

The New Girl

Pilvi Takala and Lucy McKenzie

L. I just read *Event on Garnethill*, and found it very interesting, particularly because I have a close relationship to the art school and Garnethill area. In 2001 I made a project including the neo-geo murals that got painted over last summer beside the student union at GSA, and am interested in the community projects since the 1970s. I'm glad that you identify this place as an intense site for enquiry.

Your project seems concerned with structures which produce identity and the misuse by individuals of the inherent rules contained therein to expose these structures. In the form of a book documenting an action it asserts itself as an experiment in cause and effect, and is an ascetic, matter of fact account of what happened and its consequences. The reader of the documentation is denied immediate access to the drama implied by what took place, and does not get the satisfaction of witnessing a young female artist dressed up as a schoolgirl. There are barriers in place to stop it entering the bloodstream too fast.

In this respect it reminds me very much of the book "A Glasgow Gang Observed" by James Patrick published in 1973. Patrick, a young

sociologist, infiltrates a late '50s Maryhill Young Team, and conveys in a dry and unexploitative manner what he experienced, and postulates on what social conditions are required to create intense gang culture. In the end the sociological study has as much tension as something using fictional tropes. In regard to your project taking place so specifically to Glasgow using its social ambits, currently I am living in Brooklyn which is made up of very concentrated communities. My area is African American close to Hassidic Jews, Poles, Italians and gentrification hipsters in Williamsburg, and I could imagine a similar experiment here. Though unlike Glasgow, New York is historically built on a dense population of different racial and religious groups, and relies on a certain level of tolerance to be able to function at all. Glasgow, while suffering from chronic racism, is nowhere near the same type of extreme. Your project highlights how much in Glasgow codified dress defines class and allegiance.

Firstly, perhaps you could tell me something about the decisions you made in what to present and what to leave out in documenting your action? P. When I started the project I thought of the

various ways of recording what happens and felt a bit inadequate. So I decided to just write down everything that happens; which is of course a bit inaccurate, but possible, since I stayed out less than half an hour at a time. I thought the final outcome might be a book already when I started, but it took a couple of months after the event to decide how to deal with what happened. Firstly I wanted to do something visually effective, but as I didn't have a possibility to use any images of the school kids; I would have never got permission from the school. I didn't want to use an image of me in the uniform both because it just felt too obvious and I wanted to avoid the feeling that dressing up as a school girl was something that I enjoyed, some kind of fetish. It wouldn't have made any sense to dress up in the uniform if the St Aloysius kids weren't around, so a photo of me alone in the uniform didn't make any sense either. Actually I really hated to wear that thing, the three days were a total horror, I couldn't sleep, but it was far too interesting to just stop doing it.

So, I had a diary about what happened, but no images, which felt a bit boring. I tried to keep the writing as short as possible and add images which would help to explain what happened. I realised that the project would seem very critical towards St Aloysius, which I didn't want to stress, so I tried to make the text personal and neutral as much as possible. I also wanted to avoid the impression that my project would be a scientific research trying to prove something, so I ended up somewhere between research and a personal diary. The book actually tells more about me than St. Aloysius.

L. I didn't think that St Aloysius seemed to be shown in a particularly bad perspective, though the details outlined in the school guide about dress are of course rather hilarious, and underscore an idea of scholastic propriety which seems Dickensian in the face of events in continental Europe regarding the wearing of headscarves and other religious symbols. I interpreted that St Aloysius functioned as an institution to mirror the GSA, as a site of freedom *a priori*. It seems relevant at this time to draw attention to the art school's proximity to an elitist private institution – the geographical location is metaphoric in the wider sense. I don't get the impression that you were placing them in opposition to one another, rather, identifying and exploiting something obvious; the assumption that the two schools are symbolic of different worlds and how romantically this is maintained. Your project highlights this with more insight than the standard equation of art with commerce.

In the UK, art students are generally several years younger than their European counterparts and could feasibly go straight from St Aloysius into GSA, crossing the invisible social perimeters you wished to aggravate. Was your project meant to be critical about institutions in general? Or more focused on the notion of borders?

P. It was more about the borders. I've never been very critical about institutions; I guess my experience has been in general good. Of course when it gets as extreme as St Aloysius, I can't help thinking critically about it as well. Mainly I was just amazed to see the green army on Garnethill; I thought it was very beautiful but also weird. I was more curious than critical, there must be good things about these kinds of strict rules, although I wouldn't put my kid in a school like that...

L. It's obvious that a sexual component in the action could be ascertained, because of the contemporary commodification of young women, particularly schoolgirls. Was this central to your experiment?

P. I came to think about how much my project has to do with sexuality after the event, and the





The windows facing my door

3rd January 2004

3.15 pm

My class finishes before theirs, but some boys have gotten out early. One of them passes by as I'm at the corner of Renfrew Street and Scott Street, surrounded by my classmates. I just say, "oh no" and don't move, we look each other in the eye both a bit confused, he double checks my clothing. He keeps staring at me, he even turns around when he's already behind me. I head home to change. The Hill Street classrooms are still full and a girl points her finger at me. She's in the window with somebody. I decide to be more precise about my timing in future; to go out just after they are out of the classrooms, and get back in just before them.

