

Notes on Events

Through the Looking Glass Leigh French

Since the Scottish Arts Council's threat of legal action against Variant (detailed in the last issue) and after a long awaited meeting, the SAC commissioned an independent assessment of Variant from Andrew Brighton of Tate Modern. The exact purpose for commissioning the report was unclear. We were told that it could not be used in our attempted appeal against the SAC and that (regardless of its content) it would not inform SAC funding decisions: it was for the 'director's own personal use'. In a generous act, the SAC allowed Brighton to release his findings to Variant. It transpired that of prime importance to Brighton was trying to explain to the SAC the workings of Variant as an artist-run project. The report overwhelmingly championed Variant and concluded that if the SAC was going to support Variant it should support it for what it is. Clearly such beliefs don't sit comfortably within a climate of exhaustively managed Culture. (The report is available on the Variant web site www.variant.org.uk)

Since then the SAC Visual Arts Dept. has informed us that it has come to their attention that there's a 'gap in the market' for an art magazine in Scotland. This moot point is not an admission of a failure on their part to support critical writing. Rather, sidestepping their historical culpability, their aping of market rhetoric serves to conflate market priorities with cultural priorities as justification for now acting.

To corroborate their 'gap', the SAC has bought in the services of the well-worked "research expertise" company ScotInform. In a letter from the Visual Arts Dept. we were told ScotInform would be contacting Variant for access to our data-bases to enable them to carry out their research, and that this research would go on to inform some hazy intention to establish an art magazine in Scotland. ScotInform did contact us: we had been identified to participate in their survey of art magazines based in the UK. We responded by asking for ScotInform's brief from the SAC in full as we wished to know exactly what process we were being engaged in, for what purposes, if there were any projected outcomes as there seemed to be, and how this was going to benefit existing (unsupported) projects in this field, like Variant? (Given the SAC's alleged inability to support this area in the past, we'd also like to know just how much ScotInform are being paid out of Cultural resources for their services?) We still haven't been given the answers to these questions.

As part of ScotInform's research, a closed meeting was held where a small group of invited artists & gallerists were asked to express their views on 'an art magazine for Scotland.' Those gathered were told the 14% increase in arts funding in England, though expected in Scotland and allegedly to be used to fund such a magazine, was not going to be reciprocated by the Scottish Executive. As a result, funding for this magazine would come out of existing SAC resources. In return for supposedly having their funding eaten into, the implication is an uncritical, 'celebratory' association between the magazine and those organisations deemed to have forfeited something in this transaction.

Variant have been told that the model for this magazine put forward by ScotInform & SAC was a confused hotchpotch of 'everything' from applied art to fine art photography; it would incorporate the urban and the rural, and include a market section, an international section, listings, opportunities, etc. (These strands seemed to result from ScotInform's interpretation of a phone poll they conducted, the objectivity of which needs to be examined in itself.) Because ScotInform seemingly have little experience of the area they are dealing

with, they made the mistake of assuming that these elements are editorially benign and that they will combine seamlessly because they are 'Scottish', and to a much lesser extent 'contemporary'.

It would be fair to say that their model for the magazine seemed to have altered little from the beginning of the meeting to their summing up at the end, despite criticisms. The impression is that ScotInform fundamentally lacked an appreciation of the complexities of what they were dealing with. Evident was a naive assumption of some sort of unified Scottish arts community, with the SAC as the legitimising body of this consolidation of mutual self-interest. (That old chestnut of you don't just control production but also distribution, and importantly here the circulation and reception of ideas.)

What's exposed by these shenanigans is a highly conservative view (or suppression) of what might actually constitute the sites of 'Visual Art' and what forms and focuses a cultural magazine might independently take: that it might take them independently at all. It would seem that under a guise of market-necessity, pseudo-populism and public-accountability 'Culture' is only that which is officially allowed to be. Does it really need to be spelt out that artists' practises are not utterly contained by national boundaries, phantasmic markets, illusory departmental designations, or the control of bureaucratic functionaries?

