction

#### Paula Larkin, Variant (PL)

Following an approach to review Frock On women's music events, we thought it a positive move to bring women together who were working in different areas in social and cultural projects in Glasgow, to discuss the issues that concern them. Participating were: Sandy Brindley from Rape Crisis Scotland, Rosie Ilett from the Sandyford Initiative, Adele Patrick of the Glasgow Women's Library, and Anne Kastner who has knowledge of the Frock On events.

#### Rosie Ilett (RI)

The Sandyford Initiative came about in 2000 to bring together a range of health services that already existed and to develop new ones. Based in Glasgow City Centre, and with an additional 26 community based sites, it's not a women only service, but developed partly within the context of work done around Glasgow's women's health policy. Over the last twenty years there has been a lot of strategic multi-agency development to address inequalities in how women's health is constructed and then supported. One of the main outcomes was the Centre for Women's Health, which has been going for nine years (believe it or not). The Centre is now part of the Sandyford Initiative and is a women only space—one of its remits was/is to influence change in how health services were understanding women's health. Sandyford is about a gendered approach to health—we recognise how gender inequalities affect health. We try: to provide opportunities for women to look at their own health issues, to influence health workers, and to make changes.

#### Sandy Brindley (SB)

I work at the National Office for the Rape Crisis movement in Scotland. The National Office was set up a year ago, before that it was a loose network of local groups. There are eight rape crisis centres in Scotland, four of whom are part of the network that I'm within, following a split within the network between whether or not centres wanted to work on a women only basis, or to work with men and women. It's a discussion that's rooted within the history of Rape Crisis.

Rape Crisis was set up by local women who were either concerned about rape or who'd had experiences of rape. It took a feminist analysis of violence against women: that it was embedded within power structures within society. It set up as an alternative to the response women were getting at that time, particularly from the statutory agencies. Women were saying they weren't being believed, and were getting a really judgmental response. Centres have held on to the ethos of providing fundamental things, like: a non-judgmental service, that a woman herself decides what her needs are and we work with the woman around what she says she needs. Often the response a woman can get is people telling her what they think is best for her. Our view is that the woman herself knows best, she's the expert on her life. There's lots of issues about the over-medicalisation of women's reactions, which is still an issue today. Women say they go to their GP and they just get a prescription, they get antidepressants. That's not often the appropriate or helpful response.

One aim is to develop the Rape Crisis movement in Scotland—expanding the service existing centres are able to offer, as it's a limited level of service now. At the National Office, women are

telling us they can't get through to their local Rape Crisis Centre. They're trying for weeks and can't get through—the reason is limited opening hours and a waiting list, which is directly the result of the lack of funding, which just isn't acceptable. It takes so much courage to pick up the phone and make that call to a Rape Crisis Centre and no one should be getting an answer machine.

I also look at setting up new Rape Crisis Centres, as there are big parts of Scotland that have no provision at all.

Another part of the job, which has always been a part of the Rape Crisis movement, is political campaigning, especially focussing on improving the criminal justice system as women are telling us it's absolutely hellish. If a woman does report her incident to the police it can take 18 months for it to come to court—if it gets to court. Only 10% of cases make it to court and only 6% of recorded rapes in Scotland lead to a conviction. Once women get to court it's really a harrowing and degrading experience they are put through. It's clear, the Justice System is failing women that have been raped.

We're trying to challenge myths with facts, myths such as 'only a certain type of woman gets raped', 'men rape because they're sick' or because 'they've got uncontrollable sexual urges'. Centres were trying to challenge these myths in the '70s and '80s and they are still coming up decades later. A lot of work we need to do is around awareness raising and campaigning to change attitudes and structures.

#### Anne Kastner (AK)

I've been an observer of what Frock On have been doing for the last year and a half. The events stem from an all female collective that centres on around a dozen women who live in the same building in the West End of Glasgow. Their cultural events involve workshop days, music events, self defence groups and so on. Posters around Glasgow initially alerted me to them, and I felt a lot of people would welcome this kind of activity as it seemed to be a move forward—it's something they've said themselves, "they wanted to make feminism cool again". They take their events or workshop days to places around Glasgow, bringing feminism into the community rather than people having to look for it themselves, so it was quite a help. But they weren't getting the type of publicity they should. Nothing about it appeared in the media that I could see. So I decided to write something about this, and that's what my personal concerns are, how feminism is represented within the media now.

#### Adele Patrick (AP)

I'm the life long learning co-ordinator at Glasgow Women's Library. The Library is an organic women's project which evolved out of Women in Profile. When I see the Frock On projects I get nostalgic because cultural inertia or the lack of foregrounding of women doing exiting things is a trigger for women to mobilise. That's what was happening in '87 with Women in Profile. The trigger was the announcement that Glasgow was going to be City of Culture 1990. We were cynical enough to think that it might not be a pluralistic cultural celebration.

(Laughter)

We started organising and held a series of events during 1990. Lots of women got involved, but most of the women at that time, including myself, had no history of real work in women's organisations. So there was a period of reflection after 1990. Myself and Kate Henderson (now involved in Frock On) and other women were reflecting on what we wanted to evolve out of that. We actually took on premises during 1990

and those particular constituencies of women were using the physical space almost as a locus for information exchange. One of the ways we started to conceptualise ourselves as a sort of Library was from having other women from Women's Libraries in Europe visit. Also, one of the projects we coined in 1990 was Castlemilk Women House—Rachael Harris, Cathy Wilkes, Julie Roberts, Clare Barclay and other women were steering it. As part of Women House's evolution, we had visited the Women Artists' Slide Library in London where information on the Californian and English womanhouse models were available. It was sensational to see such a volume of stuff on women artists but that model wasn't particularly appropriate to Glasgow, being solely academic and research centred. We had seen a huge traffic of women who wouldn't normally use libraries come into our original Women in Profile premises. We wanted to combine those two elements, of collecting relevant information mainly made up of things that women might donate themselves, but also making it as accessible as possible. The library was launched in 1991, and in 1995 we moved here. It strikes me as ironic and pleasing that a lot of the projects represented here have been forged in a period where you wouldn't imagine such projects would arise, be sustained, expand. If we look at our counterparts in England you're going to see a different story the last couple of decades.

Now, we have a library resource over three floors in the city centre; we're home to the UK's National Lesbian Archive and Information Centre; we're home to a young lesbian and bisexual peer support project LIPS, that has itself developed into a peer education project; an adult literacy, numeracy project for women; a life long learning programme; and Pat Crook is also the co-ordinator of the Scottish Executives Women's Organisations Data Base—there's a database now based in the library. We're trying to provide an array of learning opportunities for women. We still have a strong arts core, both Literature and Visual Arts—we had Elsbeth Lamb doing visual arts course recently, and Raman Mundair has begun work as our Writer in Residence this month. She has worked in a variety of media. After this period of growth, we feel more confident about the plurality of use—there are lots of women with different histories and diverse experiences using the library.

**PL:** Clara Ursitti, an artist and lecturer at Glasgow School of Art, who couldn't be here, brought up the issue that a lot of women artists/students don't see their work in any feminist context, and yet she sees historical feminist influences in their work. The reaction is "it's not feminist" or they think that's all been dealt with. In preparing a lecture on women only exhibitions in Scotland, Clara couldn't find out this information. The Scottish Arts Council who would probably fund a lot of these exhibitions/events didn't seem to have any. Would the Women's Library?

**AP:** I think a starting point would be visiting or contacting the Library since many women's projects over the years have not been funded and documentation is not necessarily archived by mainstream collections and libraries

**RI:** A lot of the stuff that happens around women's issues or in community settings is not necessarily disseminated or collected, or doesn't get publicity. So there might be events going on that women don't know about or be able to refer back to them as historical experiences. That's why things like the Women's Library are important, but that still relies on people donating or alerting the library's attention to it. There's been a different kind of history in Glasgow in terms of a lot of women's organisations that's different from say London, because of the way public funding has happened. With the Greater London Council there was a strategic and policy driven desire to

resource and build up women's capacity through women's organisations, and obviously other organisations were supporting different groups within the community. That made a huge impact over a certain period. When the GLC was disbanded that had an effect on what has continued ever since. Not just on women's organisations but on a range of community or cultural organisations. But there has been a different experience in Glasgow. There has been bits of funding in the last 10 years that has supported in different ways bits of activity, not to necessarily build a huge women's infrastructure.

**AP:** In issue based territories, for example women and health, I see an evolution of thinking. There have been open minded individuals in the

comfortable about borrowing them or asking about books on child abuse or something. But somewhere like the Centre For Women's Health obviously would give supportive information, if asked nobody would be shocked or indicate that this was something they hadn't come across before in terms of somebody speaking to them about it. It was about access to information and forms of support within a women only space. The library in Sandyford is now part of the City Council Library Service, so anyone can now access anything in the Sandyford library via any of the City Council libraries.

As we've developed the Sandyford Initiative some of those things have evolved in a bigger way, so the counselling service within the Centre has

(Laughter)

There is an importance to having literacy education groups, another step would be internet access. I know you're getting a couple of terminals downstairs in the Women's Library, that's an empowerment tool, if you can get hold of these tools that allow women to communicate with each other.

**SB:** There's been discussion for a long time in Glasgow about the need to improve services for women and men—but a lot of the discussion is focused on women because the majority of rapes are committed against women—to improve the response they get because at the moment it's very fragmented. If a woman goes to the Police she will invariably get a male Police Casualty Surgeon, to



Council who have been in, or may have cut their teeth in, women's politics. And there are some good women in the area of the arts. But, frankly it is going to be those areas where women can be perceived in that kind of 19th Century role almost, that can still lever funding more easily. I know that the language we're talking about and the discourse that has evolved is not couched in that way but philanthropic rather than feminist orientated support even in the territory of prostitution or women's health is still an issue in the funding discourses. I think the barriers would be, for example, if Frock On wanted to establish a centre. The Women's Library certainly hit these difficulties early on in its history where, as far as the Council are concerned, you don't fit into social work, you don't fit into education, into health, and it's almost a luxury that we can't afford. I don't think there's a fully developed discourse in terms of the funding.

**PL:** Can women drop into the Glasgow Women's Health Centre and the Sandyford Initiative, what are the resources?

**RI:** It's evolved over time—in a way that a lot of the things we've talked about have. The Centre was set up to see what areas of unmet need there were and to do things to address that. A need for women to access counselling as one issue of women's emotional and mental health was a huge issue—women's experiences, negative mainly, of accessing mainstream mental health services. The Centre started at that point to develop a counselling service within a context of providing individual support for women, but it's also about drawing to the attention of mainstream mental health that these are the issues that are coming in and these are the kind of factors that are affecting women. You've got to take some cognizance of that when you're providing a service. It's no point in us just providing service to every woman because they're going to access other services and need to have an appropriate response when they do that.

The Centre started developing a lending and reference library for women. Similar ideas to the Women's Library—that women wanted to access information that would improve their health, would address issues they were concerned with, or increase their well being. They didn't feel they would necessarily be able to find them in City Council libraries, or that if they did they'd feel

got more funding and it's now able to influence a lot of the developments within mainstream primary care. There's a lot of mental health developments now within the local healthcare co-ops. What CWH have been doing is literally influencing some of that development in terms of the competencies, awareness of issues that we will be expecting trust counsellors within primary care to have. There's a whole journey now of counselling being recognised as a National Health discipline and a properly graded profession.

**SB:** I was really interested in Frock On and representations of feminism but also about how we make feminism accessible. Thinking about it in terms of how you actually get access to the women's movement is one issue, a further issue is how feminism is represented, which then means that quite a lot of young women are not wanting to touch it, because of how they perceive feminism.

**AK:** There's a problem with visibility, with people knowing that these services exist. I'm wondering how we could solve that problem? Integrating into regular services is one answer, where going into a public library is part of the whole service and not something they have to approach separately, as that often puts people off. And leaflets might only be in the actual place where the service is...

**AP:** It's interesting that there are women now (like Frock On and one of Lucy McKenzie's Flourish series), deciding to do women only events and that's fantastic. She's a well known young woman artist in Glasgow and had a Riot Grrl history, I want to know from Lucy what made her want to do that?

**AK:** It's not something I've heard about—we need better communication through e-mail lists etc. I think people operate in these little groups, that's what happened to Frock On, from this thing called Lady Fest which started in the States they then inspired people in London and then Glasgow to set up their own little groups, and it's still going on. A lot of that is to do with the internet as well. Some of Frock On's remit is to go out and to leave something there in the community and to let people continue it on their own account. But it would be better if there was an umbrella thing that you could always go back to it. It's quite hard for individuals to set up something and to sustain it.

which women are saying "No way"—that experience is really violating and has been difficult to change within the current system. Then she will have to go somewhere else to access the Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) test, and somewhere else to get any kind of physical injuries dealt with. There has to be a lot more joined-up-ness of the immediate response. There's been a model developed in countries including England called Sexual Assault Referral Centres to pull everything together for women. Women can get a forensic if she wants it, even if she does or doesn't report to the police she can still get the examination and have the forensic evidence stored, because it's a very difficult time to make a decision. If they have the option of going through the forensic, because the evidence is lost so quickly, then they can then make the decision in their own time. They also have within the Centre access to support and counselling, medical and STI tests, joining everything up. We've been involved in a planning group looking at what the models are elsewhere and looking at what's going to work for Glasgow, with a view to a pilot.

**SB:** There's been a lot of discussion in England of whether you should broaden out the remit of Health Centres to include domestic abuse, and child sexual abuse. It's difficult because as soon as you broaden out, more and more women get access to this service but you lose its specialism, which is difficult when rape has been so invisible.