British way of being over protective with children wasn't very clear to me when I started. I was quite confused for a while, trying to think over what the hell was I doing and how to present it. With the issue of sexuality I came to the conclusion that it wasn't my motivation or concern in the first place, it's just something that comes along inevitably and something I didn't want to stress in the final presentation. I actually thought that what I was doing was quite harmless, although I knew it would probably piss St Aloysius off a little. Dressing up in the uniform for me was about crossing a border and trying to communicate over it, to get somewhere in a grey area.

L. Was the British hysterical tendency towards children and sexuality something noticeably alien to you?

P. Yes it was. Things are much more relaxed in Finland in that sense, but of course we haven't had a lot of paedophilia cases to scare people. As a Finn it also feels really weird to make children dress up in these uniforms. It was only afterwards I realized how many issues my project touches and how it could be seen, which was partly because of strong responses to the project from other people.

L. What types of responses did you get from different people? An open letter sent to people in a range of professions requesting a response was included in the book, making it clear that the repercussions and interpretations are an important part of the project.

P. While doing the action schoolmates said that I should be careful; I could get into a lot of trouble, get sued or something. Then afterwards, when GSA got the angry phone call from St Aloysius, I got told that I should never do anything without permission and even if I'm not breaking the law I'm breaking unwritten rules and offending other people; doing things like this is childish and unprofessional and I should be more responsible. I was also explained how much my event had to do with sexuality, even if I didn't want that, and how it seemed just very perverted that somebody adult would want to dress up in a uniform and hang around school kids without a reason. But of course there was also people who thought what I've done is interesting in many ways; some people who knew the school seemed to get pleasure from

the fact that somebody did something to challenge St Aloysius (and incidentally the art school). It was also clear that nobody British would have done this and often people started to tell me about their experiences with school uniforms as a kid when they heard what I've done.

As I expected, I didn't get many responses to the letter, but the ones I did get were quite interesting. I had a private detective calling me right when he got the letter and I had a nice conversation with him. When he finally worked out that the event really happened and I told him where, he thought it was super exciting. I also got a nice letter from a sociologist, outlining all the issues my project touches, and I had a conversation with a psychologist as well. Then there was just a couple of no-answers, one from the Supreme Court. I thought all of this was very interesting for me, but too much to include in the book.

L. I find it hard to imagine a native Glaswegian artist making this work. Because sexuality is such an under-explored and under-discussed subject, and because these social borders are just accepted. The site of the Aloysius uniform shop was that of the Women's Library before it moved down to the Trongate, and perhaps in general the area round and context of the art school are just too symbolically loaded. Could this work have been made somewhere else?

P. I'm sure I could have done the same thing somewhere else, but it was luckily quite an extreme and closed community that I found on Garnethill. The same kind of situations exist in many places, but it seemed to be very strong in Glasgow. I haven't had the feeling that I want to do a similar thing somewhere else, since I can't think of a better place.

L. Can you tell me something about your practice and how this project relates or develops from other works?

P. My practise isn't very easy to describe as a whole, there's a lot of different things, which is very normal to a young person I guess, but there's a work I made in 2000, when I was 19, which I think relates to this. It's *Amusementpark*, a one minute video based on a childhood memory, where two kids (girls) are in an amusement park and go to the toilet to touch tongues. You can see stills of

this in the frame website: www.frame-fund.fi/aom/takala/index.shtml

Like *Event on Garnethill*, *Amusementpark* was something I could do without being questioned because I am a young woman. It would be a whole different thing or impossible to do for a man. I'm not very good in making links between my works, but at least the using of my gender and age is quite obvious.

L. I had the same experience when I was an art student and was looking at gymnastics as source material for paintings. I would watch the practising children at the sport centre, and enjoyed feeling aware of my status as a young woman, and what this permitted. It seems important in your work to capitalise on these kinds of social assignments, because this is as much about recognising a border and transgressing it as the Garnethill project in entirety. How far were you willing to go with the project?

P. I really didn't know how things would work out, but after the first day in the uniform I thought it could go on for weeks. I had these rules I wanted to follow (which I ended up breaking a bit): not to lie, stay in public areas and not to approach anybody myself, so my idea was to go on as long as I can within the rules. I expected the kids to discover me before the teachers, since I assumed they would eventually ask me who I was. I was interested to know what the kids would do with the fact that I'm an outsider. I could easily guess what the teachers would do and I tried to avoid them. So I guess I was willing to break my rules to keep the project going on, since I entered the private area in order to avoid the teacher. I really don't know how far I would have been willing to go, since this is all that happened. But for example, I didn't dress up in the uniform again after the teacher got me, I could have tried to go on, but I really thought it was enough for the time being.

Event on Garnethill is held in the collection of the British Library, and can be requested from any public library in the UK. The Mitchell Library, Glasgow holds reference copies, and the book is also available for loan from libraries in Finland.