

Editorial

A cultural complaint

Variant has recently been asked to account for itself by the Office of the Scottish Charities Register (OSCR), following a complaint about the 'political' nature of the magazine. We understand that this complaint was centred on a possible conflict between that supposed 'political' agenda, and our charitable status. We can only guess as to the origin of the complaint in question, as OSCR are not permitted to divulge the source. However, one particular email, received in April this year, has stuck in our minds: it concerned Joyce Carmichael's 'Letter from Palestine' (Variant 19). Here is an excerpt from that email:

"The writer shows a naive and dangerous lack of knowledge about the conflict. For instance, she refers to the Jenin 'massacre', what massacre? It is a fact the UN confirmed that there was no massacre in Jenin.

"She refers to the bulldozing of buildings and the destruction of the PLO headquarters. Of course they were destroyed, they were harbouring terrorists. It is a fact that the houses of the families of suicide bombers are destroyed, they are then fully compensated by the terrorist organizations, and re-housed. There is no reference, in her letters, to the fact that hundreds of innocent Israelis have been murdered by what she refers to as 'resistance fighters'. She also does not seem to have recorded that it was the Palestinian intifada that began all the fighting in the first place. She omits to mention the fact that Yasser Arafat was offered everything he wanted at the Oslo peace accord, which would have meant peace for the Palestinian people, yet he turned it down. How can the Israelis make peace when they have no one to make peace with? We only have her version of IDF behavior, they may well have had justification for any searches as we know too well how terrorists exploit civilians to hide weapons etc.

"All of these facts have been omitted from her 'Letters from Palestine', she seems to have totally ignored the reasons why these things are happening in the West Bank, why it is necessary for the IDF to be there in the first place, why the security wall was built, and why it is necessary to have checkpoints etc. The terrorists attacks occurred first, not the other way around. Her article is dangerously one sided and the innuendo and biased [sic] is appalling.

"You are publishing your magazine and placing it in the public arena therefore your editorial has a responsibility to its readership. If you are going to print such journalistic babble then at least make sure you have some balance and some truth to the reporting otherwise your magazine is simply a propaganda base for every ranting, uninformed, ignorant letter writer from anywhere. It is not enough to simply absolve yourself of responsibility by saying 'Opinions expressed in Variant are those of the writers and not necessarily those of the editors.'"

We have no way of knowing whether this email was connected with the complaint received by the OSCR, however attention was drawn to the same article by the investigating officer assigned to our case. It is our understanding that a number of similar complaints were co-ordinated by a single group in response to Carmichael's article. We do not intend to deal with the substantive points raised in the email above, that is, the nature of the Israeli occupation of Palestine—arguing these points is beyond the remit of an editorial such as

this. However, since an issue has apparently been raised about Variant's charitable status, and the compatibility of this with our 'political' content, we offer the following statement of our position. (This defence of our activities seems to be becoming a habit; how can it be that our unassuming little arts journal can evoke so much consternation?)

Variant is both a form of collaborative curatorial / aesthetic practice in its own right and an educational, discursive public space. Both of these areas of activity have developed out of and alongside identifiable curatorial and artistic practices and their associated concerns. Variant engages with a diverse range of communities, cultural organisations and practitioners. As well as this, it is an advocate of what was more traditionally defined as 'the arts', which in the contemporary situation with the advancement and crossing-over of fields of artistic and cultural practices (informed by post-modernist, feminist, post-colonial and queer theory, and an understanding of the increasing permeation of global capitalism) would be more inclusively defined today as the socio-economic politics of cultural production.

In furtherance of Variant's stated aim in its Objects of Association, to inform and educate the public, Variant—in part—seeks to encourage discussion and exploration of the many interconnected cultural, social and political issues affecting society today. Variant is committed to providing coverage of 'the arts' in the context of these broader social, political and cultural issues, working for a greater number of voices to be represented than would otherwise be heard. The readership of Variant magazine is as diverse as the public venues through which we are distributed (see distribution list), representing and reflecting a wide variety of issues and concerns. Variant does not just publish and distribute a magazine, but also acts as a hub, a point of contact and a public research and educational tool.

There is a broad cross-section of content within Variant magazine which reflects multiple areas of concern, not just to artistic communities but to wider society. As such, Variant endeavours to have a diversity of content that may deal with highly specialised issues but attempts to relay them in a manner that is clear and engaging for a diverse readership. Variant is a unique, innovative achievement highly praised within the arts and cultural sectors for its cross-disciplinary approach to publishing. This approach and the areas covered within the magazine reflect a contemporary concern for the complexities of cultural production and issues which impact upon them.

We believe it constructive—and essential—to place articles that explicitly review the field of culture alongside articles on issues that inform or have consequences for the very production and subject of 'the arts'. Variant's diversity of content frames 'the arts' in a 'real world' context of political and economic imperatives, rather than depicting them simply in terms of consumerist escapism. It moves 'the arts' out of a specialist niche and treats them with greater weight, and in so doing makes them available to readers whose attention might not otherwise be drawn to them—and vice versa.

In furtherance of Variant's Objects, we have made contact with cultural organisations who pro-

mote the rights of and/or represent minority and disadvantaged groups. This is something which we have followed through extensively in the magazine. Variant has been involved in ground breaking work on the subject of equal opportunities, in terms of addressing subjects such as inequalities of race, class, gender and forms of cultural oppression—including media representation—not only how these are evidenced within the fields of cultural production but the societal context within which such values are received and (re)produced.

Raising what might be perceived as contentious or difficult areas for discussion in the public sphere is itself an important and legitimate activity—increased public awareness and the promotion of public participation in media criticism is vital work which furthers Variant's stated Objects. The ideal of a free press is held up as a

fundamental principle of democracy. In considering the development of a media, we begin from the premise that truth-telling should be motivated by compassion for suffering rather than greed for wealth, status and privilege. An authentic desire to remove the suffering of others—itsself a laudable charitable cause—provides a powerful incentive for rationally identifying the real causes of problems and real solutions in response to them.

This, in our view, should be an ethical point of departure for writers.

Examination and dissemination of writing which either directly or indirectly places issues of human rights, censorship and cultural representation in a broader educational and social context has been one of the features of Variant. Some articles specifically relate to furthering public awareness of the need for the social responsibility to address these issues, others act with a more direct form of agency in raising awareness of competing forms of representation in their own right. If we understand the production and replication of the media and its conventions as a cultural *and* political subject, then it is clearly within Variant's Objects to provide information and analysis that departs in some measure from the mass media's consensus—there are many recent examples of the corporate media belatedly apologising for misleading of the public over the Iraq war. Well documented analysis of the mass media—how its agendas are influenced by its structures of ownership and proximity to power—exposes its partiality, and the illusive character of its rhetoric of 'balance'. In furtherance of Variant's Objects, and its public responsibility, one of Variant's roles can be recognised, at a comparatively low level in the broader cultural environment, as providing a democratic balance to cultural and political preconceptions, internalised canons and dominant modes of constraint and organisation. This explicitly falls within "improv[ing] and advanc[ing] the education of the public." Variant is an educational vehicle, increasing knowledge and understanding of the interwoven (we would argue inseparable) social, political and cultural environments; generating broader understanding of the context in which culture is (re)produced is fundamental to Variant's core objectives. Variant is of particular value to the public development of cultural and educational activity in providing a space for a continuous, independent public conversation that might otherwise not take place—and which currently does not take place anywhere else in the UK, in this form.

