

Art & The Political Seminar: Part 2 Democracy and Its Discontents David Bellingham

David Bellingham: Ok, I think the first thing to say is that I'm gonna show you a few things I've been working on recently. Essentially presenting to a project called *Turnout* that I've been working on for, that I've completed at the end of last year. Most of last year to write this course, and I'll show you a couple of things to put that into context. I'm not gonna address these ones critically I'll just describe what they are, describe how they came about where they were placed and hope to move as quick as possible so a sort of discussion as to how these things might operate in some sort of critical, active framework. What you're looking at on the screen now is a little postal work that I made in 1998 which comes as part of an occasional group I think of them as occasional works, occasional in the sense that a Christmas card is an occasional form, something that happens in relation to a specific date in the year. Of course, it can be stimulated to respond to events political and social and that sometimes feels important to me as an artist to do that, the condition there of course, is that I would generally consider myself not to be a party political artist. Using Andea Fraser's definition, which perhaps is in some ways modified from Chantal Mouffe's, is that all art is political but most of it is reactionary in the sense that most art, of course, happens within the institution, occasionally things happen outside of the institution, they happen in the social realm and they function actively, they function in some sort of critical diagnostic way and these occasional works are generally prompted by things that happen in the world, happen as a result of power structures that seem beyond reach and therefore comment is necessary. I don't actually see them, in real terms that's different or outside of other things I might make that might feel or seem to be initially less kind of politically positioned.

But to attend to this (slide) *Cruise: a wandering voyage in search of an enemy* in a way it's a definition, it's a play on a definition which is a kind of Homeric odyssey, this idea of odyssey's kind of roaming the world looking for adventure, looking for territory and looking to extend one's horizons it seems to me that this idea of journeying and searching has been misunderstood and misplaced by certain neo-conservative power bases as a way of extending territory and extending political capital. So it's a play on this, this word that was chosen, perhaps arbitrarily, to name a missile and play on this idea of the leisure cruise, the journeying out into the world, the sense of adventure, in this case for me very much a misplaced adventure so and it's specified very directly, a definition *To Mark Four Nights of Air Strikes in the Gulf*. This was done almost ten years ago in 1998. This little publication here, I've got another couple of copies around, was produced in July/August 2006 last year and it was done in direct response, and it's just called *Town*, perhaps less overtly kind of politically positioned. But it was made in direct response to the air strikes that happened in Palestine from Israel and it's a little poem really, two page poem: 'It's

colour and shape, smell and mood had changed, but its name still stood'. Then the words evoking some sort of spirit of a historical place that spirit was stronger than the bricks and mortar that substantiated it and the following page 'its colour and shape, smell and mood changed, but its name still stands'. So moving this kind of historical heroic mode into the contemporary perhaps.

This is a series of posters that were made in Edinburgh, actually just at the time when there was a debate, just prior to the time of the first elections for the Scottish Parliament, there was this exhibition at the City Arts Centre in Edinburgh called *Without Day* it was organised by City Arts Centre and Alec Finlay, three posters that were placed around the city of Edinburgh that in some oblique way attempt to circumvent the rhetoric of party politics and cut to the quick of what a real social politic might be. And in this sense I'm interested in this French Revolutionary Saint-Just phrase that was often used, or used a couple of times by Ian Hamilton Finlay which states: 'The native land is not the land it is the community of spirit.' And this idea that it's not the bricks and mortar, it's not the earth that you walk on, it's the idea of belonging, it's a sense of belonging that comes about from the people that Chantal Mouffe referred to this morning as 'the masses', as the populous, but it's really quite interesting as something that's very important to the development of the *Turnout* piece that I will be talking about in a moment. So these four posters read: 'Our scheme is only a sketch' which is a quote taken directly out of Plato's *The Republic*, a contentious book, 'Meat, Branches, Fruit, Principles, Actions, Consequences'; 'Inquiry First, Allegiance Second'; and finally 'In party politics the earth is still flat'. As I say these were pasted up around Edinburgh in their linear sequence and there was a concertina publication that went out also.