It is an interesting time for women only services, where it feels increasingly difficult to justify in a 'women only' way. There's a lot of misconceptions about what we mean by women only services. It doesn't mean we don't support the need for services for men, or that we want to discriminate against men. What we're saying is there is a need for women only space, but I think people are threatened by that. I would absolutely support the development of services for men, but it's really crucial that we fight for and retain the right for women only spaces as well.

The issue of violence against women has been mainstreamed to a certain extent which brings its own challenges in that statutory agencies have to work from a gender neutral perspective, so it's how you fit those two things together. We're saying absolutely, you need to look at the needs of men that have been raped but we really need to focus

on the needs of women.

**AK:** You were saying you feel the need to justify women only services, is that something quite recent, a backlash from the '80s 'we have got feminism' type thing? Do people think because issues have been mainstreamed that they've been dealt with and don't need women centred services anymore?

**SB:** I've been involved in Rape Crisis for ten years, every time you go to do a talk about the work you've been doing the first question is "What about men?" In some ways I think that's a legitimate question, but other times I think we're coming here saying 2 in 5 women are raped or sexually assaulted and that's your response!

**AK:** Do you think that's always something that's got to be struggled against, it doesn't end and it never will?

**SB:** There are more challenges now. One challenge is within the lesbian community. I do feel increasingly that there are certainly in terms of Rape Crisis less lesbian women involved—why? Is it partly because it's difficult just to get access to the women's movement now, but also the impact of queer politics, that more and more young les-

bians are going into queer politics and that sometimes can conflict with a feminist approach.

**AP:** It's important that there are young lesbian projects that are based in a place like this [GWL] because they're going to bump up against it, literally, in the archive, or in other places, and they're going to make their own minds up about what's relevant for them just now. It should be a fundamental choice for women to make their own mind up but based on an array of information, some of which is historical, but they're making their own history as well. It's important they feel like they're forging something that has its place.

I do feel the onus of responsibility to be accessible, to be plural or to take into consideration the needs of incredibly diverse communities. I wish one of the benefits from our work might be that the audiences, users, critics, enquirers of our organisations might level the same intensity of questions at mainstream organisations, arts organisations, or other mixed groups—how accessible to disabled people, minority, ethnic and black people find these organizations?

That's a feature of contemporary women's organisations, they're not going to be complacent.

It's almost an automatic notion, how are we going to network?

**SB:** There has been such a focus on partnership working within local authorities in Scotland. Women's organisations are having to engage much more because these partnerships have been set up, set up partly because of the work of women's organisations!

**Contact details:**

Frock On people can also be contacted through their website: [www.frockon.org](http://www.frockon.org)

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# A low down dirty lack of shame

Tom Jennings

One of the most interesting aspects of Channel 4's new drama series *Shameless*, written by Paul Abbott, is its lack of explicit moral judgement—either on the part of the characters within the script, or in the structure and rhythm of the narrative and its logic and (partial) resolutions. This despite the fact that the scenario and subject matter seem almost obsessively to invite criticism of both the individual characters—their behaviour, choices and interactions; in fact their very being—and the collective attitudes, orientations and situations that accompany them. The result is a complicated balancing act between representation and caricature, honesty and romanticisation, comedy and tragedy, empathy and patronisation, celebration and pathos. For that matter, the chaotic and tumultuous existence of its main protagonists, the Gallagher family, is also a complicated balancing act—comprising six siblings aged three to twenty-one, living on a sink estate in a contemporary northern city, with a progressively absent, unemployed alcoholic father and whose mother has done a runner.

## Friends, Neighbours, Fellow Travellers

A corollary to the deliberate amorality of *Shameless* is precisely the absence of feelings of shame exhibited by the characters, not only in their vulgar and uncouth manners, but in their responses to their apparently hopeless plights and prospects and their sense of responsibility or moral culpability for their situation. The title of the series is both ironic and apt: apt because the Gallaghers oscillate wildly between good intentions, indifference and hurtfulness towards loved ones, but there is little sign of the overweening feelings of self-worthlessness and self-disgust that

characterise real shame; and ironic because accusations of shamelessness, for example made by 'respectable' neighbours, represent moral condemnation that tends (and intends) to render its targets beyond the pale of acceptable humanity. It reveals far more about the accusers, hinting at their deeper hidden shame and insecurity concerning their own lowly social status, and furthermore legitimises in their eyes the hostile actions and persecution by 'the authorities' that ultimately disrupt or preempt any meaningful sense of their own community.

The attitudes of the conservative, respectable and aspiring working class thus neatly dovetail with, for example, state initiatives concerning policing and welfare—demanding stringent monitoring, control and punishment, not only for transgression but for the offense of their existence. Likewise, middle class charity and much of socialism—from the Fabians, Eugenics and Leninism through to old and New Labour, has also comprehensively nurtured, articulated with, and fed upon such reactionary beliefs about the innate inferiority of the poor and the need to intervene and 'do something about them'. *Shameless* thus invokes several conventional discourses relating to the nature and potential of working class people, only to then flout and undermine them—and in the process to question the social and political philosophies and programmes that, at root, depend on class-based ideologies of moral deficit and ethical inadequacy for their normative and pragmatic utility.

## Family Affairs

The main tactic used to achieve this confrontation with accepted homilies, stereotypes and clichés about the degraded poor is a resolute refusal to centre the story around supposedly objective

'problems' or 'issues'. The focus instead is the family's determination to stay afloat together, and to maintain a sense (or illusion) of agency and hope. In the way are a multitude of obstacles and constraints, most of which are clearly shown to be overdetermined by a combination of historical shaping, situational reality and personal attributes. Any positive outcomes (such as they can be) always emerge from a deliberate (although usually not self-conscious) meshing of sociality, imagination and desire.

But this is no glib, easily or effortlessly achieved solidarity, and neither is it straightforwardly positive. Indeed the violence, abuse and humiliation the characters sometimes heap on each other, and the occasionally indiscriminate volatility of their anger, hatred and destructiveness, are intrinsically linked to their mutual affection, respect and active commitment to each other. This dense patchwork effect is reinforced by the contemporary setting of material which originated in Paul Abbott's childhood and adolescence in the 1960s and '70s—which partly accounts for distinct residual tinges of nostalgia (as well as the absence of the panoply of 'child protection' professionals which might be expected given current hypocrisies and hysterias). But although details of events, characters and storylines are massively condensed, jumbled up and redistributed, what shines through is a sense of trying to comprehend and deal with the apparently ineffable wash of life—from a point of view simultaneously of innocence and thoroughly streetwise worldweariness. The family members are at times so emotionally close as to feel part of each other, and at other times so distant in their thoughts and preoccupations as to be alien to each other even while under the same roof. The fascination with sexual antics rings especially true from this perspective, in an

environment where both emotional and physical overcrowding can make common knowledge—but only very partial understanding—of private passions and their effects and ramifications.

### Clear and Present Dangers

Despite the all pervading conflicts and crises, the predominant styles of fictional representation of working class life in social realism are also refused. Gone is the tragic pessimism which can only be overcome by individual heroism or the painstaking work of diligent self-improvement. There is no pandering whatsoever to the notion that the family are an imminent threat to themselves or to (polite) society, which can only be averted or contained by the enlightened action of outside forces (the state, employers, experts, etc). Such institutions are recognised as only having the capacity to destroy both the Gallaghers' fragile practical unity and their sense of who they are, as fully imbricated in each other's lives rather than separate individuals with isolated needs. So *Shameless* replaces earnest negativity with exuberance, the yearning for passionate fulfilment, and outrageous comedy bordering on farce.

The price paid to avoid succumbing to the tragic vision may appear to be a trivialisation of the levels of drudgery, misery and suffering experienced by many people in similar positions. Furthermore the exoticisation of their pleasures and the general comic rendering skates over the more ominous manifestations of depression, envy, malice and hatred which regularly afflict those reared in emotionally and materially deprived and dysfunctional environments (clearly, what counts as dysfunctional is crucial here), where urgent necessity prevents distance or reflection. However, it should be clear, to anyone who cares to pay attention, that all of the characters in *Shameless* are deeply unhappy about many

things for most of the time. The difference is that, since this is a mode of being which is entirely familiar and expected ('it's how life is'), there is no particular reason to dwell on or agonise over it. Personal or social catastrophe may often follow events within a family which can be attributed to individual psychology and conflict. But it is just as likely to be precipitated by more or less unpredictable externalities—particularly the intervention of state agencies, or activities resulting from crime and the pathologies of those outside one's immediate social nexus. The sheer number and range of threats and their potential origins means that a pragmatic fatalism is the only sensible policy, if stultifying depression or reactive paranoia are to be avoided.

So, as with all the best television depictions of working class life, it is the emotional realism on this phenomenological level which will most strike a chord with viewers from similar backgrounds. But unlike virtually all other examples that I can recall, there is an overriding sense in *Shameless* that given the ongoing state of emergency, everyone knows that things will—and will have to—change. And while all manner of disasters are just around the corner or are already beginning to unfold, the only strategy that makes sense to effect change for the better, irrespective of how desperate circumstances are, is to mobilise that single most important source of hope, imagination and practical agency which is embodied by the local social network where individual strengths and heroics only matter if they contribute to collective effort.

### The Uses of Enchantment

Accounts of working class experience expressed in social realism in the arts, literature and media or in the social and human sciences often also mirror prevailing discourses of class, particularly by constructing a unifor-

mity of 'the masses'. This contrasts with the differentiation and distinctions found at higher levels of society which have the power to institute general programmes and solutions from above. Similarly the guardians of interpretation and taste (reviewers, critics, academics) try to force representations of lower class life into narrow and rigid categories, leading to a most unseemly disarray in newspaper and magazine reviews trying to categorise *Shameless* in terms of its genre status, quality and relationship to current politically sensitive issues. Seen through these lenses, the complexity and diversity within and among the characters and the fecundity of their ensemble is lost—when it is precisely this differentiation, woven in practice into a wealth of meaning and possibility, which yields the promise of active, productive, collective self-organisation. As postmodern pastiche, and in wit and irreverence, comparisons with *Roseanne* or *The Simpsons* surely make sense; and in terms of affection and unapologetic self-criticism, *The Royle Family*, *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Bread* spring to mind. But the predictable, static and safe sitcom framework has been removed along with the fundamental appeal to respectability that all of the aforementioned series relied upon. With a level of explicitness entirely appropriate to its subjects, the proximity of horror and the sublime, and most of all its dynamic indeterminacy, *Shameless* is in a class of its own—in which optimistic reading it is anarchic in the best sense, rather than the worst.

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# Letter from Palestine

## Joyce Carmichael

Joyce Carmichael is a grandmother from Wishaw, and an activist for justice. Joyce was in Palestine/WestBank filming between December 2003 and February 2004. This is an edited account of her reports.

### Letter from Palestine —Deir Istia and Qalqilia

Tue 23 Dec 2003

Moved to Qalqilia this morning from Deir Istia, having had a frustrating time by the shut down of Nablus. We were given the most comprehensive handout on the Apartheid Wall and its ramifications and facts—all of them appalling, needless to say.

You can see the Wall from many vantage points. It is undeniably the ugliest, most ruthless and destructive thing I have ever seen. This Wall is an affront to Jews everywhere and that is why we have protest groups like 'Jews for Justice for Palestinians'.

The weather is absolutely freezing—like January in Scotland. My friends Grassan and Fatheya are very upset because their son is in the Naqab, the prison in the Negev. He is naked 24/7, the food is inedible, the 1,600 prisoners are under canvas and the conditions are barbaric. They got news from the Red Cross that he is to have no visitors for the whole of the two and a half years.

Abdul and Amnie also received news this week. Mohammed, 17 years old, has been told that he is unlikely to receive less than two years. He is in Magido in Israel. Conditions at Magido have improved since my last visit. Mohammed says he gets enough to eat and his parents can visit him once a month. They go by Armoured Personnel Carrier after being stripped and searched and can take a child under five with them.

### Letter from Palestine —Qalqilia and Tulkaram

Wed 31 Dec 2003

We went to Qalqilia then to Tulkaram and then back to Qalqilia for the big demo on the 27th Dec. The demonstration was large but had few internationals. The Israel Defence Force (IDF) did not mess about. We got tear gassed but the wind quickly blew it away. First time I have heard the noise the tear gas 'gun' makes. A siftish whump sound. I will not forget it.

We took a couple of days to assimilate what we saw in Qalqilia before we could really speak about it. It is such a vast and intolerable cruelty that one's mind rejects it as ridiculous. But it is as bad as it looks. Not a house we were in was free of UNRWA food parcels; this in a fertile and water-rich environment. 65% of the population are unemployed with the theft of land. The town only



has one gate. Produce is stopped from leaving by the IDF until it has rotted and is useless. No replacement goods are allowed in. People cannot access their land and 25% of the water from the aquifer beneath Qalqilia is being drawn off by the Israelis everyday. They have drilled down since encircling the land with the Wall and have made at least five wells according to the town officials. The PR man at the Baladia (town hall) says "It is like a zoo; the Qalqilians are prisoners in their town but the zoo keeper feels no moral necessity to feed them." This is a very apt way of putting it. It is a living hell. The businesses are all failing. 400 families have left; 2,000 people. Some have gone abroad, some to other parts of the West Bank. Suicide has increased enormously as has fundamentalism. Qalqilia had been quite secular until now.

