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What if political art doesn't have the politics to back it up?

Good politics, bad art?
Josie Appleton

Artists are dealing with political issues – the short-listed pieces in this year's Turner Prize include Langlands and Bell's war art from Afghanistan, reflecting on the mythical status of Osama bin Laden and the ineffectiveness of Western NGOs; and Jeremy Deller's critical video of George W Bush's home state of Texas. Veteran political artist Peter Kennard has two London shows critiquing the Iraq war; while in Manchester, Jai Redman staged a nine-day re-enactment of the US internment camp at Guantanamo Bay.

However, there is evidence that at least some of today's political art lacks bite. The fact that 'anti-capitalist' art has found the patronage of Tory Party supporter and adman Charles Saatchi suggests that it isn't exactly dealing serious blows to capitalist ideology. The Chapman brothers' sculptures of indigenous totems with McDonalds hamburgers for faces take pride of place in the Saatchi Gallery; early on, Saatchi bought up Mark Wallinger's series of photographs named after Marx's *Capital*, showing his friends dressed up as tramps standing in bank doorways. More recently, Britartist Michael Landy took on consumerism by having all his possessions ground to dust at the former C&A on Oxford Street.

In fact, notwithstanding some artists' activist intentions, much of the work addressing today's big political issues is pretty innocuous. The verve and the passion of political art of old is missing – attempts at exposing social inequalities tend to lapse into either opinionated outrage or cynical irony. We would be hard-pushed to point towards a celebration of popular defiance in the league of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* or Diego Rivera's revolutionary murals. Nor are there condemnations of elite violence comparable with Picasso's *Guernica* or David's *The Death of Marat*.

This isn't simply about the failings of contemporary artists. Instead, it is a direct consequence of a period in which there are no longer any mass political movements opposing Western intervention, standing up against oppression or putting forward an alternative to capitalism. While Delacroix drew his inspiration from the French masses, and Picasso expressed the outrage

of the Spanish republican movement at the massacre of *Guernica*, contemporary artists have to work in more of a vacuum.

Three forms of political art

We can highlight three different breeds of contemporary political art. First, there is a trend towards naturalism: simply reproducing the details of a particular political subject. Second, there is opinionated political art, which promotes the artist's view of political or material inequality. Third, there are ironic works that take up inequalities with a wink and a grin. Instead of passionate exposures of injustices that inspire people to action, these brands of art are more likely to deaden political events and make them seem farcical.

Naturalism.

Instances of elite repression and past popular rebellion have been reproduced by artists. Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* re-enacted the 1984 pitched battles between Sheffield miners and police, bringing together former miners and police officers, as well as members of historical re-enactment societies more accustomed to playing Vikings or Cromwell's troops. The two sides were coached in their performances – for the police to bang on their shields and launch a cavalry charge; for the miners to throw rocks and chant slogans. Instead of producing an artistic interpretation of the miners strike, looking back with pride or regret, Deller merely recreated the strike as a series of actions. He took the surface reality of an event – the shouts, the chants, the missiles – and said that we should 'not be afraid to look at it again'.

Jai Redman's Guantanamo re-enactment involved nine volunteers – one for each of the British detainees at Camp X-Ray. They were fed Halal soup, beans and rice, interrogated in sessions that were broadcast live on local radio and played the US national anthem and the Islamic call to prayer over loudspeakers. The recreated camp was modelled on the original, with a guards' mess, a dormitory, a parade ground and a perimeter fence topped with barbed wire. Redman said that he hoped to raise awareness of conditions in the Cuban camp, and to assist the campaign of British detainees' families.

These are examples of what the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács called 'naturalism' – meaning the reliance on surface detail and description, rather than re-

vealing a subject's inner significance. Camp X-Ray and the Battle of Orgreave are being made to speak for themselves, as if it was enough to show people bent over in orange jumpsuits or the police in a cavalry charge. Iconographic political art from the past would better fit Lukács' notion of 'realism': bringing to light the reality lying beyond surface impressions. Rather than showing bombs falling, people screaming, buildings shattering, Picasso captures the horrifying core of these experiences.

But events don't really speak for themselves; surface detail on its own means nothing. For the police, the Battle of Orgreave was a necessary challenge to what Thatcher described as 'violence and intimidation' from the 'enemies of democracy'; for the miners, it was a threat to their livelihoods. The same event means different things depending on your political point of view. The studied muteness of today's naturalism signals a reluctance to take a stand, to interpret an event's significance. The result is to confirm people's prejudices and assumptions rather than challenge them. While this art raises big political issues, it immediately kills debate over them with its non-committal, non-interventionist stance.

