

# Political Art—what it mostly isn't, and what it could be

## Protest & Survive at the Whitechapel Gallery, London until November 12

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The relationship between art and politics is a subtle and complex one. The process of creation is an act of engagement, in some form or other, with the world around the artist. It need not be a direct statement on an immediate political event for it to have resonances far beyond its immediate intention. Nor is it necessarily the case that responses to immediate and specific moments need only be relevant to those events.

The response of the true artist to the world around him or her will work to a different dynamic than that of political life. There will be a connection, but the artists' striving to understand the inner complexities of life, and express them through images, will make them more aware of subtle changes in the rhythm of that life. It will not necessarily make them more articulate in expressing that awareness politically, nor need it. The task of the true artist is to strive for an artistic truth, and express it with all the resources at his or her disposal. Such a striving for expression will in itself impel art to new developments, and express painful truths about society.

There is, however, a common failing among many “political” artists, who allow themselves to be seduced by their own radicalism. It is not uncommon to see such works falling between two stools: they are political statements, yet because they are works of art their political message is thought to be exempt from rigorous examination. Similarly, because they are political statements, their artistic merits are deemed somehow more flexible. Politically and artistically, concessions are made. The results are often substandard in every way.

Unfortunately, it is precisely this kind of thinking that typifies the exhibition *Protest & Survive* at London's Whitechapel Gallery. The curators, Matthew Higgs and Paul Noble, state that in the exhibition “ambiguity is rejected in favour of direct engagement”. They explain that they began with an interest in “the possibility of identifying a radical ‘community’ of artists”. To this end they have brought together the work of some 40 artists, spanning roughly the last 35 years.

That period clearly takes in a great many political and cultural upheavals. There are representatives of agitational street art of the 1968 generation. There are works on US imperialism from the early 1970s. There are works from the Thatcher years in Britain during the 1980s, along with works responding to the 1990 Gulf War. There are also more contemporary pieces. The exhibition thus offers us a comparative snapshot of various “political” arts, as well as the chance to assess where we might be now.

One theme that emerges more than once is the yearning for a lack of artistic knowledge, a striving for an audience without any preconceptions, an audience in a state of innocence. Artist David Hammons is quoted as appealing to a “street audience” rather than an art audience, which is

conservative and critical. The curators seem to approve that sentiment, quoting the British painters and performance artists Gilbert and George that “The twentieth century has been cursed with an art that cannot be understood. The decadent artists stand for themselves and their chosen few, laughing and dismissing the normal outsider.”

Although Gilbert and George are promoting a reassuringly pedestrian and unartistic view of art, Higgs and Noble nonetheless do them something of a disservice here. More important in what Gilbert and George say is that “We want Our art to speak across the barriers of knowledge directly to People about their Life”, rather than about their knowledge of art. There is a difference between wanting the widest possible audience for your art and wanting that art to be seen only by those without any knowledge of art. It is only through study and assessment that we can establish what is worthwhile in art, in the same way as it is only through the conscious working out of a solution that we can address political problems.

What Higgs and Noble seem to be saying is that there should be some primitive response to political art, which is instinctive and uncritical. It goes some way to explaining the dead end in which they find themselves, where they propose a “street audience” as a substitute for working to inform a wider audience. It is a political shortcut that leads them to artistic corner-cutting too.

They have selected works that deal with a wide range of political issues. Matthew Higgs and Paul Noble are critical of art exhibitions about “nothing, or nothing that matters.... Individual works are often little more than footnotes illustrating a thesis.” Life, they say, is more complicated than this. “An acceptance of its complexity is what makes each day interesting and exciting.” *Protest & Survive* is intended to “celebrate this complexity”.

For Higgs and Noble, “complexity” means recycling every single-issue protest beloved of radicals without ever trying to see those issues in a wider context. Individual artworks collected here are little more than footnotes illustrating the lack of a thesis.

The exhibition was produced in association with Freedom Press, a local anarchist publisher. As such, the exhibition is heavily geared towards the idea of an individual somehow acting outside society, and the assertion that this would (a) constitute a revolutionary act, and (b) be sufficient to change society.

One of the first exhibits that greets the visitor is a reproduced letter to the *Times* newspaper from “an idler”, S.L. Lowndes. In it, he raises the suggestion of in some way “opting out” of the prevailing economic system of the day. Apart from the fact that for working class people this is simply not an option, much less one compatible with being able to

survive, it sows all sorts of dangerous illusions in abstaining from formulating a political response. The idea that by pretending the wider political structure does not exist one somehow changes it, is a dangerous dead end.

There was clearly an element of wind-up in the original letter, and humour in art remains a potent weapon of subversion. However, the original joke was never particularly funny because of its political shortcomings. Its reproduction now serves only to further expose its failings. The notion of the artist as an offender of middlebrow sensibilities is one that came up elsewhere in the exhibition. Tariq Alvi's *Poster for a Library*, showing a naked young man, with an erect penis, reading a book, made me laugh out loud. Because of the censorship of images of erections this is almost the last artistic taboo in Britain, yet there is little more to Alvi's work than that initial burst of laughter.

