

Art & The Political Seminar: Part 1

Justin Carter

I'm going to discuss three or four different projects which look at the issue of globalisation, politics and art in relation to ecology. Obviously with the difficulty of the time limit to actually get into the work in a deeper way, I've tried to think of projects where specific political questions have come up – sometimes during the making of the work, or sometimes from the outset of a project. In fact, just to come back to Oliver's talk this morning, I particularly enjoyed his comment about having to sell a concept to people in order to get their cooperation. I think that's often the process of negotiation that I find myself in as an artist – to try and get something to happen, you have to negotiate with different people in different ways, and I guess make decisions along the way.

You can't escape the political. Art, for me, is a process of negotiation, but a social negotiation – a negotiation with site, a negotiation with materials. Art, for me, is a process of thinking through ideas, thinking aloud. I'm going to show you some images. In raising this question about art and ecology, I think the main thing that I wanted to draw to people's attention is really the idea that the work, for me, isn't about coming up with solutions. I think there are as many questions as solutions, which the work brings up.

This is an image of Glasgow, and it's an image that I came across when I was doing some research for a project called the Molendinar Project, which involved looking at the history of Glasgow, but looking at, specifically, the role that a burn or a river in Glasgow had – the Molendinar Burn, which probably most people don't actually know that much about. It was the reason that Glasgow was settled in medieval times. The reason most people don't know about it is because it's gradually become, culverted. Over time the city has covered it over completely, and essentially it's become, a sewage pipe. The sewage system, in Victorian times, was actually made in such a way that when there was a lot of rainfall, essentially the sewage system would reach a capacity which it couldn't cope with, and so the river itself became the outlet for the system. The interesting thing, I think, for me, the reason for bringing up the image of the river is to look at this question of responsibility. Something like a river is very, very difficult to manage without some level of cooperation between different individuals. A whole question of ownership. The river is actually owned, in part, by whoever actually owns the land that it runs alongside. Obviously, now, we have SEPA, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, who have a certain remit to maintain standards – but essentially, part of the downfall of the river is due to the fact that there wasn't a sense of common ownership, and in fact, the mistreatment of the river is part of that legacy. This is a view of the Molendinar as it stands today. Basically, the river runs underneath this part of the path, as it runs down Ladywell Road, past the old cathedral, which was on the banks of the Molendinar.

Essentially the first part of the project was mapping where the Molendinar was. For me, it was really interesting to find out that people like Scottish Water, Glasgow City Council, even the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency didn't actually know where the river was anymore, and what had been happening, over time, was that certain flood events – particularly in the East End of the city – had become a real problem for Glasgow City Council, and for Scottish Water, and essentially they were embroiled, at the time that I was doing this project, in a legal battle to see who actually was responsible for some of the events that had happened as a result of the culverting. Through my research, I discovered that, in the seventies, the council had actually made a decision to join two culverts underneath Glasgow Green – one called the Molendinar, as I talked about, and another called the Camlachie Burn. And as a result of joining these two culverts, instead of letting them flow in their own path to the Clyde, this causes, in severe rain events, a backing up of the water, which can go for several miles and has caused a number of different flooding events in residential areas. Essentially, what I was interested in doing was illuminating, or bringing to people's attention, the existence of the river – but also, I guess, making a memorial to the river, and the memorial consisted of a number of different signs, which took the form of advertising hoardings. The work existed as a project in a number of different ways – as an installation, but part of the project also involved recording video interviews with different people along the course of the river – people who had either been affected by the flood events, or people who were supposed to be responsible for the upkeep of the river. And I think the interesting thing for me about doing the project was finding, most of the time, the individuals who were locally related to the river knew a lot more about it than the overarching governmental structures who were supposed to be looking after the river. In fact, Glasgow City Council, towards the end of the project, decided not to cooperate with any form of the project, having agreed on four or five different occasions to be interviewed, and so, for me that said more about the situation than had they actually said anything.

