

TG

What feels like a good day's work?

The designer Katherine Hamnett, whose abiding image is that taken meeting Margaret Thatcher, Hamnett is wearing a t-shirt, it says "58% don't want Pershing" (a quote from an opinion poll against the proliferation of US nuclear missiles across Europe). It's 1984.

I once read, but I can't find where now, that Hamnett remarked that the upper and working classes have the most in common in terms of taste – that neither really gives a shit. I think she meant that neither of these classes has anything to lose.

The Miner's strike would begin on March 6th of the same year and conclude on March 3rd, 1985. 11, 291 people were arrested and 6 people died in connection with the most violent and divisive industrial action in UK history.

This was the decade in which the disintegration of the image of the working class began (this would range over until somewhere in the 90's probably 1997 with the election of Blair, where it concludes as a project and begins anew). This was a two-part project. In the first instance the annihilation of the social cohesion of the working class (here in the Marxist sense - the Proletariat – the working class of social power). This was an image as well as a socio-corpus relation, this pride and power best shorn up in the rituals of brass bands and union banners.

Destroy the pride, wear down the esteem of the corpus.

Second part – re-construct an image of the working class as low-life scroungers, unable to contribute a decent day's work and if they can it's in the lowliest of menial jobs or trades, that no right-minded, intelligent, certainly not intellectual, person would even consider.

Image hits material in the most remarkable of fissions, the tracksuit, the chain, a white van, collaged into a character from Harry Enfield.

Is there still power in a representation of the working class? What does such a representation speak of in relation to labour?

Art speaks a lot about labour and unsurprisingly contemporaneously says rather little in relation to class.

Meaningful discussions on class are taboo in part because since the work of Stuart Hall et al there is a distinct lack of development of vocabulary around the class struggle and visual culture. There are many art practices that purport to refer to 'labour relations' mostly set within the institutional power dynamic. The artist being set up as the site of exploited labour and the institution as the master occupier – here also often a proxy for the relationship of the Proletariat/ State. The artist it is argued is the foremost precarious freelancer, unpaid for the emotional and excess labour accumulated and

TG

capitalised upon by the institution. God knows I've been paid what has worked out as £2/ hr for projects in institutional settings. But this image remains unattached from discussions of labour and the working class or even a discussion of who now constitutes the working class. Perhaps it is precluded by a rebuttal of privilege via identarian credentials 'you're not working class enough', 'how dare you authenticity to draw any relation between the exploited working class and the artist.' There, exists an underscoring presumption the artist is still regarded as a state of privilege and for the most part 'art realms' draws its workers from a pool of those who are independently wealthy or well resourced.

In this ritual of the art exhibition, what could be at stake is a simultaneous collapse and ambivalent restitution of the worker image. Could this look like a good day's work? Where does this find material expression?

We could at this point go down the Duchamp path of un-skilling, via the Ready-made. Let's not. Let's focus on the levels of metonymical representation that the Ready-made brings ladened.

In this exhibition the ready-made is an object not only of class representation but also of nostalgia, itself imbued with the innate trait of reproduction and tropes of class-ism running through it like a stick of Blackpool rock. These models of miners were originally whittled from coal, a metonymical expression of the labourer; image is labour is material is object made by the subject, the worker.

This formula is hacked, literally and metaphorically and re-presented in the slippiest, most erosive of materials, soap, also used to clean the remnants of the hard day's work off the miner's body.

The trampoline target compounds a sense of repetition, but here of movement, reminding us in the reproduction of an action there is always movement in time and therefore space, however marginal.

Under Thatcher the unions certainly had targets on their backs, but so did the Mods and later the Oasis album of Blair's Britpop. Certainly feels like soap in one's hands.

Attempts to visualise conundrums such as these is just the type of good day's work art can do.

Rachal Bradley

August 2023