

Plink Plink Fizz...

Contemporary Art Dissolves the Past

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Histrionics

Roderick Buchanan
GoMA, Glasgow
March - October 2007

Shotgun Wedding: Scots and the Union of 1707

Tracy MacKenna and Edwin Janssen
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh
November 2006 - March 2007

Two recent exhibitions in Edinburgh and Glasgow demonstrate the peculiar ideology of contemporary art. Both these exhibitions concern what could be termed history and its impact on the present. The particular areas of focus are the Union of the Parliaments of England and Scotland in 1707 (*Shotgun Wedding*) and "sectarianism and its related issues – identity, territorialism, and neighbourhood" (*Histrionics*). The latter is part of the *Blind Faith: Contemporary art and human rights* programme which Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) has run since 2005. *Shotgun Wedding* was commissioned as the National Galleries of Scotland's response to the 300th anniversary of the Act of Union.

GoMA has used a strategy of employing contemporary artists to lead their social justice programme since its inception and a previous exhibition featured Barbara Kruger dealing with the issue of violence against women. *Blind Faith* is also accompanied by a series of outreach projects "working with members of the public" to develop new artwork on the themes of the series. For the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, *Shotgun Wedding* represents a relatively new approach that is intended to draw a wider, younger audience to the gallery. Both these institutions are in the public sector and have been responding to wider governmental strategies of social inclusion and social cohesion, where the arts are treated as a means of delivering social policy in an attempt to salve societal contradictions through cultural means.

What is the effect of the promotion of the contemporary artist as mediator in relation to a range of social 'issues'? This process of converting the underlying issues of these exhibitions (nationhood, political and religious freedom and conflict arising from those freedoms) into exhibitions by contemporary artists is telling. Glasgow's municipal arts infrastructure, particularly, has been at the forefront of recycling its distinctive culture and, in the case of domestic violence and sectarianism, its problems, as a voyeuristic heritage opportunity (witness the excruciatingly performed 'domestic violence' section of *Glasgow Stories* in the new Kelvingrove Museum).

Buchanan's *Histrionics* features six pieces, five of which directly refer to the issue of sectarianism. The constructed, central, triangular viewing theatre presents a classic perspective viewpoint for the visitor to witness two alternating video performances; one features a Republican flute band, the other an Orange flute band. The filming and point of view is the same and the viewer is quickly brought to the conclusion that, in essence, both sides are the same. This feeling of course produces the liberally gratifying outcome that the entrenched ideologies of the depicted bands

are both primitive and outmoded, and therefore unproductive in the 21st century. The privileged operator of the single-point perspective is able to assess the bands without his or her viewpoint being connected to the issues which are the causes of the bands' existence.

This reductive binary construction is paralleled in the mixed-marriage display, which features a large black and white photographic portrait of the artist and his wife (also an artist), who seemingly have survived the religious divide of their native city. They are accompanied by their respective family trees which bear the marks of religious and ethnic difference. So what is the message here? It could be read as saying that the successful artist transcends his or her surroundings through their shedding of the bigotries of the past. But it also seems to carry the implication that the artist, appearing here t-shirted and minimally styled, as opposed to the overly signified bandmen, is the cipher that stands for lifestyle transformation, or an effective 'life politics'¹ beyond ideology.

Far from being beyond ideology, increasingly, contemporary art, in the setting of its production and appreciation as a socially interrogative tool, provides the ideological atmosphere where personal, ethical and financial limits are reappraised or refashioned as lifestyle choices. Aspiration, therefore, becomes everything. The artist is presented in an opposition to, and dissolving of, all the constraints and ideological baggage of previous eras; as floating above all the disabling constraints associated with class, social and geographical immobility, old technology and above all, historically weighted ideas. Comparable to the 'creatives' in the world of the media, marketing and advertising, the raised-and-respectable artist is presented as the paradigm of the product innovator, appearing alongside architects and developers as those who are pointing to the city's future through the imaginary radicalism of their projects.

Against this background, Buchanan is free to 'play' with the images and significations of religious division in *Histrionics* but his work has to be seen as part of Glasgow's continuing post-industrial structural adjustment. The social scars of sectarianism should really remind us of earlier movements of capital and labour; for example, the mass migrations of the Irish poor fleeing the colonially-framed famines of the 19th century for the labour-hungry cities of Scottish industrialisation. These connections, which would take us to the forgotten material rationales of sectarianism and racism here and elsewhere are largely ignored as Buchanan's work settles vicariously on the play of visual signifiers rather than the structural relations of the visual to the economic, the social and the ideological. Instead Buchanan's work surfed history in order, quite literally, to build a defensive wall of words for what might otherwise be recognised as a trivialising installation. Surely art, visual or otherwise, can be made from the discussion of determining causes rather than from picturesque effects.

