

Table of Contents

Art For All? (Administrator 2 Administrator) 1

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By Dave Beech

From its very public call for contributions through a high-volume flyposter campaign to its nineteenth century style launch in an ex-Town Hall, hefty polemic *Art for All?* talked the talk of Big Politics. Reading between the lines, *Dave Beech* found it harder to see it walk the walk.

[IMAGE]

>> Mark Wallinger, *Oxymoron* (1996), © the artist, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

There's good news and bad news. The good news is: politics is back on the cultural agenda and culture is back on the political agenda. The bad news is: the good news is wishful thinking.

Art For All?, edited by Mary Warnock and Mark Wallinger for PEER, is a hefty document that surveys the politics of art. It is a very timely intervention: the art world is currently curing itself of the yBa brand of anti-intellectualism and is looking for something more substantial; political scuffles are once more breaking out spontaneously in art magazines, conferences, books on contemporary art and even galleries; a number of high and medium-profile artists are producing work with strong political content; and, some of the brightest young curators have hooked political agendas to their careers. Add all of this to the muscle contemporary art has acquired with its performance in the media, sales and visitor figures, and the result is not merely that there is a new politicisation of art but that it has an unusually strong voice. Consequently, *Art For All?* is well placed to capitalise on an emergent, potent political culture and to have an impact on it. What a disappointment, then, that *Art For All?* sells its politics short by limiting its horizons to 'arts policy'.

The mistake of *Art For All?* is fatal. By settling for the narrow conception of politics (government, legislation, policy), the book depoliticises politics in advance. Central to the task of politicisation is the very question of what counts as political, which means not only, for instance, raising culture as a subject for political debate but also, and more importantly, asking difficult questions about how that 'political debate' might be constituted. Feminism's slogan 'the personal is political' is a good example of this – its politicisation extends political debate to areas previously considered un-political and, thereby, embraces groups previously considered extrinsic to politics. Feminist politicisation transposes the oxymoron into a performative truth. And the new truth requires new styles and forms of politics. Take another example: postminimalism's politicisation of art. Victor Burgin's snappy idea that the representation of politics needs to be replaced with the politics of representation, an important argument that seems to have been forgotten these days, is both a manifesto for a particular kind of cultural politicisation and, at the same time, functions as an emblem of politicisation in general. It turns the tables on so-called political art by attending to the politics of representation presupposed by those artists who represent political themes in their work without reflecting critically on their techniques, status, social relations and so forth. Postminimalism's politicisation of art requires two parallel critiques, one of art and one of politics. *Art For All?* is, by comparison, a non-starter.

Forgetting, for a moment, the debacle that is the political project of *Art For All?*, the content certainly has its moments. In fact, there are some gems in it. I would strongly recommend Kingsley Amis' speech on arts policy given at the first Tory Conference after Thatcher won the election in 1979. In it he quotes the Labour manifesto. "Politics are inextricably sewn into the fabric of the arts", it says (contrast this with Chris Smith's Blairite universalism in his lecture to the RSA in 1999. Politics is out, and in its place we have a few 'commitments', a couple of 'myths' and a 'challenge' or two). Amis wastes no time in pouring cold water on old Labour politicisation, stating categorically, "the authors are telling us something about their brand of politics, not about the arts. You won't find much political

content in a given string quartet.” He ventures that the Labour Party mean that the musicians in a string quartet are members of “a leisured, affluent class”, and that there is a politics in there somewhere. Perhaps they did mean that. What they might have also meant, and what I take their image of “politics sewn inextricably into the fabric of the arts” to mean, is that the politics of art is not exhausted by consideration of the representation of social themes but extends outwards to its institutions, hierarchies and beyond, and inwards to its minute technicalities, modes of address and so forth. (*Art For All?* does not provide much textual evidence of these ideas apart from what Terry Atkinson calls “epistemological complexity”). If you read Amis and Smith together, you can detect important differences of emphasis, but what stands out, and is truly chilling, is the degree to which the comparison shows that New Labour bought its victory by adopting the Thatcherite disapproval of what old Labour called politics.

Another gem is Matthew Higgs’ gushing introduction to the publication commemorating Jeremy Deller’s ‘Unconvention’. When I say gushing, I mean it (“an event that remains – without any doubt – the most challenging (and moving) experience I have ever witnessed in an art gallery”). It is a gem because Higgs has made a career, both as an artist and curator, out of the conceptual and political stratagem of ‘decentring’ himself from his own practice and here we find him lost in reverie, carefully selecting the words that might express exactly how good he feels. I wish I’d been there. Arthur Scargill’s public address (an extract is collected here) would have been worth the trip by itself. But Higgs’ logic implies that the gallery ought to become a venue for weddings, funerals, births and spiritual awakenings. So, oddly enough, Higgs casts himself here as the head of a pretty gnarled coin. Stewart Home is the tail. Home complains that the gallery has “no room for spontaneity, for improvisation, for truly human contact and meaningful human relationships”. Obviously, Home has never been to one of Deller’s uplifting events. At least Home has the ambition to establish his political arguments about art on the basis of class relations (and the abolition of money – does he mean the abolition of property?). I think Stewart Home deserves his place in *Art For All?* just for this. Ex-Tory MP George Walden deserves to be here just for his opening sentence (“Personally, I do not believe that British contemporary art is either exciting or innovatory; indeed I do not find it of much value or interest at all...”). He offers no good reason to include the rest of his trivial ravings. His irritation at British contemporary art would have legs if, for instance, it was attached to an argument in favour of a rival version of contemporary art. Instead, the ex-Tory MP invokes obsolete modernist criteria and finds that contemporary art doesn’t match up to it. Reading Walden is like listening to an old duffer telling you “we didn’t lock our doors in the war, you know, because there was no such thing as burglary back then”. I don’t know how smug self-satisfaction gets to count as political debate.

Mark Wallinger’s *Oxymoron* (a union jack in Irish colours, illustrated here) is, in my view, an emblem of politicisation not because it takes on one of the sharpest political conflicts of our time, but because it internalises those antagonisms in its very fabric. Politicisation is based on struggle and conflict; and, its opposite is not harmony or community but the undisclosed (hence unchecked) maintenance of already established prejudices and exclusions. Sometimes politicisation is mobilised to enfranchise marginal groups, and sometimes politicisation rewrites hitherto ‘innocent’ practices as fierce battlegrounds. Whatever it does, the first condition of politicisation is that politics be detached from administration. Consequently, the first task of art’s politicisation is to struggle for struggle. This is why *Art For All?* is not a political collection at all; it is a reference book for administrators.

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