Tulkaram is also a disaster area. I never saw so many beggars in my life. Every few yards a hand is outstretched for Shekels, the person in rags and looking so ill. This in a fertile town with plenty of water. The situation in both towns is much more desperate than I understood when in Scotland. I cannot exaggerate what is going on here. We are in a state of agitation over the immediate need for the world to understand the magnitude of the starvation. I insisted on putting 'Jews for Justice for Palestinians' on our banner as I feel it is such a strong statement. The members of that group must get themselves out here to see what we have seen. I am sensitive to their good intentions re. the purchase and planting of olive trees but it will not make a damn bit of difference. They must film then show this to their community and the UK government. I am sure they would have more clout than the rest of us. The Baladia, the cafe owners and almost everybody would not take money for the purchases we made. It was really very difficult. "Pay us by telling your people. Tell the world", they said.

The malnutrition in the children is much more visible this year in Deir Istia—I see it every few children including Raisi's. There just is not enough protein. The same food is eaten every day and it is just not varied enough. Some hours I despair. What's the point. Me and my silly stall and boycott Marks & Spencers leaflets in Glasgow. This machine is relentless. Sharon wants the land, the water, and nothing is going to stop him. Then my mood changes. This machine may indeed move on to the bitter end but I WILL WITNESS and I WILL FILM AND RECORD. It will not be a secret if I and other activists can help it.

### Letter from Palestine —Israeli lies and violence

Sat 3 Jan 2004

Got excited last night watching CNN and BBC. The report re. troops withdrawing wholesale from Jenin is absolutely not true. It is mere propaganda. Not only are tanks still outside Jenin but inside as well. Nothing has changed. This is known from phoning people in various parts of Jenin. The curfew is as before. Someone should phone the BBC and tell them the truth.

Staying with my Canadian friends here in Jenin. Many times they have colleagues to stay for the night because they cannot get home because gates in the wall are not manned and are firmly closed. This works in both directions—sometimes folk cannot get to work. The Merryland Hotel here is full and this is why. The men have a short journey home and it would certainly be cheaper than staying in the hotel. The stress, however, of being locked in or out is just not worth the money saved and most stay for the week going home at week-



John Chuckman *The Segregation Fence: Built by the Sharon government on Palestinian lands for the benefit of Israeli settlers, 2003.*

ends. Sometimes this is not possible either.

The [Israeli] papers are full of the shot activists issue [when soldiers used live rounds on demonstrators peacefully protesting against the Apartheid Wall]. The soldier who did the shooting complains that he did not know one of the activists was Israeli, or he would not have shot. Many Israelis have spoken up and are appalled at this attitude. The other, a US activist, is referred to as a 'tourist'—but he is with the International Solidarity Movement.

### Letter from Palestine —Nablus

Wed 14 Jan 2004

I arrived in Nablus this morning after much trouble—the IDF do not want international eyes seeing what they are doing, this is the problem. I argued with the soldiers, lied, and with persistence this worked. I will be in Nablus for a week before moving to Jenin and then Tulkaram which has had the most hideous time over the last few days.

### Letter from Palestine —Nablus

Mon 19 Jan 2004

Received many emails from people wondering about the appalling explosion I reported that killed 27 family members in Old City, Nablus last April 2003. As I had Salwa who is Palestinian with me I had no language problems, communication was free flowing. The young couple and their mother reported the details as follows: During the night a large number of soldiers came. There was no loud hailer demand for someone to exit either house. There was just the sound of many soldiers and their vehicles. No demand was made for any one to come out of either house. As all the occupants of the two houses are dead no one knows what the Israelis said to the inhabitants. They can only surmise that people were ordered upstairs and obeyed this order. The quietness of the soldiers was extraordinary as usually when they are hunting for someone there is maximum racket and intimidation. Two huge explosions followed. These must have been caused with a great amount of explosives as the buildings are substantial to say the least. The walls are two or three feet thick—even the internal walls are thick. When the soldiers left it could be seen that two, three story houses had been completely demolished, folded in on themselves. The rescue attempts started immediately despite the danger of the soldiers returning. If they had come back while the neighbours

were frantically clearing the debris more deaths would have followed. The explosion, of course, damaged the houses of neighbours. The man we spoke to invited us in. His adjoining wall was open to the elements and no chance of being repaired due to no funds. I got the feeling they slept across the way at his mother's with his three toddlers. His mother is now agoraphobic and has panic attacks if she tries to leave her house. This gracious, kindly woman was a privilege to talk to, kindness personified. She was anxious about my face-full of mosquito bites—in the face of such misery her humanity is intact. Her other daughter who lives with her had to go to hospital the next day after the explosion as she has a pace maker and the blast disrupted it. That could have been another death caused by the IDF that would never have made news.

The details of locating and burying the dead are harrowing. It took weeks. As each body was located it was buried quickly and with respect. One little boy aged seven was found minus his scalp and hair. He was buried, as was his mother, father, grandparents, three year old brother and baby brother. Later in the excavations his hair and scalp were found on another floor—the blast had caught his head first and the force had dealt with this part of him first before depositing him further up in the debris. His grave was respectfully opened and this part of him buried with the rest.

Earlier this morning Salwa located a courtyard and showed me where 19 bodies had to be temporarily buried from another Israeli incursion as the city was seething with soldiers and the cemeteries inaccessible. The dead had to be buried in this courtyard during the night by stealth by terrified family members and friends fearful of the soldiers returning. After the Israelis left the dead were disinterred and buried at the cemetery.

In Nablus there are many pictures of a young man who carried the coffin at his young cousin's funeral. This young man was not active, not political in any way. He was shot in the middle of the forehead and killed by a sniper. This is what can happen if you are 'guilty' of assisting at a funeral of a freedom fighter.



## Letter from Palestine—Nablus

Thur 22 Jan 2004

The Israelis are back in Nablus today. They have surrounded the Samaritan area and are calling for a household to come out into the street because they want to blow it up. The family so far is refusing—very worrying as these soldiers have no respect whatever for life.

Salwa's son cannot go to school because the school is in the area where the soldiers are. Salwa and her husband are home today as this is their week-end, Thursday and Friday. I was planning to go to the Baladia to get info regarding NGOs but that is shelved at the moment. I stick out like a sore thumb with my fair skin and short white hair. The Israelis have been repeating the warning to Internationals to get out of the West Bank and reminding us that we are not welcome. Apparently last week this started with radio announcements commanding all internationals to sign the form we all know about, where we sign saying if we are shot it is our own fault for entering a war zone. Wajdi's father was angered by the sheer mendacity of this form—this was the first many Palestinians heard about it. I will have to keep my

head down there is no doubt about that. I will shelve Jenin which was the plan for tomorrow. Who knows how long the soldiers will be here?

## Letter from Palestine—Nablus

Fri 23 Jan 2004

The information about the murder of Aboud and Ibrahim by dogs and bullets is now complete. The neighbours had assumed, reasonably enough, that the man called Ibrahim was staying at the family home of Aboud. Why else would the soldiers attack the home and kill the son along with Ibrahim? The facts are that the soldiers were chasing this man Ibrahim (married, father of four and wanted) for a period before he entered the street that the murders took place in. There is a public footpath by the house's garden wall which is entered from the street. Although next to the house it is clearly not part of the house property. This made no difference to the IDF. The dogs got Ibrahim at the back of the house and for good measure the soldiers blasted the house with many shots for a long time. I like to think that the soldiers mistakenly thought the man was trying to enter the house by a back garden gate. The shooting at the house destroyed ten windows steel frames and all. The soldiers then entered the house and shot the fridge, the washing machine, the three toilets, a twin tub, every fitted wardrobe in the house and much else. They shot into a bedroom which was Aboud's and his two brothers'. The three were tied at the wrist and the two younger taken to an Armoured Personnel Carrier. Aboud was taken to the back of the house near flats and was heard by the people in the flats to be shouting "I don't know him! I don't know him!" over and over again. A brave woman in the flats was watching from a darkened room. She says the soldiers told him to shut up, but he kept repeating the words. The soldiers insisted he did know him and when his protests failed to stop they shot him by forcing a gun in his mouth and shot him with a dum-dum bullet. End of Amoud's young life. They then shot him in the chest with the same type of bullet. I have the autopsy report.

The details about the resistance fighter are correct as stated in earlier letters. After the dogs were taken off he was placed on his back with his arms and legs spread and then he was shot six times in each arm and many dum-dum bullets sent into the genital area. Bits of bone and hair are still being collected.

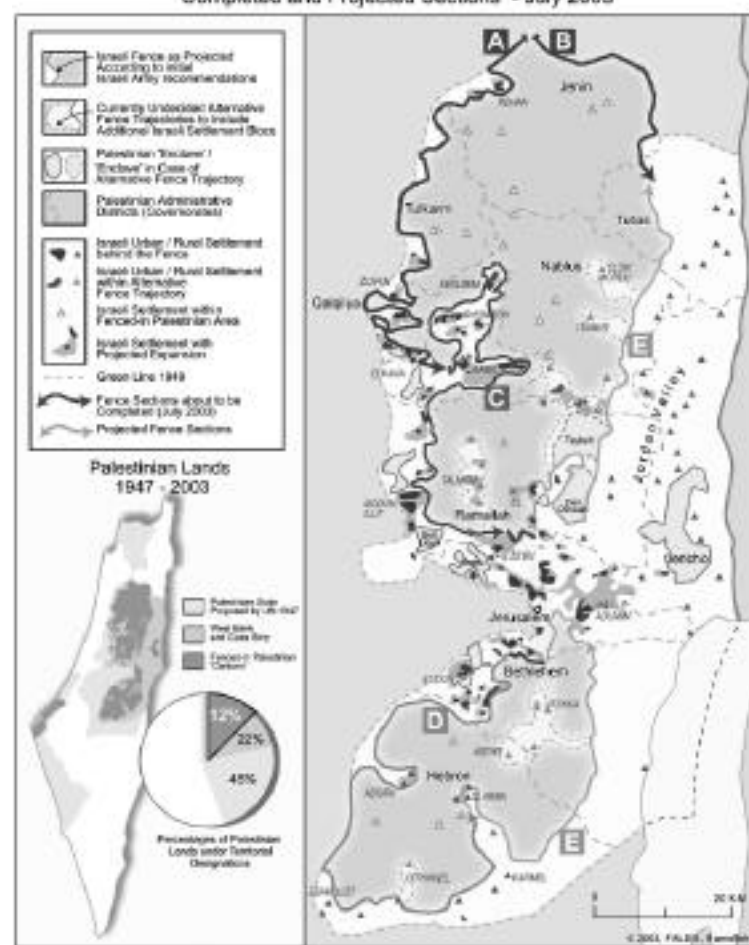
The father and mother of Aboud have twice welcomed me into their home. It is totally trashed. Curtains have been ripped down and slashed, a beautiful rose wood table stabbed right through. Glass is everywhere and no room habitable. The water tanks were shot on the roof which meant the water poured into their home and flooded everywhere. The bullet holes have all been plastered—there must be at least forty. Not a door is left unharmed and most have to be replaced including the main front door which is metal. This couple were so touched that someone was interested enough to take film of the mess and ask about their son. Apart from the post mortem at the local government mortuary there has been no official interest in this appalling event. I asked if they had made a complaint to anyone, they said "To whom should we complain? The Israelis? Arafat? There is nobody to complain to."

## Letter from Palestine—Nablus

Sun 25 Jan 2004: Operation Earthquake

As Thursday developed we got updates from Radio Nablus. The IDF had entered the town at 5.30 am having secreted soldiers earlier. They entered the town from different directions, one or two jeeps at a time and then an APC or two and finally the tanks. They then converged on the Samaritan area en masse. Two four storey blocks of flats were evacuated and the men crowded into one small workshop and the women and children in another. They had to stay there all day with nothing to eat or drink and no toileting opportuni-

Israel's Separation Fence: Completed and Projected Sections - July 2003



ties. The mother of a suspected resistance fighter was made to get in a jeep and speak through a loud hailer asking him to give himself up or the two blocks would be demolished by explosives. This continued throughout the morning. Some people refused to leave the flats and offered resistance—stone throwing. This invasion was recognised as the threatened Operation Earthquake and people realised they were going to lose their homes, their belongings and everything they hold dear in this illegal collective punishment. Finally, a Molotov Cocktail was thrown from a high window and landed on one of the tanks. Then tank gun-fire could be heard. We had heard sporadic shooting in the morning -tuh-tuh-tuh of repeating weapons. I can't describe the noise of tank gun-fire—it is a hellish sound. We heard on the radio about the earlier gun-fire. The announcer remarked that there was no resistance and asked why the soldiers could possibly be shooting? I found out later, they had billeted themselves in neighbouring houses and were shooting the photos of elderly deceased parents, wedding china, ceilings, etc. and also set off stun bombs which caused further damage. By mid afternoon, neighbouring houses were evacuated and the people imprisoned in shops across from the flats—hell on earth. At 5.10 pm a monstrous explosion was heard—just one. Both flats were blown to smithereens. Nablus is built on two mountains and on a narrow valley. The blast from the flats passed over the top of the building opposite which were further down the mountain side causing damage to buildings 700m away. Salwa and I went in the evening so that I could film. There were many people, all very stunned and quiet. The sight of the blast will be engraved on my memory for ever.

Earlier I had filmed bulldozers going past and returning again. They were used to clear cars and a wall in the area of the flats so that the soldiers could access the sight better to set their explosives. The cars—some very new smart ones because this area is inhabited by the better off in Nablus—were first wrecked by the tanks and then



bulldozed into the ditch in front of the flats.

As I stood on the road filming, these four storey solid buildings were now beneath the level of my feet. People were not yet searching for belongings as the Red Crescent were there telling us through loud hailers to stay off until the morning when the site could be surveyed.