George Parsonage, who some people in Glasgow might know, he basically is known for rescuing bodies from the river. He runs an organisation called the Glasgow Humane Society down on the Clyde that basically looks after the river – and he, essentially, was one of the people who actually gave me the map of the Molendinar and was able put together where the river was. At this time, Glasgow City Council were involved in political and legal negotiations with Scottish Water. They had employed the National Geographic Survey to do the job of actually going underneath the city to find where the river was actually running, because it was only roughly mapped out from historical records.

This is moving onto a different project. This man is called Paul Smith, as you can tell from his van. (Laughing.) Which he's very proud of, and he has reason to be, because he made the decision to convert it to run off used vegetable oil, and this decision I think is a political one, an economic one and a creative one; he engineered the whole thing himself, and it saves him £3000 a year – and that's after declaring the tax, the lost revenue to the Inland Revenue, which you otherwise have to pay legally for it to be a legal change. So Paul could save himself much more than that, but basically, the way the government operates is that they charge you on the fuel you would otherwise use as diesel – which, to me, seems a completely insane set of affairs. The other interesting thing is that whilst doing the project with him, what, essentially, we did was to take his model, his additional fuel tank, which basically enables a vehicle to

run from either used vegetable oil or diesel, depending on the kind of supply available. We took his model and updated it slightly, put a few more filters on that enabled the system to run for a lot longer – but the work itself also involved me retracing the human links in the chain between supply and demand. The project looked at the consequences of Paul's actions, and the video you can see on the right hand side here is basically a series of interviews which use the same kind of strategy as the interviews I did along the course of the Molendinar. It starts at the supplier, the hotel supplier, where Paul had essentially set up his own petrol station at the back of the hotel; the supplier, interestingly enough, is saving himself money because he would normally be charged for the removal of used oil. Vegetable oil had previously been uplifted and used in the perfume or soap making industry but following a collapse in the market people started to get charged for disposal in landfill. Hotels and fish and chip shops basically get charged £10 per drum. So obviously, what this, in effect, did was prohibited people from getting into that agreement with local government. In a sense, people were, instead of paying the £10 for it to be removed, they were throwing it down either the toilet or the sink. And where this is ending up is in the river in Berwick, where this project took place.

For those of you who know Berwick, Berwick is very much symbolised by the river. It affected the local wildlife, the local swans, the local fish, and there were a number of events where it's been noted that swans had been suffering; basically they lose their buoyancy and literally drown in the river as a result of oil getting in their feathers. So the work, essentially, existed as a manual for how people could actually do this transformation to their own vehicles, if they have a diesel car. But it's also a way of bringing to people's attention the repercussions of a decision which, for Paul, was basically an economic one – he wanted to save himself money. But essentially, there were other repercussions, and I think, in terms of ecology, this is what I'm much more interested in – rather than making a kind of eco-art, I'm much more interested in looking at those connections, socially, economically and politically.

But the interesting thing, at the end of the video, what I disclose is the fact that the government had actually put out a lot of what I would call propaganda during the fuel crisis of 2000 to warn against people converting their own vehicles – I would say because of the potential lost revenue. My source for this information was actually a local civil servant who had been working for the Inland Revenue, and basically he had received internal mail, which talked all about the problem, particularly in Wales, where people were going to local supermarkets and literally buying oil off the shelves and putting it straight into their cars. And obviously, this caused a certain anxiety in government about what this might lead to, and this work obviously existed in a number of different sites – primarily in Berwick, where the project happened as a result of a long term residency there, but also the work travelled to various places and here it is in the middle of London at London Metropolitan University gallery.

