

Blood curdling

Tom Jennings



Recipe

Take blood from right arm
Take oil from car engine
Mix ingredients
Observe reaction

Take country with large oil reserves
Take global capitalism
Mix ingredients
Observe reaction

Take untenable situation
Maintain in artificial state
Mix ingredients
Observe reaction

Sally Madge

A contemporary art exhibition entitled 'Resist: Protest Art' might sound like a surprising proposition in this postmodern age of cynicism, Young British Art and the death of grand narratives. And whether or not the obituaries are premature, for me the title of this show (and the clenched fist on the poster) raised the spectre of the heroic pose either as a safe veneer on liberalism, or concealing the kind of prescriptive moralising beloved of many political groups and parties on the left over the last few decades. However, this might only worry those of us jaded by the manipulation, dishonesty and/or downright betrayal by vanguards, central committees and other 'conscious minorities'—whereas perhaps concepts such as resistance and protest are more innocent for the younger anti-globalisation generations. Plus of course there is always the possibility of reclaiming the symbols and language of rebellion from the dead hands of reformist, bureaucratic, institutional or even corporate sequestration—as in the anarchist movement's persistent attempts to realign Mayday with its revolutionary grass roots origins.¹ In any case, happily, the vague misgivings—in particular, the likelihood of yet another worthy middle-class, trendy-leftie, political-correctness-fest, somehow left over from the 1980s—proved unfounded here.

Instead Scarborough's *Crescent Arts* mounted an interesting and varied collection of mainly small-scale pieces in painting, collage, photography, mixed media, sculpture and installation. The relationship of the work to either protest or resistance was tenuous, but then an exhibition entitled 'Critical reflections on what politics in art might entail these days' probably wouldn't have cut any promotional mustard. Certainly there was little sense of any politics in the formal qualities of the exhibits (beyond the ambiguities of referentiality and irony, along with texts signalling a problematization of discourse), which dealt with current real-world concerns such as the right to publicly organise, war, technology, environmentalism and consumerism. For example, while backing away from the wall-based work, viewers risked tripping over Yoke & Zoom's ammunition box 'Not In Our Name' in the centre of the main space—a more subtle and effective message about the debris and detritus of war (landmines, etc) and its mediated portrayal, than any number of celebrity charity galas could achieve. More oblique were Catherine Graham's double electrical socket and plugs joined with a short cable, 'F**k The System'—implying the possibility of shortcircuiting the rapidly closing nature of present power (and technological) relations—and George Heslop's 'Chocolate Crucifix' hinting at the religious overtones of commodity valorisation and fetishisation. Most potent was Sally Madge's installation, 'Recipe', consisting of small clinical specimen bottles containing blood and oil on a glass shelf, accompanied by short verses in the form of cookery notes.

Blood and oil has been a potent metaphor in

the context of the invasion of Iraq, as demonstrated well by the 'Recipe' text. Public outrage made an intuitive connection between powerful corporate vested interests and the actions of the governments such interests support. And it can hardly be denied that since early last century there have been consistent links between the directions followed by international politics and control over petrochemicals. The slogan 'No blood for oil' captures the widespread sense of revulsion at the cynicism and duplicity of the New World Order, even though it is generally understood that rather more is at stake than cheap crude.² Importantly, the commonplace laments of the complacent classes about the political apathy of ordinary people are exposed as lies by the unprecedented levels of protest against this Iraq 'war'—before it had even started, and irrespective of the media circus grinding into gear and spinning the vacuous demagoguery of freedom and democracy where none is (or will be, in any meaningful sense) apparent.³

So, despite their oversimplifications, slogans can be very effective in mobilising people to contemplate and take action; and 'Recipe' could be interpreted as effective sloganeering in the form of a small art installation. But, whether intended or not, it also mobilised many more layers and levels of meaning and resonance than such a function would suggest. Contributing to and wholeheartedly echoing the exhortation to 'Resist', more difficult issues were also raised—of complicity, the relationship between subversion and containment, and the problem of tackling symptoms rather than causes. Deeper philosophical questions loomed underneath, of the exploitation, destruction and future of all *resources* (as perceived by our rulers; encapsulated in the concept of 'collateral damage')—including human bodies, consciousnesses and lifeworlds, and the material and biological environment. Most of all, implicit in this work was the challenge of where we locate ourselves in these complex processes—as viewers or makers of art, citizens or consumers in the West, and/or as subjects and objects of political or other discourses. This challenge surely started as humble and local (e.g. 'Where do I, where does my life, my art, *figure* here and now in this situation?'); but on reflection could hardly avoid expanding into the historical, universal and global.