Another work that if you like breaks down this idea of where you might put things, in other words the site for art, this is a text I've used in many different situations 'Just another part of the world' again a borrowed phrase, comes from part of a dedication that John Cage used in the foreword to his book in *A Year from Monday* and to paraphrase him that the complete sentence is something like: 'I dedicate this book to the people of America in the hope that one day we and our land will be just another part of the world.' As opposed to some empire-building monster, I suppose, so this little borrowed phrase gets placed into situations, this is an anonymous piece of concrete wall, a bit of vinyl text stuck up and left until it fell off, I guess. It's happened as a wall text in various situations, in institutions and outside institutions, on pages and various sort of stickers and banners sort of things. So just to place this little project *Turnout* in some sort of little lineage of occasional works that I've been involved with.

So to attend to *Turnout* the first work that happened was just this, was a little 32 page A5 pamphlet it was distributed by post, free of charge, and a few kind of artist bookshops, the Serpentine in London and printed Matter in New York, took them and gave them away free, but essentially it was a way of again circumventing the big piece of work that had this public life that disappeared almost instantaneously. I'll read the little text on the back of the book: 'The 4,668 crosses in this book represent approximately 1/500th of the votes cast in Scotland on the general election of May 5.' And it was an addition to 500 so the book itself is full (slide: first page. here's a kind of ballot box to put you in the spirit of the voting mood) and the rest of the book is full of crosses, every page is just full of crosses, the size of the book is determined by

the amount of space that these 4,668 crosses took up. The addition of 500 if you can imagine it, altogether would have represented one cross for every person that voted. So it was complete thing in itself but you could only ever have a fragment, you could only ever have 1/500th. The idea of the cross is something in itself that interests me as that's a kind of figurative gesture, the idea that one cross equals one person and in a later publication here, there is this idea that a cross is two arms and two legs, so every time you're writing this little figurative gesture the cross itself becomes representative of an individual.

So this thing happened, it went out in the world, it had quite a lot of response. It was published by little gallery in Edinburgh which was a stone's throw away from the Scottish Parliament, by a guy called Paul Robinson who runs the Heart Gallery, a tiny little private gallery erm, and this is the kind of scale of works that I usually make, I generally make things that can happen in a day, can be distributed fairly quickly and easily and I forget them and get on with the next thing, and he kind of dared me in a way to extend this, what about if you actually made the complete piece and as it turned out in the first general election, after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, as Rebecca mentioned earlier, just under 2 million people voted which represented just under half of the total of the people with the right to vote. This idea was kind of mooted that I might spend some time in a gallery and make the whole project, make it as an archive. And initially I kind of declined that the idea of being holed away for a month didn't appeal to me too much but he went away and raised some money and we did it and it came about and it turned into a situation that I couldn't really back out of; and actually I came round to this idea that being involved in labour, being involved in a day to day task was something that wasn't completely irrelevant in the production of work.

(Slide) This is little a painting from a series called the *Painting by Numbers* series that were made between 1992 and 94 and it's maybe not so clear what we're looking at here but we're looking at six 30cm. 12 inch school rulers and each of the individual implements has been painted in a shade of black, white or grey. And these used to take a week to two weeks to do and one of the motivations for making these works was that I was recently out of Art School, I've got a studio, what do I do with my time? how do I fill that time? It seemed quite important to me that I made some work that in a way was non-heroic, and I didn't wanna make big metal things, but I wanted to make something that in some ways the process of their making revealed a sense of time and a sense of investment and had some sort of equivalent to what it might be to go and do a job, to go and work in a factory or to work in an office. So there's an element of time, there is a time base to this kind of production that I think has a direct cross over to the *Turnout* project. So what happened, I spent a month in Edinburgh, failed to complete the task in my time in this little gallery. We agreed to extend my residency at the gallery for a further month and it was really just physical constraints, I realised that I wasn't gonna get the job done in time. I should say that the way that I produced this, as you see on the panels on the back of the white partition wall, there are a number of A3 panels. The work was produced on a light box with a grid underneath and I would fit a thousand crosses per A3 sheet. It's very much kind of systematic approach to you can imagine; the aim was to produce 2,000 A3 sheets with a thousand crosses on each sheet or approximately 2,000 it was just under 2,000 sheets. So the gallery was closed to the public for a month in this kind of conceit of a second show, a second period of time, that we called *Abstention* - there's a little card

