



entertaining ghosts of radical engagement. Without the hope for large-scale transformation, critical art often declines into cynicism, violent lashing out, grim humour or nostalgic whimsy (some of these can be found in *Protest and Survive*).

Yet hope in the future is not confined to the past, as the recent rise of anti-capitalist movements has shown (these movements are unthinkable in conventional postmodern theory, and it is most inconvenient that they exist). They have well-developed forms of cultural expression which are not much seen in art galleries. That exclusion, and the general tendency to skip over political art, is due to the involvement of big business in the art world. From the beginning of the 1980s, with greatest effect in the US and the UK, corporations moved into the art world, sponsoring exhibitions and prizes, and establishing art collections, while prominent business people became trustees in major public art institutions. At the same time, of course, state support for the arts declined rapidly. A fine book to be published next year by Verso, *Privatising Culture* by Chin-tao Wu, details that involvement and its consequences. The museums and galleries became more market-oriented and business-minded, and the character of the art that they showed changed. All large exhibitions—and even the rearrangement of works in public collections—now require sponsors so art that is not attractive to sponsors is rarely seen. Some critics have complained that *Protest and Survive* is too modest and muted a show, that its slight and ironically inflected statements are less calls to action than acts of mourning for a lost heroic age; we will come back to these charges, but this show, too, needed sponsors—the donors in this case being Bloomberg in association with the *Big Issue*.

Much as most people in the art world are loathe to admit it, their activities are strongly influenced by the state of the economy. In boom times, there tends to be a revival of painting and other decorative media, and a proliferation of vacuous or ideologically rebarbative objects meant to hang or sit in the living rooms of patrons. There is quite a bit of talk about the ‘return to painting’ at the moment, and those who wilfully ignore the economy will continue to be mystified by it, no matter how regular the revivification. In times of recession, there tends to be an increase in work that stands outside the usual circuits of buying and selling (performance, say, or objects that quickly decay), and a higher proportion of artists rediscover a social conscience. The present long and steady period of economic growth, especially in the US, has not been conducive to the making of political work, and has made those art-world assurances about the disconnection between art and politics appear all too plausible.

In this context, as an intervention in the art world, *Protest and Survive*, despite being far short of a full-blooded call to arms, and despite its eccentricities (both the curators, Matthew Higgs and Paul Noble, work as artists and the entire show could be seen as an art work in itself) is a worthwhile statement. A little notice in the exhibition, beneath an excellent work by David Hammons, bears a little text by the artist describing the art audience as over-educated, conservative, out to criticise and never having any fun. It is those people (a little more fun-loving now than when Hammons wrote that fourteen years ago) that *Protest and Survive* sets out to remind that history still exists, that antagonisms still sunder society, that people still go without the essential of life, and that the ceaseless rehearsal of contradiction serves conservative ends.

The most radical statements in *Protest and Survive*, such as the photographic collaborations of Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, seem ancient now, as dulled and distinguished with the patina of passing time as the Freedom Bookshop. Yet, despite the lack of a well-formulated alternative politics, there does exist much explicitly engaged contemporary art that could have been included. We could have seen, for example, the photographs of Sebastião Salgado made in support of the Brazilian landless movement; or the extraordinary pictures of the photojournalists of the Mexican border favelas, working in extremely dangerous circumstances to seize images of life in the streets and in the unregulated factories run by multinational companies; or the devices used by movements such as Reclaim the Streets, including the tall tripods from which brave protestors suspend themselves, that simultaneously serve aesthetic and practical purposes; or online tools that bring about the same coming together of art and action, such as collectively activated pieces of conceptual art designed to bring down the servers of repressive governments. But it is unlikely that the sponsors would have gone for any of that.

*Protest and Survive* is showing at the Whitechapel Gallery (020 7522 7878) until 12 November.