In fact, these re-enactments have a neutering effect. In 1984, the battle was one of life and death, in 2001 it was a performance staged for the cameras. Anger, pride and regret endures to this day among those who took part. 'People there were prepared to kill us, and we were prepared to kill them', said one participant; 'we were fighting for our jobs, our livelihoods', said another. Deller's event turned tragedy into farce. Participants were warned about getting carried away, reminded that the aim was to 'put on a good show for all the cameras' and 'go home safely' at the end of the day. While in 1984 the miners had torn up a stone wall for ammunition, now they were given a limited number of Channel 4-issue 'stones'. (That it is bad political art doesn't necessarily make it bad art. One could say that this neutering, staged effect was precisely the point with Deller's piece. Although those days of left-right confrontation were a mere 20 years ago, they indeed seem a world away, as safely distant as the Civil War. It's a powerful gesture to conjure up the taste and sound of a real political fight, only to dispel it to the ranks of the recreational Roundheads.)

Opinionated art.

Political art that does try to take a stand on social inequality often comes across as harsh and opinionated.

Peter Kennard's exhibition 'Decoration' shows a series of US and UK medals, with flags fraying and medallions replaced with the heads of war victims. Kennard's point about the connection between nationalism and suffering is driven home from every possible angle, showing the medals' flags in various states of disintegration, and victims of every age and gender. But the victims' faces are blank and unfeeling, appropriately so, given that they are merely ciphers for Kennard's message. The experience is akin to being accosted with a man with clipboard, determined to tell you how it is. A set of prints accompanying the Kennard show, 'Award' (with Cat Picton Phillipps), includes a photo-montage of a scowling Muslim woman superimposed on the backs of an embracing Blair and Bush; another shows Bush and his wife grinning through the window of an aeroplane smeared in blood.

Ironic art.

Alternatively, art addresses oppression with a wry wink. Here we could include the Chapman brothers' remake of some of Goya's war etchings with plastic shop dummies, recasting military brutality as horror-show kitsch. The Chapman brothers' McVoodoo sculptures work on similar lines; in spite of the piece's allusions to global capitalism, it is really a light-hearted gag that you are supposed to 'get' then move on. Meanwhile, the graffiti artist Banksy takes on the authorities with adolescent glee, thumbing his nose at officialdom before disappearing into the night. One recent intervention was a statue of Justice dressed as a prostitute in Clerkenwell Green, apparently to criticise the criminal justice system's bias. Like a disruptive schoolboy, Banksy knows that his provocations are just gestures of protest, rather than attempts to change things. Ironic public art raises political issues only to trivialise them.

Political movements and political art

In order to explain the present predicament of political art it helps to look back at the past relationship between political movements and political art. Political movements provided the lifeblood for artists such as Kennard in the 1970s and Diego Rivera in the 1920s. The inequalities they sought to expose in their work were being exposed in people's day-to-day struggles; the pride and anger they depicted was drawn from those around them. Art also fed back into the movement, hoping to inspire and guide political struggle. At a time of mobilisation, the artist operates at the crest of a huge wave. By contrast, it is when artists are isolated, as they are today, that they lapse into clichés and

naturalism.

In his autobiography *My Art, My Life*, Rivera said that his aim was to 'reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, and through my vision of the truth to show the masses the outline of the future'. (1) His epic mural series at the Ministry of Education and the National Palace showed every aspect of Mexican life as part of a national populist destiny – the festivals, the revolutionary heroes, the war against France and America, workers' struggles. The message is often obvious and didactic, but unlike today's opinionated art it is infused with genuine sentiment. There's nothing forced about Rivera's noble, lolloping figures when they're scowling at the bosses or the intellectuals, or mocking the indulgences of the rich. It wasn't just that Rivera was a passionate man (though he was that); he was painting during the final stages of the Mexican Revolution, when a new government was setting about nationalising industry, collectivising fields and universalising education. His work expresses the optimism and conviction of the times.

Peter Kennard, meanwhile, switched from painting to photomontages after the events of 1968, and throughout the 1970s and '80s took up Vietnam, nuclear proliferation and General Pinochet's coup in Chile. He aimed to expose official deceit and point a new way forward; he said that he hoped his images reflected 'deep human desires' and could help to 'ground these desires in visual fact'. (2) 'The photo-montages are not only reports on events and possibilities but become part of those events themselves when they are used by the people campaigning for change.' His pieces were taken up by political movements, reproduced on banners, postcards and t-shirts. In contrast to his recent work, many of Kennard's early photomontages were biting and harrowing. In one, a Japanese crowd was shown looking up at an atomic explosion, surprised in their realisation that they are all about to die.

While Kennard's convictions may have remained the same, times have changed. The popular mobilisation that fed his work is no longer there. The break up of the Soviet Union in 1991 sealed the collapse of the left; the battle between opposing ideological visions, which had structured political life for some 150 years, was declared over. Once there was 'no alternative' to capitalism, political life lost its *raison d'être* – cynicism towards politics increased, voting declined and popular movements waned.

Popular mobilisation still goes on, such as the anti-

capitalist movement that burst on the scene in 1999; or the recent 'million man' anti-war march in London, the largest demonstration in British history. But this mobilisation is actually a sign of political malaise rather than health – they are individualised demonstrations of powerlessness rather than a political movement with coherent aims and goals. The anti-capitalist movement expressed a sense of being 'anti-everything', a disgruntled lashing out against the unfairness of the world. The antiwar movement's slogan – 'Not in my name' – symbolised individuals opting out of a situation that they didn't like .