We returned the following morning. The blast damage to houses over a vast area has rendered many of them unstable and some will have to be knocked down, some renovated. Most of the householders are middle-aged owners who have worked hard, despite the situation, to make good provision for their families. Now they are at square one. These flats cost £78,000 sterling and, like most of us in Britain, the equity in one's house is what you have to show for a lifetime's endeavour. Wiped out in one blast. We were invited into a small grocers shop to see the damage and then into the house above the shop, owned by the same man. The place had been one of the billets for the IDF and had been trashed even before the blast. The ceilings were spattered with gunfire, china, mattresses plus bedding shot through and burned by the bullets. Then came the blast. These people, like all Palestinians, have no one to turn to. No complaint will be made to Israel or the UN as both turn a



deaf ear. The local Baladia provides a massive machine which has a probe to turn over the debris and help people find what they can before lifting the rubble into skips and removing it to leave a chasm where the flats once stood. I saw cars being removed which had been in basement garages. The blast had lifted these cars to the top of the heap. My description of this site is quite inadequate to describe what we were seeing. I asked if the Palestine Authority will send observers or letters of sympathy and people laughed at my innocence.

## Letter from Palestine—Jenin

Wed 28 Jan 2004

Left Nablus yesterday. Took three hours to reach Jenin but delighted to have succeeded in getting in. The check-point between Nablus and Jenin at Beit Ibah is the most hostile I have encountered. The soldiers are in a reinforced metal container and speak through a small hole in the front. There is an Xray machine which one walks through. There were two tanks and various vehicles. Having successfully passed through this, buses and cars are again stopped by soldiers a quarter of a mile down the road—we were made to get off the bus and stand in the rain. You are 'interviewed' again. A mile further on, the same thing happens yet again. "Do you see our life?" has been said to me so often. This time we stayed on the bus and the IDF came strolling through it, then we carried on to Jenin on a road that was so chewed up by tanks and bulldozers that it was almost impossible to drive. Got to Jenin and went straight to the Baladia where I was adopted—that really is the only way I can put it. Jenin is wrecked. It is an old county town with rich farming land in abundance. The Naqba in 1948 pro-

duced the refugee camp which holds 5,000 people. The population of town and camp is about 35,000.

## Letter from Palestine—Jenin

Sat 31 Jan 2004

I have been here ten days and have not got used to how damaged this lovely country town is. I am very worried about people whose houses I am staying in—reprisals are frequent and collaborators endemic according to the police. It is difficult to describe the kindness people have shown.

I have a lot of film to bring home—the destruction is incredible. The Mukatta [PA HQ] was bombed so they built another. It was bombed so the Palestinian Authority is now scattered across this large town in temporary buildings. I visited the Police Headquarters under cover of night and spoke with the Head of Police. He doubles as a major. This slight man has great presence and an aura of extreme sadness and sweetness about him. I could see he was much respected by his men, indeed loved. After the massacre in April 2002 when the town repelled the Israelis for four days he was imprisoned for months. On his release he was not allowed to go to Amman, Jordan to see his wife and children. This ban has now been lifted but not until one was in place in Jordan. Now he can't visit because the Jordanians won't allow it. This man looked to be in his fifties but I suspect he is a bit younger. I asked where he stayed and he told me he now lives in the station as he would be a threat to any landlord who rented him property—the place would be demolished.

Samer, my policeman friend, took me to Burkin yesterday to see the ancient Christian Church that marks Jesus' healing of the ten lepers in the cave. This is the fourth oldest Christian church in the world. The two men who let us in are Muslim and they told me that this ancient town contains Christians and Muslims in equal amounts. All attend each others' festivals, funerals, christenings and weddings. No problem has been recorded at the Mosque or the Church in the hundreds of years that records have been kept. I was allowed to film inside this still functioning ancient building. I was asked about my own religion and confessed my atheism. This was received with interest and consideration. No one felt insulted.

The 200 men taken away by the IDF three weeks ago have not been heard of since. This is seriously worrying. 400 men were taken away in the Battle of Jenin and never returned. All taken, dead, in lorries to be buried in communal graves by the IDF. The refugee camp was happy two days ago when several of their men were returned from prison in Lebanon by the Israelis. The suicide bomber's explosion in Jerusalem that followed the 13 killed in Gaza the day before has not seemed to have affected the prisoner exchange. Many of those killed in Gaza were children and this is causing much grief here in Jenin. I like Jenin very much because it feels the pain of other towns. This is not the case all over the West Bank. This letter has been the most difficult that I have sent from the West Bank. Jenin is so battered it is painful to look at. I am also having to be most careful in what I am saying. I find it difficult to write like this. I was supposed to leave Jenin during the week but that got postponed because of the bomber. "No internationals", is still the order so no point in approaching checkpoints until this blows over. I may go back to Nablus by the mountains. I don't think I could face Beit Ibah checkpoint again.

## Letter from Palestine—

Tue 3 Feb 2004

Said good-bye to poor, battered, obstinate Jenin yesterday. Sad to leave everybody. You don't know if they will be in prison, dead, injured or homeless due to demolition, or annexed.

The checkpoint at Beit Ibah was very easy for me. The soldiers seemed to have been infected with the festive mood of families returning after the Eidh children's festival. Not one person was



waiting at the side anxiously wondering if they would get their identity card back and the queues moved quite briskly.

Still turning over in my mind the dreadful situation in Jenin. Reading this morning that many international politicians are not sure if the Wall is legal or not. How can the Wall be legal when it is being built on land that is illegally occupied? How can it be legal when it is breaching the Geneva Convention which states no occupied land can be annexed?

I won't be reunited with my map of the Wall until I get back to Deir Istia. I must study it to see the predicted course around Jenin. Jenin is mostly flat with hundreds of dunums of arable land around it. They too call the Israeli's plan 'Imprison and Starve.' I don't use the word cantons, now. I use the real word—reservation. The Palestinians are going to be encircled by the Wall, penned in reservations and largely left to fend for themselves which, with most water and arable land gone, will mean a very, very lean life. To move out of one reservation to another will mean applying in writing to secure a pass. Showing an identity card as happens now will be abandoned. The situation will be more like the palaver a Palestinian has to go through to go to Jordan—apply many weeks before for a travel permit. These, of course, are mostly refused. I spoke for a good while to a Jenin GP. He has not left Jenin for four years. He just refuses to play Israeli games, do the 'checkpoint dance' as he calls it.

Nablus is quiet just now, no soldiers. I go back to Salfit district Thursday to look at the progress of the Wall. The surveyor's pegs are going to split the town in half; the olive groves and arable land will be annexed between the green line and the Wall, many, many dunuums. This is not going to be an emergency in the future—it is an emergency now.

Before I left Jenin, the police told me that news of the 200 plus prisoners taken in the last Israeli attack has started to trickle in. For those of you who are not familiar with the procedure, let me explain. The Israelis can arrest you from your own bed in your own home. No court order would come, no news of which prison you are held in; absolutely no information at all would be forthcoming. What the families do is contact the Red Cross which has an office solely set up to confirm arrests and find out where the prisoners are held. In other words, the Red Cross has to spend money doing the Israeli's job. Remember, next time you are putting money in a Red Cross collecting tin that you are helping the Red Cross locate Palestinian prisoners. Your taxes are financing the State of Israel and our arms trade has grown wealthy selling to this regime. The Israeli army uniforms are made in Britain. It is hard to think what more we can do to support this regime.

Joyce

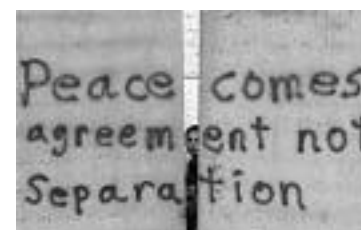
### Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign

Peace & Justice Centre, Princes Street, Edinburgh EH2 4BJ  
secretary@scottishpssc.org.uk  
<http://www.scottishpssc.org.uk>

### Jews for Justice for Palestinians

P.O. Box 37402, London N3 2XG  
jfjusticefp@yahoo.co.uk  
<http://www.jfjfp.org/>

*Palestinian children standing against Israel's apartheid wall built around the Palestinian town Qalqiliya. AEF, 2002*



# Documentary from No-man's Land

## 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' and *Document 1*

Doug Aubrey

It was the last place in the world you'd expect to get a chance to see a film like 'Prisoner of the Caucasus'. A profound and viscerally unnerving documentary about a country that many war correspondents have called the most dangerous place on the planet: Chechnya, a burnt out clump of blood and soil, where even the most seasoned of war hacks and thrill seeking bang-bang chasers still fear to tread.

And while the west engage in their on-going 'hi-tech' war on terror and our view of such events becomes increasingly sanitized (i.e. war with big bangs and no body count), here was a remarkable film about the fog of war that the trans-global media for the most part have largely forgotten about.

The venue for the screening? Sunday night at a cinema supermarket—the UGC—in the very heart of Glasgow.

The partisan and sycophantic followers of a Scots' movie star turned humanitarian saviour-cum film maker have recently departed, to indulge in post premier back-patting, leaving the venue close to empty.

So just how come the few of us that were left ended up sitting here of all places, waiting to watch an obscure film about an obscure place on the planet that many of the multiplex's users probably didn't even know existed?

Enter *Document 1*, Scotland's first ever (as far as I know) *Human Rights Documentary Film Festival*—an intense weekend dedicated to global human rights documentary.

A documentary festival has been talked about for a generation or more here in Scotland. Long overdue, such an initiative has variously over the years been scammed, shammed and even scunnered by people who should know better, many of whom are now part of the great and the good from the media/arts establishment.

Although flawed and over-programmed to the detriment of many great films, *Document 1* was a significant step in the right direction—if not necessarily the great leap forward needed for the reclaiming of the art form from mainstream fakery.

*Document 1*'s organizers, Mona Rai and Paula Larkin, deserve much credit

for pulling off such a significant event, despite being funded as much by giro as by the generosity of the nation's cultural institutions (with the notable exception of a few sympathetic sponsors, including commercial ones such as the UGC).

The films programmed ranged from the life-changing and life-reaffirming to the total crap (video art in search of an audience outside a gallery is still video art even if shown in a proper cinema). From



Karin Berger *Ceija Stojka—Portrait of Romni*

the predictable (privileged kids from the 'observer class' making films about wire burners and busking junkies) to the truly awesome. Criticisms aside, *Document 1* still represented a positive attempt to create a programme that was inclusive rather than exclusive in its intent. Evidenced by everything from the highly imaginative animations of a generation of kids in Glasgow who are learning to live with and get along with their asylum seeking neighbours ('Going Global'), to the moving story of the lost victims of the Nazi holocaust ('Ceija Stojka', Karin Berger). A people who have largely been written out of the story by the Holocaust Industry: the trans-national Roma.

Other key themes explored included: human trafficking and the sex trade; mental health; globalization; the current wannabe chic for 'guerrilla production' (why is it that just about every US kid with a camcorder is now a guerrilla film maker!?!); and other assorted world-wise films from a global village, that is increasingly running out of space, not least of all to show such stuff.

Over-programming also meant that many discussions were either cut short or in some cases didn't take place at all. Although those that were given room were highly charged and articulate.

Witnessing the persecution of the Kurdish people in a programme of films dedicated to the memory of the murdered Firsat Dag (a member of the new community in Glasgow's Sighthill estate) and hearing the eye witness accounts of among others Peri Ibrahim, a former—and potentially again in the future—Peshmarga fighter who had quite literally just stepped off the plane from Northern Iraq, also reinforced the need for the documentary form to 'take you there' by any and all means necessary.

'Prisoner of the Caucasus' (Yury Khashchavatski) the festival's closing film (as much by accident as intent) did just that—to a conflict still being fought in 1st World War conditions at the start of the 21st Century. Watch it and you end up feeling

raw, exposed, sickened and angered that such atrocities were and still are happening in not just a forgotten corner of the old Soviet Union, but in countless other places around the planet. Conflicts which the mainstream media for the most part either ignore for reason of political expediency (supporting a policy of 'you fight your wars and we'll fight ours' on the part of the one great super power and what's left of the rest) or for the enfeebled reason that such events are not considered to be news worthy enough for their audience demograph.

Is 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' one of the best documentaries ever made? Probably.

Because in its depiction of the brutality of war, it also used black humour to convey the horror (something that wouldn't go amiss in the po-faced world of the 'right-on' Euro-doc)

Did it go too far in its graphic depiction of the atrocities committed and human jam that war leaves behind? Definitely; it needed to.

Come to think of it, is it even really a documentary at all, or something far more important—real art maybe?

The layered narrative format of 'Prisoner of the Caucasus', centred on readings from Tolstoy (himself a young soldier when Imperial Russia first started to fight the Tartars in the region) and the film maker Yuri Khashchevatsky's correspondence with a number of his friends—a generation of camera wielding media mercenaries who covered and in some cases still are covering the war in Chechnya, armed not with Kalashnikovs but with Sony Camcorders.

His use of their footage—material we all seldom see of the horrors and sheer boredom of war—at times cut or underscored with music and not without irony (the burnt remains of a Russian tank crew are shown in black and white because, as the narrator says, they are too gruesome in colour!) is an abject lesson in the realities of war and raises fundamental questions about how we either as film makers or viewers perceive war, whether it be in a Hollywood movie, the Hollywood influenced coverage from the current war in Iraq, or just about anything that calls itself serious that comes out of the USA.

The fact that the film itself managed to escape the censorship of the film maker's own country also bares witness to this.

Also underpinning both the gore and horror of the Chechen War is a journey being made by the film maker in the company of a Navy lieutenant returning what is simply referred to by the authorities and film maker as 'Cargo 200' to its homeland.

"There are 3 types of soldier—The resigned, the professional and the reckless."

**Tolstoy**



Metyn Yegyn  
'F', 2001



Beth  
Armstrong  
*Welcome to  
Dover*



Contrary to war being about winners and losers, 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' deals in the universal futility not just of war but also of war coverage, which for the most part (if you ever get a chance to watch uncut footage) is not about heroes and honour but about tears and 'Cargo 200'.