Many of the pieces on display here show a fundamental lack of understanding of what they imagine they are addressing. What are we to make, for example, of Mike Hollist's 1976 photograph of a stripper protesting at the lack of women at Eton College? Should we be struggling to improve women's position in the upper layers of the bourgeoisie, or should we be addressing the fundamental divisions within society? If the protest was a stunt, it certainly does not seem to have shocked the adolescent hormones of the Eton college boys in the photograph.

This lack of focus is something that becomes more pronounced in the more recent works. Rob Pruitt's *Whitechapel Evian Fountain*, made out of Evian boxes and with Evian water being pumped round it, looks at first like a (rather poor) statement on multinational corporations. It's not a fundamentally interesting piece, but it looked like it might have been a one-liner about global enterprises. However, on closer inspection, it turns out that the work was only possible through the assistance of Evian. A one-liner loses its impact if it is hedged around with such caveats. The piece is as lazy politically as it is artistically.

The nadir of such dimness of thought is reached with Mathew Sawyer's black banner, reading simply *No to Bad Things*. This deeply unpleasant work manages to sneer at what actually was noble in the aspirations (however formless) of a layer of radicals, while at the same time assuming that their targets were obvious. At a time when there is an upsurge in such confused political protests, Sawyer's work explains nothing and is conservative in the extreme. As art it is entirely witless.

The difference in periods of political activity is an interesting one, which emerges through the exhibition by accident. Oyvind Fahlstrom, for example, is represented by four pieces. The earliest piece is a 1966 photograph, *Mao-Hope March*. Demonstrators march with placards of Mao Zedong and Bob Hope. Such puerile commentary on the radicalism prevalent in student movements of the time, particularly in relation to Mao, is replaced in the early 1970s by a more developed view of world politics. In the 1970 piece *World Trade Monopoly*, he attempts to explore imperialist economic intervention around the world. His version of a Monopoly board has countries instead of streets, and shows their value to imperialist trade and exploitation. It is an interesting piece, not entirely coherent politically, but symptomatic of a deepening seriousness towards politics.

Perhaps the furthest point of Fahlstrom's development on display here is a poster design for the Yippie 1972 Miami campaign. The Yippies had developed out of the student radical layer represented in *Mao-Hope March*, yet here Fahlstrom warns them to remember the lessons of the Russian Revolution, as "Russia wasn't changed by playing great music".

Probably the most focused art on display here is that created during the rule of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-89) in Britain. With varying degrees of artistic merit, the artists represented from that period responded to the increased alienation, the stepping up of the assault on living conditions and the rightward ideological shift that was taking place.

It is no accident that the exhibition was named after a slogan of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). The slogan was a parody of the government's advisory manual on surviving nuclear war "Protect and Survive". At the time there was an upsurge of radical political activity. The assault by the Thatcher government on the rights and conditions of the working class, which reached its high point in the 1984-85 miners strike, radicalised layers of the working class and middle class behind various much more outward-looking slogans. The possibility of class offensive was being raised, yet Higgs and Noble choose to represent the period instead by an inward-looking and limited slogan that refers only to one issue. They refer to it as "a slogan from a time when we believed that it was possible that without Protest there would be no Survival".

Yet Higgs and Noble fundamentally misunderstand even this work. Richard Hamilton's stark installation *Treatment Room*, where a video of Thatcher plays over a hospital bed in a bleak room, was never "a sardonic lament to Margaret Thatcher", as they write. In 1982, when it was created, it was an urgent response to the assault on the National Health Service. Theirs is nostalgia for a protest, which they have to misrepresent—to portray as more powerful and successful than it could ever have been given its limitations. They are attempting to revive the notion of protest as being powerful in itself.

Yet pieces like *Treatment Room*, or Paul Graham's photographs of unemployment benefit offices, do tell us something of conditions at the time. Graham's photographs show the bleakness of queuing for benefits in Social Security offices. The scenes look depressingly similar, which gains more impact when one realises that the four pictures were taken in different offices.

Perhaps the most interesting pieces from this era, although the least completely realised, are Stephen Willats's two large collages from 1982.

*Taboo Housing Estate* is an exploration of increasing alienation in housing. *From the Day into the Night and from the Night into the Day*, whilst ostensibly about the artist's sexual identity, throws in some perceptive comments on the counter-culture developing at the time. Willats expresses his suspicion of the glorification of 1930s Berlin that was taking place. He points to an awareness of how that movement ended with the brutality of fascism. Such an historical awareness is refreshing in this exhibition.