Further evidence of adverse interference within the 'Cultural sector' (this time as a more blatant result of coerced public/private 'partnership' models of funding) is the utter farce surrounding the title of a recent exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh. The show of mainly Vancouver-based artists, many of Scottish descent, was sponsored by Standard Life Investments. On hearing that the show was to be titled 'Homesick' Standard Life intervened. Not wanting the slightest chance of being miss-associated with the word 'sick' they asked the curator and artists to change the title to something more acceptable to their brand image. ("In October, [Standard Life] cut the maturity payouts on 2.1m pensions and endowment policies by 10% and imposed an additional 10% penalty on those wanting to cash in their policy early." *Guardian*, 30.11.02) Sadly for the artists, gallery, and contemporary Scottish art scene, the result of this intervention was another innocuous title for what was (in part) an interesting exhibition, and the Fruitmarket Gallery and public funding in Scotland being the butt of ridicule in Vancouver. Similarly, when EasyJet sponsored the Fruitmarket they inflicted a sizable bright orange banner advertising cheap flights to Amsterdam across the bottom of the show's posters and invitation cards.

Clearly, we should criticise the Fruitmarket for these crass commercial deals which raise fundamental questions about freedom of expression and corporate power, but ultimate responsibility lies higher up the ladder. Those overseeing the stripping back of arms-length public funding are replacing it with a structure which exposes such galleries to unnecessary and totally disproportionate corporate influence. As a result, such galleries are being brought about to serve flagrant commercial and political interests.

The generating of private revenue as an essential requirement to receive public funding recently left its squalid mark elsewhere in Scotland, exposing the contradictions of a supposed liberal Cultural scene...

Centre for Contemporary Armaments

Gair Dunlop

"We glorify war as the sole hygiene...."
Marinetti, Futurist manifesto.

The CCA in Glasgow may be modest about its programme; all the more surprising that one of the more notable gatherings in the building recently has gone without mention in its publicity.

A seminar organised by Scottish Enterprise and the Ministry of Defence on Thursday 3rd October featured Anthony Ingram MP (Minister of State for the Armed Forces), representatives from Nobel Industries, The Defence Export Services Organisation, Defence Supply Service, and representatives from the Glasgow Universities, mingling with Glasgow's would-be body bag suppliers and weapons makers. The Defence Diversification Agency exists to diffuse the expertise from Britain's defence laboratories into industry, and vice versa.

A session on "the inventor and the MOD" featured exemplary tales such as that of the man who invented a new hygienic non/piercing syringe, now used for mass inoculation in the US and UK armies. Unfortunately the "percent for art" formula was not applied to this public gathering; artists use of the building was strictly confined to CCA6 where Bill Drummond's journey from Southampton to Dounreay traced parallel lines of nuclear force.

When the CCA re-opened [after a Lottery refurbishment], many of us felt a bit puzzled: there seemed to be little extra functional space, and a corporate style atrium cafe which squeezed artists out. Even more startling was the news that this mismatch of environment to its expected uses was up for major architectural prizes.

Now it's clear that these reservations were due to our complete misunderstanding of the purpose of Lottery revamps on arts structures. The hermetically sealed CCA5 makes a secure and confidential venue for any variety of military-industrial encounters. Assorted nooks and spaces make for quiet discussion zones, and excellent service from the cafe sweetens each encounter.

It's good to see the CCA devoting its soul to the necessary expenditure on future mayhem. But why leave artists out? If British Airways can commission a series of ethnic tailfins, think what contemporary artists could do with an F16. Defoliants have huge possibilities in Land Art. And a chic desert camouflage motif on the CCA cafe cups will convey an ideal zeitgeist punch this autumn. Why shouldn't artists get their hands on the incredible beauty represented in the apocalypses of tomorrow?