At the same time, I was making a project which was about trying to establish a garden – a community garden to begin with, but because the residency in Berwick, you might know the Berwick Gymnasium Fellowship – it exists in an old barracks which had a role in terms of protecting the sovereignty of Berwick, which had previously passed between England and Scotland four or five times in its history – but it still was being used by Territorial Army, and of course, when I started doing this residency in 2002/3, Iraq was very much a developing political crisis, and actually, a lot in the TA people

ended up in Iraq. One of the things that happened as a result of this was that the garden, which I wanted to be tended by people locally, ended up being tended more or less by myself and a few helpers because the garden itself existed in a militarised zone. The site suddenly became sensitive, in terms of who was going in and out of the barracks, because there were army vehicles operating from that site. Essentially, the idea for the garden came from the gymnasium itself, which is where the exhibition ends up. You have a nine month residency period, and at the end of that residency, you show some work which is a result of your research and I was very interested in taking the work outside and beyond the gallery. I used the plan for the garden based around the plan in the actual gymnasium, which still had markings on the floor. You can see in this image here, some of the yellow lines that belong to an old basketball court. So the idea for this work was basically to grow, or develop a kitchen garden which would grow food, and that food itself would go back into the gallery, into this system, into this machine, into this process called a methane digester, which is very old technology – it's about taking organic matter, letting it decompose, and as a result of that, you get methane gas, which, essentially, can then be taken along into a collection cylinder which is here, and then piped off into a cooker. So it's the idea of actually reconnecting all of those different links in the chain between food production and food consumption, and essentially, the work was proposed as a functional device that would illustrate this potential connection.

And the final work I just wanted to talk about was this work called sustainable indulgence, which essentially is a title but also a kind of question – it's a solar powered ice cream stall, which was commissioned for the Whistable Biennale 2004. Essentially, I did a site visit to Whistable. The remit of the project was to look at ways in which art can be taken out beyond the gallery, and essentially to reconnect the different venues. So essentially, I automatically started thinking about mobility being a useful device, but I wanted to do something that was locally connected, and at the time I'd been reading about other problems about globalisation. The idea of, in food production, the food miles that things have to travel – so I wanted to make a structure which would both produce, store and distribute a product which would be made from local ingredients – and it would all be powered by this kind of alchemical transformation of the sun's energy into cold ice cream. I saw this as a selling point for the work, and also as a selling point for the produce. I think one of the interesting things that came out of the process, one of the things I learned, was this idea that people who'd come along to me to buy an ice cream who had their five pound notes out, and when I said no, it's actually part of the work, it's free, it's a gift, a lot of the time I found that people felt quite unhappy about that. (Laughing.) They wanted to buy it! They didn't quite trust this transaction happening without money changing hands, and I think partly, that might be to do with the recognisable nature of the way in which most other food is labelled or has associations, you know, Coca Cola, you know, they want an ice cream, they want a Cornetto – but I think it says something about that social breakdown of trust, in a way. Eventually, as a result of this, I then developed the project into an equal exchange, so in exchange for me taking a photograph of the person, a kind of happy snappy thing with a Polaroid, people felt a lot happier to go away with something, so it's much more of a transaction. Afterwards, I got approached to show this work in Japan as part of the Japan Expo, which, itself, is a very complex context in a way, because the gallery that the work was gonna be shown in is called the Toyota Municipal Museum, which essentially, is being funded by the Toyota car corporation. It's got a massive collection of art and design. It's an

incredible museum, but I guess knowing that those profits have come from something essentially which is what I'm trying to critique becomes a dilemma. And also, within the context of the Japan Expo, which itself was set up to be an ecological, social experiment, it wanted to address things like global peace and harmony and all these utopian ideas, I guess it asks the question how cynical should we be and to what extent should we make use of those opportunities? I basically decided to try and make use of the opportunities and to turn the project in on itself, I decided, instead of showing the same work again, to update the model, if you like, to look at how the thing had existed in its previous incarnation, and to address how, for example, the work might actually travel there. The work, in terms of making the smallest possible carbon footprint, should travel by boat, it should be as light as possible, it should be as small as possible – so all of these things are considered in the design. And essentially, the work, instead of having a crate, basically evolved from the crate and so, in a sense, within the gallery context, it very much acknowledges itself and the journey that it's taken to get there, through the labelling, through the packaging. So essentially, the work is a crate, and it fits back into the crate.

That's me really. Except I wanted to just show a picture of my allotment.