ISBN 3-88375-649-0

100 Reviews

Backwards

Alberta Press

100 Reviews

Backwards

Matthew Arnatt · David Batchelor · Kate Bush · Alex Coles · Tommaso Corvi-Mora · Sacha Craddock · Alexia Defert · Emma Dexter · Dustin Ericksen · James Faure Walker · Dan Fox · Mark Gisbourne · Penny Govett · Mark Harris · Charles Harrison · Matthew Higgs · Susan Hiller · Peter Lewis · David Mollin · Niru Ratnam · Andrew Renton · John Roberts · John Russell · Julian Stallabrass · Gilda Williams · Andrew Wilson

Alberta Press

Araeen was showing on the garden outside the Serpentine whilst the gallery was closed for refurbishment. I got out of the tube at South Kensington, and walked up towards the park. The area reeks of empire – the Albert Hall, Imperial College, the statue of Albert which at the time was under scaffolding. So it was kind of an appropriate place for Araeen's work. His work in the 80s had mostly been paintings and installations, but 'To Whom It May Concern' harked back to the stuff he did in the 60s and 70s which I think is great but is mostly ignored. It was a big lump of scaffolding – a huge cube of uprights and verticals criss-crossed all over by supporting bits. It was aggressive, messy and big. Standing on the outside you could peer into the inside and it looked like a dysfunctional jungle of steel. I liked the impenetrability of it – so much so that when I found there was an opening and a corridor leading into it, I felt a bit ambivalent about its worth. There were some people wandering inside it – and a few more outside, prodding bits of the scaffolding, which pleased me. As I walked around it I can remember thinking about a quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins – something like "My life has been nothing but scaffolding". I can't remember it exactly now. I think I was also thinking about a quote from Wittgenstein, that may or may not have had anything else to do with scaffolding. But even more, I was thinking about the insistent outsideness of the lump of scaffolding, and the way Araeen believed he and other artists from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia of his generation had never been accepted by the art world. And here he was finally, at the Serpentine. Or at least, here he was lodged in Serpentine's garden, stuck outside of its walls. Typical, I guess. Part of me wished that the scaffolding loomed over the Serpentine a bit more, but part of me liked the way it seemed kind of resigned to its fate. Albert, of course, would re-emerge from his scaffolding, all shiny and new, but Araeen's scaffolding would simply disappear, leaving nothing for me, aside from the memory of cool, burning anger and the undeveloped film that I carried around in my camera for months, before I misplaced it. Niru Ratnam

6 **Aristocracy** (Gallery Westland Place, 2001). Was it really that weird? If I'd written on it at the time I might have flattened it out into something intelligible but at this point it's only the eccentricity that has settled into memory. If I hadn't known anyone I might have slipped out at the start, but Dirty Snow were playing later and Martin Tomlinson was behind the event. They'd been in a music video I'd been working on so there was no way I could leave.

"Good evening, we are Aristocracy", is how I think it began. If foppishness could ever be confrontational this was it. Flamboyantly sipping wine in a chair way back in the space, one of them introduced their own first act in this blasé manner. This was to be Artistocracy's encounter with Harold Pinter, presented by two self-consciously beautiful actors, (one of them Martin Tomlinson) sitting across a table from each other as if in a Prada ad. The pair seemed to have chosen only the more tense passages and then worked hard to make them even more strained, with stilted delivery and prolonged silences. With my aversion to Pinter there was some pleasure in seeing him dispatched inadvertently. Am I imagining that the actors settled into their parts with each new assault on the text? It's really not fair. It was the tourist in me that enjoyed this melodramatic disaster appearing to Aristocracy a theatrical triumph. Next up, a performance piece every bit as earnest as the first. I noted this was fast becoming "We are on another planet" night. Moving to loud ambient music, a couple of dreadlocked women, painted green and wearing rag costumes, crawled from a cocoon in agonising slow motion. They pawed each other's bodies in the way of origin-of-the-world enactments. It was about right for an uncomfortable experience at the school play, but chancing it in this part of town. So far the whole event upheld the schoolkids' conviction that yearning adds value to action. As yet there hadn't been any complexity, reflexivity or irony. It was making a weak case for innocence and qualifying as material for Mike Kelley's restagings of school dramas.

Everyone moved downstairs for the music. By this point, because the evening had been so strange, nothing had a hope of passing as normal. Dirty Snow's lineup had changed since I last saw them and Marc Hulson and Esther Planas now walked on with a drummer of child's height. His jazz drumming style of accelerating rhythms seemed oblivious to the band's melancholic grunge-rock dirges. It was like hearing two epochal soundtracks simultaneously. However, as if this was not discrepant enough, a psychedelic light show (Planas told me it was conceived by Chris Gange) now swept over the band, imposing a further set of cultural resonances.