The above polemic appeared on the *Ambit* email discussion group and rapidly spread. What became apparent was a widespread sense of unease amongst artists relating to the question of space, and in particular the abandonment of the idea of public space. Several other strands of coping behaviour also emerged: liberal seeing-both-sides, denial, and from the CCA a surface response of seeking dialogue, with simultaneous threats of dismissal for any staff who talked about it.

Voice of Ambit List Moderator: I'm very aware that the subscribers to this list are being asked to make moral judgements on a variety of issues surrounding the CCA and this seminar based on minimal information.

Does anybody have hard info on this seminar — for example an agenda, delegate pack, handout? If not, can we obtain some information from CCA?

Gair, it's not that I don't believe you, but you are asking everyone to take a lot on trust here. I don't think clarity is helped by your mix of factoids, polemic, satire and humour: effective as a critique perhaps, but more information is needed.

Gair Dunlop: My intention was solely to help the CCA promote this radical "new audience" initiative.

Let's show the world we mean business when we invoke a social inclusion agenda...

I wonder if some of the undoubted surprise about

this is due to artists' thinking that somehow artspace and civilspace are immune from the war forces of the moment. Well it would seem they're not.

Response from Mandy Macintosh: so my reaction is quite sad really, i mean one day i was passing [the CCA] and popped in and the Scottish Football Association had taken over the front and cafe so i couldnt even get near the cappuccinos for trays full of vol au vents.

i mean basically it wasnt open to the public and this was mid week afternoon. so that was annoying and a bitnaff but this is just really crass now, and i cant imagine it being tolerated in other equivalent uk venues in manchester, london,bristol etc. so why here?

i couldnt boycott every venue or warn every future artist about malpractice or questionable association taking place there, i use domineering technology, i fly on aeroplanes, bla bla, we all participate in messy fucked up compromising things, but when a particular item is pointed out to you like Gair did here and you see it as emblematic of something kind of bigger and more insidious than how it actually appears on paper then i want to know more about it and i dont want it to drift past.

No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail spectacularly (No sanctuary from caricature, parody and oblivion...)

Daniel Jewesbury

This has been a year of mixed messages and unfulfilled commitments for the arts in Ireland, a hubristic year, on both sides of the border. As great plans wither on the vine and funding bodies fail once again to present a co-ordinated approach to cultural policy and provision, artists are left wondering what the 'criteria' are that they're meant to be fulfilling. One thing is left unchanged by this year of reversals and terminations: artists continue to be the last to know.

When Arthouse, then the Multimedia Centre for the Arts, was conceived of more than a decade ago, artists in Dublin (and across Ireland) were unsure what the new centre would either be or do. Many felt that a huge new venue for an artform that had yet to define itself was not only premature but remarkably ill-judged; at that time the word 'multimedia' was still applied to work that used video and sound, and the idea that artists who couldn't even get access to facilities to work in these media would somehow embrace 'digital art' (whatever that was or is) was surely a peculiar one. There's no innovation without experimentation, of course, but as the twin edifices overshadowing the new Curved Street were completed, many felt that the manner in which the Multimedia Centre had been developed was characteristic of the lack of consultation in the Temple Bar project as a whole. Arthouse opened far behind schedule and (much to the surprise of those venturing in for the first time) with no dedicated exhibition space. From the very beginning this was one of the main problems with the building (for the building became synonymous with the entity it housed); where was its centre? While shows were hung awkwardly in the reception area, the café became the only effective and frequented space in the building.

There's no point going over the details of Arthouse's demise once again, five months after the event. Even the dogs in the street know that story, as we say in Belfast. We know also that it's naïve to assume that lessons will be learnt from the calamitous demise of such ill-defined, ill-used facilities. If you've got a big idea, the last thing you want is a rabble of scruffy creative types telling you it just won't work.

"The traffic lights, and yellow lines, and the illuminated signs, that all say 'welcome to the borough that everybody's pleased in'..."