Political action has become reduced to theatrical exhibitionism. Anti-capitalist demos of the late 1990s were called 'carnivals', entailing great attention to costumes, self-presentation and protest methods. A 'successful' demo was when marchers managed to outwit the police and put on an impressive show; the protest became an end in itself. Similarly, many of those I spoke to on the recent London antiwar march said that they just wanted to 'show Tony Blair how I feel'. The march was about individuals demonstrating their displeasure then going home, rather than people taking a collective stand against war. It is for this reason that the demonstration had so little effect and just seemed to melt away afterwards.

Because there are no political movements exposing and mobilising against inequality and injustice, phenomena such as capitalist exploitation become naturalised: they just are as they are. Everybody can get angry and cynical about things, but nobody expects to change them. This explains the different forms of contemporary political art. Without a political critique or ideology, it is difficult for artists to grasp the meaning of an event, so they instead reproduce it in re-enactments. Lukács argued that in the absence of ideology 'a writer can neither narrate or construct a comprehensive, well-organised and multifaceted epic construction. Observation and descriptive detail are mere substitutes for a conception of order in life'. (3)

Opinionated art such as Kennard's arises when artists try to substitute themselves for the political movement, making solitary statements about the brutalities of war. Because the artist has to do all the exposing, the work lacks the nuances of that which channels collective experiences. And ironic political art results from the fact that pointing out capitalism's inadequacies is inconsequential. If there are no alternative ways of organising things, and no hope for improvement, then the inequalities of wealth or power stop being serious –

everybody, even a Tory adman, can get the gag.

Looking forward

When art tries to take a stand on big issues such as inequality or war, it tends to come out as clichéd or ironic. Instead of weighty political art, we end up with artists posturing. This isn't due to artists' personal failings – it is due to the apolitical times we live in.

Perhaps a more genuinely political kind of art is that which concentrates on telling the truth about contemporary experience – be that love, depression, scientific progress or whatever. Art's attempt to capture reality in all its complexity, to probe beneath everyday experience, is actually an inherently political task – more political, in fact, than posturing about the Iraq War. Raymond Williams and others have noted how art developed in self-conscious opposition to capitalism. (4) While capitalism looked at the world from the point of view of mechanical utility, art aspired to be a sphere of 'imaginative truth'. While capitalism weighs all things in terms of market value, art looks at the object from its many angles. In his 1844 manuscripts, Marx wrote: 'the dealer in minerals sees only the mercantile value but not the beauty and the unique nature of the mineral – he has no mineralogical sense.' (5)

And while capitalism involves people selling their labour power, giving up their creativity and time for goals that they have no part in, art has to be sincere. In a letter to André Breton, Trotsky argued that it was art's sincerity that made it a potentially revolutionary force: 'The struggle for revolutionary ideas in art must begin once again with the struggle for artistic truth, not in terms of any single school, but in terms of the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self. Without this there is no art. "You shall not lie!" – that is the formula of salvation.' (6)

It is especially important that art play this role now, at a time when individuals are more isolated than ever. In the absence of collective engagement, individuals often understand their problems as something peculiar to them that they have to bear on their own, rather than something that can be worked through with others. Art can help to expose social reality, and to create a common, humane culture. To do this it will need to oppose the dead hand of official cultural policy, which demands that projects meet official criteria such as social inclusion goals.

There were no political utopias or slogans in 'Edge of

the Real' at the Whitechapel, only art that sought to penetrate experiences such as death, depression, institutionalisation and commoditisation, as well as to look forward. One work that seemed to convey a sense of future possibilities was *Good People* by David Thorpe, which featured a mysterious, space ship-style house in the woods. Meanwhile, Santiago Sierra's recent show at the Lisson Gallery involved spraying Iraqi immigrants with polyurethane, creating rough sculptures that bore the imprint of people on the inside – a much more powerful take on the assertion of Western power than more upfront political art. The gallery looked like the scene of a terrorist attack or a murder – with scattered overalls and empty canisters attesting to Sierra's act of violence. Instead of painting his subjects, Sierra arranged them only to turn the nozzle on them, obscuring their human form. Sierra's act elaborated the dark ambiguities of the assertion of power, and the clinical/industrial modes it employs.

So perhaps the future of political art is to come down off its soap box and stop trying to prove its radical credentials. Just trying to tell the truth about today's society is political enough.

Notes

- 1 *My Art, My Life*, Diego Rivera, Dover, 1992
- 2 *Images for the End of the Century*, Peter Kennard, Pluto Press, 1990
- 3 *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, Merlin, 1975
- 4 *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Raymond Williams, Penguin 1971
- 5 *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, I Meszaros, Merlin, 1970
- 6 *Art and Revolution*, Leon Trotsky, Pathfinder 1970

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