"What's the point of you being here...?"

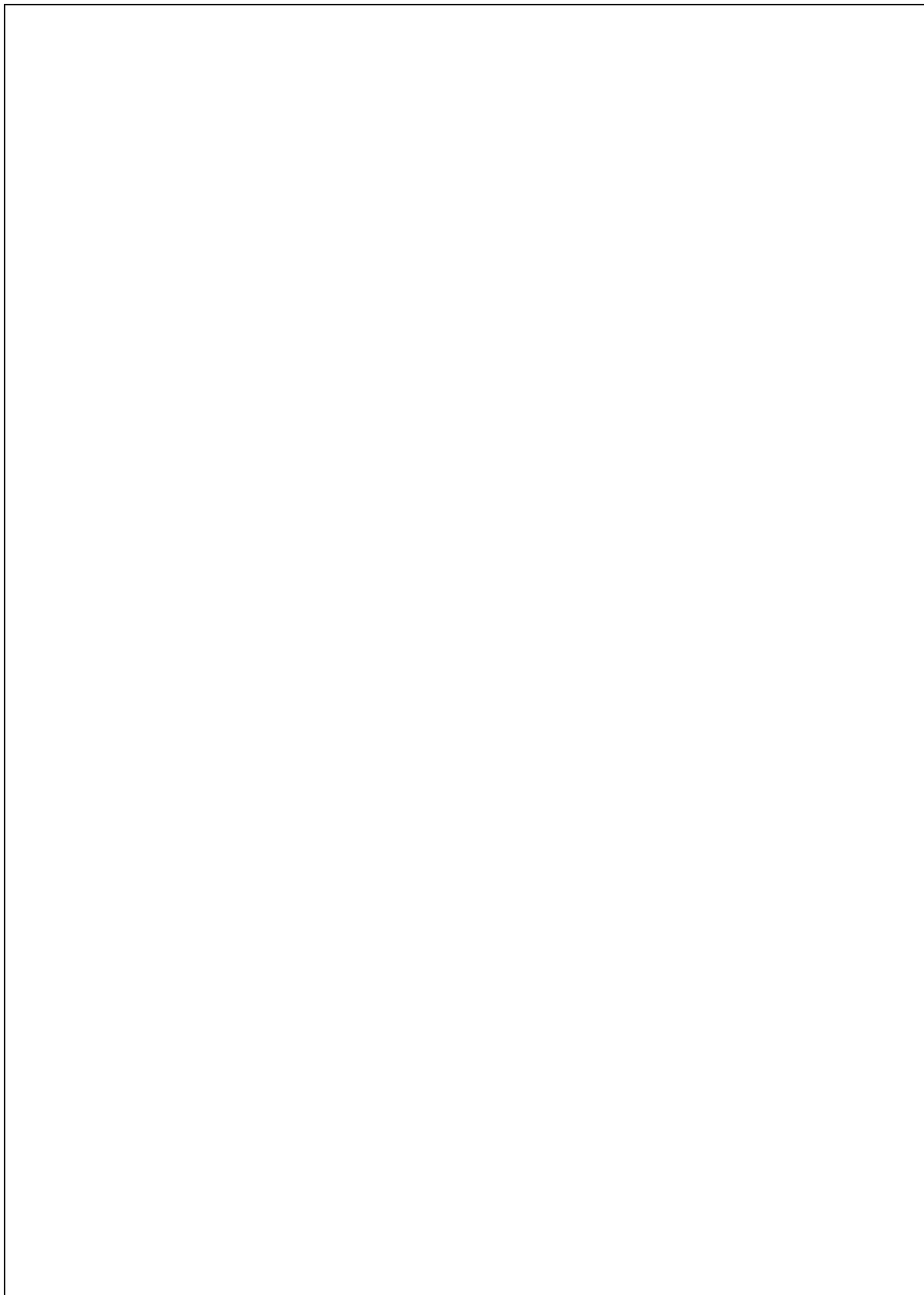
**Tolstoy referring to an old Caucasian saying.**

Increasingly the role of war correspondent is seen as a glamorous one. The camera person (the observer) as some kind of dare-doing war hero, rather than, as should be the case, as just a grunt in the service of a propaganda machine, which increasingly has become a weapon of war. While the glamorous image of the freelance war junkie, leap-frogging the planet in search of his (and increasingly her) next fix of human misery is an increasingly common phenomena. And yet with digitization and the www making it easier for us to see more and ever more young and idealistic wannabes chasing the bang bang, we witness less of what they see of such events.

Perhaps one of the biggest questions that 'Prisoner of the Caucasus', and several other films in *Document 1*, answers is that if we don't get to see the reality of war as seen by these news

stringers etc. then just who does?

The references to Tolstoy in 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' also perhaps points at the much maligned significance of that old and not so trendy any more (lefty) notion of a historical context still being as important—if not more so—than ever before. Because, as the narrator of 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' tells us: "In a movie just like a book you can always see how it ends..."



# Evaluating the social impact of participation in arts activities

## A critical review of François Matarasso's *Use or Ornament?*

Paola Merli

### Introduction

In 1993 the independent research organisation Comedia, on behalf of the Arts Council of Great Britain, produced a discussion document on the social impact of the arts (Landry *et al.*, 1993). The study was followed in 1995-1996 by an empirical research project focused on the social impact of participatory arts programmes, co-ordinated by François Matarasso for Comedia, producing the influential report *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (Matarasso, 1997). The research programme included, among others, the working paper *How the Arts Measure Up* (Williams, 1997), an updating of a research project on the social impact of community arts (*Creating Social Capital*, 1996) carried out in Australia in 1994-1995 with support by the Australia Council for the Arts. Williams' study pioneered the methodology developed by Matarasso in his research.

While earlier publications on the social impact of the arts had attracted relatively little attention, Matarasso's study has played an important role in establishing a near-consensus in Britain among cultural policy-makers. The research was cited by the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, in speeches at the Fabian Society conference at the Playhouse Theatre, London, on 19th September 1997, and at the University of Hertfordshire in Hatfield on 14th January 1998 (Smith, 1998).

Matarasso's research has thus become politically important and worthy of critical analysis. It develops the complex theme of the social impact of the arts from a particular ideological perspective. This is partly due to the author's strong desire to be relevant and useful to the policy process and to contribute to decision-making, but such relevance seems to have been achieved to the detriment of the quality of the research work.

In the first part of this paper I will concentrate on analysing the quality of Matarasso's research. My critique will focus on methodological issues and will try to show that the research project is flawed in its design, execution and conceptual basis. I will then deal with political issues such as whether using participatory arts as a form of governance, under the heading of promoting social cohesion, is actually worthwhile and desirable. Finally, I will frame some suggestions for possible future research.

### A short description of Matarasso's study

The subject of Matarasso's study is the social impact of participatory arts programmes "because it is to this area of the arts that social benefits are most commonly attributed in policy discussion" (Matarasso, 1997, p. iii). The researcher has deliberately avoided studying the social impact of the professional arts. In fact, in the foreword to his research project's final report he recommends reversing the traditional logic of funding: "Britain deserves better than the exhausted prejudices of post-war debates over state support for the arts"; the new objective should be "to start talking about what the arts can do for society, rather than what society can do for the arts" (Matarasso, 1997, p. iv).

The objective of the research is to advocate for the funding of participatory arts programmes on the grounds that they can produce positive social effects which are "out of proportion to their cost" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 81). Such objective is achieved by generalising the results of the cases examined.

The study covers 60 projects in different contexts (rural, urban and metropolitan). The main survey was conducted through a questionnaire made up of 24 questions with a set of three response categories (yes/no/I don't know).<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire was given out to 513 participants.

The 50 findings (i.e. the 50 hypotheses which, according to Matarasso, have been proved right by the research) are structured in six principal themes taken from the eight areas of social impact identified in the discussion document by Landry *et al.* (1993): personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, imagination and vision, health and well being.<sup>2</sup>

### Methodological problems

My first criticism is that Matarasso's study has no internal validity, i.e. the data collected cannot support conclusions about the hypotheses of the research project.

Many of the 50 hypotheses are expressed as relationship between abstract concepts which are not observable, nor measurable. For example: participation in the arts "can give people influence over how they are seen by others", or "can help validate the contribution of a whole community", or "can help people extend control over their own lives", or "can help community groups raise their vision beyond the immediate". The author has not explained what people are expected to do when, for example, they have gained influence over how they are seen by others, or when they have extended control over their own lives.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the 24 questions which make up the participants' questionnaire are not related to the hypotheses. Therefore it is impossible to guess what legitimates Matarasso to say that if people answer "yes" to some specific questions, it means that, because of participation, they have raised their vision beyond the immediate, rather than having gained influence over how they are seen by others.

The reader of *Use or Ornament?* is informed from the very beginning that objectivity should be set aside, because it is an "inappropriate aspiration in evaluation of social policy" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 4), while the only interesting data are the subjective points of view of participants, which are "an appropriate response to the nature of the arts and the complexity of its social outcomes" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 4). Yet there is no systematic record of such subjective points of view in the final report, where we can only read "yes/no/I don't know" answers to the researcher's predetermined questions.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, to what extent is the subjective perception of the participants reliable or, on the contrary, does it reflect only their (unsatisfied) desires? As Bourdieu (1979) argues, it is possible that the researcher,

because of the dissymmetry of the survey situation and his social position, is invested with an authority which encourages the imposition of legitimacy (...). The imposition of legitimacy in the course of the survey is



such that, if one is not careful, one may, as many cultural surveys have done, *produce* declarations of principle which correspond to no real practice. (...) it is no accident that it is the culturally most deprived, the oldest, those further from Paris, in short those least likely really to go to the theatre, who most often acknowledge that 'the theatre *elevates* the mind' (pp. 318-9).

The wording of questions in Matarasso's questionnaire may actually have led respondents to biased answers. For example, the question "Was being able to express your ideas important to you?" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 101) implicitly assumes that everybody had a chance and was able to express his or her ideas. In addition, from the respondent's point of view, answering "no" to this question means either not having been able to express one's ideas (this is bad in terms of personal development, thus some respondents may answer "yes" only in order not to look or feel undeveloped) or not appreciating the fact of having been able to express one's ideas (this is socially undesirable, thus some participants may answer "yes" even if it is not necessarily what they think). The same happens with other questions, for example: "Was doing something creative important to you?" and: "Since being involved did you become more confident about what you can do?" (If one answers "no" it might seem that one was not able to grasp the opportunity of doing something creative and becoming more confident, thus some respondents may answer "yes" just to protect their own sense of self-worth).

Under these circumstances, it is by no means certain that Matarasso is really measuring what he claims to measure. There is a distinct possibility that he is measuring something else, such as the social desirability of the abstract concepts of "happiness", "empowerment" and "confidence" used in the questionnaire. Social desirability can in fact behave as a moderator variable which modifies the intensity of the dependent variables. Its influence can even make it the decisive factor in the research findings. However, the author of the research fails to note the possibility of the existence of social desirability bias and consequently does not control its extent.

In addition, some of the questions unintentionally force answers to unfold from indifference to positive values only. For example: "Since being involved have you felt better or healthier?" (even by answering "no" the respondent cannot at any rate mean that he is feeling worse, but only that he has not experienced any change); and also: "Since being involved have you been happier?" (even answering "no" the respondent cannot in any case mean that he is more unhappy or miserable, but, at most, that he is just as happy as before attendance). The consequence is that the author of the research can rule out possible negative impacts.

The reason why Matarasso does not evaluate the negative side of activities is, he claims, that the artistic experience is so important for the individual (according to whose criteria?), that it is always worth taking the risk (however, this should have been decided by the participants and not by the researcher). Thus he judges other people's quality of life according to his own standard. In a multi-ethnic society and in projects which involve people with different cultural backgrounds, this way of working seems rather inappropriate.

Factors which appear to be fairly secondary in relation to the hypotheses are examined by at least four of the 24 questions: "Has taking part encouraged you to try *anything* else?" (is there any social value in just trying anything else? What about trying a murder?); "Do you feel different about the place where you live?" (is there any social merit in just changing one's feeling about where he or she lives, or does this question imply that before attendance people must have felt necessarily negative about their place of residence?); "Has the project changed your ideas about anything?" (is there any social worth in just changing one's ideas about, for example, lipstick colour?). These questions do not seem to refer to indicators linked to the social issues and problems which, according to Matarasso, participatory arts should address. This shows quite clearly that Matarasso has not devised the questions in relation to the hypotheses.

On the whole, Matarasso's survey only allows him to know *some* of the ideas, attitudes and intentions of respondents, not to evaluate real modifications in their daily conditions of existence in relation to specific social issues. Therefore the author has only measured a change in the ideas and the values of participants, a change which seems, at least in part, to coincide with the degree of acculturation of participants to his own ideas. Strangely enough, Matarasso has devoted a whole chapter of his methodological working paper (Matarasso, 1996) to ethical issues, but has just touched upon the possibility that a patronising attitude is developed on the part of the evaluator. In any case, in the empirical research he seems to have done nothing to counter the risk of imposition of the researcher's values and ideas on participants.