Willie Rushton, 'Neasden'

And so to Imagine Belfast, or the fiasco of an aborted renaissance. In this issue of Variant, John Gray, librarian of the Linen Hall library, points out that the failure of Belfast's bid to be European Capital of Culture in 2008 was only a surprise to those who compiled it. Those dogs on the street had sensed that here was another grand project that would fail because it had no connection with the activity that already existed in the city. The grandiloquent schemes described in Imagine's bizarre bid document mentioned only selectively, and then in passing, those organisations whose sole work in the past ten, twenty or thirty years has been putting culture in the recovery position and stopping it from swallowing its tongue. The bid, 'One Belfast', was almost perverse in its naivety, acknowledging on the one hand the massive social and political problems, the fragmentations and dissolutions and blindness that cripple Belfast (Belfast is a city 'acquainted with grief', as one Biblical passage in the bid would have it), whilst proposing on the other that we could wish all these away with a 'culture' that would heal the wounds and, more importantly, get the cash registers chiming (in unison, obviously). No one could agree what this vision of 'culture' was, least of all the team of Imagine Belfast, as John Gray points out. The desire to make Belfast a 'whole' city is a laudable one; it deserves more to see it to realisation than the platitudinous pledges of a pack of PR consultants:

"Yet Europe is still a continent with boundaries, barriers and borders. In Belfast we have our walls. We are one of the last cities in Western Europe to be divided by 'peacelines'. But we have other walls too. Invisible walls, between men and women, rich and poor, young and old. The culture of barriers will end.

"We will cultivate the arts of infiltration, transparency and transgression. We will come through not in ones and twos, but in our thousands. We will bring others to come through. From Ireland and Britain and Europe, we will bring the people who suffer and fret and remember, and we will bring them through what were our walls and barriers.

"We will reconnect our populations.

We will cement conciliation.

We will replace the peace lines with peace.

We will bring down the walls of Belfast.

We will embed our peace in the fabric of the city and in the conscience of Europe...

"One Belfast:

The whole various, unexpected, unreliable, dependable, unruly, uproarious, threatening, stubborn, generous, violent, scary, hospitable, perverse, cack-handed city in a bucket between sea and hill."

What many found particularly galling about Imagine's schemes was the application of 'cultural' activity to the ends of inward investment and economic and social regeneration. This instrumentalised approach to culture is to be found in any city desperately trying to reinvent itself after years of industrial or social decay, so it's hardly a surprise that it's become virulent across the North in the last eight years. But the collective sigh of relief that many artists released when the bid failed was a recognition of the fact that culture is not a panacea, something exclusively benign that speaks to everyone and no-one.

Early on in the bidding process, poet-in-exile Tom Paulin rowed in behind the bid with a proposal that Belfast's real 'culture' was to be found in the patterns of its vernacular, something which Imagine seized on and incorporated into their document. Their hugely imaginative proposal was that a different 'word of the day' from English,

Irish or Ulster Scots would be featured on billboards across town during 2008. This seems to epitomise the way in which the bid conceptualised the future for Belfast; the only way forward, it proclaimed, is in the policy of 'equal but different', a kind of cultural power-sharing in which all cultures are to be valued and none to be questioned. In the post-ceasefire, post-Agreement climate, 'culture' is used cannily by all seeking to gain political advantage; it's one of the few weapons that doesn't have to be decommissioned. The frenzied rush to acclaim Ulster Scots as a 'language', and thus a marker of a truly different 'culture' within the North, is a testament to this. Culture has always been implicated in the grand crimes and petty misdemeanours of history, and so it goes on.

Tom, it was a load of auld boke.

Variant has secured funding towards the next three issues from Awards for All in Northern Ireland, and we will be developing a broad range of content from Ireland and Britain over the coming year. In particular we will be organising an event in Belfast early in 2003, exploring the huge variety of small arts publishing that goes on in these islands. The next issue will extend our collaborations with organisations across Ireland, drawing in new contexts and debates and further broadening the magazine's remit.