that was sent out to announce that I would be there, in the first part of the exhibition being open to the public, people could come and watch me at work, if you like, the second part of the time I spent there was closed to the public, by invitation only - and then again I thought that was the kind of end of it, that the work itself had turned into this kind of performative act and the very fact that I made all these crosses and this archive had been produced was something that would disappear. And then I had a response, this is just a way of saying that all these things are in a way out of my control the way the work ended up is slightly out of my control which is quite unusual, at least in the kind of work that I make, a woman from an organisation called Fife Contemporary Art - which is relatively new organisation which morphed out of the old Crawford Art Centre which closed a year or so ago in St Andrews - approached me, she came to visit the exhibition and she saw me at work and told me anecdotally about this building in St Andrews which is called Parliament Hall and Parliament Hall was a place where in the 17th century the Scottish parliament was resident for a number of months whilst plague was rampant throughout most of Scotland, Edinburgh was out of bounds, all the people went back to their country piles, parliament happened in St Andrews where apparently it was plague free. And on this table where you can see there is this kind of wooden, black ballot box on the table, it says 'Turnout' on the front. And in that black box were the majority of the 2,000 sheets with the crosses on and what you're looking at behind are the first 10,000 and the last 10,000. So this woman, Diana Sykes, invited me to St Andrews to present the work within this very specific historical context.

The obvious thing in a way would have been to approach the new Scottish Parliament building as a place to show some sort of completed version of the work but I quite liked the idea that this work was produced in this little kind of garret-type, unofficial situation, out and above the Scottish Parliament itself and there's a little skylight on top of the gallery you could climb out and just see the roof of the new building, which kind of appealed in that the work in itself remains unofficial and that this kind of counting off of the populous is kind of a conscious saying that 'everybody counts', I recognise the fact that voting isn't this kind of a bleak abstract notion, isn't something that's kind of imposed on the people, it's actually an active responsibility that's respected. And in a way my feeling about the piece in its concluded form is that it's a physical monument to each individual that got up in the morning and asserted their right to vote, it was very simple and pragmatic in that way.

So the piece happened, it was open to the public in Parliament Hall for a couple of weeks, this is the little brochure that went with it, little image of Parliament Hall a couple of hundred years ago, a set of crosses over the top, a little description of the piece, my 'a cross has two arms and two legs' note on the back putting it in some sort of context. So that's the piece really and at that point I don't really want to delve too much into any more critical analysis of how that work might be read or understood, I prefer to throw it open to the floor at that point.

Question and Answer

RGN: Did you use deliberately neutral language so as it wouldn't be read in any particular way?

DB: Well as I said earlier, despite the fact that I've had this instinct to respond to political events, I think it's quite important not to assert party political allegiance. In as much I suppose generally I find the rhetorical mode to be counter-productive in visual art, in a way what you're doing is throwing propositions out, and I suppose if I wanted to be involved in pamphleteering I could go and join the Socialist Workers' Party and be involved in that kind of thing, and also I suppose it's a response to a certain kind of acknowledged hypocrisy, unintentional but inevitable, within the way that I ended up making things. To take Andrea Fraser's point, that all art is political and yet most of it is reactionary, which I think is a key point, under those terms, even though I consider myself to be a good socialist boy, I'll consider that most of the work that I make under those terms is reactionary. Occasionally I try and do things like the projects I've shown today, which aim to be sort of proactively setting up a dialogue, a political dialogue which is outside of that kind of mainstream idea of representation and sort of more neutral ideas. Most of what I do fits more cosily within art discourse, and under her terms would probably quite rightly or fairly be called reactionary, although I'd never think of it like that, under her definition that's probably where it sits, where most people's stuff sits and it doesn't sit very well but that's the reality. But I can't emphasise it enough that it's very important to me that it's a monument, I wanted to make it a monument so this black ballot box there which is now, you know, I was persuaded under the situation, if you like, to show the foot and tip of the iceberg, you can see the conceit in this little installation here at St Andrews, you've got the first 10,000 and the last 10,000 crosses, so it just gives those people that are coming in to see the thing when it's shown in a single point display, a sense of what I've done, to evidence that labour. But I think in other situations I'd be very happy just to show the ballot box, the monument itself is invisible. A great model for me is Jochen Gertz's *Invisible Monument*; this idea that you engrave the names of the Jewish dead under a cobblestone and invert them and the piece itself is invisible and yet this kind of cultural rumour that this work is there, is bigger than any big lump of bronze or stone could ever be, and so I liked the fact that in a way this big ugly obtuse box could function as a prop to cultural rumour: 'Did he do it?', 'Is it faked?', 'Or was it all photocopied?' Doesn't matter actually, what's important is the idea of a populous, a population that acted on a democratic right is being represented in some way, that's what's important.