Meanwhile the final act had disappeared. They'd been there earlier but some thought they'd got fed up waiting and had left. People drifted away home and the place started to shut down. Suddenly a taxi pulled up and three guys piled into the café dressed as New Romantic punk crossed with Countryside Alliance (plus-fours and spats). It turned out they had gone home to get changed. "We

are Maison Criminel" they yelled at the remaining twenty or so, and began a high-energy rap, bizarrely combining French and Mockney, with an intensity that bore no relation to the dwindling audience. Those earlier acts may have been from other planets but this was from an undiscovered galaxy. The main singer was throwing himself around and shouting about the gentrification of Shoreditch, although the splendid costume suggested a P.G. Wodehouse mutant: "Yo! Nous venons d'oxton." They were having a wild party by themselves and might have carried on this way if just one spectator remained. In their enthusiasm for outré posturing Maison Criminel redeemed the event. This was so spectacularly out there as to be beyond condescension. Initially checking the web to help my memory I could find no trace of 'Aristocracy', nor of 'Maison Criminel' and negligible information on 'Gallery Westland Place', now shut down. Such brushes with catastrophe deserve better records. Mark Harris

7 **The Art of Photography** (Royal Academy, 1989). 8 **Rut Blees Luxemburg Liebeslied** (Laurent Delaye Gallery, 2000). 9 **Otto Dix** (Tate Gallery, 1992) 10 **William Eggleston** (Hayward Gallery, 2002). So, Matthew, you ask me to write about some shows that have lodged in my mind, but – and I know that these rules are arbitrary so as to be productive, like Georges Perec writing a novel without the letter 'e' – I am only to choose shows from 1987 onwards (though the one that stays with me most is the first I travelled to London to see), and I must confine myself to shows seen in this country (though those seen abroad, with the heightened charge of travel, have often affected me more). And what is that last injunction about? Isn't the art scene here navel-gazing enough?

If it's not to be a mere parody of academic bean-counting (you tell me this book will have an apparatus), or worse some more or less lauded critics' pick of the best, the only sense I can make of this project is that it is about memory. So what follows is only what is remembered, without recourse to catalogues or any other sources. It is bound to be partial, unreliable and probably in parts simply false, yet what I will try to do is to account not only for what is remembered but how and why. After all, how often are shows remembered for the art in them, or only for that? Maybe it's best, too, since all these memories overlay one another, to write out this thing as one chunk – I hope that this doesn't screw up any chronologies or other categories you've got going.

'The Art of Photography' is a title that contains both a claim and a reassurance.

Seeing photographs in the Royal Academy was a novelty, particularly in a nation so slow to grasp the conceptual shifts and financial advantages involved in moving tranches of photographic production into the 'art' category. If photography was to be seen there, it had to be on conservative ground, reflected most dramatically in the decision to begin the largely chronological display with black-painted walls from which early prints and plates stood out as if in a jeweller's display, lightening through various shades of grey as the decades wore on, and leaping into a blaze of modernist white as the photographic medium apparently achieved autonomous self-consciousness in the 1920s. The photographs displayed to illustrate that path seemed to embody various modes of perception and memory; the metallic surface of *daguerreotypes* was once crawled over by the eye intent on registering every detail, the picture being a panorama of such details – the facades of Parisian buildings, for instance – none of which were given much priority; now they are less studied for their detail than wondered at for the very fact of their survival.

Beyond those old, slow pictures what emerged as the rooms lightened was an increasing concentration on single details and moments, on incidents, either pictorial (a sudden shaft of light) or to do with subject matter (a finger pointed in accusation). The picture that I cannot forget from first seeing at that show was among a group of photographs entirely new to me, taken by Soviet war photographers and soldiers during the Second World War. Dmitri Baltermants had photographed a group of women on the Kerch Peninsula, picking through the corpses of men fallen in wet, churned-up ground beneath a menacing sky to find their loved ones, and weeping over them when they did.

Then in the most recent photographs shown, new creatures made to hang in museums, it was not exactly that incident had been abolished in favour of a new panoramic vision but rather that panorama had become incident, or lack of incident had become the incident commented upon, and that everything in these photogaphs seemed still, less the freezing of movement than the recording at one instant of an eternally immobile condition – of a barcode scanner bleeping or the keys of a computer tapping.