The research design also has no control groups, nor a longitudinal dimension, which would have allowed the researcher to control possible extraneous variables and to ascertain the existence of a causal link or a correlation between the activities examined and the measured effects. The independent variable (arts participation) has not been manipulated along time, because the questionnaire was only distributed once. Matarasso actually worries about the fact that the phrasing of questions such as "Do you feel differently about where you live?" did not take into consideration how people might have felt before they took part in the project (Matarasso, 1977, p. 96). He notices that something has not gone well, only because some participants have answered "no" to such question. However, apart from the fact that just feeling "different" does not mean anything precise in terms of social impact, the underlying structural problem is clearly the absolute lack of

before-after comparisons in the research design.<sup>5</sup>

The author of the research does not even attempt to establish a causal link because, he asserts, the difficulty is so deeply rooted in social research methods, that it is not possible to solve it. Against possible criticism to his methodological choices, Matarasso puts forward the rather evasive argument that in any case the determination of causal links does not answer the question "Why the project has been a success or a failure", while, he points out, it would be extremely important to be able to do so by analysing "the causal mechanism triggered by a given programme" (Matarasso, 1966, p. 20). However, he himself does not analyse such mechanism.

Not having tackled the problem of the causal link, or at least of a correlation, Matarasso lists the results of the research with the sentence: "the study shows that participation in the arts can:" (a list of 50 effect follows). It is like reading the label on a bottle of mineral water: "it can be diuretic". Nobody knows if this is a threat or a wish, but in any case the advertised effect cannot be guaranteed.

To sum up, it is quite clear that the data collected by Matarasso cannot support conclusions about his own hypotheses. In other words, his research has no internal validity.

How does the author deal with this problem? He justifies himself with the argument that internal validity is unattainable in the evaluation of artistic programmes because "creative initiative cannot have internal validity (...). But that is their strength—it is in the creative *unpredictability* of their outcomes that arts project add an essential tool to the range of social action" (Matarasso, 1996, p. 21, my italics). Leaving aside the fact that internal validity is not an attribute of real life initiatives but of pieces of research only, the author should have inferred, from his own premises, that the impact of arts programmes cannot be studied by using predefined indicators. In fact, predetermined indicators are methodological tools not suited to the task of discovering the unpredictable results of activities. Yet Matarasso does use predefined indicators—i.e. in this case, indicators which are constructed by the researcher and agreed with project partners without preliminary discussions with the people who have taken part in the activities.

Let us now suppose that all the findings of the research are valid. There are still some problems. The author does not investigate whether he is dealing with lasting results or rather with only transitory or even evanescent effects. For example, what will people do when the arts programmes are over? Also, the author does not attempt to understand whether participants in the activities under examination are actually economically deprived and socially excluded people, rather than affluent people who perhaps were feeling somewhat bored before participating.

My second criticism of Matarasso's research is that even if we assume that the findings are valid in relation to the specific activities examined, the research has no external validity. The results cannot legitimately be generalised because the sample is not representative of the wider population and of all participatory arts activities. It simply includes all participants in initiatives, which, in terms of research methodology, are selected in an accidental way. This would not be a problem in itself, if the author of the report clearly stated that his sampling procedure only provides a very weak basis for generalisation—which Matarasso fails to do. Although he may consider his sample to be typical of participatory arts activities, he does not provide any explanation of why the sample itself is a typical one. Participatory arts and the people who attend them (and thus, presumably, their impacts) are not the same in different places, times and contexts.

Moreover, in 75% of the activities studied the

questionnaires were not returned. In this situation, the already weak basis for generalisation is further undermined. If it were precisely the failed projects (and hence the dissatisfied individuals) not to return the questionnaires, quantitative evidence could be interpreted as a 75% negative result. These underlying doubts are strengthened by the author's statement: "Efforts were made to extend the net beyond the enthusiasts, and speak with those who, so to speak, were inclined to slip away silently. Neutral and dissenting views were actively sought from (ex-)participants, members of the local community and professionals with knowledge of the projects" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 98). Still, the negative points of view are not discussed in the final report. They are only mentioned briefly in Chapter 9, under the title "Counterweight", where unfavourable criticism is tellingly categorised as "dissenting voices" and dissatisfaction is mistaken for cynicism: programmes where "initial optimism had dissolved and been replaced by a further layer of cynicism about the possibility of change, because nothing had happened since" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 75) are safely restricted by the author to "one or two cases".

On balance, it is fairly obvious that the "results" of the research on the specific activities examined cannot be generalised.

At the same time, Matarasso does not examine critically the projects which possibly failed to achieve their objectives, but ascribes failure to the circumstances that the "employment conditions of artists who work with people are lamentable", materials and equipment are limited, and "once or twice problems seemed to arise from inexperience of the artist(s) concerned" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 74). The scarce research material concerning the difficulties and negative effects of participation is placed by Matarasso in a section of the text under the (again very telling) title "The cost of change", where the author simply reassures the reader that "costs of participation in the arts, as in life, may be indicators of richness and engagement" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 76).

Comedia's discussion document (Landry *et al.*, 1993) drew attention to the concept of opportunity cost used in cost-benefit analysis. The opportunity cost is the value of the benefits which would have been offered by foregone alternative projects with the same costs. In a study on the social impact of the arts, the application of cost-benefits analysis might show, for instance, that the value of the benefits produced by participatory arts activities is higher than the value of the benefits produced by other types of intervention with the same costs. On the other hand, it might show that participatory arts programmes have lower costs if compared with other types of intervention, which produce the same benefits. But Matarasso cannot develop this issue, because he has not proved that such benefits exist. Still, he asserts that "arts project can provide cost-effective solutions (...). They represent an insignificant financial risk to public services, but can produce impacts (social and economic) out of proportion to their cost" (Matarasso, 1997, p. 81). He just considers this assertion to be self-evident. Nevertheless, for impacts to be out of proportion to their cost when such impacts are not proved to exist, the cost of participatory arts programmes should be just zero. This is not a very good result for Matarasso's advocacy.

### The theory of social change implicit in Matarasso's research

My last point of criticism is that the research is flawed in conceptual terms. In brief, I will try to show that the theory of social change implicit in Matarasso's research is questionable.

The interest in participatory arts which Matarasso shares with some policy-makers seems to be the expression of a particular philosophical attitude towards society. Many intellectuals have

started looking at society as a mere *fact*: they do not venture questions, hard criticism and struggle any more; they increasingly behave like “new missionaries”, who play guitar with marginalised youth, the disabled and the unemployed, aiming at mitigating the perception which they have of their own exclusion. However, this benevolent attitude does not seem to be capable of solving problems. Indeed, it does not seem that “feeling differently” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 101) about the place where one lives will transform slums into wonderful places, nor that just helping “transform the image of public bodies” (Matarasso, 1997, p. x) will transform the reality of public bodies, nor that having “a positive impact on how people feel” (Matarasso, 1997, p. x) will change people’s daily conditions of existence—it will only “help” people to accept them.<sup>6</sup> However, making deprivation more acceptable is a tool to endlessly reproduce it. Social deprivation and exclusion arguably can be removed only by fighting the structural conditions which cause them. Such conditions will not be removed by benevolent arts programmes.

The “new missionaries” also think that social problems can be tackled through top-down social cohesion and integration strategies. In a publication by the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion at the London School of Economics, Mark Kleinman (1998) criticises the fashionable recommendation of fighting exclusion by simply promoting inclusion:

the current vogue is that (...) socially excluded areas don’t just need jobs and better homes—apparently they need community centres, self-help groups, voluntary organisations and community businesses. I don’t quite follow the logic here, as these seem to be things which better off areas don’t have, or at least don’t have that much (...). The danger is that the emerging ideology of social inclusion will lead to the imposition of modes of behaviour on the poor, which the rest of society has rejected (Kleinman 1998, pp. 10-12).<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, for Kleinman a social cohesion strategy as a tool for preventing potential social conflicts is only a “chimera”. To prove this, he reports the results of a study carried out by the American sociologist Mary Baumgartner on the calm suburbs around New York (*The Moral Order of the Suburb*, 1988), which concludes that the sense of social cohesion is actually opposed to social order and lack of crime:

the order (...) does not arise from intimacy and connectedness, but rather from some of the very things more often presumed to bring about conflict and violence—transiency, fragmentation, isolation, atomisation, and indifference among people (...). If people in such places cannot be bothered to take action against those who offend them or to engage in conflicts, neither can they be bothered to help those in need (Baumgartner, quoted in Kleinman, 1998, p. 11).

On the other hand, the “new missionaries” have a notion of their work as an instrument to transform the culture of the studied communities and make it more similar to their own culture and values. They know what is good for people, what their “deep sources of enjoyment” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 68) should be, and how such sources should be provided. They know what levels of “personal development” and “confidence” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 14) people should possess and what should be done in order to raise them. They even claim that people should “widen their horizons” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 16) and explain how this should be accomplished.<sup>8</sup> Such a commitment to changing people’s ideas and behaviour does not solve problems because it leaves the structural conditions of deprivation untouched. Andrew Sayer (1992) rightly questions research approaches where the critical attitude is aimed at influencing and changing the people whom it studies, because this is not, in itself a sufficient condition for social change and disillusionment might lead to unexpected nega-

tive effects:

in primarily leading a life of reflection, it is easy for the researchers to forget that changing people’s thinking may leave the world of practice largely unchanged, although a relation of dissonance may be induced between the two (Sayer, 1992, p. 254).

Research aimed at the emancipation of the researched, continues Sayer, would involve an elimination of the division between the researcher and the researched. However, such division is deeply rooted in our society and thus the interests of the researcher are far from compatible with the interests of the researched; on the contrary, in these circumstances the development of certain types of knowledge may (and often does) have the effect of reinforcing domination and subordination and hence opposing a general emancipation (Sayer, 1992, pp. 254-255).

### Social stability as “new” objective

At a first reading, Matarasso’s final report awakens the enthusiasm, typical of the seventies, about the idea of active participation of people in cultural activities. Nevertheless, from a deeper investigation a fundamental difference emerges between Matarasso’s conception of participatory attitudes and the original phenomenon of community arts.

Matarasso claims that the “real purpose of the arts” is “to contribute to a stable, confident and creative society” (Matarasso, 1997, p. v). This point is crucial, because it reveals the new trend in the revival. While the original phenomenon was a spontaneous movement, its revival is a device “offered” by the government. While the former was directed to the expression of conflicts, Matarasso’s vision is directed to social stability obtained by means of “peaceful” popular consensus, the underlying inspiration seemingly being that whereas the rich are doing the “right” things,

the poor should be soothed through “therapeutic” artistic activities. While in the seventies the aim was emancipation and liberation from any form of social control, also (and above all) by means of artistic creativity, in the revival of interest in participatory arts advocated by Matarasso the aim is the restoration of social control using the same tools, although otherwise directed.

Hence, the issue of what the arts can do for society, proposed by Matarasso as an innovation, is simply a new way of achieving the old “civilising” objective of cultural policy.<sup>9</sup> This is quite evident in some of his hypotheses, such as: participation in the arts “can promote tolerance and contribute to conflict resolution”, or “can provide a route to rehabilitation and integration for offenders”, or “can help people feel a sense of belonging and involvement”, or “can be an effective means of health education” or “can extend involvement in social activity”. However, the old “civilising” objective is used for new aims: “to develop a society of responsible risk takers” (Habermas, 1999, p. 53) who are willing to accept, in a constructive and self-reliant way, the process of dismantling the welfare state. This is clear in some of Matarasso’s hypotheses, such as: participation in the arts “can provide a forum to explore personal rights and responsibilities” (whereas the welfare state—according to its critics—had accustomed people to focus on rights only), or “can encourage people to accept risk positively” (while the welfare state had tended to minimise risks for people).

### Conclusions and suggestions for possible future research

I have tried to show why and how Matarasso’s study does not produce a well-founded understanding of the social impact of the arts. The research design is flawed, research methods are not applied in a rigorous way and the conceptual bases are questionable.

Research on the social impact of participatory arts should thus aim to develop new approaches. Publications on social impact assessment can be especially interesting even though they do not concentrate on participatory arts programmes, but, more generally, on the social consequences of policy formulation and implementation. For example, Finsterbusch (1980) provides a conceptual framework for social impact assessment, devoting as many as 25 pages to definitions of the concepts of “community cohesion” and “neighbourhood”, to a historical analysis of the functions of neighbourhoods and their transformations in the twentieth century, and to methods of measurement of community cohesion and neighbourhood attachment. Finsterbusch, Llewellyn and Wolf (1983) have edited a collection of essays on social impact assessment methods, including a stimulating discussion on causes and correctives for errors of judgement in social impact research. Finally, the chapter “Towards a methodological framework” in Comedia’s discussion document (Landry *et al.*, 1993) offers methodological guidelines and *caveats* which can be very useful in designing an empirical research project about the social impact of arts activities.<sup>10</sup> The document lists five different methodological approaches, explaining the contexts in which each of them would be more appropriate, and stresses the need to give relative weights to each variable that is going to be evaluated, arguing, for example, that in order to legitimately declare that an artistic programme has improved the quality of life of participants it is necessary—first of all—to know what are, in the opinions of participants, the main constituents of “quality of life” and the relative weights attributed to them.

However, one of the major problems of research into the social impact of participation in arts activities is that it has no strong theoretical grounding. The argument that the arts *do* have social effects (which therefore just need be measured) is far from being substantiated. Furthermore, it is not tenable that any kind of participatory arts activity in any kind of communi-

ty and culture would have identical social impacts. Differences are expected to exist and it is necessary to know more about this. Without knowing what the real, specific effects of the arts are, and in which circumstances they occur, the researchers are only going to measure what they would like to be there, for example—as in Matarasso—a reduction of crime and vandalism: “the community police officer argued that active participation of residents in the life of their community was essential to maintaining order on the estate” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 35). We should therefore capitalise on—and develop further—through an interdisciplinary approach, the contributions of other important fields of research. Moreover, we should proceed along clear lines and make explicit the theories underpinning our research.

Relevant contributions include, for example, psychological and sociological theories of creativity and art perception and empirical studies in the field of cognitive psychology on the effect of the arts on individuals.