KJ: Thinking back actually on our last discussion of Oliver Ressler's work, for example, there's a documentary style, or other artists who use artwork or art production as some form of documentation. Then, if I see specifically the earlier pieces that you showed here, it's almost something like commentary, that's different than documentation, it's a comment on an actual situation and then at the same time I just thought of one of the words that Chantal used today about subversion, that the critique of power comes from the subverting. So how do you see yourself in that, if one can use this triangle: subverting, commenting or documenting?

DB: I suppose I called that little set of posters that were in Edinburgh in 89 'Four Propositions' and I think what I'm interested in is the active sense of proposition in Wittgenstein's sense, of kicking an idea into play or igniting a debate. I think this idea of pushing something into play is an interesting one, you know the idea of the stumbling block, something that you can't help but trip over, drawing something to attention. And so I'm more interested in the conversational mode of art production in that sense. I'm less interested in what it means to do one thing than I am in what it

means to do a number of things that accumulate into an approach and I think that's difficult to show three and four things but if you're asking me in a more general sense, what's the purpose of your project, then I would suggest that it's conversational. The works itself are indispensable any one work is indispensable it's not really the point, the point is the project that we do these kind of things, in real terms you know they all, if they all disappear tomorrow it wouldn't matter too much you make some more, the project remains intact. And I think that this idea of commentary I think is absolutely crucial in that sense. I think that quite often what I'm commenting on are, as I was suggesting earlier, issues to do with representation or issues to do with poetics or the weather or whatever, they are things that might seem initially to be apolitical, but, sometimes things, events, circumstances, suggest that a response is required, and that's what these kind of things are about.

KJ: Let me ask you, I mean, if you say conversational, so as to provoke a conversation, but is there an active response? I mean are you soliciting also to really get the direct conversation going, it needs a partner right?

DB: Well in that sense, it sounds like a get out to suggest that's the responsibility of the audience, but in this kind of poststructuralist sense, the Roland Barthes idea that the role of the reader is beyond the power of the author to control. I think I align myself very strongly with that in that I'm interested in the idea that this kind of propositional mode is something and if I happen to be there, if a colleague that sees something or in circumstances like this, I'm not at all bothered about being involved in the debate. But I'm a realist and the situation is that most of the things that I do occur in either anonymous public situations or institutional public situations where I'm not present, I'm not a performer. Perhaps it's different in live art or in art that involves other individuals more directly, but in the stuff that I'm doing the delivery is single point delivery, I'm putting something out there that is essentially object-based and people are coming into contact with the stuff outwith my presence or my ability to control the situation. So the conversation is in real terms a hypothetical one and it assumes interest. So in that sense it's not what I'd think of as rhetorical, it's not standing on a soapbox and saying, 'Hey, come here, you've got to listen to this!' It's not about that at all, it's about saying, 'If you're interested in this, here's a take, here's something to kind of tease out.' It's a prompt, a prompt to conversation, but it's not soapbox stuff.

KJ: But there's a difference between saying 'ok, come and listen to this' or saying 'I want a conversation with you' which is the opposite.

