

Art & The Political Seminar: Part 1
1st December 2007, Glasgow School of Art

Chaired by Craig Richardson

Participants: Tanya Eccleston (Director of Research Centre for Art in Social Contexts, Programme Leader Fine Art, Head of Sculpture & Environmental Art, GSA), Chad McCail (Artist, Cumbria Institute of the Arts), Ross Sinclair (Researcher, Sculpture & Env Art, GSA), Alan Currall (Researcher, Sculpture & Env Art, GSA), Dr. Ken Neil (Head of Historical & Critical Studies, GSA), Chris Fremantle (On The Edge Research, Gray's School of Art), Monika Vykoukal (Curator, Peacock Visual Arts Aberdeen), Justin Carter (Sculpture & Env Art, GSA), Minty Donald (AHRC Research Fellow in the Creative and the Performing Arts, Mackintosh School of Architecture, GSA), Craig Richardson (Chair) (Researcher, Oxford Brookes University), Sue Brind (Research/Sculpture & Env Art, GSA), Dr. Damian Sutton (Research Developer, School of Design & Fine Art, p-t Historical & Critical Studies), Professor Klaus Jung (Head of Fine Art, GSA and Director, Studio 55: Centre for Research in Fine Art Practice), Dominic Hislop (Artist, Berlin), Oliver Ressler (Artist, Vienna), Kyle McCulloch (Artist, Glasgow - and editor of spoof art magazine *Pear: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*), Ranjana Thapalyal (Researcher School of Design, and p-t Historical & Critical Studies, GSA).

Introduction (Craig Richardson)

There are some basic points I wish to make in introduction in order to assist in the structure of this discussion. These have been shamelessly culled from Richard Noble's 'Some Provisional Remarks on Art and Politics' presented at "To Change an Opinion: A Conference on Art and the New World Disorder" (2004) and provided some following helpful categories of political art.¹ It is important to recognise today that we are talking about art and that we do not have the presence of any major political theorists, nonetheless this is a major subject, and perhaps we should be mindful of how daunting it might seem.

The first category is '*Art as political criticism*'; which '*takes certain political or social processes as its subject matter [... in order to...] critically analyse and expose*

¹ Richard Noble, *The Showroom Annual 2003/04*, (London: The Showroom Gallery, 2004), p. 50 – 56. The conference "To Change an Opinion: A Conference on Art and the New World Disorder", organised by Jean-Paul Martinon and Kirsty Ogg, was held at The Showroom Gallery, London, 3rd April, 2004.

*these...'*² At the very best these expose the nation-states otherwise hidden deeds. In the UK we can point to Conrad Atkinson's work, some of Hans Haacke's work in a European context, and exhibitions made by Gran Fury or Group Material in America. Can it be decisive insofar as it effects political change which can be measured? Perhaps such an art with such intent is castigated for its very ineffectiveness?

A second category is art which explores and possibly upholds '*positions and identities defined by otherness, marginality*'.³ A complication is the tendency to become less 'artful', more representatively conventional, and Noble describes such representation as a 'burden'. Conversely this can be compelling at precise moments, and addressing the under-representation of groups, communities, even peoples and the contributing events and resources which have come to define them, has a tendency to make good art history, perhaps because it is a form of History? It is worth considering a point here made by Thomas Lawson that discussions of identity politics are rarely discussed by Scots, well, maybe not the one's he knows.

A third category includes '*Utopian experimentation*'; alternative ways of living often seen as contestable activity. Our own Ian Hamilton Finlay's 'Little Sparta' is such an example. Somehow lifestyle issues seemingly and increasingly define such movements in art. Or perhaps it's the misplaced and nostalgic view of community, in which everyone's front door is always open. Richard Noble writes of the Venice Biennale (2003):

The idea of utopia animating this exhibition seemed to be that if curators invite lots of artists to do whatever they want in a vaguely platform-like architectural structure made of inexpensive wood products, and as long as no-one makes any sort of aesthetic or political judgement about what to include or how to install it, then a new egalitarianism and democratic utopian movement will spontaneously occur.⁴

Perhaps such an idea is simply a response to the otherwise overdone exaggeration of national traits that Venice exemplifies. Noble does acknowledge that such an approach may hold up a mirror to our social limitations and deficiencies, and I would suggest that just such an equality, where all expressions are supposedly valid, is the ethos of democracy.

Does art thrive in democratic structures, do democratic structures accommodate artists? Or is it the case that, as Lawrence Weiner has suggested, if the modern state knew what artists were really thinking they'd lock them up! To which I'd add we'd probably want to lock up politicians if we knew what they were thinking.

And a final category '*Art as an investigation of its own political condition*'; artists examine the conditions of art's making. This can be quite hard work to look at - dare I say - boring. Well, I've made quite a few boring works myself, so I don't mind using the word if you don't. I've written elsewhere that while such a politicised art might be boring it has to be defended. Is all art political in the sense that it reveals conditions of its making? A large number of conceptual artworks in the historical period do just this. Adrian Piper discussed Ian Burn's engagement with Conceptual art, that it had

² Ibid., p. 53.

³ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴ Ibid., p.54.

reflexive content, the idea that what you do when you do Conceptual art is to examine the concept of art itself, to look directly at the nature of the discipline in which you're engaged.⁵

And finally, as we are in an academic environment, places in which internecine battles emerge from the structural iniquities of educational institutions (which are then described as 'political'), we should remind ourselves that the modern educational environment deals with globalism and competitive markets like any other business. Equally the challenge to meet targets set by Research Assessment exercises are also bound by equal opportunities legislation and a raft of many other legal and social provisions. We might want to ask ourselves who we serve in these circumstances, is it the hard-headed business model moving towards greater income generation, or a big old soft-hearted socially inclusive, all embracing goodness! I'm exaggerating the polarity but... that anyway might be an ever-present question in our society, asked of artists as it is of others, to which artists might respond in more complex ways than democratic structures understand.

Our first of four artists speaking today is Justin Carter...

⁵ Adrian Piper, 'Ian Burn's Conceptualism' in M. Corris (ed), *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 343-4.