

[Reply to letters about *Renegotiations* review]

I am puzzled that my review was taken so negatively, and sorry that it was read as patronising. Perhaps I did not make it clear enough that I admire John Roberts and the artists involved in this exhibition and their highly necessary engagement with the issue of class. Such a feeling should not, however, prevent artists and critics asking hard questions of each other.

I think that some of the specific criticisms of my review are based on misunderstandings. The point about workers in the Third World was not to distance working-class experience from this country, but to stress the increasingly close connections between the circumstances of workers here and abroad. Much of the difference between the radical industrial disputes of the 1970s and the Timex workers' strike today is due to the comparative ease with which corporations can shift operations around the globe. History is of course vitally important but only to the extent to which it is linked to an experience of the present. I liked Marchant's installation but was worried by the danger that it might appear as a heritage display, rather than something connected to the current experience of factory work. I did not criticise Jeff Wall, or anyone else in this exhibition, for the use of studio photography, but suggested that his bringing together of charged class imagery and commercial visual means was productive.

Alison Marchant's letter argues that the gallery can be reclaimed for the working class (though it's a little difficult to know, at least in this country, when they were ever at home there) by confronting the middle-class gaze and by using street language. I really don't think it is as easy as that. This issue is of course connected to the way that Jo Spence's work operates in the gallery: certainly as a provocation, which in itself is no bad thing, but is it enough?

Incidentally, it was the *slogans* in the work which I described as sometimes partial or incoherent, not the work itself. Marchant also suggests that only working-class artists should address the issue of class. I cannot accept this, since the experience of all classes are structured by each other. Martin Parr has made wonderful photographs about middle-class 'subjectivity', for instance, and it would be a telling to see these alongside pieces by working-class artists. To suggest that artists might look beyond their experiences is not to deny or exclude their subjectivity, and indeed it might lead to a better understanding of what forms and sustains it. If different social experiences are

linked, this is something that anyone can usefully do, if they choose, irrespective of their gender, race, class or disability.

Being judgmental is part of a critic's job, but my comments in a review are offered as opinions and questions. It is my hope that they might lead to a constructive dialogue, one which is badly needed if artists and critics are to find a way to address the appalling economic and political situation, very much a global phenomenon, in which we find ourselves.