DB: I suppose my take there is that no-one works in the dark, you know I don't think of the stuff that I do as existing in a bubble. The work that I make is a direct response to art that's happened in the last 100 years that I respond to directly and feel to some extent responsible for and in the wake of, stuff that's happening that is produced by my colleagues today and as a response to direct circumstances in the culture that we live in and so that's the conversation. Things happen, I'm responding to it, that's the conversation. And I think on one hand it's kind of polarised into think of, ok here's Bob, what do you think? I respond. It's not that kind of pub chat, it's more of an extension over a longer period. You know and when I mention this idea that Saint-Just's sort of definition of what a people might be in 'The native land, is not the land, it's the community of spirit' I feel that if I evoke that and make something in response

to that idea I'm having a conversation with that notion, it's only a couple of hundred years ago. You know, and so in a sense my sense of history and time and how debate might flow is less about what might happen today with you, however interesting that might be, it's that plus an extended dialogue. I suppose when I talk about conversation that's what I mean, that extended historical stretch of how you might do something that in its own way contributes. It's not about saying, 'I elevate this and it's more important because I'm thinking about these things', perhaps its almost doing the opposite, saying 'It's not something special, it's just part of this ongoing thing. These ideas aren't new. It's just another sort of take.' And one of the things that I'm really interested in as a maker is this idea of re-articulation, the idea of accepting the fact that the grand themes are kind of out there and the job is to re-ignite and keep the question of dialogue alive as opposed to something that's kind of fixed and stale - that's the danger. It's less about the need to initiate and originate new ideas, new takes, new kind of 'radical', in inverted commas, responses to things. It's more about looking at precedent and trying to find some way of keeping it in play. So that's kind of work I'm interested in, that's what I see my role as any way. And as a result a lot of the work the stuff seems quite quiet, actually, it's not overtly assertive, I'm not really interested in that at all.

KJ: Can I ask one more question? Referring back to Chantal Mouffe one more time, I mean she used this term, that Rebecca summarised, that of dis-identification/re-identification. Saying there's a need for offering the chance to re-identify. How do you see yourself in that? Is that something you would agree on, do you make an offer for re-identification through the work?

DB: I would identify that with very directly and I think that's what I was just trying to talk about in a way.

KJ: It's the re-articulation you're talking about...

DB: The 're-' clause is really important there, it's not about a passive acceptance of some sort of neo-liberal status quo. Thinking ok, well I'll do my best, fantastic, the art market's bubbling over at the moment, I'll know I can sell a few things, I'll do ok, it's not about that it's about saying well, maybe do a little bit of that, but every now and again it seems important to do some other things too. I mean for me perhaps there's less of an emphasis on the idea of re-engagement with ideas that I myself might have come across or feel necessary to keep alive but, for me, it's more of a kind of constant this idea that some of what you do has to be socially engaged. You know, it's a lesson in a way that came about directly, or was drawn to my attention directly from being here and studying in Glasgow I mean we have David Harding's line of 'the context is half the work' which no-one who has studied at Glasgow School of Art in the 90s could avoid and was so clear, and some of it came straight of course from Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner and that whole kind of conceptual practice, but was repositioned in terms of work that implied some kind of social responsibility and that was always really interesting to me and, I guess, in spite of the fact that I never worked with him directly that was a lesson that I took to heart. Sorry not to answer that more fully.

KJ: What about this idea that the identity of which you spoke about is actually a collective identity and not an individual identity, so there you're again addressing something which is bigger than just a conversation with someone?