He also points to the commercialisation of the supposed counter-culture of Punk. He says that Punk's attitude that "you can do it" had changed nothing. The conclusion he does not draw is that this was because of the lack of perspective contained within it. Punk scared the establishment precisely because it contained the possibility of a movement beyond its control, but that didn't happen because of its formlessness.

It is interesting that Giorgio Sadotti's *One ... Two ...* (1993) simply repeats the failure. Here are the instruments for a five-piece band. They are plugged in and ready to play, and viewers are invited to do so. We are back at punk's "you can do it" ethos, but this time the viewer is almost being taunted with the lack of inspiration and focus.

The Turner Prize-nominated Wolfgang Tillmans also has some interesting things to say about the appropriation of youth- and counter-cultures. In a printed statement that forms part of Whitechapel Installation (2000), he writes "The problem with youth culture and media today is that young people are given the impression that they actually are doing something, when in fact they are only needed as participants in a staged marketing event". Unfortunately his artwork can express this no further than he does in words. This failure to realise his ideas is more pronounced than Willats's, because his images and ideas are more fragmented and scattered.

Tillmans also guest-edited an edition of homeless magazine *The Big Issue* for the exhibition. His photographs here explore urban living. There are one or two striking images, but Tillmans seems content rather to produce dull portraits of some extraordinary people, or pictures

emphasising the cramped travelling on London's Underground. Given the attention he has been receiving of late, I found him over-rated and a disappointment.

Two works stood out from the exhibition. The first was a textiles piece, *The Mother of All Battles*, by Grayson Perry. Perry is better known for his pottery (some of which is also on display here). He frequently employs comic-strip drawings with graphic violent sexual imagery to explore the formation of sexual identity and sexuality. As such I find much of his work has a slightly petulant and childish tone, but *The Mother of All Battles* employs his skills to much better effect.

It is a Balkan-style dark red skirt and waistcoat over a white blouse. The skirt and waistcoat are embroidered with images of violence (some of it sexual) and religion. The simple beauty of the dress draws the viewer in, where they are confronted with the violence and brutality lurking about it. Titled after one of Saddam Hussein's comments about the Gulf War in 1990, it was created in 1996, as the Balkans was being bloodily dismantled again. It was one of the most fully realised artistic endeavours on display here. It was also politically one of the most suggestive and redolent.

The other piece that stood out was Gilbert and George's *Cocky Patriot* from 1980.

Gilbert and George's trajectory has been an interesting one. From their earliest efforts they have mixed an almost childish element of wind-up with some social comment based on a libertarian individualism, which is not at all inconsistent with the surrounding philosophy of this exhibition. There is, at best, an ambivalence in their stance; at its worst, it is thoroughly reactionary. It says much about the state of the British art establishment that Gilbert and George are increasingly being advanced as some of the most thoughtful and insightful artistic commentators around.

Certainly *Cocky Patriot*, a large black and white photograph of a young man flanked by two Union Flags, is an image striking for its self-assured execution, unlike much of the work on display here. The young man with an erection visible through his trousers is presented as a homoerotic subject. The period was the heyday of the fascist National Front, which was virulently homophobic.

Gilbert and George have often worked only on the basis of a shallow and glittery representation of their homosexuality, for example in their pictures in the form of stained-glass windows. This piece is not quite in the same category. The picture's subject is much more serious than the glorification of their own images. The blending of homoerotic and fascist images was not a new one even then, and was fashionable amongst certain layers of the middle-class at the time (precisely as Stephen Willats had criticised). But Gilbert and George are clearly seeking to express opposition to the National Front's street thuggery and homophobia. If there is an element of flippancy in the representation of the man's sexual arousal, it is surmounted by the oppressive size of the picture. It is possible that we are meant to succumb to the young man's charms. Instead we are repulsed by the nationalist flags around him, by the arrogance, by the violence brooding here.

Having said this, the underlying ambivalence of *Cocky Patriot's* imagery underscores the political limitations of such a single-issue perspective. It is probably a more striking image, and for different reasons, than its authors intended. Gilbert and George were the forebears of an artistic generation that holds everything to be ironic. More than any of that younger generation, they are aware that not everything in art is ironic, yet they use the notion of irony to disguise a serious content in their own work. In a quote displayed there is a typically cool understatement that, "The true function of art is to bring about new understanding, progress and advancement. Every single person on Earth agrees that there is room for improvement."

This last sentence may be intended as a sneering little joke, but we can allow ourselves to take it seriously. The question remains, what will effect

that improvement? It is only on the basis of a conscious and critical study of the works of the past that we can fully appreciate and understand the developments of our contemporaries. Viewers do artists no favours by suspending their critical faculties. Similarly, the task facing artists is to find a means of expression for the world in which they find themselves, which means coming to grips with that world in some way. This is a process that is open to all serious artists, and indeed is becoming a pressing task in all forms of artistic creation.

The Whitechapel Art Gallery website can be visited at: <http://www.whitechapel.org/>



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