The psychologist Lev Vygotskij researched into the phenomenon of creativity as a social process. He was interested in understanding how individual creativity affected innovation at a wider social level. In his fundamental work on imagination and creativity in childhood (1930), he rejected the romantic conception of creativity as the product of a sudden inspiration. He also refuted the idealisation of children’s creativity, based on a typically romantic negative attitude towards education. On the contrary, for Vygotskij the products of authentic creative imagination, in any field, were exactly the results of education and mature imagination. He showed that children have less creativity than adults, but they believe more in the products of their imagination because they have less control and critical judgement over such products—this is why children do not feel frustrated with their creative achievements. However, as rational thought gains control over imagination in the process of growing up, children who do not have a chance to learn the cultural and technical factors which make mature creativity possible, gradually become frustrated about their creative accomplishments and stop engaging with imaginative activities. Creativity—in the arts, science and technology—is, for Vygotskij, an historical and consequential process. Inventors, even geniuses, are always creatures of their times and of their environments. Their creative capacities are prompted by the needs for innovation which had been formed in earlier times and by the opportunities offered by the context in which they work. All this accounts for the disproportion in the number of innovators in different social classes. The privileged classes, according to Vygotskij, produce a much higher percentage of innovators because their members enjoy all the necessary conditions for creation.

Vygotskij’s notion of creativity can raise significant research questions. For example, what is the role of participatory arts programmes in encouraging this type of creativity, compared with other forms of education? In this framework, are the social effects of participatory arts activities attended by children different from the effects of the same activities attended by adults? In what ways? Also, are the impacts of creative activities implemented in exceptionally disadvantaged areas different from the impacts of the same activities implemented in other areas? In what ways?

John Sloboda has conducted important research in the field of the cognitive psychology of music. His book *The Musical Mind* (1985) is an enquiry into music as a cognitive skill. Sloboda is interested in understanding “*how* music is able to affect people”. He argues that music has to do with emotional factors, its social functions and motivations being only secondary to the emotional factors; but, he writes: “the cognitive stage is a necessary precursor of the affective stage”: a listener cannot find a joke funny unless he understand it. However, the affective stage does not necessarily follow the cognitive state. A person may understand a joke perfectly well without being moved to laughter by

it. So it is with music. A person may understand the music he hears without being moved by it. If he is moved by it then he must have passed through the cognitive stage, which involves forming an abstract or symbolic *internal representation* of the music (...). Composition and improvisation require the generation of such representations, and perception involves the listener constructing them (Sloboda, 1985, p. 3).

Thus given the “conceptually-mediated nature of experience” (Sayer, 1992, p. 54), does the cultural background of participants influence the social impact of the activities? Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception*, first published in 1968, argues that the arts exist only for those who are able to decipher them:

the recapturing of the work’s objective meaning (...) is completely adequate and immediately effected in the case—and only in the case—where the culture that the originator puts into the work is identical with the culture or, more accurately, the *artistic competence* which the beholder brings to the deciphering of the work (...). Whenever these specific conditions are not fulfilled, misunderstanding is inevitable: the illusion of immediate comprehension leads to an illusory comprehension based on a mistaken code (Bourdieu, 1968; 1993, p. 216).



The first consequence of Bourdieu’s theory might be that a real, deep impact of the arts can exist only for a very small élite of educated people who are able to decipher their codes, while for all those who do not have artistic competence, the main function of the arts is to legitimate social differences: “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu, 1979; 1984, p. 7). This might be taken as a grounding theory for an interesting research on the social impact of the arts. For example, do participatory arts overcome such drawback?

From Bourdieu’s theory we can also derive ideas which have implications on the choice of research methods. As the work of art only exists for those who can decipher it,

the satisfactions attached to this perception (...) are only accessible to those who are disposed to appropriate them because they *attribute a value to them*, it being understood that they can do this only if they have the means to appropriate them. Consequently, the need to appropriate (...) cultural goods (...) can appear only in

those who can satisfy it, and can be satisfied as soon as it appears. It follows on the one hand that, unlike “primary” needs, the “cultural” need as a cultivated need increases in proportion as it is satisfied, because each new appropriation tends to strengthen the mastery of the instruments of appropriation and (...) consequently, the satisfaction attached to a new appropriation; on the other hand, it also follows that the awareness of deprivation decreases in proportion as the deprivation increases (Bourdieu, 1968; 1993, p. 227).

Also involvement in participatory arts is a cultivated cultural need and not a primary need, thus asking people whether they are satisfied with participatory arts programmes is arguably not fair unless those who are being surveyed are fully aware of their cultural deprivation. Yet because of the particular characteristics of awareness of deprivation identified by Bourdieu, it is probably not correct to use questionnaire surveys to assess whether socially deprived people are satisfied with participatory arts programmes. In-depth interviews might prove to be a better tool because they offer chances to compensate, though only in part, for distortions in communication, allowing the interviewee to ask questions and obtain information from the researcher, and enabling the researcher to understand—and not simply to measure—the ideas and the feelings of the interviewee. In-depth interviews also allow the researcher to control the effects of the research relationship, “to perceive and monitor *on the spot*, as the interview is actually taking place, the effects of the social structure within which it is occurring” (Bourdieu, 1993; 1999, p. 608). Finally, such methodological tool can make interviewees feel free to express and explain ideas and opinions which are not being asked to them, thus revealing aspects unforeseen by the researcher.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Franco Bianchini, Stuart Price, Mike Walford and two anonymous referees for their help.

#### Notes

- 1 Matarasso asserts that besides the questionnaires completed by participants, he has also made use of other tools (questionnaires completed by observers, field visits, participant observation, formal interviews, discussion groups, observer groups and evaluation through indicators agreed with project partners). However, these tools have been used only in some projects and the results are not mentioned in the research report.
- 2 After completing the research under consideration in this article, Matarasso has continued to work extensively on the social impact of participatory arts programmes, drawing on the same methodological framework, with only minor changes. The hypotheses and findings in his more recent works are very similar to the ones in *Use or Ornament?* Some of the results are published in the reports *Poverty and Oysters* (Matarasso, 1998a) and *Vital Signs* (Matarasso, 1998b).
- 3 In *Vital Signs* Matarasso (1998b) includes another indicator which is not observable, nor measurable: the “creation of new positive symbols” (p. 34). Who decides, and according to what criteria, that the symbols created are positive?
- 4 Apart from sporadic, isolated quotations from participants’ comments, such as: “It made me realise that I’m capable of doing anything I put my mind to, whereas before I never thought that I could do anything” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 15), or “We used to be worst—now we are the best” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 50).
- 5 In the research report *Vital Signs*, Matarasso (1998b) introduces a longitudinal dimension in the analysis of data on cultural infrastructures, but not in the participants’ questionnaires.
- 6 Towards the end of the final report Matarasso surprisingly claims that the arts can “reduce public expenditure by *alleviating* social problems *which the state would otherwise be obliged to put right*” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 93, my italics). A slip of the pen?
- 7 In *Poverty & Oysters*, Matarasso (1998a) actually identifies social inclusion as one of the main hypotheses of impact.
- 8 In *Vital Signs* (Matarasso, 1998b) the objective of changing people’s ideas becomes explicit. One of the key indicators identified by Matarasso of such change is, revealingly, the “increased appreciation of public authorities” (p. 34).
- 9 For an account of the debates on culture’s civilising effect, see Bennett (1998).
- 10 It is quite strange that Matarasso seems to have almost completely ignored the suggestions given there.

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- For a response by François Matarasso to this article see *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2003 Vol. 9 (3), pp. 337-346.
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# Wasting our powers away

## Stephen Dawber

A review of:

Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists, and Corporate Sponsorships*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

Joost Smiers, *Arts Under Pressure: Promoting Cultural Diversity in the Age of Globalization*, (London and New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2003)

Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, (London and New York: Verso, 2002)

Spectrality may be an overwrought trope for the left today, but it is hard to ignore its resonance. Even in its safest havens the haunting of capital takes on more exuberant forms and the links between different kinds of question are made manifest. For the millions in Europe who marched against the war in Iraq over the past year, their engagement owed at least something to an adjacent sense of diminishing freedoms on home territory. There might, after all, be some relation between the violent and illegal stripping of Iraqi public assets on behalf of (mostly) American corporations and, say, the morning crush on suburban commuter trains.<sup>1</sup>

It is now nearly three decades since a Labour administration first publicly capitulated to monetarist 'realism'. Under pressure from financial markets and the International Monetary Fund, James Callaghan subjected the welfare state to £5 billion of spending cuts before Margaret Thatcher's redoubled assault on the public sector from 1979. Since then our common wealth has steadily been eroded, with the global restructuring of capital forcing the logic of market forces into every aspect of public policy.<sup>2</sup> Today, the resulting social crisis extends profoundly, marked by escalating global inequality, the collapse of our ecosystem, and the failure of social democratic politics to staunch the influence—not least in the media sphere—of powerfully anti-democratic forces. With the waning legitimacy of the Blair regime, privatisation more clearly marks out the terrain of domestic opposition, although the capacity of trade union leaders to capitulate means that the weight of British dissent has proved slight compared with Italy, France and most recently Germany. In cultural terms, too, we are living out what Cornelius Castoriadis once described as a 'protracted agony for the existing institution of society'.<sup>3</sup>

These texts attempt to anatomise that agony, each analysing in detail the encroachment of private interests into the public domain of culture over the last three decades. They constitute a new wave of academic critique, exceeding the more ambivalent response to privatisation that followed from the collapse of the Soviet system after 1989.<sup>4</sup> Each has a different disciplinary and descriptive optic: Wu examines empirically the partial takeover of public high art institutions by private capital in Britain and the United States since the early 1980s, whilst Rectanus engages more with the politics of representation underpinning corporate cultural interests in America and Germany. Smiers' book is global in its scope and is most closely connected to a body of cultural policy, namely Unesco's strategies for protecting artistic diversity developed during the 1990s. Taken together they perform a valuable, indeed, shocking diagnosis, although none promises much in terms of steps towards meaningful political transformation.

Since the rise of mass-mediated societies dur-

ing the inter-war period, capitalism has shown scant interest in promoting cultural democracy. The tendency of Western states since 1945 has been to 'democratise' culture from above, devoting the majority of public expenditure to high art forms and centralised professional bodies. Popular culture has, on the whole, been left to the marketplace and grassroots arts programmes have suffered a precarious existence. The historic inequalities of cultural provision are seen most dramatically in the media sphere. Beyond the parochialism of community radio and television, no Western nation has fostered an expanded realm of interactive and democratically-controlled mass communication.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the inequalities of cultural stratification, post-war public funding offered, for a select few, a degree of creative autonomy. It is the decline of that margin of freedom over the last quarter century that these histories interrogate. This is already to hint at their limitations (the post-war cultural compact they appear to defend was always structured in dominance), but in their own terms they provide a useful contribution to cultural workers' understanding of their contemporary agency. In the arts sector, as well as in higher education, the scope of that agency is rapidly diminishing. Caught between the spectacularising pressures of commercial incorporation and the controlling logic of social inclusion policy, the autonomy—and hence creative and critical capacity—of cultural workers is being fast eroded.

All three texts document similar transitions since the late 1970s: the reduction of state funding and the expanded intrusion of private capital into the public realm; the introduction of tax subsidies for the culture of the rich (including corporate propaganda), enhancing its mystification; the rise of a promotional 'event' culture and the shift from a philanthropic engagement in the arts to the more aggressive marketing of corporate identity; the wielding of corporate censorship and institutional self-censorship of critical projects; the maintenance, and in some cases bolstering, of nepotistic systems of institutional governance; the conglomeration of media ownership and a sharp decline in the diversity of distribution outlets; the use of public sector institutions more explicitly for maintaining capitalist social reproduction (not least through social inclusion policy); the murder of critical reason by consumer sovereignty (seen in the rising influence, amongst other symptoms, of the celebrity critic); the collaboration of the press in the market-driven seduction, rather than critical engagement, of public opinion; and an increasing uniformity in the content of acquisitions and displays (the rise of the 'blockbuster' exhibition). The incursion of the logic of accumulation into the cultural 'lifeworld' advances globally with increasingly detrimental consequences.

As Wu in particular points out, British governments since the 1980s—often in direct collaboration with commercial interests—have been keen to promote these processes at a time when various forms of anti-capitalist politics pose a mounting threat to neoliberal legitimacy. From Philip Morris, to Armani, to American Express and Absolut vodka, there is nothing disinterested about today's corporate sponsorship. What is striking about all these books is their empirical density: under sheer weight of evidence, it seems, the liberal self-congratulation of the early 1990s has



mutated into a clear-headed understanding that the capturing of public culture for private interests undermines democracy. Facing mounting commercial pressures, curators and artists become uncritical brokers of consumption-led identities, further flattening the political contours of social inequality. Managerialism and the corporate wooing of the 'scholarly business manager' place limits on the ability of organisations to stimulate critical questioning vital to the wellbeing of democracy. Public discourse is delimited by institutional branding and artists are recruited to various vacuous conceptions of creative 'entrepreneurship'. As Rectanus puts it, 'corporate cultural programming frequently diverts attention from a more rigorous and critical examination of its own institutional interests in local and global public policies' (p. 97).