DB: Yes, when I was speaking about historical consciousness, I think that's really important to understand a body of work like mine, you know, is that it doesn't exist in a bubble, that actually it kind of fits into some sort of timeline. I mean, as an example, the reason I showed something I made 10 or something I made 15 years ago, that little ruler painting, as an example of something that might almost share a methodology, that little ticking off of increments of course that's in direct parallel to ticking off individuals as marking down of crosses, is to suggest that even within the sort of sort of modesty of a project that's occurred over a few years, there's common interest in things that might thematically appear to be world's apart and I suppose I'm really interested in the role that art can have in bringing fields of specialisation together. And one of the things that I lament in our culture, in spite of the fact that it's breeds a kind of hybridized debate of an extremely high level is that everything needs to be specialised and it seems to be this kind of, even, you know, you can see it in education, city academies being specialist institutions in music or in science or whatever, I think that's just totally the wrong way to go and I'm interested in, and it's not some sort of romantic kind of rosy-eyed vision, but this idea of sort of metaphysics, you know one of the other interests I have in early philosophy, particularly in pre-Socratic philosophy, is this idea that academics had licence to dabble; they could be an astronomer one day and a mathematician the next and a physician the day after. And this idea that you might use a common framework for problem solving to deal with different thematic bases and different ways of thinking about the world seems to me to have some sort of analogical relationship to the role of the artist, the potential for what an artist might do today, we're in one of the few fields where you're allowed to multi-task academically in that way and certainly I feel a responsibility not to be, I don't like to speak negatively, but the kind of work I stand against is you know kind of monochrome easel painting where people paint the same old thing, day in day out, as a kind of signature, as a way of being a 'specialist', you know in a way I think it's important to, from a common, from a common approach to bring stuff in, to kind of be a filter or things rather than to copy what the neo-liberal majority do which is to specialise and produce some neat little-packaged signed product, that's the enemy as far as I'm concerned, the thing to avoid at all costs. If you adopt that tack of course you're a commercial disaster but that's the way it goes, as far as I'm concerned, if you wanna be responsible.

KJ: So not a specialist in making crosses.

DB: I'm an amateur. I got worse I went along so definitely I'm living up to my amateur view of myself.

Ross Sinclair: What do you think about this piece in light of the forthcoming election? How do you feel its relation to... it's kind of interesting that it is this idea of a monument, but by its very nature, while the mechanism that constructs the monument remains the same this time, broadly speaking. Of course, by definition it's sort of *raison d'être* is that everything around it changes, potentially, it's nice that it's so fixed based on the last time.

DB: I suppose there's a lot to say about the difference between this upcoming election and the previous ones, they've all been different so far. We could talk about that in a minute, but I suppose though, in a more general sense, although I specify this election,

it has a topicality. I live in Scotland, Scotland is a small country, it was a perfect kind of model if you like of the electoral process to make monument of democracy from. Of course it dawned on me that you could do the whole of the UK, but I'd be doing it three years later, the only way to do it would be to teams of people to raise hundreds of thousands of pounds, teams of people in warehouses it'd be something like assembling, you know the OED the Oxford English dictionary. I was less interested, what I was more interested in was making this kind of model that's representative of all elections. So although I specify in a way I kind of see it as a thing as, as representative of what's about to come, what came before, of other kind of electoral processes. I mean in saying that of course, it's saying you know it's there, its been written about a little it, its been historicized in its own way of course is less active and less live than it was when I was doing it, then it had this kind of currency. A couple of people have said, well why don't you do another one. Do, do the same piece, do the thing again, keep it live do another I suppose for pragmatic reasons I feel that the point has been made. I mean the anti easel painting thing... I'm not gonna become 'the cross boy'. You know it's not gonna happen.

RS: It's just interesting, I mean Klaus and everyone else who is actually dealing with er, the various tiers upwards sort of thing, must, must happen a lot, but I mean I've had a couple of meetings with people from institutions who say things like, 'God if the SNP get in...' - it seems to to be this real concern - '... if the SNP get in culture is gonna completely change it's gonna be all traditionalised' and you know the kind of thing that we do in that kind of neo-liberal kind of way is no longer gonna be in favour.

DB: I find it truly frightening because, I mean, in spite of the fact that one assumes they have the good of the nation at heart, they're a reactionary party, that terrifies me. They're a right wing party and I think it would be a total disaster for the country.

KJ: It calls for agonistic subversion right?

RS: Trying fitting that on the ballot paper. (Laughter)

DB: Well what it's saying that of course, you look at some of the cultural production that came out of Eastern Europe, you know you look at someone like Kabakov, you know one, one of the great projects of the modern era and it came out of total suppression, you know, and so, although of course I'm not wishing a reactionary party on the nation, if it were to happen I think you have to take the situation by the horns and run with it. And it kind of gives you licence to do some things you can't do when everything's just about ok. You know you can do some stuff that's under the table when you've got a party that is officious in its antagonism towards art practice, towards culture in general, it allows an underground to blossom, maybe not in an economic bubble, but in an active bubble. And I think that's really, really interesting, so it's not all bleak and I think that a lot of us would be involved in just that. In a way it awakens the spirit, comfortable times breed complacency and sometimes you know one of the great things about democracy whether, you know, the party you have allegiance to or its foe get in there's something to respond to. And one of the terrifying things, as I think Chantal Mouffe's acknowledging, is when you have, you know, a middle left and a middle right, you're left with this horrible kind of stock in

the middle which is actually amounts to not very much, it's difficult to be angry about it and it's difficult to respond in any way.

