

Me, Myself and I

Leigh French

"Our general culture is... permeated with ideas about the individual nature of creativity, how genius will always overcome social obstacles, that art is an inexplicable, almost magical sphere to be venerated but not analysed. These myths are produced in ideologies of art history and are then dispersed throughout the channels of TV documentaries, popular art books, biographic romances about artists' lives..."

Arts History and Hegemony, Jon Bird, *Block*, Issue 12, 1986/7, available in *The Block Reader In Visual Culture* (Routledge)

STOPSTOP is a Glasgow based publication of "contemporary art and writing" and as an artists' initiated project. It is being developed by Caroline Woodley and Chris Evans. It consists of work from 33 artists, some work specifically made for the context of the book, photo, text based works and the documentation of work existing elsewhere. The writing consists of 7 short pieces, including fiction, articles and an interview, predominantly from artist/writers. The artists - run/ membership-driven spaces: Transmission Gallery, Glasgow; the Collective Gallery, Edinburgh; Wilkes, Glasgow; Three Month Gallery, Liverpool, are either directly represented through this writing or associated via accreditation. A number of the artists and writers in the publication are, or were, directly involved in the curating and running of these spaces.

The book appears to be propelled out of the interest generated by the recent *Live/Life* exhibition at Musée d' Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997, more particularly, the accompanying catalogues. The catalogues took the form of two books. They acted as both an index of UK based artists' run spaces and arts publications that participated in the show, and, through artists' pages, catalogued the spotlighted younger generation of artists individually invited to show by *Live/Life's* curators Laurence Bossé and Hans Ulrich Obrist. This overview of contemporary practice in the UK, while being well researched and inclusive of particular styles of artists' led/driven initiatives, had at its heart a specific curatorial focus most conspicuous through those individuals invited to exhibit. This exhibition was not an objective overview of artist led activity in the UK displayed in Paris, though it might have been presented as such, but more, part of a display of the internationalism of the market place, its stars and accompanying curators.

STOPSTOP is not a census of broad artistic activity. It is described in the introduction as "an exhibition in a book". It is produced by specific artists about and concerning themselves and their (self)interests. In some ways STOPSTOP documents activity and loose or temporary associations; in other ways it is the catalyst for activity and these associations. In this sense, while it may include the recording of artists' led activities outwith the book project itself, other artist run projects and spaces, thereby associating itself with such activity, it is predominantly engaged in circulating a specific set of values and meanings of and for itself.

The differences between the participants within STOPSTOP are displaced. As with other *festivals*, slack associations are formed in a pact of visibility. A neat simplicity of apparent interdependence and communication is constructed. This disinterested togetherness, however, is an illusion. Behind the benign facade paranoid careerism and information retention is epidemic in what passes, and is accepted as, an everyday condition of existence. Here a sense of identity is implicitly reinforced by the hidden agenda of macho self-reliance and aggression. This exists in, and is directly effected by, a false economy induced by a public funding system desiring an apparent market structure.

Not to place myself in a position outside of this activity but to acknowledge my participation within the field, my frustrations have been in encouraging the

younger generation of Scottish based artists/writers to write on anything other than themselves. By themselves I don't mean any range of interests/concerns or the problematics of 'speaking for others', but anything apart from what may be perceived as directly benefiting their careers in the gaze of a particular market. However, what I see as being restrictive forms the very foundation stones of STOPSTOP.

The general difficulty here is for artists' groups to facilitate social potentially discursive communities while intrinsically operating via a competitive individualism. The resulting representative structure is reduc-



tive: which individual best expresses the gallery's, so-essential-to-public-funding, pluralism—that is, as being representative of a *type* or stand in for a *group* or *movement*. For these reasons I have to challenge both Angela Kingston's Artists Newsletter bubbly editorial of April 97, where she praised the artist/writer activity in Glasgow as being part of an administrative exercise in courting those-in-power, and the support structures that actually encourage sycophancy. I must stress this is not the case for all the texts in STOPSTOP, nor all the artist/writers.

STOPSTOP is but one in a line of recent artists' publications produced in Scotland. In Scotland, as Sarah Munro stresses in her article *Go Left at the Lights*, the number of contemporary showing spaces are limited for a younger generation of artists due to an excluding municipal gallery ideology. This has been compounded in recent years by the growth of the educational structure and the mythologising of Glasgow, (Angela Kingston's editorial being but one example) leading to an increase in the number of young resident practitioners. A great number of these artists often exhibit in artist-run galleries or self initiated pro-



jects in temporary spaces on little, if any, funding. Just as artistic practices have evolved which bypass an ongoing work-ethic-driven, studio-based practice (a legacy of conceptualism and prohibitive cost) to ones where work is made for the site or a specific opportunity/event, so now we see the artists'

catalogue/book becoming a familiar site/cause of the work and a self-conscious form of display and international dissemination.

The artists' document has also to be viewed from a UK wide perspective where catalogues exist only for the professionals, produced to accompany shows in those public/commercial spaces sufficiently endowed to afford publications. The catalogue has a symbolic capital all of its own. For those who desire it, it is a marker of success, recognition and acceptance—inclusion. Compare this with Europe where catalogues are, perhaps banally, more often expected documentation of a show. Though this is not to say that the dynamics of the systems are necessarily any different.

Historically, many artists' publications have been tools of empowerment, engagements in the politics of representation, sites for the questioning of how historical narratives are constructed. In many cases the intentions of this recent rash of publications (often born of a full stop due to an encounter with Scotland's artistic glass ceiling, and wondering where to go next) are actually to cajole the market into recognition, operating as springboards into the sanctified waters. Rather than challenge the homogeneity of the circus of the exhibition circuit, the form is used to market oneself to those very institutions: An inflated CV operating at a base level of such distribution-equals-exposure with a desire for recognition from a few elevated sites. This often has little to do with the work; the work is at best an aside, and everything to do with maximum exposure of the personality, of the name. Implicitly, for many of these candidates-for-celebration there is an underlying desire for regulation of their production and their reputation from these institutions; a zeal for packaged stardom which John Beagles goes some way to questioning in his *StopStop* article *I cannot be arsed to spend all my time and money on art, there are more important things*.

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Top:
GRAHAM RAMSAY
200 Watt Ideas
Middle:
RICHARD WRIGHT
Detail: I Can't Live With It
Right:
DAVID WILKINSON *No Title*