The 150th anniversary of photography, which this show celebrated, came midway in the political murk of Thatcherism, as it, apparently endlessly, destroyed lives (one casualty was very close to me) and tore up the social fabric. In that setting even this conservative, nostalgic display of modernist enlightenment

Exquisite Corpse was a game played by Surrealists in Paris in the 20s and 30s. One person would draw a head, cover it up and pass the paper to the next person who would draw the upper torso and so on. The result would be a fantastical, often erotically charged, monster; the product of the unconscious. Manet has drawn the head, Prina the upper torso and the viewer sees the body of work – 'completes' it – in its now relocated space as the inhabitant of a number of systems. Andrew Wilson

79 **Prognosis: Sermon, Film, Banquet** (Plummet, 1996). In provoking irritation Plummet had no equal amongst alternative spaces. Its brief life on the top floor of a high rise council block near Old Street was ended by director/tenant William Shoebridge with the exhibition 'Euthanasia' for which 'Sermon', 'Film' and 'Banquet', as three parts of 'Prognosis', were a kind of vanguard wake. The first show I saw there was Tina Keane's trans-American train movie, a meditation on her mother's death. From the beginning there was a morbid aesthetic to the place which recalled Freud's speculation about organisms living only long enough to die in their own fashion. I'd come to recognise this as the unspoken drive behind monochrome painting's drawn out self-mortification but never recognised it as a factor in institutional decline. Shoebridge was smart to end things precipitously. That may have been his only big idea for the space but it was more critically challenging than I remember other galleries being at the time.

Visits and openings were always really uncomfortable there. It could have taken an hour and a half to cross town to this wasteland (there wasn't much else in the area then) yet Shoebridge and his mates would act as if they'd rather you hadn't bothered. Opacity and frostiness were the vehicles of communication and it didn't seem that the artists in the show were any less bewildered than the public.

For 'Sermon' a room had been set up with an installation of pews and a lectern. Exactly at 7pm a priest walked in and began his sermon which, as I remember, lasted about an hour. The room was full and more people stood in the corridor. With some knowledge of Heideggerian phenomenology I could appreciate parts of the talk, but it must have instantly alienated many in the audience. This was a speculative discussion of philosophical aesthetics in relation to theology, with non-sequiturs and misleading deviations, and no application to the immediate context in which Plummet operated. The priest never acknowledged the artificia

lity of the staging, never conceded any disparity between his artist audience and a typical congregation, and when he finished speaking he went straight out the door of the flat and didn't return. No one would say whether or not he was genuine.

Under a critique of aesthetic irritation these events have interesting status. In terms of successful provocation their properties include the deliberate withholding of pleasure, which would normally have derived from comprehension and a sense of resolution. Furthermore, with 'Sermon' the tacit legitimacy derived from an integrated milieu was subverted by converting one community (gallery public) into another (parishioners) with predictable alienation. It brought one institution (the church) into collision with the other (contemporary art) without discernible critical objective. And as if that wasn't enough, at the end of the gruelling address we were served cups of tea, not alchohol.

A month later 'Film' brought a similar audience together for a second unexplained group event. Plummet screened a von Sternberg movie (I can't remember which one) where a glamorous diva risks her neck to get military information to the allies. We were asked to wear 3D glasses throughout since there were several frames of the word Euthanasia – intercut as three-dimensional text – into the main film stock. This was a long movie from which it was impractical to leave and the glasses were an uncomfortable requirement for a few seconds' effect. The usual bafflement followed with no clarification offered and little on which the crowd could speculate. I was starting to feel there was something sadistic about these openings, as if in voluntarily dying Plummet was determined to take a few us along with it. After all, this was also a nicely malignant jab at the conventional ethos of group events as informative, celebratory, or intoxicating. In a conversation I had years later with John Russell he was saying that he was fed up with the inattentiveness of much of BANK's audience and that perhaps they should force visitors to read a three-page theoretical text before coming into a show. Even though their press releases did get longer things never came to such a disciplinary measure. In a sense Plummet went a step further in their last events by making the audience literally sit through hours of obfuscation and still get nothing out of it. Here was an impressive nihilism, born out of anger at the distraction of the art public and at the ineffectiveness of art to have any sort of agency. In a sense here was an anethical positioning where any purposeful end was denied simply in order to assert the implausibility of purpose.

