

I PROTEST, WE PROTEST, THEY PROTEST...

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The space between us presents new works by the artist James Newitt, emerging from a three-month residency in Liverpool. The two-channel video work *Say it like you want it* and the single screen work *We Are The People* (both 2012) are installed so that they may be read discretely or taken together as an integral, multi-channelled installation. When looked at either way, these works comprise an elegant, concise and subtle reflection on forms of public collective demonstration.

Formally the works use a documentary mode of visual address but are edited within a terse rhythmic structure, punctuated by abrupt cuts through black, with a tightly constructed audio track. These elements combine to compel the viewer's attention. This allows the artist to maintain a minimal narrative structure while elaborating a complex *mise en scène* that foregrounds the theatrical strategies of street marches and protest actions. In terms of the events depicted, both works have a particularity of place marked by the distinctive Liverpool accents in the opening scene of *Say it like you want it* and by the 'Star of Toxteth, Liverpool' emblazoned on the marching band's drum in *We Are The People*. However, the particular sites of class and race conflict referenced are not the substantive content of the works. In the two-channel work it becomes apparent as the scenes unfold that the performances enacted by the thirty or so players in the modest theatrical space are not anchored in any clear political project or cause. The montage of elements – chants, slogans, masks, scarves, flags, banners and gestures – are formally integrated by the carefully orchestrated camera work, the simple choreography of bodies evenly paced in the tight circles of the theatre space, and the precise editing. These strategies combine to distil the general form of protest rhetoric and gestures from the unlikely collision of ethno-nationalist, anti-fascist and class-war references. On the other hand, the insertion of the second work, with a very singular depiction of an Orange Order band in the streets of working-class Liverpool – namely a place linked notoriously to a series of riots in 1981 – ensures that we do not see this as an arbitrary composition of ideological positions and rhetoric.

There is a particular problem being worked through here, the problem of collective political mobilisation and the production of public identities in an era that is often decried as ‘post-political’ and as an age of ‘cynical reason’, or at a time of ineffective, insincere and complicit dissidence (à la philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek).¹ It is very important that neither of these depictions – the avowedly ‘staged’ performances in the theatre nor the ‘unstaged’, though rigorously planned and theatrically orchestrated, Orange marching band – are presented in a fully detached manner. Both works, in different ways, balance the camera’s tendency to objectify the persons and actions depicted so as to interrupt any casual presumption by the viewer to pass easy judgment on the folly of protest or the predictable territorial reflexes and anxious antics of identities under threat.

The inclusion of moments of rest within the theatre performances and the rhythmic pull of the chants both work, albeit in different registers, to draw the viewer affectively into the scenes depicted. The opening frame of the short, single-channel work presents the viewer with an out-of-focus street scene that is broken into by the marching band moving past.

The unmoved camera suddenly re-positions the viewer as being simultaneously intruded upon by the marchers and enfolded into the scene as someone standing close by, part of the crowd drawn out to the street by this parade. These subtle devices work to balance the artist’s impulse to critique with an ambivalent recognition of more diffuse identificatory longings.

In this way the works open out from the specificity of their place of production – a particular post-industrial, dis-invested and politically abandoned inner-city urban scene – to a globally dispersed, contemporary political doubt. Following on from the western media’s zealous over-hyping of the Arab Spring, in the wake of the seemingly impulsive organisational strategies of the Occupy Movement, and with the accomplished cooption as media spectacle of the anti-austerity protests that marked the most recent cyclical crisis of capital, there is doubt as to whether there are viable strategies of dissent, protest and collective mobilisation available in this historical juncture. But the energy and vitality of Newitt’s work is precisely the degree to which it can resist the temptation to abandon the potential for public identification and political agency while rehearsing a radical doubt as to their inherited forms. This then is the saliency of Newitt’s poetic moving-image works; these tightly condensed and rhythmic meditations call us out into the streets, asking us to think carefully again: With whom, for what and how shall we identify and give ourselves agency? •

May 2012