KJ: But if you say it allows the underground to bubble it again refers to individual activity doesn't it?

DB: I was thinking more of communal activity.

KJ: This kind of subversion for example is much more difficult again on an institutional level?

DB: Yeah, it doesn't happen on an institutional level but it happens I think you know, what's interesting is it can happen on an unofficial institutional level you know when if you look at an institution like Glasgow School of Art there are things that happen officially; there's a hierarchy, there's a directorship, there's courses and there's heads of courses, of which you of course are one, and there's this body of people who pass through it, the student body, and then there's this body of people that decide to stay in town, people perhaps that have always been there, some come in and decide to stay, and there's this kind of floating body of the population in and around the environment of Glasgow School of Art that have an affiliation with the school but aren't the school. In a way that's always the most interesting bit about the institution and I think that's the bit that would be activated. You know, we have a modest amount of artist-led activity in the city at the moment, there's been more in the past it's been more interesting in the past, at the moment some of the models by my reckoning are based upon commercial leads, which is a bit of a problem, but I think that that whole idea of artists-led initiatives could blossom in that environment.

KJ: Could it be the place where a non-hegemonic identification takes place?

DB: Potentially, I think so. I think one of the dangers, I mean I'm being oblique, but I think one of the dangers is some of the institutions like Transmission, for instance, or the Modern Institute that had very honourable pasts, there's a tendency now for some of the stuff that they promote to be based on what happens in white cubes, and so it's like a step-up situation, let's do something here that looks like something that happens somewhere else and it's a step up to that, and I'm slightly suspicious of that, not that I don't think one should make work in commercial galleries, but if we're going to have a slightly..., I mean in a way the Modern Institute are combat, so that's not a good example any more, but Transmission is a good example and, I think sometimes, not that they don't do interesting projects sometimes but I think nine times out of ten there's this assumption that if we do this here maybe they'll look at us and take us on board and we'll become the real thing. Rather than saying, 'forget that, we wanna do something else', it's what happened in the early days of Transmission, it was a genuinely interesting political, active-reactive organisation in the town. And its been a great model for a lot of things that have come out of this city and we need a couple of places like that, arguably three or four places like that, for this underground to occur and I think that it's unlikely to happen in under the current comfortable terms when you apply to the Arts council get a little bit of money. When that doesn't happen you've got to go and squat, I mean the Chateau was a good example of that, happened for a while, not necessarily that there was always great art to be seen but the political model of it, you know, that kind of social claiming of the space and doing something

and I'd like to see more of that kind of thing happening and I think it's likely to happen particularly if we end up in a situation where there's less money directed into culture.

Ranjana Thapalyal: How does that kind of activity compare to people going and squatting outside the Trident Nuclear base?

DB: Well I think it's all about intent. I think in a way the claiming of the social, the use of space saying there's a space, I'll have it, I'll use it as a stage for what I want to do. I think it's a direct cross over. I mean the difference for me is that, if you are an activist, if you are a protestor, under my terms you're adopting a rhetorical mode you're saying 'This is wrong, this is what we think, we're gonna stay here until you change it', which is different from the way that art operates, art can't operate like that. Art is, under my terms anyway, art is a more propositional thing and the minute it becomes rhetorical it fails and it's just not art anymore. It doesn't mean in any way protest is bad, protest of course is good, but once you tell people what to think you deny one of the major things that art does really well which is to be a catalyst rather than something that sets up and directs an opinion. I don't think art is any good at directing opinion, politicians, political people do that better than artists do, in my experience anyway, I think that good protest is good protest. Protest based work can end up being quite flawed by my reckoning.

RT: I don't know if I misunderstood you but I've seen some contradictions there between what you're saying about social, about community and about people sharing ideas, sharing conflicting ideas, not necessarily imposing them but airing them, and the idea that per se any kind of stance taken on an issue is imposing.