I never went there again. I missed 'Banquet' which, from what I heard, matched its predecessors for infuriating effect–the artists were sat down to a dinner which visitors watched through a Plexiglas window in the kitchen. I almost forgot to mention it – I met the priest some time later and he confessed, after some persuading, that he was really an actor. Mark Harris

80 **Protest and Survive** (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2000). There used to be a peeling black and red 'Protest and Survive' sticker on the grotty toilet cistern of a studio myself and some friends lived in not so long ago. It looked like the perfect prop from an early episode of *The Young Ones*. You could almost hear Rik Mayall's nasal tones pushing his housemates further into a state of apathy as he berated them for not attending his student Socialist Worker (Maoist-Trotskyite Branch) meetings. Taken from a 1980s CND booklet, the title of Matthew Higgs' and Paul Noble's survey of socially conscious and politically engaged work from the last thirty years conjured up images of dour agit-prop collages, reams of type-written text and the odd photo of Parisian barricades manned by extras from an Ed van der Elsken shoot. It could have been a dismal *Young Ones* idea of protest. Rather, what was offered was far broader and sensitive in its remit than the rather lumpen title initially suggested. Sex, race, class, politics, war, science, information, play – 'Protest and Survive' refracted a myriad of ideas surrounding an art of refusal and active engagement.

A criticism levelled against the show at the time was its air of 'political nostalgia'. That this was partly the point was overlooked. Yes, it did indeed hark back to a time when there was more faith in the efficacy of intellectual and political protest, but in a manner that came across more as an optimistic set of blueprints for future activity than a resigned closing time shrug of the shoulders. Thomas Hirschhorn's 'The Bridge', connecting the gallery café with the Freedom Press Bookshop opposite was a fantastically simple portal to a valuable alternative information resource – an example of potential rather than a document of past struggles. The show certainly wasn't humourless either. Amongst others, Tariq Alvi's tumescent library visitor, Rob Pruitt's fountain of Evian water and a fantastic *Private Eye* cartoon (depicting a factory skyline with a flat-capped northerner telling his son that "one day, all this will be art galleries") were reminders of the crucial importance of satire.

In recent years social and political utopianism seems to have been a popular subject for artists to address, or rather, glibly misappropriate. Utopian modernism, after all, looks damn cool and the Situationists had a neat turn of phrase. 'Protest and Survive' was a pre 9/11 show that – post 9/11 – does not seem cheap, and whose message to travel hopefully still rings clear. Dan Fox

81 **Pyramids of Mars** (The Curve, Barbican, 2001). A notorious set of photographs of the surface of Mars led a number of people to believe that pyramids existed on the Red Planet. The sightings of illusory Martian ziggurats were born of a very human desire to find systems, pattern and meaning anywhere, Forever lost in space, any connections are reassuring. The Queen, Kylie Minogue, Chairman Mao, George Harrison, various members of the art world, Miss Piggy, Claudia Schiffer, the living and the dead all appear in Aleksandra Mir's 'Hello', and somehow that's a comforting thought. Stretching the full span of the Curve's main wall, the work comprised a set of photographs featuring two or more individuals. When read either from left to right or vice versa, at least one person from the previous photo could be found in the image adjacent to it. As a demonstration of the premise that there are roughly six degrees of separation between everyone on earth, 'Hello' was dizzying. Although drawn to Sture Johanesen's hard-edged psychedelic graphic posters from the 1960s, and sidetracked for a time by Palle Nielsen's 'Model for a Qualitative Society' (images from the week the Moderna Museet became a playground for children's spontaneous creativity), the human factor in Mir's project overwhelmed any desire to search for patterns elsewhere. Dan Fox

82 **Ramsay Bird New Flotex** (Gimpel Fils Gallery, 1992). BABIES. BABIES. BABIES. THEY GROW UP. REMEMBER THAT. THEY ALWAYS DO. LOTS OF BABIES. And there were lots of carboard boxes. With prints of babies. Under the name Ramsay Bird. In the gallery were lots of mirror-stage prints of BABIES: "ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME?" on Flotex carpet, with texts like "HOWDY BOURGEOIS DEVIANT" (I thought it said "BONJOUR BOURGEOIS BABY!") and large prints of penguins on Flotex carpet with texts saying: "KILL THE FASCISTS" and prints of tropical fish with texts saying: "EVERYTHING IS UNDER CONTROL" and "THE PROJECT IS GOING WELL". And "WHO'S WHO IN NAZI CROYDON" (or was that another show). "ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME?" And so the baby grows up a bit and misrecognises itself as a subject and flops out of the oceanic into THE MODERN WORLD but Good and Evil have gone and only schizophrenic civil obedience