

Gary Anderson and Lena Simic 'A Family Protest' was the opening paper of Art for Political Change Panel, Session 5A, 2:00-3:30pm on Friday 20th July 2007

A Family Protest

[This paper featured a short video film 'Coming To a Town Near You: Condo in Liverpool and Dick in Dubrovnik']

We are Gary Anderson and Lena Simic, two artist-activists, married with children, who have recently completed practice as research Ph.D.s in contemporary arts practices: Gary in film, Lena in performance/live art.

In this paper we will seek to map out how our contact with Cultural Studies and its proximate fields (particularly transnational feminism, the study of the everyday and critical perspectives of cultural production) has been instrumental in radicalising our arts practices. Much of our collaborative arts practice has sought to engage critically with some notions of family and the familial. This paper is therefore written from the point of view of artists who believe that their primary task is to try to think through their arts practices and positions as family members, in the name of social and ecological justice.

Our arts practice seeks to intervene in naturalised notions of the family as a stabilising principle for society. We use our own family as a case study. The intention is to deploy our own familial context as a destabilising factor through which political activist work can be carried out. In this arts practice, a combination of Activism, Performance and Home Movie making, we found a base from which we could realize a politicisation of our arts practice. In this we found there was a relationship between the politicised arts practice and the way we felt about ourselves as members of a family. We felt strongly that the function of arts practice was to think through social and political problems. This is from the position of artists AND members of a family. The function is also to provide space for critical thinking and engagement in the world from a thoroughly situated position.

In this paper we will trace how our arts practice was built up to this point of critical thinking. We have worked together on a number of projects nationally and internationally. Our collaboration stretches back to 1995 Bratislava, Slovakia where we set up the first English speaking theatre company Lara Studio. At the time both of us were students at VSMU, the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, studying film and theatre directing. Lara Studio was set up so that Gary and Lena could collaborate professionally. Together, along with Valeria Schultzova and Domagoj Cavcic, we produced, acted in and directed a selection of plays by English playwright Harold Pinter. We chose a number of short plays and scenes and staged them collectively over a week as *An Evening With Harold Pinter*. These were interpretations of Pinter's texts. At the time we were all being schooled in the Stanislavski form of actor training and we all thought Pinter's text was a good place to poke fun and undermine our schooling. The chosen plays and their absurdist and imaginary twists allowed us to intervene in the dominant style of psychological realism which was taught at the Academy. Here we had started to use arts production as a way of commenting critically on our immediate environments, in this particular case the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts and its predominantly classical theatre schooling. By the time this professional collaboration was under way we were already collaborating privately: sharing a home, money and friends and, soon after, parenthood with the birth of our first child.

We were married, technically, in Bratislava with the express intention of furnishing Lena with appropriate documentation to take up residence in the UK. We were now understood to be 'a family' at least in terms of our own legal status vis-à-vis immigration. This meant a man and HIS wife who was carrying HIS child. After a particularly stringent and unpleasant qualifying interview at the British Embassy in Zagreb, Croatia (Lena's home country), Lena was given the WIFE VISA. This carried some rigorous requirements, for example 'having no recourse whatsoever to public funds'. Claiming benefits or 'signing on' amounted to a criminal (hence deportable) offence.

After a year of clean living – meaning Gary working in telesales and other walk-in-and-out-of-jobs – the WIFE VISA became the ILTR (Indefinite Leave To Remain) passport stamp. We were living in the UK as a family that in legal terms qualified for residency through the privileged status of the male. It infuriated us personally and we sought to express our fury professionally.