DB: I'll try and clarify that. The stance of course can be taken in the response to the work. So if you wanna tell me something about something I've made, fantastic, but the point I'm trying to make is the mode of delivery that people like myself are interested in isn't rhetorical: I'm not trying to tell you anything, I'm trying to show something. I think that mode of delivery is different. For me that's the difference between art practice and political practice which is why I was trying to say at the beginning, you know that even though I think these works are directed toward the political field and they are a political response they are not party political...

RT: ... Political?

DB: ... I can't say it any more clearly than the delivery is propositional rather than rhetorical, I'm not interested in that idea of trying to tell you what to think, there's too many people out there trying to tell you what to think. However, of course, if we were to meet in social circumstances, of course I'd tell you what I think, I'm not afraid of opinion, but in my guise as a maker when I put things out there I don't want the works to tell you what to think.

Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt: As an artist is it your responsibility to have a position that you can clearly articulate?

DB: Independent of the works, yes. Which is, I'm not at all afraid of saying, I'm interested in a socialist agenda, you know I think of myself as a social democrat under

those terms, but I doubt you would be able to establish that from looking at a body of my work and I'm not at all interested in that, in fact I always think the work fails... Maybe I have done it on occasion and under those terms perhaps something like that little *Cruise* card I showed you at the beginning, probably under my terms there's a contradiction, that fails in a way in my terms of what a good artwork is or isn't, inasmuch as it's more opinionated than I would usually be - I was angry at the time I wanted to do something and I break my own rules sometimes. But generally speaking I want the work not to be a kind of soapbox, not grandstand, I want it to kind of offer a way around something, or as an approach to something as directing that fixed opinion.

RS: I'm just trying to reflect on what your saying on my own thoughts and practice, and seeing something there which is interesting to me, is I suppose broadly speaking a sort of premise that all the things that we do as makers as you've said are put out there, we're just completely making them up anyway, they don't exist without us bringing them into being in some way. And if you take that meaning that they're essentially fictional, it's kind of arguable, but what if in the same way, and it's quite a simple analogy I suppose looking at literature, you know, to put something up there in an extremely rhetorical way and to say this is this thing here in whatever space it's in, it's extremely rhetorical on first look and it seems to be saying this thing in a very strident way but, you know, one has constructed this thing. And in the same way in literature it's not necessarily what I think as an individual but I'm proposing to an audience that this rhetorical,... another kind of monolith let's say.

DB: I understand that and I take that on board, particularly in theatre, for example, one sees that a lot. If you look at someone like Beckett, there's this constant kind of shifting of opinion from character to character. I think that under those terms of course some of them aren't necessarily representative of yourself and what you think and, again, I always think of it as a kind of point of failure if people kind of assume that what the work does is what you think. Absolutely, not that I tend to make things dry but I try and remove it as far away from the self as possible, I'm not really interested at all in politics of self.

RS: I think it draws an interesting kind of question that in the visual arts as opposed to the theatre, there is this sort of assumption that the artist is somehow telling the truth or from their perspective, but you know why should that be?

DB: Well I think one of the things I really hold dear is this line which is often misquoted and I'm going to paraphrase now, Picasso, famously, when asked about 'How can we tell who you are, you're changing from style to style', 'Well obviously as a maker one needs to lie in order to get close to the truth'. In other words, it isn't a heartfelt well-spring from the soul this stuff, I'm taking what I need in order to present a whole which brings me to a totality, which brings us back to the idea of the umbrella project, you know, bring things in and these different voice, these opinions, these different circumstances that accumulate and accrue to form the project are what I wanna be judged on, and the net result of those things rather than you know whether or not the sky was really that blue that day, it's not the point. Which brings us back to this idea of documentary that you were talking about. I've got huge problems with this idea of truth through the document I think it's a highly problematic area and it's almost an acknowledgement of the failure of the power of the imagination, I kind of

stand against that. Not that I think a documentary practice and documentary film-making, documentary photography or whatever it is, of and for itself or within its own genre is fantastic, good and bad, of course, but when it repackages itself as an approach to art I think it's kind of flawed really.

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