

We Provide the Smiles

Ivan's Dogs

The central motif of Sideshow was that of Context: the context of a fringe in relation to an institution (BAS6); the context of the relationship of the individual work to its own unique situation; and the context of both the work and the festival, in relation to every other micro-context going. After attending 'We provide the smiles', I was initially unsure as to what specific context I should be using to consider the work.

Now, despite its title, the context of the event was clearly not an exercise in 'fun' or 'entertainment'. This was no theme park exercise in the statistical commodification of pleasure. Whilst I began by enjoying myself – meeting my crew; listening to the truly terrible 'adventure' music The Dogs had provided for us in our vehicles; being outside in the countryside on a pleasant evening – as the tasks set by The Dogs began to appear increasingly arbitrary and disconnected, I became increasingly distracted and distanced from the experience. Other participants became somewhat resentful, as they felt their time was being wasted in a situation that they were unable to leave.

As the event progressed it appeared that, if there had ever been an intention that the event reach any form of resolution, this was not now going to happen. Either The Dogs had overrated the capacities of their audience, or they never intended the event to do anything but leave us thinking: 'what was that all about?' or just, 'why?'

With seemingly little else to go on, I sought to locate a context within which I could place the work. My conclusion was that the event should be thought of along the lines of 'logistics as art', and that the role of the audience was to be manipulated as a living material by our anonymous organisers. But something seemed wrong. If we were both the audience and

the material for a work of art that none of could perceive in its entirety, then where, exactly, was the work? If The Dogs were manipulating and organising us according to a design that we were unable to grasp through participation in the event, and which was not going to be 'revealed' to us at the end, how could the 'artwork' ever be communicated, or experienced as an artwork, beyond the event?

I took to thinking of the event as a precise inversion of the crass spectacularism of the photographer Spencer Tunick. Tunick uses living, but passive, human flesh, organised according to the design of a despotic aesthetic ego, to effect the reduction of human multiplicity to a simple totalised image, which is then crudely served up to the passive consumers of 'art' and functions as little more than an branding gimmick for the artist. Ivan's Dogs, on the contrary, had used the active participation of their audience to make up a work that was remarkably unspectacular – in the sense that no-one within it, and this most likely includes The Dogs themselves, was in a position to experience (or impose) a single totalising perspective, and thereby fully commodify and consume the event. The little we knew about The Dogs was that they were multiple and anonymous, both of these aspects seemed to help attempt a resistance to reduction to a single aesthetic product. However, with commodity comes a specific function, and thereby specific concepts of success or failure, without it we are left again with the question: 'what exactly was the point?' Where is the narrative? Where is the hook? Art – perhaps by definition – has, despite its best attempts, had little historical success in resisting totalisation and commodification. We need our 'closure'...

This got me thinking. My review of the event was in a highly specific context of its own. Because the event was due to take place after the release of the final Sideshow publication, it had been decided that my review would be released after the close of Sideshow via my personal email address. I was in a very interesting place: no one could control or edit what I was to write (nor even be sure that I was writing the same things each time I emailed out the review). Through my position in relation to this specific material context, I could not only affect closure on the event, but also (to a degree) closure on Sideshow itself. Ivan's Dogs had appeared to use a similar trick themselves, at a Sideshow talk a couple of weeks earlier, when they had manipulated the material conditions of a head-to-head discussion with local group Reactor, so as to publicly ask Reactor seemingly embarrassing questions about their practice, with no possible comeback. So, with a similar 'cheap trick', I could have the last laugh...

Or could I?

Whilst I was in the process of revising my first draft, the news broke: Ivan's Dogs and Reactor were one and the same. The circle was closed and the true context of the event revealed. Closure had been achieved and an attributable and communicable commodity created: Art triumphs once again! (and my intended review strategy becomes more or less redundant...)

But does this reduce the work to the level of a Spencer Tunick? I would say not. Despite falling back on closure, 'Ivan's Dogs: We provide the smiles' presents a highly sophisticated and intelligently ambiguous exploration of the possibilities of audience involvement within a work of art.

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We Provide the Smiles took place on 4th June 2006 in the Nottinghamshire countryside