Whether cultural democracy is a situation to be grasped now, or a condition to struggle towards, is a question of political strategy these books—with the partial exception of Smiers—carefully avoid. To this extent their contribution to the immediate repositioning of cultural policy is limited. Certainly, the tendency of recent years to regenerate urban areas by erecting cultural institutions has been dominated by anti-democratic policies that could be reversed politically to immediate collective gain. The most striking example of this is the expansionism of the Samuel R. Guggenheim Foundation, a private trust with a base in New York and six satellite museums across Europe and America. Buying into the Guggenheim brand has certainly cost taxpayers dear. As Rectanus points out, its Bilbao museum deprived local and regional governments of \$100 million in construction payments, not to mention unknown ongoing operational and administrative expenses; \$50 million for a new Spanish and Basque art collection for the museum; and \$20 million in the form of a tax free 'donation' to the Foundation as a 'rental fee' (p. 178). This prodigious gerrymandering of collective resources, outwith the normal paraphernalia of public accountability, has little to do with cultural democracy, although doubtless it attracts the tourist euros and taste-seeking sensationalism of the managerial class. The destructive social implications of such regeneration projects—including in many cases the expulsion of the poor to the city's margins—demand a more politicised engagement with urban and cultural policy than these writers, for the most part, are able to supply.

Similarly, Wu's careful history of the corrupt, self-selecting committees that comprise the governing bodies of some of America's and Britain's major art galleries is not matched by any effort to describe how they could be reformed, or, indeed, whether current institutional structures are reformable. Although she mentions democratic



cultural agendas in passing, the position from which any progressive transition might be achieved is never considered. Whatever their descriptive strengths, all these texts lack any workable sense of political strategy or collective agency. Rectanus' rendition of a sociological poetics of simultaneous incorporation and resistance amounts to practically no resistance at all, whilst Smiers' main proposal—the global abolition of copyright imposed by international treaty—vastly underestimates the interest of capital in maintaining intellectual property relations, not to mention its ability to do so. Wu's book, with its New Left credentials, suffers from no properly theorised framework and little effort to link the shift from public provision to private sector enterprise with a wider political economy. To this extent all three books can only add to a growing litany of supposedly radical diagnoses premised on the continuing retreat from working-class agency.<sup>6</sup> This is not to posit some simplistic socialist alternative—any collective agency in the cultural field will be complexly constituted and must build from a position of considerable weakness. However, it is to suggest that cultural workers need to be much more concerned with rethinking the limits of contemporary cultural policy in order to articulate a strategic politics of resistance.

Since the 1980s, especially in the wake of the abolition of the Greater London Council, left cultural policy has been overwhelming pragmatic, abandoning hard fought theoretical positions from the 1960s and realigning around progressively weakened social democratic forces. Left intellectual resources for action—Gramsci, Freire, Brecht, Benjamin—have been displaced in favour of a liberal articulation of Habermas and Foucault.<sup>7</sup> Although the dangerously anti-democratic growth of monopolistic corporate media continues to receive scrutiny, campaigners have failed to mobilise much beyond the conservative vested interests of the trade unions.<sup>8</sup> Doubtless the influ-

ence of cultural studies is partly to blame—pragmatism, as John Roberts has recently argued, constitutes its political unconscious—and Francis Mulhern is surely right to suggest that the logic of culturalism—the idea that culture encompasses the political—leads to the dissolution of politics.<sup>9</sup> This crisis of cultural policy is exacerbated in Britain by the undue influence of private consultancies (and increasingly academic departments) whose vested interests exclude the conduct of critical research. Faced with the dialectics of commercial expansion and social exclusion, the much vaunted 'democracy' of the cultural inclusions turns out, in the absence of a socialist politics, to be precious little democracy at all.

The catastrophe of the world at large continues to bear in on culture in all its forms and these books convincingly describe how, within our lifetimes, the margins of creative freedom have been diminished. One way for cultural workers to respond is to extend their activity beyond the production of critical artworks and fight to renew cultural policy, to become involved, in other words, in gaining power. This means combating commercial vested interests within institutions, mobilising through trade unions, building cultural programmes around political issues, and obstructing state agencies in their efforts to use cultural institutions to recompose the social relations of production (social inclusion policy is a key target here). All these strategies imply moving beyond institutionally-defined artistic prerogatives in order to develop a broader cultural praxis within the public sector. In this way, cultural democracy could become a powerful tool for action, premised on the importance of critical communication (and the autonomy that sustains it) for a healthy polity.

As the ongoing capitulation of the Blair government to neoliberal forces confirms, the forward march of social democracy is irrevocably halted.<sup>10</sup> In the face of increasingly frequent and violent global crises, it is above all a rejuvenated sense of

political agency that will allow cultural producers to sustain their critical and creative energies in opposition to the dehumanising and totalising logic of today's promotional industries.

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## Notes

- 1 This plundering has not passed uncontested. See Naomi Klein, 'Of course the White House fears free elections in Iraq', *Guardian*, 24 January 2004, p. 18.
- 2 Colin Leys, *Market-driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Interest*, (London: Verso, 2001).
- 3 'The crisis of culture and the state', in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 219-42.
- 4 See Peter B. Boorsma et al. (eds.), *Privatization and Culture: Experiences in the Arts, Heritage and Cultural Industries in Europe*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998).
- 5 See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constituents of a theory of the media', in his *Critical Essays*, (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 46-76.
- 6 For a typical example see George Monbiot, *The Age of Consent*, (London: Flamingo, 2003).
- 7 For a useful account of this process, see Jim McGuigan, *Culture and the Public Sphere*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 8 See especially the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom at <http://www.cpbf.org.uk>.
- 9 'Beyond metaculture', *New Left Review*, 16, July/August 2002, pp. 86-104.
- 10 For recent discussions of this question, see Susan Watkins, 'A weightless hegemony: New Labour's role in the neoliberal order', *New Left Review*, 25, January/February 2004, pp. 5-33, and Minqi Li, 'After neoliberalism: empire, social democracy or socialism?', *Monthly Review*, January 2004, pp. 21-36. available at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0104li.htm>

# Neither Great Nor Glorious

## John Chalmers & Sandra Marrs

### Warburger

Forum Ljubljana  
ISBN 961-91025-1-7  
3000 sit; 24.95 US\$, 22g

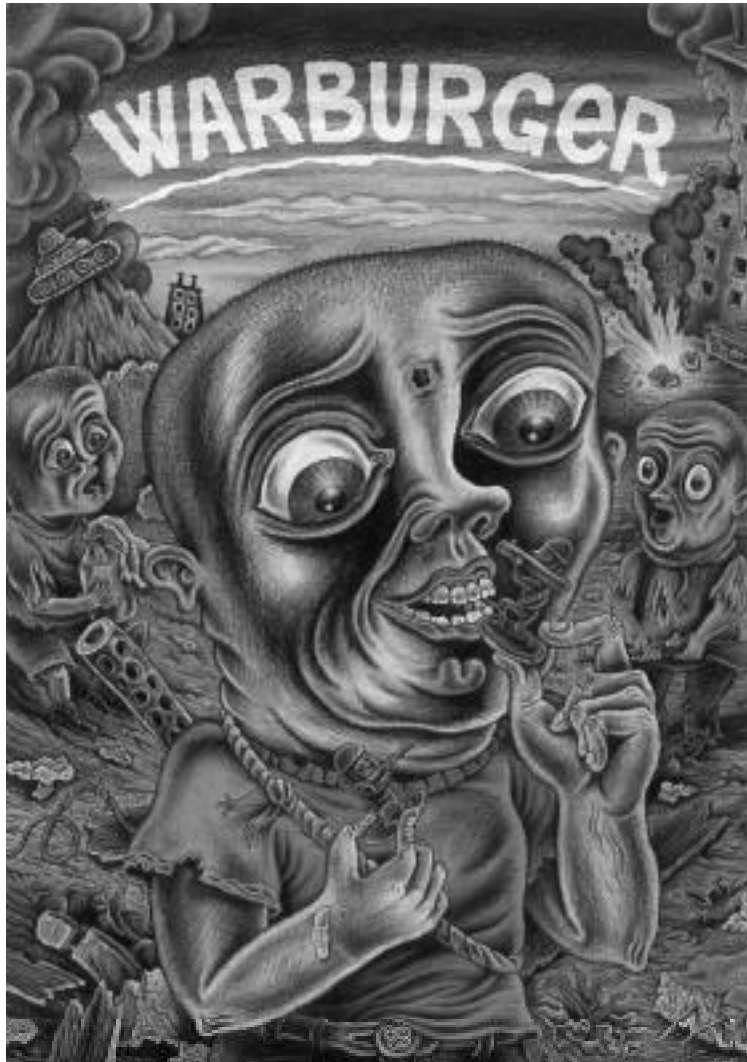
Somehow it seems fitting that the book launch should take place in such a cobbled warren, redolent of rich histories, painful mysteries. No gold plaque will ever say enough but people have to try to speak, to remember. Berlin seems suffused with atmosphere, charged; here in the Haus Schwarzenberg, Otto Weidt employed and protected blind and deaf Jews and non-Jews at his workshop on Rosenthaler Straße during the National Socialist era. By declaring the brushes and brooms he produced "vital for purposes of the military", he was able to protect his employees; his workshop hid Jewish citizens from their persecutors, a last refuge. Otto Weidt also saved many others from collective deportation including a family of four, hidden in a backroom of the workshop.

Night has fallen quickly and an illuminated abstract sculpture casts fine grotesque shadows. A corner doorway leads to a narrow staircase which belies a spacious interior; galleries are tucked away beyond a small bookshop: two rooms lined with pages and pages of original art. Voices on the walls. Artists from all over the world have contributed their time and energy to *Warburger*, a special issue from the Slovenian publisher *Stripburger*, supported by The Peace Institute of Ljubljana and the Ministry of Culture. It's a monster book, a marvellous piece of work. The exhibition forms part of the excellent Berliner Comic Festival; everyone is buzzing, tired yet energised, there's a feeling of relief that the book at 400 pages is finally printed.

Originally, an open call for submissions had appeared: to create a story on "the forgotten or overlooked aspects of war." Producing a contribution seems a distant memory as we return to the bookshop. This ante-chamber is filled with unusual artefacts of our butterfly culture. Books, records, comics, cds: strange stuff, not items easily found elsewhere, avant-garde, oddities, small press, low print runs, limited pressings; we've watched counter-culture shift to over-the-counter-culture then almost disappear as mass-marketed phenomena create an all-pervasive illusion of reality. It's hard not to feel that art or pop-culture are luxuries, especially when for some people poverty is a matter of life and death. What right do we have to write about war? Surely the best art or literature is born of experience? The lived experience fills a work with authenticity. From the relative safety and security of our western cultural standpoint it seems patronising to attempt to write about war, parked comfortably on our shiny largely white arse.

Parents and friends' parents remember World War II. Scribbled in a small black notebook, "Forgotten or overlooked aspects of war?" The blitzed Gorbals; anecdotes from arthritic aunts; refugees gang raped; startling how homosexuals and gypsies are so rarely mentioned when the Holocaust is remembered, Sergei Nabokov died after helping fellow internees; the narcotic Northern fields of France; the pain of alcoholism; soporific floral symbolism; 50 odd wars since '45; depleted Uranium shells tested in Scotland; faces perform pizza gymnastics. Hand-me-down stories rub together in memory and fail to ignite the silent page.

In writing about war an immediate recourse is satire, serious subjects often lurk beneath a jocose veneer: gallows humour, black humour, laughing in the face of adversity, daring to point out the foibles, peccadilloes of the rich and the powerful; laughing at ourselves and our neuroses, but not



discompassionately. There is an illustrious history of satirical literature and also of political cartooning, the inky power of a vicious trope.

A constant war we feel is waged on the little people, everywhere, in immeasurable ways. As the gulf between rich and poor widens, the size and number of barricades and barriers grows: access denied! It would be wrong not to write, not to make a story.

Capitalism's implosion will not be spectacular, rather it is already occurring as a gradual slow decay—rotting, degenerating. Consumer lust, trance and guilt coupled with a pathological denial. The rampant ego, blind to any possible alternative, terrified of change. A healthy culture



can only be nurtured by careful construction of an humane societal infrastructure within which people have meaningful roles, not jobs they hate.

Contemporary capitalism, advanced or corrupt, has installed a vast complex of corporate controlled machinery, breeding fear; fuelling a reactionary world view, helping maintain the illusion of progress. The intensification of capitalist competition and the intensification of imperial discipline. The status quo: a comfort zone or buffer heavily reliant on drugs and media stimuli, people reduced to obsessive compulsives, archetypes, far removed from any semblance of a natural state. Women are objectified, dehumanised, while objects are deified and ideas reified. Information supplants History. Corporations are under written by huge 'subsidies', whilst they play a game of tax avoidance. Our world's most powerful country, the biggest debtor. A secret war is waged daily on our very realities, cultures, diversity, tea-rooms. Hypothesised events of Easter Island are a synecdoche illustrating the dangers of a monoculture.

Anyone feeling remotely impotent or uncertain can take heart

and remember that although this constant war is on the forgotten people, the majority world; people have power and can change things: consume responsibly; buy kindly, mentally unpack products to explode their trade histories; slow down; value nature, knowledge gained through suffering over information, and human qualities over money.

"Forgotten or overlooked aspects of war."

*Warburger* is a necessarily dark yet beautiful book, passionate, containing a full gamut of emotions, and a variety of story treatments: from Peter Kuper's phallic political rage (he was criticised for depicting the presidential penis too large), to the gorgeous, gentle melancholy of Carol Swain's desert turned glass, animals trapped innocently beneath its stilled surface, and Knut Larsson's unspeakably touching *Zyclon Boy* who during the last hallucinatory moments in the gas chamber imagines he has superpowers and is able to fight to save others and avenge his mother's death.

In an age where pre-emptive war is tolerated and seen as a solution: what have we forgotten, why aren't the alarm bells ringing?

Stripburger have taken the time to put all the contributors online at: <http://www.ljudmila.org/stripcore/warburger/warburger1.htm>

<http://www.metaphrog.com>