An opportunity arose at the Bluecoat Arts Centre in Liverpool, both Gary's birthplace and our city of residence. They were seeking new artists for their Live Art programming. Just as we'd been keen to move away from the Stanislavski system of actor training and its insistence on psychological realism we were also becoming keen on different notions of theatre and performance. We felt that these forms were better suited to artists such as ourselves: those who had very limited access to funds and resources. We became interested in exploring ways of thinking critically through an arts practice that did not rely on already written plays or tried and tested acting methods. We were also interested in developing a piece from scratch. We had embarked on an interdisciplinary performance practice. We concocted a twenty minute piece which was to be performed for only ten audience members at a time. The piece moved through performance, installation and photography. Set up as though at home, the piece began with several introductory monologues which addressed the items that lay on the inflatable bed in the centre of the room. For example Lena's wedding dress, Gary's favourite shirt, the baby's first toy, the silver wedding rings we got on the cheap from a Slovak friend for the wedding. It moved on through slides of the wedding projected on the front wall and ended with a conversation between Gary and Lena that looked at the new roles they had taken on as parents and spouses. We called this live art event TOUCH UP (2003) because we wanted to indicate that all the items and photos and stories about how we'd moved from bohemian student-artists to parents and spouses were all more or less 'touched up' to help bring aspects of our personal transitions to the fore of the performance.

TOUCH UP came about because we felt uncomfortable with the idea of family. We used this project as an opportunity to dis-identify with the familial and some of its more repressive ideologies. It became important to us at this live art event to be seen as 'a family', but who are also practicing artists. This, we insisted, instead of being an unproductive alliance was in fact a very productive one. We were, from our respective disciplines of film and theatre making, searching for our own performance language, for a practical application of what we came to call our 'familial dissent'. The TOUCH UP live art event provided us with that opportunity. After its performances in the Bluecoat Arts Centre in Liverpool (Gary's hometown and our place of residence), TOUCH UP was also performed at Art Workshop Lazareti, Dubrovnik, Croatia (Lena's hometown).

This sort of critical thinking and reading took us into practice-based Ph.D.s. Gary studied at the University of Plymouth in the School of Media and Photography and Lena went to the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts, Lancaster University. Both research projects were concerned to create arts practices that intervened in the reproduction of repressive ideologies or in the words of Trinh Minh-ha 'uncovered the ideologies at work' in any given cultural milieu (1991: 77). Our research projects were also concerned to discover, through experiment, a new arts practice – a theoretically informed arts practice. The formulation of the practices owed a lot to cultural studies, particularly figurations of the everyday as a crucial area of study for social change. We also drew on post-colonial theories, specifically transnational feminism that sought to identify power structures at work in identity practices, local, national and global. For arts practices of limited resources we were particularly attracted to the notion of the everyday, the mundane or the quotidian. There was a further moving away from our respective trainings of making polished theatre and films with high production values. We turned to Home Movie making and solo performance practices that made full use of the homemade aesthetics.

For 'Cultural Studies Now' we presented a short video film called *Coming to a Town Near You: Condo in Liverpool, Dick in Dubrovnik* (2006). This is a family activist response to the high profile visits of Condoleezza Rice and Dick Cheney to our respective birthplaces of Liverpool and Dubrovnik. The first is set in Liverpool and the second in Dubrovnik, Croatia. The film itself

consists of two parts: 'Condo in Liverpool', which was primarily conceived, edited and directed by Gary and 'Dick in Dubrovnik', for which Lena was in charge. Even though our work on the film as a whole was collaborative, we were compelled as activist citizens to defend our own birthplaces from the high-profile visits (and subsequent cultural onslaught) of USA's political elite.

