



Alison Marchant, *Hidden Histories*, 1989

## Renegotiations. Class, Modernity and Photography

Current intellectual fashion is hostile both to any photography which pretends to social engagement and to the very notion of class itself, so an exhibition which uses photography to explore the way people experience class is asking for trouble. Just as Marxism is the one theory excluded from the postmodern pantheon, class has become the invisible determinant in the new ideology. In the catalogue, the curator of the exhibition, John Roberts, writes: ‘... class experience is related through, and in conflict with, a person’s identity as a man or a woman, heterosexual or gay, black or white, disabled or able-bodied.’ This statement is reproduced on the walls of the gallery, and that viewers must be reminded of such truisms is in itself telling. The tone is embattled and defensive, and this is apparent even in the title, **Renegotiations**, with its implication of starting over—perhaps after hostilities have commenced.

Heroic modernist images of class are reproduced in the catalogue as a foil to the work displayed. The impression on entering the gallery is of a sequence of large scale, colour works usually shot in the studio, and more reminiscent of advertising than of the grubby but affective little squares of conventional documentary. In Jeff Wall’s **The Arrest**, which shows a man bordered by two police officers (one of whom reaches into his trouser pocket), the scene takes place in slick high definition colour in which the figures are isolated against a dark studio backdrop, and are artificially lit to bring out the textures of their clothes and skin. The arrested man looks doleful, the police stern and a little bored, but there is no high drama here. The picture is a huge transparency, placed in a steel box and backlit like a bus-stop advert, so Wall is taking the mute subjects of realism and dressing them up in the colours of glossy commercial images. He comments on the commercialised consumption of real

events, and even on the implication of the image makers and their masters in actual events of this sort.

By contrast, Geoff Watson photographs puke on the pavement, stalking the no doubt richly spattered ground around Newcastle pubs after closing time. Eight large prints are hung close together, depicting vomit in various states of plenitude and freshness. As Roberts points out, these lush colour works are reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism, so the involuntary splurgings of working-class youth are ironically associated with the expressive alienation of the artist-hero. Watson certainly comments on the powerless and futile self-destructiveness of this aspect of working-class culture, but again, in these large colour photographs, on advertising, this time on the final resting place of consumables.

The subjective experience of class is more directly addressed in work by David Hevey in which his brother plays out a variety of personal roles, and in **Class Shame Projects**, where Jo Spence is seen with penned and painted slogans, some of which seem partial or incoherent, while others are all too clear: 'If I don't need to please my parents any more, why the fuck should I worry about pleasing you middle class bastards?' Why indeed, but then, what are these pictures doing here at all? Spence, with bare feet and cut-off jeans, masquerades as a naughty, dishevelled little girl, daubed with paint. The point of this psychoanalytically based 'phototherapy' is to use pictures as part of a performance in which problems—in this case caused by class origins—are brought to light. As an educator, Spence carried her project into schools hoping to show pupils how class and commercial stereotypes determined their lives. The aims are highly laudable, yet the works seem unlikely to be effective, at least on anything other than an individual basis, and their role in the gallery is unclear.

Symrath Patti and Terry Dennett in rather different ways work towards achieving a more collective expression of class experience. Patti presents images of the condition of Asian women in British culture, while Dennett works on broken political promises and redundancy. Both present poignant documents: Patti's coloured glass panels include a page from an Asian marriage bureau publication where potential spouses are listed by caste, age, height, profession and education. Dennett displays alongside his photographs actual notices from political campaigns and evictions, and instructions to workers following a firm's liquidation.

It is striking that the theme of work itself is almost absent from this exhibition. The exception is Alison Marchant, who projects old photographs of mill workers in a room where threads are stretched from corner to corner, and industrial artefacts lie on the floor. She has interviewed women mill-workers and their recorded reminiscences are played as the slide show runs, giving them a public space in which their voices can be heard. Despite her admirable insistence that women still work in the cotton mills, there is an air of archaeology about the piece - most of those interviewed are old and out of work, the slides and objects are of a bygone era. It is as though contemporary work - often mundane and service based - is out of bounds for photography.

This exhibition is to be welcomed, for artists must engage with the issue of class, but to do so they must become less insular in their outlook—and this may mean concentrating less on the subjective. The Satanic mills still exist, though less often in the First World, and the experiences of unemployment, 'redeployment' and part-time work are intimately tied to the complementary experience of Third World industrialisation. The aims of a photography which deals with these issues must be clearly defined, and 'renegotiation' may not be a part of them. Since corporate capital has been taking few prisoners lately, it is a little unclear who exactly these artists are meant to be negotiating with.

Julian Stallabrass

**Renegotiations. Class, Modernity and Photography** is on show at the Norwich Institute of Art

and Design Gallery, Norwich until May 8th.