There are two key factors that are most questionable in Buchanan's exhibition. The first is the idea of a visual critique. It is, above all, the surface appearance, with a video of sectarian bands, which the viewer is manoeuvred into position to assess merely as mirror images of each



other. Secondly, there is no attempt whatsoever to investigate the causes of the sectarian divide. Like the approach to the marching bands, conventional historic narratives are taken at face value. What we do get is the current preoccupation with a visual anthropology that often passes for contemporary art's 'take' on any particular theme.

Jeremy Deller's Turner Prize-winning, 2001 reconstruction of the *Battle of Orgreave* would seem to be the apogee of this style. To paraphrase Marx: "Those who cannot change history are condemned to re-enact it." This eclectic museology renders recent history 'folkloric' rather than polemic. It could be argued that Deller uses re-enactment in a Brechtian manner, encouraging his 'actors' and audience to probe the presumptions associated with an event they have been involved in, but the final outcome seems to evacuate any deeper critical enquiry into the neo-liberal economics ushered in by the miners' defeat. These sociological enquiries are often reduced to behaviourism as this art nostalgically mourns the ruins of what was social meaning. Deller's 'grand masque' of the Miners' Strike of 1984 substitutes spectacle for critical engagement as he buries the class war in the shroud of a colourful pageant. In this contemporary replay of picturesque aesthetics, subject-matter is discovered/identified in the textured remnants of a fossilised modernity. In these events, history is resurrected as a costume drama.

Shotgun Wedding was an installation of a series of video projections by Janssen and MacKenna utilising a similarly reductive format as Buchanan, but this time in a parallel assembly

Top: Still from 'Here I am', 16mm film, transferred to DVD, 2007. Photographer Alan Dimmick for *Histrionics* by Roderick Buchanan. GoMA, Glasgow

Above: Jeremy Deller, 'The Battle of Orgreave', 17 June 2001, Orgreave, South Yorkshire. Still from EventPlan extras database, who provided extras used in the recreation for Artangel and Channel 4.

of the personalities of the period of the Act of Union. Three displays on one side of the gallery featured portraits of those in support of the Union, whilst three opposite bays presented those opposed to the Union. A panning camera pored over images of the details of the faces and costumes of personalities such as Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Duke of Hamilton and Queen Anne, whose images were taken from paintings in Scotland's historical collections. This portentous myopia delivered no insights into these works or the characters they displayed. Again history was rendered as wallpaper, stripped of any structures of determination. Once again both sides looked the same on the surface. A serious investigation into the visual culture of Unionism or Jacobitism would surely have revealed distinct symbols and representational tropes that unpicked the ideologies of both tendencies. The exhibition was based on Christopher Whatley's recent book on the Act of Union but it failed to make anything of his clear presentation of the ideas and motivations underpinning the rival hegemonies. Instead of witnessing a crucial moment in Scotland's passage into modernity, where monarchic, *ancien regime* political power is rejected in favour of access to imperial commercial power, we instead are presented with the hoary nostalgia of an illustrative storybook. Sadly, the artists here allow their technological 'updating' of the images to be nothing more than the anachronism that Marx identified in the Ancient Greeks' use of a prototype steam engine to open the doors of their temple. In *Shotgun Wedding* the video projections clunk along with the same elaborate conceit. The idea that history is a constructed dynamic grinds to a halt amid the banal repackaging of this 'same old' Scottish story of eternal rewinding, which is itself a product of Scotland's reflex reaction to its

modernisation. 'Unionist nationalism' was Tom Nairn's term for this invention of a recurrent, palliative nostalgia born of the dramatic and brutal capitalisation of both agriculture and industry in 18th and 19th century Scotland. 'Scotland's history' is constantly promoted at the expense of its future, and in the case of the new nationalist government, at the expense of any identity outside the narrow vision of a national trajectory.

Contemporary art events, especially in supposedly 'socially-engaged' spectacular form, have recently been promoted by the liberal left as the vehicle for a 'new politics'; a means of representing the hopes and aspirations of communities let down by party politics.² If anyone is willing to give this viewpoint credibility, the two exhibitions which have been under scrutiny in this article should act as cautionary reminders of the actual role that such distracted art plays in scouting the neoliberal wasteland. Ultimately, "all that is solid melts into jobs for the boys."³

Notes

1. Chris Rojek, 2001, *Celebrity*, (London: Reaktion).
2. Madeline Bunting's *Comment* feature on Anthony Gormley in the *Guardian* is an instructive example: "Artists are now taking the lead politicians have failed to give. As professional politics becomes ever more remote, the most fraught controversies of our time are migrating into art". *The Guardian*, Monday May 21, 2007. www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,2084368,00.html
3. Francisco De Oliveira, 'Lula In The Labyrinth', *New Left Review* 42.

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