In 'Condo in Liverpool', subtitled 'The Special Relationship', we were interested in bringing two problems together. Condoleezza Rice's high profile visit to Liverpool was a sort of symbolic affirmation of the 'special relationship' the UK suffers with the USA. One of its more obvious manifestations is the decimation of Iraq for its natural resources and strategic position in Middle East affairs. The second problem, no less significant, is the phallogocentric construction of families, manifested not least of all in Home Movie amateur practices. We saw the political struggle of the rest of the family, especially the women against the dominant patriarch, as another kind of 'special relationship'. We wanted to bring these two problems together to see if they shed any light on each other. This took the form of an experiment in thinking through oppression, intimately, through the performing and the making of the Home Movie. This Home Movie opens with shots of colourful demonstrators waving placards which read 'Stop the War in Iraq', 'Condo Is Not Welcome Here', 'George Bush: TERRORIST'. The camera pulls back to reveal that the demonstrators are outside in the cold whilst the family are inside, in the warm. This family, consisting of two adults and two young kids aged three and five, eating chips and drinking tea. We hear a description of Condoleezza Rice's arrival in Liverpool over the radio that plays off screen. The commentator is particularly keen to stress this historic moment as a consolidation of the 'special relationship'. The commentator goes on to say that Rice's visit is indeed an excellent example of the special relationship between the UK and USA. Then we hear Gary and Lena's argument in voice over. Lena claims she is sick and tired of being filmed all the time and complains that she would rather be outside having fun with the demonstrators. She discloses that it is Gary's idea for them all to be sitting in a café enjoying their chips and tea. It is Gary's idea that they make their own little protest movie and shy away from the demonstrating crowd. During this time the camera lingers on the children eating chips and eventually on Lena, who shows some signs of annoyance at being filmed. Gary admits his position as Home Movie-maker-cum-patriarch is untenable. They agree it might be best to give up. The final shot of the movie rests on Gary, the author's face, and it is in this shot that we can discern who has been holding the camera throughout the Home Movie.

The second part is 'Dick in Dubrovnik' centred around the high profile visit of Dick Cheney to Dubrovnik, Croatia. The original idea was to rally people together for a demonstration, or failing this, to raise the issue of a demonstration with close friends and family. The Home Movie opens with Dubrovnik's old town and travels in one unbroken shot, slightly unsteady and very slow, that runs for six minutes down the entire length of the street Stradun. Stradun is well known in Croatia as Dubrovnik's centrepiece in its architecturally stunning medieval and renaissance city. Throughout the shot of Stradun we see numerous people walking down the street, tourists and locals. In this movie we were interested in satirizing a Dubrovnik pastime of sitting in the coffee houses on Stradun and listing the famous people that have visited the town in its long, rich history. The punch line was to allude to yet another famous person visiting: Dick Cheney. However, this time there were consequences. Lena, in voice over, explores her familial context in a critical light asking her family and friends about the famous visitors who have walked down Stradun. The voice over is a series of famous names listed by Lena's family and friends: Richard the Lionheart, Tom Cruise, Margaret Thatcher, Elizabeth Taylor, Pope John Paul II, Roman Abramovic, George Bernard Shaw, Rio Ferdinand, Steven Spielberg and Christopher Walken. In a telephone conversation with her brother and sister-in-law, Lena goes on to ask what the political significance of Dick Cheney's visit might be. She asks what the outcome of such a high profile visit might mean for Croatia entering NATO and its subscription to US led hegemony and economic empire. Once those 'big issues' are discussed, the telephone conversation returns to more mundane matters, such as a boat trip with kids to a nearby island the next day. We were concerned to engage in a way of thinking through global problems intimately, through our own positions as family members and activists.

Insights from Cultural Studies and thinking through arts practices has led us to a working hypothesis that families are politically constructed units that are often used, not least of all nationally and internationally, to normalize and naturalize repressive ideological practices. In order to dis-identify with the prevailing notions of the family we made critical Home Movies.

In the final analysis it is up to us, as family members and artist-activist academics, to intervene in such repressive practices and to try to make as-visible-as-possible some of the unnatural naturalisations of the family as the basic unit of a 'good' society. To this end we have set up The Institute of the Art and Practice of Dissent At Home. This is a new arts practice initiative located at our own council home in Liverpool. One of the rooms in our social housing flat has been given over as an arts and research venue. In this way it will have its function doubled as bedroom and venue. Our year long programme of events will include performances, workshops, conversations and film screenings and coincides with Liverpool 08 European Capital of Culture or Capitalism of Culture as we have come to call it. The running theme will be, as the title suggests, politicised familial dissent. See our website <<http://www.twoaddthree.org>> for more information.

References

Trinh, T. Minh-ha (1991) 'Outside In Inside Out' in Trinh T. Minh-ha *When The Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, New York and London: Routledge, 65-78.

Lena Simic and Gary Anderson, a performance artist and a film-maker, are married with children. Both are Lecturers in Drama and Theatre Studies at Liverpool Hope University and Co-directors of The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home. www.twoaddthree.org