In practice, the blood and oil *resisted* being mixed; they could be juxtaposed, but remained separate. Just as seawater is hidden from the sun underneath oil slicks, this mammalian blood (a phylogenetic analogue of seawater) was sealed in from the atmosphere by exhaust oil rendered thicker and darker with immersed particles picked up from the internal surface of the ailing engine. The blood was itself heavy with waste products and exhausted of oxygen and nutrients after its passage around the tired body's machine. Over its lifetime as an exhibit, the components sedimented into plasma and corpuscles; and the engine oil's components might do something comparable given geological time.

Fossil fuels represent prehistoric generations of lifeforms fixed in their strata by the natural disasters of planetary biography. Over many millennia they become instrumental in cycles just as arbitrary and destructive, but made to appear similarly inevitable by the rhetoric of neo-liberal economics—which also conveniently offers a revisionist Darwinism in which biological entities compete as capitalists, and only the most evolutionarily profitable survive. If the destiny of the losers is to become the ideological fossil fuel of the future, then blood and oil are both biologically and discursively related, but dislocated in time; and time is running out for both. Extracted from their natural habitats, they enjoyed here the tem-



porary reprieve of suspended artistic animation in an exhibition which was their memorial service.

However, this was not just any old blood and oil, but that which had circulated around the body and accoutrements of the artist in the service of her life. To keep us all in the lifestyles to which we have become accustomed, oil and human bodies are likewise basic raw materials of the lifeblood of the global machinery of capitalism. Both must be produced and reproduced for money to flow. We imagine and contrive our integrity and our purposes in life—including our freewill, individuality, expressivity and desire—according to and in between the demands this system makes upon us, in the interstices of its networks of subjugation, seduction and sedation. And the 'good life', for those who have one, has always required the devastation, exploitation and destruction of colonised lands and dominated peoples—now, it seems, more than ever (that's progress). What, then, does it mean to 'resist' one isolated symptom of this disease? Why here and now if not always and everywhere else? By mobilising the artist's own body, daily life, and sense of self in the equation of blood for oil, 'Recipe' pondered such questions intimately and personally, asking viewers to do the same.

Left to its own devices blood has a cycle. Blood flows, changes, grows, differentiates, mingles, heals, reproduces, degenerates. Blood organises itself over time. Time may also fossilise the body and its blood into oil—it depends upon how it is *contained* (what is done to it, where, by whom and for what purpose). One of these bottles of blood (in its 'universal container') clotted and developed imperceptibly into other modes of being; with the potential for strange beauty, fascinating and interesting shapes, colours, dynamics. Or, if tainted with anti-clotting agent, it could be maintained in an artificial state. This had a certain minimalist aesthetic quality, one might suppose, but was rather sterile—not only that, but it required the dead density of the oil for the effect to work. For my part, in art as in politics, I prefer the self-determination of the human element, which in both spheres has the additional capacity to not need the oil at all. And, when organised political resistance does finally return to the agenda, if an 'artificial State' is deemed to be oxymoronic as well as moronic—so much the better.

'Resist:ProtestArt', Crescent Arts, The Crescent, Scarborough, May 13th to June 28th 2003

Notes

1. See *Freedom* magazine, 14th June 2003, for a discussion of Mayday as well as coverage of the latest round of anti-globalisation protest in Evian, Lake Geneva, from 29th May-3rd June; and the subsequent issue (*Freedom*, 28th June) for a recent example of the machinations of Leninist would-be leaders—in this case the SWP—in the Stop The War Coalition.
2. See *Variant* No. 17 for a range of perspectives.
3. As in any other country the Western 'democracies' have blundered into over the past few centuries—so it can hardly *always* be a case of unintended consequences of 'good intentions'. See Noam Chomsky's work for detailed accounts.

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