

Fitzwilliam talk. Social engagement in art.

I want to take a very quick personal look at social engagement in art. At a minute an image it can only be superficial but I hope to raise some important issues.

Giotto's fresco of the life of Saint Francis was an attempt to bring the actuality of the event into the church so that the congregation were able to feel personally involved. The work also showed profound emotion in the faces of the followers of the saint, again a technique for engagement. By including architectural detail from the church, the scene was seemingly physically involved in the space it occupied and again transmitted the message of 'this is happening now, for you, for ever'. Life and death passed through time, but art was immortal, like the memory of the saint.

Goya's 'Disasters of War' prints from the early 19th C show the desecration of the dead. As a shock tactic it vividly displays a nightmare vision. As a reproducible medium, these prints could be widely distributed and seen in any context, in contrast to the Giotto fresco which was a special event confined to a particular place. As such, this image is for everyone. Something however of this work retains an aesthetic element. We do not know how truthful it is. We are aware of composition, perspective,

draughtsmanship and tone. This shield us from the possibility of reality.

O'Sullivan's 'Harvest of Death', 1860s, from the battlefield of Gettysburg, was not printable as a photograph in a newspaper, but instead was used as a source for a woodblock print.

However, it caused a profound effect at the time. 'If he has not brought the dead and laid them in our dooryards he has done something very like it.' Taken as a document of the war, this image is unavoidable, despite some signs of retouching.

Exposure times and technical factors prevented images being made of actual fighting, which was anyway so covered in dust and gunsmoke as to it practically invisible.

Social awareness and campaigning imagery in photography became truly possible with faster emulsions. However questions remained of the ethics of the medium and this image of the dustbowl by Dorothy Lange, from the 1930s, might both manipulate and contrive the reality of this woman's predicament. She was held up as a figurehead of the New Deal, a subject of pity and social commitment, although she later complained that she did not profit or gain from the wide distribution of the image at all. The image has a distinctly 19th C quality, making it odd in its actual context. Also, we are as

aware as in the Goya image of aesthetic qualities. It is clearly more than a press image.

Symbolic of the Soviet agenda, Social Realism produced art of the people, for the people, however we might replay the successes and failures of the system today. Here the idealisation of the working man and woman, finally equal in stature, was designed to be a focus for achievement and the glorification of the state mechanism., We are drawn to heroic scale, in this case a rather unlikely sheave of wheat and a permanently golden sunset.

Rachel Whiteread's House, a cast of the inside spaces of a terraced house in London, also elevates the everyday to an heroic scale, again transformed into another material. By turning the inside out and making the private public, House has 'outed' the concealed and particular lives of the inhabitants and made them as symbolic as the previous image. Destined for demolition, the house was finally removed despite a concerted campaign to keep it. Its publicity promoted local distinctiveness and Whiteread's concern for humanity as an artistic agenda.

Field (in this case for China) was a series of installations made by Anthony Gormley in which the thousands of crudely made clay figures are made by a team of volunteers. Art by the people

about the people for a person. Gormley's use of his own body casts as an 'everyman' always struck me as essentially self-centred, but he does seek to engage with what is essentially human-ness and an odd mixture of ego and social sensitivity. The product aesthetic control by the sculptor for a kind of democratic production of a image of mass control and sameness.

Direct engagement in social processes produce a document of events. The art work is that engagement, again a celebration of both the ordinariness of human interaction and the specialness of the individual. Jeremy Deller's piece here is a record of ten years in a German town's garden festival. That involvement is recorded in films, such as his recreation of 'The Battle of Orgreave' the breaking up by the police of a demonstration during the miners strike. Deller's concern to be involved as an artist in social and political events does not necessarily made good art but it makes, in my opinion, important attempts to make art relevant.

This anti war protest outside parliament was partly dismantled by police who then introduced an exclusion zone. As a piece of public art it had many contributors and was clearly politically engaged and effective in raising public consciousness. We would have to begin defining the boundaries of art were the event to stop there, but

The installation was hijacked by Mark Walinge and meticulously copied for an exhibition at Tate Britain, displayed on both sides of the exclusion zone, which happened to pass through the gallery. As art, it was clearly publically engaged, but as soon as it entered the gallery, the work was neutred, put out of its rightful context, and became an object of aesthetic and elitist contemplation. Absorbed into the 'academy', the power and relevance of the work was lost, however expensive it had been to reproduce, however high the status of the space in which it was shown.